

Illinois Action for Children
Community Connections Preschool Program
Evaluation Highlights

The Community Connections preschool program was developed to help prepare children in home-based child care for school and for life. It has three goals: (1) to make state prekindergarten classroom experiences available to children in home-based care, (2) to extend classroom learning experiences in the home-based care setting, and (3) to support infant and toddler development in participating providers' homes.

Preschool-age children are transported from their home-based care settings to classrooms 4 days per week for either AM or PM sessions. On the fifth day, the teachers visit the home-based providers to share curriculum materials and ideas, and discuss the children's learning.

Child Trends and the National Center for Children in Poverty have just completed Phase 1 of a program evaluation – an implementation study. This study considers whether the program model is well defined, well understood by participants, and well implemented. During the 2009 – 2010 school year, evaluators interviewed program participants in the following five roles: program coordinators, center directors/owners, teachers, home-based providers, and parents. They observed the quality of home-based care using the Child Care Assessment Tool for Relatives (CCAT-R). Finally, they reviewed program documents and service data supplied by Illinois Action for Children. A projected Phase 2 will be an outcomes study, looking at children's learning and other benefits to participants.

Findings

Strengths. Through parent interviews, evaluators concluded that the program does achieve its first goal, serving children who otherwise would not be enrolled in a classroom-based early learning program. Parents were well aware of classroom-based Preschool for All, but until learning that Community Connections was an option, felt that home-based care better met their needs. Other findings included:

- The program is well regarded by the directors, teachers, home-based providers and families.
- All respondent groups perceived improvements in children's learning and social skills.
- Home-based providers reported multiple ways in which the program strengthened the care they were providing – including care of infants and toddlers.
- CCAT-R results showed acceptable to good quality of provider-child communication & engagement in the home settings.

Challenges. The most common challenges involved the teacher visits to providers, including difficulties in scheduling visits, handling of provider cancellations, lack of guidance for working with children birth through two, and help in connecting providers with community services. Evaluators call for greater model specificity in these areas, combined with additional training, coaching, and material resources for teachers carrying out the home visits. Other challenges included:

- Teachers reported difficulty with parent communications because the parents' primary relationship is with the providers.
- Providers reported that transportation is sometimes unpredictable.
- Teachers and providers requested support for connecting parents with community resources.
- Events at the centers, intended to bring together teachers, providers, and parents, are not well attended.
- Even though the curriculum is well-defined and supported through teacher training and coaching, teachers requested more curriculum training.

Next Steps

Staff is now reviewing evaluators' recommendations and planning program improvements. Phase 2 of the evaluation, an outcomes study, is being planned for the 2012 – 2013 school year.