

Annual Forum October 20, 2005
Making the Most of our Early Education Investments

Hansberry (Chicago, Illinois) Child-Parent Center: Edith Allen-Coleman, Principal

Good afternoon. I'd like to thank FCD for inviting me to speak about something that I love so much -- Early Childhood Education. The Chicago Public Schools Child Parent Centers (CPC) were developed in the sixties to eliminate the deficiency of quality early-childhood programs in low-income areas. Twenty-five centers were sprinkled in the poorest areas of the city of Chicago.

The purpose was well defined: Create a learning community that encompasses programming and addresses the academic, social, physical, mental, and economic needs of the participating families. The staffing formula at that time was very innovative. We had highly qualified, certified teachers, a speech therapist, a full-time nurse, a social worker, experienced teacher assistants, and community resource personnel to work with the centers. The centers originally serviced students from PK to third grade, an ideal situation.

Originally, a principal was assigned as the instructional leader for two Child Parent Center (CPC) sites but as time progressed, the centers were attached to a regular K-8 school building and the principal was assigned to the main building, the regular education building and the CPC site. At the Prekindergarten/Kindergarten level, a head teacher was assigned to oversee the instructional needs of the CPC site. A parent resource teacher was assigned to develop an effective parent program that focused on parental skills, life issues, educational opportunities, and enhancement experiences for our parents. The parent-resource teacher worked on the curriculum for grades one through three. Her duties and responsibilities were similar to the combined duties of the head teacher and the parent resource teacher. The Child Parent Center (CPC) was extremely effective. It was a program that worked. Hansberry CPC was one of six sites.

Unfortunately, throughout the years, due to the lack of funding, our program has decreased in staff and grading structure. Currently, the CPC only service the Prekindergarten component and the sites have dwindled from 25 sites established in the '60s to only 15 sites today.. But the 15 faithful schools that remain are committed to the original philosophy, and through state discretionary funding and grant writing, they have maintained the essence of the original PK to third grade program. Webster CPC is 100% African American. Ninety-Eight percent of our students are from low-income families. Our school mobility rate ranges from 15-20% and that's mainly because of the housing renovations within our community.

Our Prekindergarten program in Hansberry is comprised of two collaboration rooms. These rooms are heaven because they have a certified teacher, two teacher's assistants, and two child-care workers. This is an ideal situation in terms of staff. The programs start at 7:00 am and the parents have the option to have their children remain for after-school programming until 5:00 pm. The program runs for 49 school weeks.

It is an ideal program to have but we only have two rooms. One room is an all-day, four-year-old program that runs from 9:00 am to 2:45 pm. It is staffed with a teacher and a teacher's assistant. We also have one half-day program, which runs from 9:00 am to 11:30 am and again from 12:15 pm to 2:45 pm. The half-day program is staffed with one teacher and a teacher's assistant. Our primary program, which is called the expansion program because it is an expansion of the preschool program, features three all-day Kindergarten classes, three first-grade classes, two second grades, and three third grades. We maintain low-class size; trying to not go over twenty students per class. We have scientifically based research materials in our classroom and a literacy-rich classroom environment. This is the norm for us.

The funding is provided through the state's school-based discretionary funds and grants, specifically, the Reading First Grant. We've had the Reading First Grant for three years. Hansberry Webster shares a united vision: we are not two separate units, but one. We view our mission as developing life-long learners who will exhibit attributes and characteristics of productive community citizenship. In this endeavor, we, the teaching staff, consistently ask ourselves, "Are the children learning? How do we know? What must we do to improve instruction for all children in our school?"

We have formulated three essential committees to empower our staff; to collaborate, reflect, plan and develop a school-based curriculum model that is conducive for all grades. We have a school-wide action team, which we've affectionately called the SWAT-team, and we have membership of PK through eighth grade; not just PK to three. We have a literacy team and a partnership with the University of Illinois and we have a math and science team that work with the mandates of the Chicago Math and Science Initiative. Our staff, PK-8, perfected our craft through collaborative, reflective dialogue, via horizontal and vertical team-meetings daily.

We have school-wide schedules that enable our teachers to meet on a daily basis. The meetings are based on effective teaching-learning strategies; examining evidence of student work; developing and analyzing assessments to foster proficiency in learning; and understanding and providing differentiated instruction based on data. We and K-3 have tested the Dynamic Indicator of Basic Early Literacy (DIBEL) and the Illinois Snapshot of Early Literacy (ISEL), which is the state standard test. We used to have the Iowa, but Chicago eliminated that this year, thank God.

We work as a team to provide additional school-based support for the teachers and students in their transition from pre-school to the primary grades. We have a reading specialist who works with the teachers and the students in K-3. We have a Lead Literacy teacher who works with our total program and we have created a school-based primary intervention teacher whose sole responsibility is to work with students who need intensive support in reading from grades K-3. The results are evident. The children do take responsibility for their learning. Higher percentages of our children do complete high school and pursue college grades. I am very pleased to say I have an eighth-grade class of 45 students. Chicago has a plan where individuals are invited to take a test for entry into our most outstanding schools within the city. You have to be a top-student to be invited or considered. Fifty percent of the eighth-grade class who are former CPC students are invited to take the test. And students who are now parents continue to register their children at our center.

Our parents are the heartbeat of our community. We realize that the quality of parent interaction is critical to the success of our mission. Parents are encouraged to be risk-takers, to share personal weakness and to re-invent their personal outlook on life. Our programs support our parents in their efforts to provide a better life-style for their children and also to ultimately provide opportunity for their own life dreams. Because of our program, our parents have successfully completed educational programs. They have gained college degrees. They are property owners in their community and have raised, with pride, young people who love to learn, exhibit high self-esteem, and are self-disciplined and productive citizens.