

ENGAGING FAMILIES:

The ReCharge Approach

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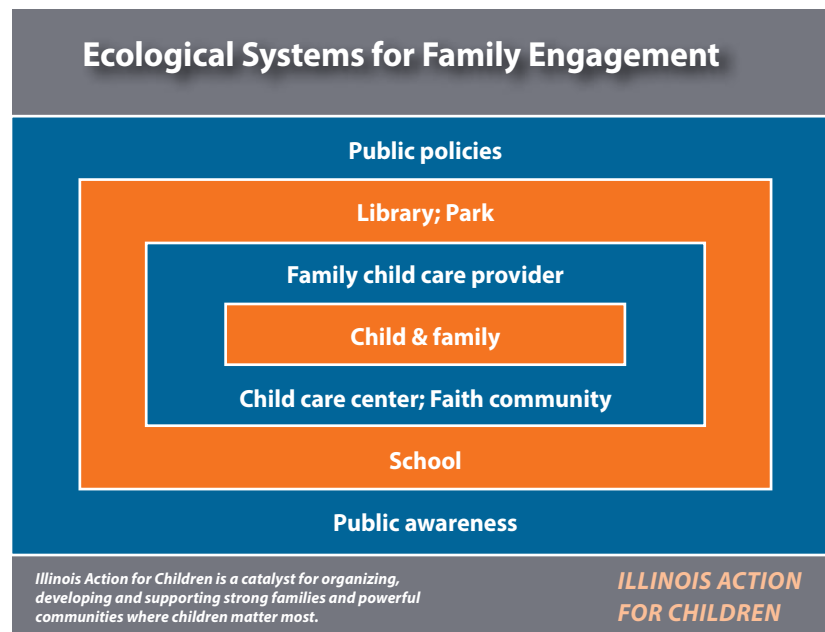
PROJECT OVERVIEW

This essay highlights a best practice model for engaging parents, outlines the multi-layered system in which parents and families are struggling to prioritize child development resources, and asks important questions about the limitations funders and policymakers place on effectively measuring program outcomes.

Illinois Action for Children's outreach and work with vulnerable families in under-resourced communities led us to research and implement highly effective and innovative programs and advocacy to ensure that early care and education, school-age and other opportunities are accessible to them. As a state and national leader in the early care and education community, Illinois Action for Children stands distinguished by its "Strong Families, Powerful Communities" approach to child development, Pre-K education, family and community supports. We believe these supports work best to ensure school and life success when administered as part of a comprehensive system that includes parents and communities. This broad-based approach to supporting children by supporting families is a proven and effective means to address overarching issues of endemic¹ poverty, which are the root cause of educational failure among America's poorest children.

Illinois Action for Children's work begins with an ecological systems view of children's development conceived by Urie Bronfenbrenner² recognizing that no single intervention or program is likely to change a child's future, and that people closest to the child will be most important in constructing their future. With that in mind, the organization takes a social capital approach to its work, providing vital resources and opportunities so families can make connections and take action toward stable employment, stronger communities and more adequate services for their children. The adjacent diagram illustrates some of the nested systems, with the child and family at the center.

Our approach embraces a short-term focus on meeting the needs of families while working across-sector to implement long-term, systemic solutions that educate and engage families through community collaborations designed to improve



family outcomes. Program strategies recognize the importance of meeting families where they are, addressing everyday challenges that impact their ability to parent. This approach has been used in developing the *ReCharge Family Engagement Program* and the *ReCharge Youth Wellness and Fitness Program* for the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA).

The *ReCharge Family Engagement Program* serves more than 75 families in 10 CHA developments, including teen parents, family child care providers who provide care for teen moms, and grandparents and fathers committed to being involved in the lives of their children. The program is multi-generational and focused on fitness, nutrition and goal-setting to promote lifelong health, safety and learning in families. Families have participated in parent leadership and early childhood development trainings, literacy activities and cultural environments focused on educating and connecting children to enriching learning experiences.

The *ReCharge Fitness and Wellness Program* has served approximately 350-400 children between ages 6 and 14 annually for the past three years, and is focused on engaging children in activities to help them develop skills to maintain healthy families. During the summer, the program takes place five days per week for six weeks at no charge to families, and includes fitness activities from the

President's Challenge curriculum, nutrition activities, field trips, team building and personal goal-setting. Personal invitations, information flyers and community-based collaborators were successful in recruiting 18% of the parents to engage in the program activities. This program partners with CHA Family Works Case Management Agencies that are contracted to support and provide direct services to families in housing developments. Additional partners include health care organizations, faith-based partners and community stakeholders, including cultural institutions such as the Bronzeville Children's Museum and school partners, such as the St. Malachi and Smyth Schools.

The *ReCharge* Projects offer:

- **Needed services to children and families.** These include greater access to quality child care and after-school programs, as well as health education and supports for families. Several *ReCharge* communities were "food deserts" and benefited from connection to the Chicago Food Depository, as well as visits to local farms for fresh fruits and vegetables. Families have stressed the need for activities that keep their children engaged after school and, especially, during the summer. One way of addressing that need was building relationships with the Ray Kroc Fitness Center, which includes a swimming pool, basketball court, track and outdoor recreation equipment. *The ReCharge Fitness and Wellness Program* offered suggestions on healthy eating and easy exercises that the entire family could enjoy. Families who have participated in *ReCharge* programs have voiced their satisfaction:
- **Opportunities to develop social capital.** *ReCharge* programs offer opportunities for parents to meet and support each other, and to learn about and use resources in their community. To strengthen families, *ReCharge* makes referrals to health services, learning and cultural opportunities for families, and other community supports such as the schools, library, and parks. *ReCharge* has hosted storytelling and cultural field trips, such as visits to the Bronzeville Children's Museum, which is dedicated to connecting children to the rich culture and contributions of African Americans. Cultural field trips are our most popular, with 18-20 families participating per field trip. Activities close to home included year-round cluster gatherings, in which 66 family members participated, at three centrally-located neighborhood libraries. By holding sessions at libraries, parents and children were made aware of resources such as tutoring sessions, free book days and literacy activities to support families' individual academic goals. In addition, *ReCharge* has conducted more intimate activities such as family scrapbooking, which engaged over 60 participants. Parents have expressed sincere appreciation for these events as they promote a strong, vibrant family structure and deeper sense of community within CHA.

AMONG BLACK PARENTS 25 YEARS AND OLDER WITH CHILDREN UNDER AGE 9:

65% HAVE AT LEAST SOME COLLEGE EDUCATION.

11% OF BLACK PARENTS DO NOT HAVE A HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA.

- **Advocacy training and education to equip families with the tools needed to advocate for their children.** *ReCharge* participants advocate on behalf of their students and families to improve systems that lead to success in school and in life. Families have advocated for and received a computer room in several of the CHA housing complexes, established quiet rooms for children that are open throughout the day, and lobbied their local alderman for safe street conditions. *ReCharge* continues to be a driving force in providing families the tools needed to be effective leaders in their communities – both within and outside of CHA.

"This is a very educational program for young children. We need more people like you all. Thank you."

— Parent Response from *ReCharge* Outcomes Survey

"My teen child came reluctantly and continues to scrapbook with friends using the technique and materials she got at the workshop."

— Parent from *ReCharge* Scrapbooking Event



PROJECT SUCCESS

The project's Theory of Change suggests that our relationships with families and communities are the keys to driving successful outcomes in *ReCharge* communities. The project focused on building relationships with families in cohorts through a range of activities focused on good health, strong families and access to early learning opportunities. As the program evolved, parents developed supportive peer-learning communities that focused on specific attitudes, habits and skills primarily required to maintain healthy families. The peer-learning topics included family finances, community mapping and family goal setting. The parent leadership training provided tools for parents to assume additional responsibility for family well-being, connect to specific community resources and support each other to improve outcomes for their families.

Much of our work with families has been focused on a neighborhood-based model built on relationships and connections to families in targeted CHA neighborhoods. Although much of the research and many of the program models are focused on engaging parents in schools and early childhood programs, *ReCharge* engaged a range of families in a variety of settings and communities. Many families include grandparents who play a significant role in the lives of their grandchildren, fathers who want to be connected to their children, but without custody, and family child care providers who are also parents. The National Black Child Development Institute's Family Empowerment Program curriculum was utilized to engage, educate and empower parents and caregivers participating in *ReCharge*.

ReCharge's success is built on:

- Connecting with both the child and his/her family
- Providing responsive programming that includes activities for school-age children ages 6-13 during the school year, summer and weekends
- Strengthening webs of community support
- Utilizing parent pre- and post-surveys and focus groups to inform programming

PROJECT CHALLENGES

While CHA residents are very positive about *ReCharge* programs, like many low-income families, they face a number of challenges to attending programs regularly and engaging with them fully. Irregular work schedules, unstable child care, uncertain health and illness, high rates of disability among family members, and the frequent need to apply or re-certify for social supports are issues that many parents and grandparents share with fellow CHA neighborhood residents. Parents and grandparents spend much time reacting to adversity, and we respect their competing priorities.

The challenges of CHA parents and grandparents become our challenges. The *ReCharge* staff meets CHA residents where they are by working to build and maintain positive, supportive relationships with them. From a programmatic perspective, relationship building is critical for program success, and it takes a specially trained team to make it successful. With the input of parents, the training team develops a culturally-responsive curriculum. The trainings – five interactive sessions of two and a half hours each – are designed to build relationships. The trainings are a major investment of staff time, and can be expensive to sustain. A key challenge is attracting funders to support the necessary staffing to deliver this relationship-based program model.

ReCharge's ecological model demonstrates that child development takes place in the complex, nested social and cultural environment, where the family exists (see graphic above). This understanding requires us to engage parents and grandparents, and support children, on several levels, beginning with the inside of that environment. Our work is to engage parents and support them on psychological, social and cultural levels that affect their children's growth. In addition to using communications strategies to engage parents and guardians and encourage them to actively respond, we also need to address challenges such as unemployment, extended and blended family issues and limited community services. Sometimes, we can only direct parents toward useful resources with a referral, keep the lines of communication open and follow up with them.

Our goal is to share with policymakers and funders this ecological understanding of the developing Black child. But, we are challenged to demonstrate short-term impacts on children and parents to satisfy funder requirements. Often, funders request that we use impact measures that have little to do with supporting the child and parent in the larger context of developing children. It can be particularly challenging when policymakers and funders define program success differently than families define success for themselves and their children. *ReCharge* is focused on steering a stable course between funders' visions and families' visions of children's success, much as it did in past years, when its initial work focused on educating families about the benefits of early care and education. At that time, funders understood the importance of lowering barriers to enrollment and attendance, and families defined success as being connected to programs that put their children in the best possible developmental setting. Outcomes for both stakeholder groups were aligned. As we continue to support parents working toward success for themselves and their children, our priority is to advocate for the continued and expanded funding of relationship-based parent engagement to drive positive, longer-term outcomes for the learning, development, stability and well-being of children and families.

IN ILLINOIS:

74%

**OF ALL BLACK CHILDREN
UNDER AGE 9 HAVE AT LEAST
ONE PARENT WHO WORKS
PART-TIME OR FULL-TIME.**

CONCLUSION

The Illinois Action for Children approach combines compassion, commitment and respect for the role that families play as leaders in their communities. This must continue if we are to make a difference. The quote below, taken from a newspaper article written by Margaret Wheatley,³ describes the "lens" that allows us to see and engage others:

"Courageous acts aren't done by people who believe in human badness. Why risk anything if we don't believe in each other? Why stand up for anyone if we don't believe they are worth saving? Who you think I am will determine what you're willing to do on my behalf..."

—Margaret Wheatley, *"On Working with Human Goodness"*

As families continue to build on their strengths of resilience and hope, we must engage them while recognizing the limitations racial and societal injustice place on their ecosystem, often limiting their ability to fully benefit from *ReCharge's* resources. Program leaders must be flexible and work with researchers to identify barriers to measuring family engagement outcomes, and design tools that can effectively demonstrate successful models to support children's learning and development.

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