An Evidence-based Approach to Student Support

In high-poverty urban school districts, the barriers to success for many students are pervasive and severe. Trauma, deprivation, and toxic stress threaten healthy development and achievement in school. City Connects is an innovative school-based system that addresses the out-of-school factors that impact education. Leveraging in-school and community-based resources, it provides an efficient way to connect the right service to the right child at the right time.

City Connects is grounded in developmental science. At its core, the City Connects approach recognizes that a child's course of development can be altered when risks are addressed with the right supports and opportunities are designed to cultivate strengths, enhancing resilience. All children deserve quality supports and are capable of learning and thriving with careful attention to their unique strengths, needs, and interests.

The Story of Our Growth

Start up

The partnership that led to City Connects began in the early 1990s. Researchers and leaders at Boston College, a Boston Public elementary school, and community agencies began to explore ways to address out-of-school factors that impact students' success and thriving in school.

The partners drew on best practices emerging at the time from research on student support. From 1999 to 2001, in an iterative process, they repeatedly convened school principals, teachers, other school and district staff, representatives of community agencies, and families to develop a practice that systematized the work traditionally done in schools by school counselors, nurses, psychologists, community agencies, and others. The resulting system, designed to permit measurement of outcomes, was initially implemented in Boston schools in 2001.

Replicate

City Connects has proved replicable. It expanded from six Boston Public Schools to six more in a new area of the city in 2007. It expanded to a distant site (Dayton, OH) and to urban Catholic schools in Boston in 2008. Two years later, the success of the program led the Boston Public Schools to ask City Connects to enter the "Turnaround" (restructuring) schools in the district. City Connects also launched in public schools in Springfield, MA.

At early stages of growth and replication, evidence of positive outcomes for students began to accumulate. Over time, the evidence base has grown dramatically, demonstrating that City Connects students outperform their peers in measures of academic achievement in elementary school. These benefits persist into middle school and high school (lower chronic absenteeism; lower likelihood of dropout).

Scale

The expanding evidence base has led more districts and states to seek out City Connects as a comprehensive approach to supporting all students. It has expanded to districts in New York City (in partnership with Children’s Aid Society); Springfield, OH; Brockton, MA; Minneapolis, MN; and Hartford, CT. It is now implemented in over 80 public, charter, and Catholic schools in five states, serving over 26,000 students. Anonymous surveys across the network consistently indicate high levels of satisfaction among principals, teachers, and community partners.

City Connects is now recognized nationally as a comprehensive approach to student support that can be delivered at low cost to yield significant, positive outcomes for children's achievement and life chances.
Grounded in evidence, City Connects is a system that takes advantage of resources and structures already present in schools and in communities.

A full-time City Connects Coordinator meets with each classroom teacher and other school staff to review every student in a school every year.

They discuss each child’s strengths and needs in the areas of academics, social/emotional/behavioral growth, health, and family. Each student is then linked to a tailored set of services and enrichment opportunities in the school and/or community that address his or her unique strengths and needs.

As a hub of student support in schools, a Coordinator cultivates partnerships with community agencies, serving as a point of contact for the school. Coordinators collaborate closely with families and facilitate access to supports and enrichments. They use proprietary software to document, track, and report on service referrals, follow up to assure service delivery, and assess effectiveness. This systematic practice leads to measurable student outcomes.

**Reviews, Services, and Partnerships**

City Connects is implemented in public, Catholic, and charter schools in five states, serving students from preschool through high school. About 91% of the students City Connects serves are low-income. The services that students receive vary in intensity, ranging from prevention and enrichment (e.g., after-school programs, academic and arts enrichments, sports) to early intervention (e.g., behavioral interventions, health and social/emotional skills interventions, mentoring, parent/family supports) to more intensive services (e.g., attendance support, counseling, health/medical services, trauma support). Across all schools and sites, each City Connects student receives an average of 6 services or enrichments.

| Percentage of students receiving a review of individual strengths and needs and a student support plan (Whole Class Review) | 97% |
| Percentage of students receiving at least one service | 95% |
| Percentage of students receiving three or more services | 80% |

Data source for Reviews, Services, and Partnerships: City Connects Student Support Information System records, 2015-16.
City Connects Makes a Difference for Students

Research demonstrates that City Connects significantly improves academic performance and thriving and narrows the achievement gap. Findings converge across methods and sites and have met the standards of rigorous expert review.

**Elementary school**

- Students in City Connects schools significantly outperformed their peers in comparison schools in report card scores in reading, writing, and math⁴ and standardized test scores (SAT-9) in reading and mathematics.²
- Immigrant students in City Connects schools significantly outperformed comparison immigrant students on both reading and math achievement test scores. City Connects also narrowed achievement gaps between immigrant students and their English-proficient peers.³
- After City Connects was launched in Boston “Turnaround” schools, test score gaps between students in these schools and those in comparison schools were narrowed to insignificance.⁴

**After students leave City Connects**

- After leaving City Connects and moving on to middle school, students scored higher on statewide math and English language arts tests than comparison peers who were never enrolled in a City Connects school.¹
- City Connects students at greatest educational risk demonstrated lower rates of retention in grade than comparable students never enrolled in City Connects.²
- Students previously enrolled in City Connects elementary schools demonstrated lower rates of chronic absenteeism in middle and high school than students in comparison schools.⁵
- Once they reached high school, students previously enrolled in a City Connects elementary school dropped out of school at about half the rate of comparison students,⁵ as shown in the figure.

**The Economic Benefits of City Connects Outweigh the Costs**

Research shows that the benefits of City Connects outweigh the costs. An economic analysis by the Center for Benefit-Cost Studies of Education at Columbia University found that **City Connects yielded a benefit of $11 for every $1 invested.** Even when the costs of community partner services were also included in the analysis, the study showed a return of $3 for every $1 invested.⁷

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Principal, Teacher, & Community Partner Responses to City Connects

In anonymous surveys, principals, teachers, and community partners working with City Connects consistently report high levels of satisfaction with the intervention. Network wide:

- **97% of principals** (N=73) reported overall satisfaction with the partnership and would recommend City Connects to a principal in another school.
- **92% of teachers** (N=584) reported satisfaction with City Connects and would recommend City Connects to a colleague.
- **96% of community partners** (N=130) reported overall satisfaction with City Connects. 99% would recommend City Connects to another agency.

In Their Own Words: Testimonials

“Our school has become increasingly aware of issues that our students are struggling through every day because the City Connects method of student support keeps asking the right questions. It has brought a new mindset to our building.” – Principal

“[Coordinator], specifically, and City Connects as a program helps facilitate whole child and family support. Through City Connects, families know that we are invested in their success. [Our Coordinator] has created an open environment where both teachers and families feel comfortable seeking her advice or support.” – Teacher

“Our City Connects Site Coordinator is always reliable and approachable when it comes to helping to identify and match students to appropriate services and help to connect teachers to our particular program when it appears to be a good fit.” – Community Partner

“The most valuable thing about having City Connects would be their effectiveness on referring families and students with appropriate services. With such referrals we have seen an improvement in many students who were presenting with some difficulties.” – Principal

“[City Connects] gives a window into the outside lives of students, enabling teachers to understand the student which enables us to adjust our practices to help students succeed individually.” – Teacher

Stay In Touch!

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