



Evaluation of Strengthening Inclusion for Children with Disabilities in Chicago Head Start Programs through School and Community Partnerships (Year One: 2023 - 2024)

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Executive Summary

Objective: Over the 2023-2024 School Year, Chicago's six federal Head Start (HS) grant recipients and Chicago Public Schools (CPS) partnered to implement a pilot project to improve the delivery of special education services from CPS providers to children with disabilities enrolled in community-based HS programs. This change helped eliminate disruptions to children's education and made critical services more accessible for families. This evaluation measured the process by which these changes in special education service delivery were made, the experiences of the individuals involved and gathered suggestions for future project improvement efforts.



Methods: A mixed methods evaluation approach was used. Participants included CPS and HS teachers, staff, related service providers and project planning team members. The quantitative data was collected through a survey that was conducted at the beginning and end of the school year, measuring pre- and post-pilot implementation reflections on skills, collaboration, communication and program processes. The qualitative data was collected through interviews and/or focus groups. Participants discussed their perspective of successes and challenges that were experienced during the pilot project planning and implementation processes, as well as hopes and suggestions for the future. Additionally, meeting notes, agendas and presentations were analyzed to track key events and decision-making timelines.

Results: Positive outcomes experienced throughout the pilot project include, 1) an increase in children receiving their special education services in the HS classroom, 2) an increase in understanding the importance of inclusion, 3) an increase in the belief in the effectiveness of the co-teaching model for implementing inclusive practices and 4) HS and CPS teachers building strong relationships and learning new skills with one another throughout the year. Suggestions for changes to the pilot project for the upcoming school year include, 1) improving the initial training on the pilot project model, 2) increasing professional development opportunities throughout the school year related to special education services and collaboration, 3) improving communication among all project members, especially the HS and CPS classroom staff and 4) continuing to engage in discussions about plans for program expansion.

Conclusion: Although this pilot only served a small number of HS students in its first year, this foundational work was key to start establishing a model of community-based special education services in Chicago. With more work to be done this school year, this early childhood education system improvement project has and will continue to positively impact the staff, families and children receiving these services.

Introduction

The goal of the project is to ensure access to inclusive special education services for all children with disabilities enrolled in community-based early childhood programs in Chicago. Chicago's Head Start (HS) Recipients and Chicago Public Schools (CPS) have partnered to develop, implement, assess and institutionalize feasible strategies and approaches for delivering special education services to children with disabilities in the HS programs in which they are enrolled. This change will eliminate disruptions to children's education and make these critical services more accessible for families, strengthening the quality of programming in community-based settings. In the end, the goal is to have positive outcomes for young children with disabilities and their families.

Evaluation Purpose

Chicago has a robust mixed delivery system for early childhood education, including the option for public school programs through CPS, as well as community-based organizations like HS. There are many reasons a parent may choose for their child to attend HS programs, including more convenient hours and comprehensive, year-long services for children and their families. Legally, CPS is the designated agency in Chicago responsible for providing special education services for all children ages 3-5 with disabilities, regardless of where they receive their education¹.

Prior to implementing this pilot project, the only option for children with disabilities enrolled in HS programs to receive their special education services was to leave their community-based classroom and be transported via bus to and from a CPS classroom, which caused significant disruptions in a student's day. This caused some families to waive services altogether or miss out on services due to constrained CPS resources for transportation. To solve these issues, Chicago's HS recipients and CPS began working together to design a model of services that would honor the rights of children with disabilities to receive services in the least restrictive environment - their community-based HS program.

The purpose of this evaluation (*Advara IRB Exemption #Pro00075060*) is to understand the roadblocks and facilitators to implementing this collaborative pilot project that is working to improve special education services for children with disabilities in HS programs within Chicago.

The improved outcomes for children with disabilities receiving inclusive services in their classrooms are well-researched^{2,3,4}; however, this evaluation helps fill the gaps in literature on documenting the process in which this work is done, as well as capturing the benefits to both children and staff involved in this model of inclusive services.

Specifying the “who”, “how”, and “under what conditions” of key decisions and experiences of everyone involved in this project is critical for improving outcomes for children, staff and families, as well Chicago early childhood education advocates and others. The goal of understanding this process is to optimize, systematize and scale this approach so that it can be available to all children for whom a community-based early education program is their least restrictive environment. Though focused within the context of the Chicago early education system, similar work to improve inclusion practices is being conducted all around the nation. Lessons learned and findings from this evaluation can be useful to these other locales.

Research Questions

The evaluation of the first year of the pilot program focused on the following questions:

1. System Integration

Did the pilot project create a system with better integrated access to special education services for children with disabilities?

- What steps were taken to create an improved system?
- What structures and processes were put in place to do so?

2. Pilot Program Experience

How was this model experienced by the project key players (i.e., program staff, service providers, teachers, parents, etc.)?

3. Changes in Beliefs

Were there changes in beliefs and/or skills in providing services to children with disabilities by pilot project team members?

4. Future Recommendations

What is recommended for project expansion and sustainability?

Background

Program History

This project builds from similar work that occurred between 2017-2019 to bring community-based services to children with disabilities in HS classrooms. Though this pilot project ultimately stopped due to key personnel turnover and a shift in city funding and prioritization, improving inclusion practices for children with disabilities who are enrolled in HS programs remained a commitment among advocates, families and community-based providers. [The compiled lessons learned from this previous project](#) were shared with the pilot project planning team prior to implementation.

In 2021, the Head Start Grant in Chicago was recompeted by the federal government, resulting in the expansion of the Head Start Grant recipients from two to six agencies. These six agencies worked together to send a joint letter to CPS to begin work to establish community-based services for children with disabilities who are enrolled in HS. From this advocacy, an Advisory Committee and Subcommittee were created, launching the planning and development work of this pilot program in mid-2022.

The work to plan, research and implement this model is funded through a private grant from Crown Family Philanthropies.

Cross-Organizational Collaboration

At the core of the project work were the Advisory Committee and Subcommittee members consisting of cross-organizational key players.

Advisory Committee:

Quarterly meetings centered around decision-making related to this program that is attended by leadership from:

- Each of the six Head Start Recipients
- CPS Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD)
- Office of Early Childhood Education (OECE)
- Advisory Subcommittee Members

Advisory Subcommittee:

Twice monthly meetings centered around developing and implementing the pilot project that is attended by:

- Disabilities Coordinators from each of the six Head Start Recipients
- Staff from CPS Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD)
- Additional project implementation staff (i.e., programmatic, policy, and research specialists)

Additional meetings were held by subsets of Advisory Subcommittee members, as well as additional project experts (i.e., transportation and school assignment) to review data and address any issues related to service delivery.

In addition to capturing staff voice and input, the Early Learning Lab team from Start Early (an innovation lab that uses human-centered design to transform how to meet the needs of young children and families) created a Family Advisory Committee. This group consisted of parents/caregivers of children enrolled in the pilot representing the six participating pilot sites to continuously check-in and learn from their perspective of what is and is not working in this service delivery model throughout the school year.

Family Advisory Committee (*The Early Learning Lab*)

Through the Family Advisory Committee, the Early Learning Lab (ELL) heard from parents/caregivers that they were pleased with the opportunity to participate in the pilot and share their needs and pain points. Overall, the families shared that they felt the structure of the pilot model served their child's needs better than the original model. Some areas where they shared constructive feedback were around communication about the program and services (e.g. identifying who their point of contact is), collaboration among staff and increasing the number of opportunities for inclusion in the classroom.

Additional details and feedback from this [group can be found here.](#)

Program Model

Prior to program model development, the Consulting Team at Start Early (experts that work with state and community systems leaders and advocates to assess and resolve challenges) [conducted interviews](#) with several school districts across the country who provide early childhood special education in community-based settings. They asked about delivery models, structures and staffing, planning and implementation and funding and resources to help inform best practices for the Chicago model.

With this information, the Advisory Subcommittee worked together to decide on the most feasible model for delivering services to children with disabilities enrolled in a HS program.

The itinerant teaching model was decided upon, with CPS itinerant special education teachers traveling to the community-based early education programs to provide one-on-one services for students in their HS classrooms, working alongside the HS teachers and teaching aides. Additionally, CPS speech-language pathologists and/or social workers were also deployed to serve students in their HS classrooms if indicated in the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) (a plan created for a child after being evaluated by professionals that lays out their special education service needs). This model eliminated the need for the students to travel to CPS locations to receive their special education services, as they previously were required.

To be eligible to receive services within the pilot project, the student had to meet the following qualifications:

- Be enrolled in one of the six HS pilot sites selected (more details below)
- Have an IEP that included up to 275 minutes per week for early childhood special education services, excluding other related service minutes (e.g., speech pathology or social work)
- If a student at one of the pilot sites only receives speech-related services, they are also still eligible

Next, the HS sites had to be determined. The six pilot sites (one from each of the HS Recipients) were selected based on the following criteria:

- Program Director is collaborative and has the capacity to be engaged in some minimal planning
- The program has Lead Teacher(s) with a Professional Educator License whose classroom includes multiple children who qualify for this pilot and is open to receiving support from CPS teacher(s) and Related Service Provides (RSPs)
- The program has an assigned staff member who can be dedicated to the planning of collaboration between the program and CPS
- The program has families of children with disabilities who are engaged and would likely consent to their child's participation and provide feedback
- The program has formal structures that allow teachers to plan, reflect and collaborate

These qualifications were then approved by the Advisory Committee, and implementation was set to begin for the 2023-2024 School Year. Throughout the school year, 12 CPS itinerant teachers were assigned to this project, along with 13 RSPs (7 Speech Language Pathologists and 6 Social workers), and 21 HS teachers/teaching aides. **40 total students received services within this pilot program during the 2023-2024 School Year.**

Methodology

Approach

To get a deeper understanding of the experiences of implementing this pilot project, a mixed methods evaluation approach was used.

Qualitative Data:

The main qualitative data was collected through interviews and focus groups with CPS and HS teachers, HS site staff, RSPs and Advisory Subcommittee members. These interviews and focus groups were conducted between February – April 2024, a breakdown of participants can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1:

Staff Affiliation	1:1 Interviews	Focus Group Attendees	Emailed Responses
CPS Itinerant Teachers	6	0	0
Head Start Lead & Assistant Teachers	6	0	0
Head Start Site Staff	2	0	0
Related Service Providers (RSPs)	7	0	0
Advisory Subcommittee Members	4	10	2
TOTAL	25	10	2
TOTAL INDIVIDUALS ENGAGED: 37			

To help map the process changes that occurred throughout the pilot program, additional data came from project meeting notes, agendas and presentations from mid-2022 – June 2024 to capture key events/timepoints and ways in which decisions were made. The researcher analyzed documents from the twice-monthly Advisory Subcommittee meetings and the quarterly Advisory Committee meeting.

Findings from these data highlight participants' perception of successes and challenges experienced during the pilot project and suggestions for the future.

Quantitative Data:

Quantitative data was collected through online surveys distributed to all project participants at two separate timepoints: at the beginning (October 2023) and end (May 2024) of the 2023-2024 School Year. A breakdown of participation numbers can be seen in Figure 2.

Figure 2:

Staff Affiliation	Pre-Survey	Post-Survey
CPS Itinerant Teachers	8	8
Head Start Lead Teachers	6	5
Head Start Assistant Teachers	3	13
Head Start Site Staff	8	5
Related Service Providers (RSPs)	9	7
Advisory Subcommittee Members	10	12
Parents/Caregivers	11	8
<i>TOTAL INDIVIDUALS ENGAGED</i>	<i>55</i>	<i>58</i>

These findings inventory the program staff's skills, collaboration, communication and program processes pre- and post-program implementation, and the parent experience. The pre- and post-survey results were also compared to track any potential changes in beliefs, mindsets or skills over time.

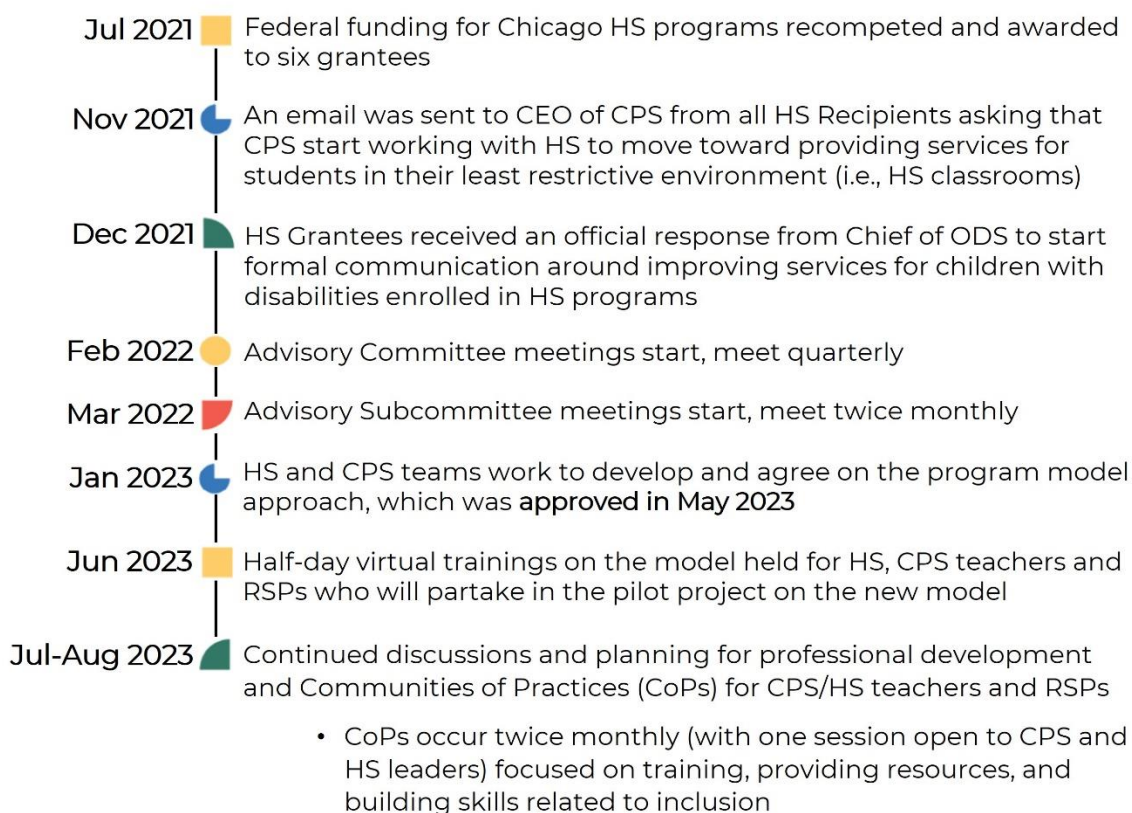
Findings

System Integration

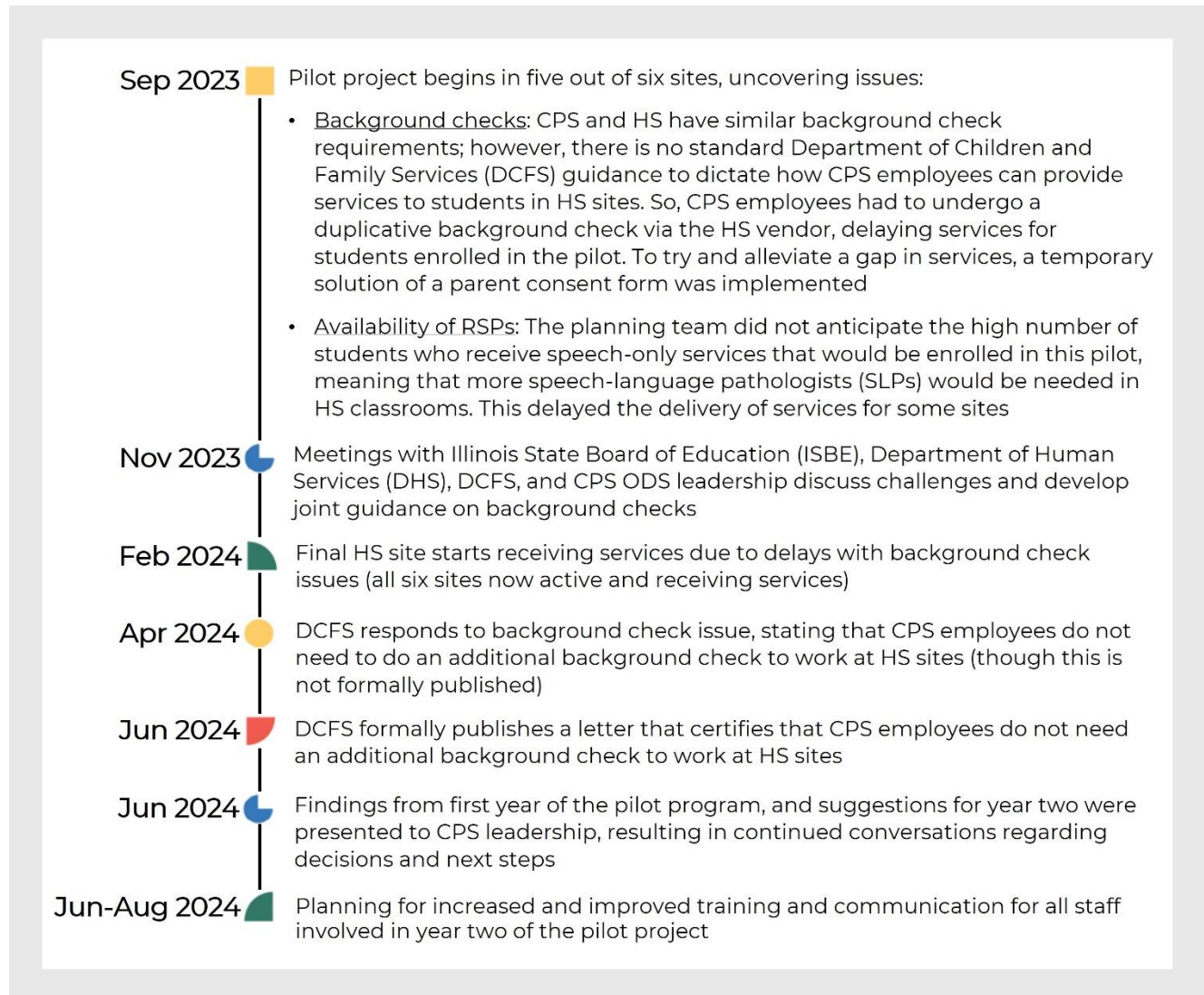
The following timeline of important events that occurred during the pilot project highlights key turning points and decisions made throughout the project by the cross-organizational teams.

***Note about timeline:** The timeline begins in 2021 after the HS recompetete process. Though this enabled a jumping off point for this pilot project, years of advocacy work and relationship building were done prior to this between HS leadership and the former Chiefs of ODS and OECE. Thus, a foundation of awareness regarding the issue of serving children with disabilities in community-based organizations was already established amongst the ECE system players.*

Timeline of important events that occurred during project planning:

- 
- A vertical timeline with a central line and colored markers (squares and circles) on the left side. The markers are: yellow square for Jul 2021, blue circle for Nov 2021, green triangle for Dec 2021, yellow circle for Feb 2022, red square for Mar 2022, blue circle for Jan 2023, yellow square for Jun 2023, and green triangle for Jul-Aug 2023.
- Jul 2021** Federal funding for Chicago HS programs recompeteted and awarded to six grantees
 - Nov 2021** An email was sent to CEO of CPS from all HS Recipients asking that CPS start working with HS to move toward providing services for students in their least restrictive environment (i.e., HS classrooms)
 - Dec 2021** HS Grantees received an official response from Chief of ODS to start formal communication around improving services for children with disabilities enrolled in HS programs
 - Feb 2022** Advisory Committee meetings start, meet quarterly
 - Mar 2022** Advisory Subcommittee meetings start, meet twice monthly
 - Jan 2023** HS and CPS teams work to develop and agree on the program model approach, which was **approved in May 2023**
 - Jun 2023** Half-day virtual trainings on the model held for HS, CPS teachers and RSPs who will partake in the pilot project on the new model
 - Jul-Aug 2023** Continued discussions and planning for professional development and Communities of Practices (CoPs) for CPS/HS teachers and RSPs
 - CoPs occur twice monthly (with one session open to CPS and HS leaders) focused on training, providing resources, and building skills related to inclusion

Timeline of important events that occurred during project implementation:



Importance of Relationships

This cross-organizational team's ability to have about a year of planning before starting this pilot project was beneficial. This time allowed them to make thoughtful decisions on approaches and pilot models, get meeting structures in place and build relationships with one another.

As the implementation process began, unexpected roadblocks occurred, resulting in delays in services. This situation caused frustration amongst both HS and CPS teams.

However, due to the consistent meeting structures put in place during the planning phase, as well as the established relationships among cross-organizational team members, the ability to have candid, productive conversations allowed for these challenges to be met head on. Although the solutions to these challenges were not resolved as swiftly as teams hoped, the ability to continuously communicate helped the cross-organizational project team find creative work arounds to help ensure that children and staff were still receiving services and support they needed.

Pilot Program Experiences & Changes in Beliefs:

Based on feedback from the pre- and post-surveys and interviews and/or focus groups with HS and CPS staff and families involved in the pilot project, the following experiences are highlighted. Quotes from interview/focus group participants are displayed in the light purple boxes throughout this section:

What Went Well:

Comparing change in means for pre- and post-survey responses by role (Figure 3), there was an overall increase in agreement among HS and CPS classroom staff on the importance of inclusion, the co-teaching model and for children with disabilities to receive their services in their HS classrooms

Figure 3:

Statement	Pre-Survey Overall Mean	Post-Survey Overall Mean	
It is important to teach both typically developing children and children with disabilities in the same classroom	CPS Teachers: 4.25	CPS Teachers: 4.50	↑
	HS Lead Teachers: 4.20	HS Lead Teachers: 4.40	↑
	HS Assistant Teachers: 3.67	HS Assistant Teachers: 3.92	↑
The co-teaching model is an effective classroom model for implementing inclusive practices	CPS Teachers: 4.63	CPS Teachers: 4.63	–
	HS Lead Teachers: 4.00	HS Lead Teachers: 4.60	↑
	HS Assistant Teachers: 3.67	HS Assistant Teachers: 4.54	↑
It is important for children to receive their IEP services in the classroom at the site in which they are enrolled	CPS Teachers: 3.38	CPS Teachers: 4.13	↑
	HS Lead Teachers: 3.50	HS Lead Teachers: 4.00	↑
	HS Assistant Teachers: 3.00	HS Assistant Teachers: 3.77	↑

All three questions were asked using a 5-point Likert scale with 1.00 being “Strongly disagree” and 5.00 being “Strongly agree.” The increase in mean scores shows general increased agreement with the statements over time.

Positive Experiences:

- CPS and HS teachers are building strong relationships with one another
- CPS and HS teachers and staff are developing and improving skills, especially around early childhood special education
- Staff and parents are seeing overall improved outcomes for their children and are happy to be a part of this pilot program

“Not only students benefit because they’re receiving what they need, but I think that teachers are benefiting, and teachers appreciate the support and the feedback. At least in my experience, teachers have been very open.”
– CPS Teacher

“The benefit [of this pilot] is not having such young kids with high needs split their day and be bussed. I think that’s amazing.”
– RSP

“[My child’s] speech has improved tremendously as well as confidence.”
– Parent/Caregiver

Challenges Faced:

Comparing pre- and post-surveys results (Figure 4), there was a decrease in agreement on HS and CPS classroom staff having adequate time to communicate and collaborate with other staff and general support due to overextended schedules, caseloads and competing priorities

Figure 4:

Statement	Pre-Survey Overall Mean	Post-Survey Overall Mean	
I have access to the tools and resources needed to deliver services	CPS Teachers: 4.50	CPS Teachers: 4.50	–
	HS Lead Teachers: 3.67	HS Lead Teachers: 3.00	↓
	HS Assistant Teachers: 4.00	HS Assistant Teachers: 3.46	↓
I have access to the time and resources needed to discuss my strengths and challenges	CPS Teachers: 4.38	CPS Teachers: 4.25	↓
	HS Lead Teachers: 3.33	HS Lead Teachers: 3.20	↓
	HS Assistant Teachers: 4.33	HS Assistant Teachers: 3.92	↓
The level of communication that typically occurs between HS and CPS teachers in my classroom is strong	CPS Teachers: 3.75	CPS Teachers: 3.63	↓
	HS Lead Teachers: 4.50	HS Lead Teachers: 3.60	↓
	HS Assistant Teachers: 3.67	HS Assistant Teachers: 3.46	↓
I feel well supported in my role as a teacher in this pilot program	CPS Teachers: 3.88	CPS Teachers: 3.50	↓
	HS Lead Teachers: 4.00	HS Lead Teachers: 3.40	↓
	HS Assistant Teachers: 4.33	HS Assistant Teachers: 3.23	↓

All four questions were asked using a 5-point Likert scale with 1.00 being “Strongly disagree” and 5.00 being “Strongly agree.” The decrease in mean scores shows general decreased agreement with the statements over time.

The evaluators considered that the decrease in scores could be due to response-shift bias⁵, a phenomenon where post-test results are lower than pre-test scores because participants gained knowledge during the intervention; however, based on the repeated themes that came up during the interviews and focus groups of HS and CPS teachers and staff, it was concluded that this decrease in scores was based off of challenges faced during the project implementation process.

Challenging Experiences:

- Lack of set time for HS and CPS teachers to collaborate with one another
- Classroom behavior issues resulting in a lot of distractions and taking away from group learning time and collaboration
- Differences in instructional approaches and classroom structure expectations between HS and CPS teachers
- Communications challenges due to not having a set contact person or system for HS or CPS staff to reach out to with questions or concerns
- Staffing shortages and turnover for both CPS and HS staff members, increasing need to do additional training and relationship building
- Administrative barriers between CPS and HS communication and scheduling systems, leading to staff confusion
- Mindsets regarding the effectiveness of this model, as well as confusion around the pilot model approach processes
- Delays or gaps in providing services for children impacting CPS and HS staff and families

“It just really wasn’t a priority to have that communication and collaboration... and I truly think that if we could have really sat down and had some serious conversations, that maybe we could have made more progress sooner.”

– CPS Teacher

“A lot of students are coming back [from evaluation] without an IEP, so they can’t get help from those itinerant teachers... but their behaviors are so big that the amount of learning for the whole group has greatly decreased.”

– HS Site Staff

“I don’t want to make [the CPS teacher’s] role into, “well now when you come in, I don’t have to “deal” with this child anymore.” That’s one of the challenges, not to just use the teachers...but to be clear about what the lines are.”

– HS Teacher

Future Recommendations:

Program Improvement Work:

- Improve onboarding and ongoing training and professional development opportunities to provide more detailed explanations of the model, staffing roles and expectations, program similarities and differences (HS and CPS)
- Ensure there is protected and consistent collaboration time for all CPS and HS classroom staff to meet and communicate regularly
- Provide additional professional development opportunities on topics such as managing challenging behaviors in classrooms, team building and communication best practices, and building confidence in early childhood special education best practices

“Training is very important... it seems to be that sometimes boundaries are kind of overstepped. So, I just think some more like clear guidance, some more clear expectations on roles would be very important.”

– RSP

Administrative Work:

- Create universal communication systems for all classroom and project planning staff
- Hire a Case Manager who is embedded in CPS and HS work and serves as a lead between all staff involved in the project
- Reinstate the purpose/goals and attendance expectations of the Advisory Committee and Subcommittee meetings

“We haven’t had any real direction throughout the year...there seems to be a disconnect between the people that are in the planning and the people that are in the doing.”

– CPS Teacher

Leadership Work:

- Engage in philosophy/mindset work between CPS and HS leadership on topics in which each organization has a difference in opinion (i.e., teacher qualifications, inclusion practices and program model)
- Revisit and communicate a unified short- and long-term project vision and project expectations

“When you’re talking about bringing CPS and Head Start together...it’s a common language we’re trying to develop, an inclusion language that’s mutual.”

– Advisory Subcommittee Member

Next Steps

Together, the CPS and HS teams determined the following next steps leading into the 2024-2025 School Year (year two of the pilot project):

Provide Services:

- Continue providing services in the current six HS program classrooms for the 2024-2025 School Year

Improve Professional Development and Training:

- Continue a commitment to professional development by providing ongoing joint training opportunities for both HS and CPS professionals

Improve Communication:

- Provide families of children in the pilot program with continuous support and communication during enrollment, placement and while receiving services
- Establish regular touch points with all staff responsible for implementation of service delivery (HS and CPS teachers/staff, and RSPs)
- Establish universal communication systems and procedures for all cross-organizational planning team staff and leadership, including beginning and mid-year touchpoints

Collaborate on Visions for the Future:

- Continue to engage in conversations regarding expanding services and funding to provide additional service delivery
- Continue collaborating cross-organizationally on a unified vision and coming to an agreement on any potential changes in service delivery model and/or approach
- Continue to advocate for additional supports and service improvements for children with special needs in early childhood education

Conclusion

Overall, the work within year one of the pilot program to strengthen inclusion for children with disabilities in Chicago HS programs through school and community partnership successfully provided services for 40 students, including students who receive speech-only services, in their least restrictive environment.

Prior to this pilot, students with disabilities were either transported by a family member or bused from their HS classroom in the middle of the day to and from a CPS classroom to receive their services. Or, because of the interruption in their daily routine, some families decided to waive services, resulting in their children not receiving any of their needed services. The pilot project also allowed for children to receive timely placement options for continuous and uninterrupted service delivery. Although this pilot only served a small number of HS students, this foundational work is key to establishing a scaled model of community-based special education services in Chicago and beyond. This early childhood education system improvement positively impacts not only the children receiving these services, but also their families and the staff interacting with these children on a day-to-day basis.

Additionally, stronger bonds between CPS and HS staff members (both in and outside the classroom) were forged and continue to be built upon. The ability for the cross-organizational team members to meet regularly to discuss major and minor challenges throughout the planning and implementation process was one of the most impactful aspects of this project to come to fruition and continue to be in place. Though there are still improvements to be made in the model's implementation, the CPS and HS teams in and outside the classroom have provided detailed, constructive feedback on ways to do so. These insights will be critical to consider in improving and eventually expanding access to special education services for all children with disabilities in HS classrooms.

Communication and collaboration between all the leaders and staff on the HS and CPS teams will be more important than ever as this work continues. As changes for year two of the pilot project are implemented, these cross-organizational teams will also be facing the additional challenging work of further breaking down systemic barriers and expanding into other HS programs. Though it may be challenging, the CPS and HS teams are well-poised to do this work, all for the mutual goal of improving outcomes for young children with disabilities and their families throughout Chicago and beyond.

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