To ensure that children are off to a great academic start in kindergarten and beyond, CRT uses the research-based Creative Curriculum in all ECE classes, and provides extensive training for all staff members. The curriculum meets the standards of the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the Connecticut Department of Education’s Common Core Standards.

Following the Head Start Performance Standards, CRT ensures that all children going to kindergarten know how to write their names, know at least ten letters of the alphabet, and are able to count to 10. CRT’s Transition Services provides parents with a simple checklist to help them keep track of the required pre-kindergarten skills that their children have mastered.

Applying For Elementary School

At the close of the 2012-13 school year, CRT saw 454 children make the transition into kindergarten. Registration processes vary among the six communities the Agency serves, and can sometimes be quite complex. CRT staff and a partner organization called Achieve Hartford, help parents understand their options and complete the appropriate paperwork.

The City of Hartford is an all-choice system, in which parents apply for one or more of the themed elementary schools available throughout the district. Some of these schools are operated by the Board of Education, but many are magnet schools run by other organizations. There is also an opportunity to apply for a community school in another district (Regional School Choice). At the same time, parents who live in our other five towns can enroll their children in their hometown schools, or apply for a magnet/charter school.

Applications are accepted from November through March, followed by a lottery to determine a child’s placement. Several dates during this period are designated as Kindergarten Enrollment Days at CRT, and workshops are held at the different centers. The magnet schools do presentations at all December parent meetings. In addition, CRT held a fair in December 2012 at which all kindergarten options were represented.

In May, parents attend presentations concerning “Getting ready for Kindergarten.” Each child receives a “Kinder Newsletter” offering readiness activities for parents to do with their children so that they are prepared to start school. CRT also provides a list of local resources and summer programs that can help the child prepare for school. We also give children supplies (i.e., paper, pencils, crayons) so that they have what they need to practice at home.

Children with special needs have a Transitional PPT (Pupil Placement Team) meeting prior to entering kindergarten, which will include parents, the CRT teacher, and Special Needs Facilitator, and the Board of Education staff.

CRT makes every effort to ensure that the transition goes smoothly for all of the children leaving a CRT Early Care and Education Center.

OFF TO KINDERGARTEN

As part of the federal Head Start reauthorization signed in December 2007, Head Start providers were asked to publicly share information on funding, enrollment, education and support services. These pages provide a snapshot of CRT’s Early Care and Education Programs, which CRT supports with funding from many sources including federal and state Head Start, School Readiness from the City of Hartford; child care from the Department of Social Services, and more. This report also reflects some of the work that is done by our delegate agencies in Bristol and East Hartford, which serve 290 children in their Head Start programs.
AN INVESTMENT IN THE FUTURE

High quality, affordable Early Care and Education is one of the best investments that a community can make in its own future. Each dollar invested in preschool services yields nearly $19 in benefits over the subsequent two decades, according to research prepared by the Connecticut Commission on Children.

These benefits are shared across the generations: Children acquire both the academic and the social-emotional preparation they need to be successful in school, and to move on into productive adult lives. With dependable childcare, parents’ engagement in the workforce increases and household income grows. Taken together, these factors result in significant long term community savings in many areas, including education, law enforcement, health care and public assistance.

The Community Renewal Team has been providing this type of quality Early Care and Education for more than 40 years. The Agency was in the first pilot for the Head Start program, which was developed by a team from Yale University.

From that small pilot, CRT’s early childhood programs have grown to serve more than 1,600 children annually in 98 classrooms in Hartford, Middletown, Bloomfield, Windsor, Portland, Clinton, Bristol and East Hartford. These children and their families benefit from a multi-dimensional program that includes:

- Effective education using a proven curriculum
- Free nutritious meals
- Dental, hearing and vision screening
- Services for children with special needs, including mental health, behavior, disabilities and medical consultation
- Intergenerational literacy activities
- Family advocacy and case management
- Access to a broad variety of community-based resources
- Parents’ governance and leadership training
- Programming tailored to families’ concerns

The confidence shown by our funders, our families and our communities is evidenced in the revenue chart, shown below.

Out of a total of 1,231 children in classrooms receiving Federal Head Start funding, the average monthly enrollment during the school year is 1,189. Approximately 10% of these children are from families who earn more than 130% of the Federal Poverty Level.
ENGAGING PARENTS

As a community action agency, CRT takes a multi-pronged approach to family engagement. In addition to providing opportunities for parents to be involved with their children’s education, CRT provides holistic services that help families set goals and move toward a more prosperous and secure future.

CRT delivers wrap-around, intensive case management using an approach that we call Steps to Success. It starts with an assessment across 19 dimensions, with each area rated from ‘in crisis’ to ‘thriving.’ This helps CRT staff identify where the family has the greatest need. For example, in the 2012/13 program year, 415 ECE families received emergency-crisis intervention to meet an immediate need for food, clothing or shelter through CRT.

Case managers help parents set goals, and define shorter-term steps that they need to take to meet those goals. As part of meeting their goals, the agency helped 393 families enroll in English as a Second Language classes; nearly 240 received job training; and more than 50 families attended parenting education (including our well-regarded Fatherhood program).

Housing was a key area of support, with 450 ECE families receiving assistance, including housing subsidies, assistance with utilities and the like. As a housing provider (from emergency shelters through permanent supportive housing), CRT is well-positioned to help homeless families. During the program year, our Head Start program served 32 homeless children. One of our proudest accomplishments was helping 37% of these families to acquire housing. CRT also helped four homeless shelters child-proof their facilities, improving conditions for the many families who stay in those residences.

In 2012–13, there were 28 foster children enrolled in CRT Head Start. CRT has worked closely with the Department of Children and Families’ (DCF) Strengthening Families initiative to improve services for foster families and the children in their care. Our ECE staff now meets twice every month with a DCF liaison and quarterly with all ECE programs in Connecticut, to discuss staff training, assessments of behavioral health issues, and other issues pertaining to foster care. As an outgrowth of these meetings, CRT has established permanent offices for DCF Liaisons at three ECE centers. While these centers act as ‘bases,’ they also facilitate the liaisons’ travel to our other Head Start programs.

Education and Health Opportunities

CRT provides both intergenerational and adults-only education at all centers. Several mornings each month, parents are invited to remain in the classroom when dropping off their child to participate in literacy workshops where they can read or do arts and crafts projects with the children. In addition, the following presentations, workshops and events were scheduled at one or more of our centers:

- Agency-wide Community Resource Fair, with more than 60 community partners;
- Disability awareness and social-emotional understanding days;
- Workshops on child development, challenging behaviors, addressing bullies and more;
- Introduction to the Tax Assistance (VITA) offered at CRT;
- Free flu shots, digital mammograms, presentation on HIV among African-American and Jamaican women;
- Science Exploration Day;
- Family Fun Days (with massages, puppets and free Zumba);
- Cultural lunches and other multicultural activities;
- Safety workshops, car safety and teaching children to cross streets;
- Dress for Success.

There are also multi-session classes for parents. In 2012–13, we held a seven-session ABC's of Parenting class with 20 parents, grandparents or guardians enrolled. This curriculum promotes positive parenting strategies, understanding of child development, child self-esteem, healthy parent-child relationships, discipline, stress and anger management, communication and more.

CRT was also able to bring back the highly esteemed People Empowering People (PEP) program. This program seeks to improve parents’ communication skills and better their understanding of the different organizations and institutions with which they are involved. Through classes and volunteer work, these parents strengthen their advocacy skills so that they may take a more active role in their community, including educational services for their children.

Families also enjoy the health and nutrition workshops included in the previous section of this report.

Parent Advocacy

CRT helps parents become strong advocates and leaders for themselves, their children, their families and their communities. Leadership is nurtured in the center-based Parent Committees, which elect representatives to an agency-wide Policy Council.

AND DIVERSE FAMILIES

Extensive training is offered to Council members, who learn about program governance, parliamentary procedures, successful meetings, performance standards, and budgeting. CRT sends Policy Council officers to the annual national Head Start meeting, where they can attend a wide variety of workshops. A parent can only serve a three-year term and this ensures that these learning opportunities are made available to a large number of parents.
**HEALTHY BODIES HEALTHY MINDS**

CRT’s Early Care and Education program plays a key role in ensuring that children can take advantage of good health and wellness practices: regular medical and dental care, immunizations, good nutrition, insurance benefits, proper treatment of chronic illnesses, etc.

Accessing and understanding these resources can be complicated. Many students come to preschool without a regular doctor or dentist; parents may not understand nutrition labeling; uninsured families may not have access to appropriate medications.

Through the school year, the ECE Health Team ensures that children and their families have access to all types of health care. By the close of the 2012-2013 school year:

- All ECE students had health insurance.
- All students had a medical home – a regular provider who offers continuous and accessible health care.
- All children were up-to-date on their immunizations.
- 97% of the children were up-to-date on a schedule of age-appropriate preventive and primary health care – an increase of 25% from the baseline at September enrollment;
- 100% of students received on-site dental exams, complete with fluoride treatment.
- CRT helped the families of 123 students locate a dental home. As a result, 1,320 children (96% of the students) were enrolled in a dental home, up 5.4% from the previous year.
- 158 children were diagnosed as needing treatment and nearly 92% of those identified received services by the close of the school year.
- All students received vision and hearing screenings, with appropriate follow-ups.

**Addressing Obesity**

There are several medical issues that disproportionately affect Connecticut’s low-income children. A major and rapidly growing problem is obesity. In the 2012/13 school year, 32% of CRT’s Early Care students were overweight or obese. This represented a 70% increase in the number of overweight children from the prior school year.

A number of alarming health issues are linked to childhood obesity, most notably the skyrocketing numbers of youngsters with Type II diabetes. Obese children are far more likely to become obese adults, and may be affected by issues such as hypertension, cardiovascular and gall bladder disease, and orthopedic issues.

Our ECE program has taken several steps to combat this new epidemic. Both the Director and Assistant Director of Early Care and Education sit on the Hartford Mayor’s Task Force on Childhood Obesity and the program is acting upon recommendations. In 2012-13, ECE staff, CRT nutrition staff, and the parents worked together to examine and improve the food choices offered to children. One small example: Apples and pineapple were distributed rather than ice cream at the annual Head Start parade, a change that ECE parents praised.

The Ritter Center piloted a USDA-backed obesity prevention program that emphasized the importance of exercise. Staff at this center made sure that children exercised for 60 minutes each day, regardless of the weather. As part of this project, staff used pedometers to track the children’s footsteps and then mapped them. The children walked a total of 2,931 miles, “taking” them all the way to Phoenix, Arizona!

CRT also ran programs targeted to parents, either changing behaviors or offering activities to do with their children. ECE partnered with the Children’s Center for Community Research at the Connecticut Children’s Medical Center to adapt a program called ‘Steps to Growing Up Healthy’ for our Douglas and Grace Street sites. Bilingual, bicultural staff trained in brief motivational counseling engaged mothers of young children (ages 2-5) to change behaviors in four target areas: increasing physical activities and consumption of milk, and reducing sugar-sweetened beverages and screen time. This program was piloted last spring and helped to reinforce the importance of healthy nutrition and exercise.

CRT brought back the popular six-week Cooking Matters course, which helps families stretch their food budgets while providing more nutritious meals. Twenty-five parents learned to shop smarter, use nutrition information to make healthier choices, and cook delicious, affordable meals.

One of the highlights of this program is a trip to a local supermarket, where parents learn to comparison shop, and to spot the marketing of processed foods.

A Health and Nutrition Fair was held, as well as five weekly parent-child yoga classes.