COMMUNITY RENEWAL TEAM'S EARLY CARE & EDUCATION

A Great Start on a Lifetime of Learning

2014-15

EARLY CARE & EDUCATION

A Great Start on a Lifetime of Learning
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. Distinguished economists find that high-quality early-childhood programs are the most cost-effective way to ensure the healthy development of children in poverty, offering the greatest returns to society (Federal Reserve Bank of Boston).

These benefits are enjoyed across the generations: Children acquire both the academic and the social-emotional preparation they need to be successful in school, and to grow into productive adults. With dependable childcare, parents’ engagement in the workforce increases and household income grows. With the addition of effective wrap-around case management, Community Renewal Team’s preschool programs help families set and meet important goals as they progress toward economic stability. Taken together, these factors result in significant long term community savings in many areas, including education, law enforcement, health care and public assistance.

In the 2014-2015 school year, CRT served more than 1,600 children in Bloomfield, Bristol, Clinton, East Hartford, Hartford, Middletown, Portland and Windsor. Children and families in these programs benefitted from a multi-dimensional program that includes:

- Effective education using a proven curriculum
- Two nutritious meals and a snack each day
- Dental, hearing and vision screening, with follow-up care as needed
- Services for children with special needs, including mental health, behavior, disabilities and medical consultation
- Intergenerational health and nutrition activities
- Family advocacy and case management, with access to a broad variety of resources
- Leadership and advocacy training
- Programming tailored to families’ needs and concerns

The confidence shown by our funders, our families and our communities is evidenced in the charts shown on these pages.
Differences between budget and actual expenditures are addressed by funding source budget flexibility, which allows the transfer of funds among categories.

Out of a total of 1,191 children in classrooms receiving Federal Head Start funding, the average monthly enrollment during the school year is 92%. Approximately 12% of these children are from families who earn more than 130% of the Federal Poverty Level.
Parents and guardians play an important role in all of CRT’s Early Care and Education programs. Parents are always encouraged to drop in to visit, or to volunteer regularly in the classrooms. Centers make every effort to communicate with parents in their preferred language. Children who see that their parents value education and participate in school activities are more likely to be excited, engaged learners themselves. CRT provides many varied opportunities for parents to learn, to teach, to support and to influence community policies.

**PARENT ADVOCACY**

CRT Early Care and Education programs help parents become leaders and strong advocates for themselves, their children, their families and their communities. Parent Committees at each center give parents and guardians a voice in their children’s education. Each committee sends a representative to the monthly meetings of the Head Start Policy Council, whose chair sits on the CRT Board of Trustees. CRT also sends Policy Council officers annually to the national Head Start conference to deepen their understanding of governance, standards, policies and more.

To increase the number of parents who benefit from this empowering experience, CRT engaged a consultant to provide three days of on-site training in Fall 2014. A former Head Start parent with more than 20 years’ experience as a program governance specialist, the consultant covered an intense agenda that included Head Start Performance Standards, shared governance, communication, conflict resolution and more. Nearly 40 parents who hold elected positions within their centers participated in the training, along with the family service staff who support them.

Parent reaction to the session was overwhelmingly positive, as were the resulting outcomes. Participants were asked to put their training to use immediately: A group worked with staff on developing a new student outreach and recruitment plan; seven parents devoted three long mornings to provide input in CRT’s proposal for Head Start grant recompetition; and 18 parents attended the Policy Council meeting to approve that proposal. When the Parent Coordinator was absent for a Council meeting later in the school year, members convened and ran the meeting successfully.

In April, the newly-trained advocates and many of their peers called on legislators to support quality preschool education. Nineteen CRT parents – many with their children – turned out in brightly-colored ‘Head Start Works’ shirts at the Early
Childhood Advocacy Day at the state capitol. Organized by the Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance, the day included an overview of educational initiatives and budgetary constraints from legislative committee chairs, followed by visits with individual district representatives.

ENGAGING DIVERSE FAMILIES

In 2014, CRT’s Early Care and Education Enrollment Manager worked with the internal communications team to reach out to several under-served populations in Greater Hartford. A CRT board member who is executive director of the Connecticut Asian Pacific American Affairs Commission pointed out the tremendous need for free preschool among newly-arrived Asian families, most of whom were unfamiliar with Head Start. Working with a translation service, the team created outreach flyers and posters in Chinese, Japanese, Nepali, Vietnamese and Lao.

Through the Center for New Americans at the Hartford Public Library, CRT learned that some newly-settled refugees come from primarily oral traditions, and don’t read in their own language. Working with the library and the Catholic Charities Refugee Center, CRT arranged to have H’mong (Cambodian) and Karen (Burmese) parents visit one of our centers. A H’mong interpreter was present to speak with and reassure the families who toured the center.
Everyone Loves a Party!

The children, parents and staff of CRT’s Early Care and Education programs celebrated the 50th anniversary of Head Start at every center, and even brought the commemoration right into the State Capitol! Students created banners from paper roses and planted rose bushes in honor of the signing of the Head Start Act in the White House Rose Garden. CRT sponsored one of the first sites when Project Head Start was launched as an eight-week summer program in 1965.
CRT’s Early Care and Education program ensures that children establish good health habits, eat well-balanced meals and receive regular medical and dental care. Staff help families establish both medical and dental homes with pediatric or family practices, so that children receive ongoing integrated care. This is the foundation for appropriate developmental growth and learning.

During the 2014-15 school year, the ECE Health Team helped facilitate these outcomes for 1,164 children:

- **1,158** students had a medical home to provide regular and accessible health care.
- **98.7%** of children had health insurance.
- All but five children were up-to-date on their immunizations; two of the five met Connecticut guidelines for exemption from immunizations.
- All students received vision and hearing screenings. Three were diagnosed with vision problems and 16 with hearing difficulty; all of these children had appropriate follow-up care.
- All students received on-site dental exams with fluoride treatment.
- CRT helped the families of **102** students locate a dental home during the school year. As a result, 1,032 children (89% of the students) were receiving regular care from a dental home.
- 24 children were determined to need further dental treatment, and 14 of them received that treatment before the close of the school year.

A student samples a basil leaf from the school-yard garden.
“I AM HEALTHY!” CAMPAIGN

In the summer of 2014, CRT launched an exciting new campaign called “I Am Healthy!” which helps to address the alarming number of low-income children who are sedentary and either overweight or obese. A health educator introduced preschool children and their parents to nutritious new foods through cooking demonstrations, tasting parties and a small school-yard vegetable garden. Fitness instructors also came into the classrooms to lead a variety of physical fitness activities, from African dance to zumba.

The goal was to reduce or prevent chronic diseases and obesity through access to nutrition and fitness information and experiences. Behavioral research shows that at least eight exposures or “touchpoints” are required before a person begins to form new habits. For that reason, each participating Early Care Center got at least eight sessions over the course of a month.

Flyers in English and Spanish went to parents after each lesson, suggesting recipes, changes to make at home and activities to try with their children. Topics included: Cooking With Children, Limiting Screen Time and More Movement in Your Day.

In one year, 758 unduplicated Early Care students and 55 of their parents took part in the classroom activities at 13 sites in Bloomfield, Clinton, Hartford, Middletown and Portland, CT. In addition, a wide array of health and fitness activities was offered at the annual Head Start Spring Fling in June 2015, which brought more than 2,000 children and parents to Bushnell Park in downtown Hartford. Hundreds of people joined the zumba line and played with parachutes or hula hoops.
In 2014, Community Renewal Team developed an innovative 10-week transitional summer program that provided an educational introduction for children just turning three who had never been to preschool. Jumpstart combined three school days per week with home visits and parent/child activities, to pave the way for 153 children to successfully transition into full-week preschool.

Jumpstart was a unified response to two different conditions experienced in Connecticut: Intense competition for three- and four-year-olds by public, magnet and charter schools offering full-day preschool, and the largest state achievement gap in the nation.

Data mapping conducted by CRT’s Director of Research showed that Greater Hartford had nearly as many licensed preschool slots as there were children – and some of the unenrolled families actually preferred to have their youngsters stay at home, or with relatives and friends.

However, by studying program enrollment trends, parent surveys, community census and educational data, CRT determined that there was a gap in services for younger children – those who were at least two years/ten months and who would benefit from a preschool experience. The agency tested the hypothesis by calling families of enrolled CRT students with younger siblings, and families with age-appropriate children in the Energy Assistance database of 23,000 households. Families indicated a strong interest in a summer program for younger children.

The Office of Head Start approved the launch of the Jumpstart program. Nine classrooms that would otherwise have been closed in the summer enrolled 166 children and retained 156 of them, achieving a remarkable 82% average attendance throughout the summer. The program provided a supportive and developmentally appropriate introduction that emphasized sharing, taking turns and playing.

Children conquered their separation anxieties more quickly as they felt close to a teacher who had been to their homes. By alternating days at home with days at school parents became true partners in teaching, as they referred to the daily family hand-outs to reinforce what was being learned at school.

In addition to three days per week in the classroom, CRT provided home visits and family socialization on alternate days. This allowed staff to build relationships with parents in a relaxed setting, and model stimulating activities that can be done in the home. Staff provided information on each child’s adjustment to school, answered questions about child development and encouraged the parents to be actively involved with their children at the center.
A key message at every visit is that parents are the primary educators of their children. On opening day, parents were encouraged to remain in the classroom for several hours – setting a tone of strong involvement throughout the summer. This was further supported with intergenerational activities at each center, and chances for parents to share meals with children during the school day.

By attending Jumpstart, parents and students were able to form relationships with the school and teachers before attending full-time in the fall. This approach set up children and parents for a successful transition to preschool, allowing any natural fears children might have about leaving their parents to gradually dissipate and opened pathways for learning and school success.

Many of the children who enrolled in Jumpstart were already receiving special education services for a diagnosis of autism spectrum, hearing deficit, developmental and mobility delays. Other children were screened and identified during Jumpstart as needing specialized interventions – including hearing and mobility assistance. By attending the CRT program, these children received the help they needed at least two years before the start of kindergarten.

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Early exposure to an organized, literacy-enhanced environment may also help to reduce Connecticut’s achievement gap. Based on the U.S. Department of Education’s National Assessment of Educational Progress (often called the Nation’s Report Card), Connecticut’s black, Hispanic and low-income students continue to lag far behind their classmates.

Jumpstart staff introduced simple learning activities during home visits. To get familiar with their own names, children walked along giant taped initials and chose cards to spell out their names (at left). Parents were encouraged to visit classrooms as often as possible (below).
OFF TO KINDERGARTEN

Preparation for kindergarten starts as soon as a child enters preschool. CRT uses the research-based Creative Curriculum in all ECE classes, which supports cognitive, reading and language development, as well as mathematics, social and emotional competencies, motor development and physical health. 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 ten. 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 2014-15 school year, CRT saw 601 children make the transition into kindergarten. Registration processes vary among the eight communities that the Agency serves. In an all-choice district like Hartford, the process can be quite complex. There, CRT staff and a partner organization called Achieve Hartford help parents understand their options and complete the appropriate paperwork. To support this process, CRT offers a School Choice Celebration that showcases many available providers and lets families know about other opportunities to complete enrollment.

In May, parents attend presentations concerning “Getting Ready for Kindergarten.” Each child receives a “Kinder Newsletter” packed with activities to complete over the summer, and a kit containing paper, pencils and crayons. 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 Board of Education staff from the town in which the child will be attending school.