BEING BLACK
IS NOT A RISK FACTOR:
STATISTICS AND
STRENGTHS-BASED
SOLUTIONS IN THE
STATE OF ILLINOIS

Including a foreword written by
BARBARA T. BOWMAN, PH.D.
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AN IMPETUS TOWARD CHANGE...

In Chicago—like far too many urban cities—the vicious cycles of violence, poverty, failing schools and poor health disproportionately affect communities of color. Too often we respond with outrage laced with a paralyzing despair and hopelessness that serves more as an impediment to progress than an impetus.

The narrative surrounding Black children and families often feeds this sense of despair and hopelessness. Bombarded with negative stories and statistics, the collective will to realize positive, substantive change in communities where that change is needed most can be stunted.

In 2013, the National Black Child Development Institute (NBCDI) released its national report, “Being Black Is Not a Risk Factor: A Strengths-Based Look at the State of the Black Child.” This report challenged the prevailing discourse about Black children, which overemphasizes limitations and deficits and does not celebrate the considerable strengths, assets and resilience demonstrated by our children, families and communities.

Since then, we have turned to the states, working with our Affiliates and partners to begin developing reports that assess and address the strengths and needs of young Black children and their families where they live.

Like the national report, “Being Black Is Not a Risk Factor: Statistics and Strengths-Based Solutions in the State of Illinois,” and the materials to follow, will serve as resources for policymakers, practitioners, advocates and parents by weaving together three critical elements:

1. **Essays** from state experts that focus on using our children’s, families' and communities' strengths to improve outcomes for Black children

2. **Points of Proof** from organizations in Illinois that serve not as exceptions, but as examples of places where Black children and families are succeeding

3. **Data** that indicates how Illinois’ Black children and families are doing across a range of measures, and in relation to their peers nationally and in the state.

To achieve our vision for these reports, we relied on the innovation, dedication and creativity of our contributors as they delved into critical areas affecting Black children and families from a range of vantage points. Though the essays and Points of Proof in the Illinois report are thought-provoking, the work they illuminate is not glamorous. It is, rather, the grassroots, day-in-day-out, community-based work that moves the needle on outcomes for Black children and families. The ideas and work contained in this report help change the narrative; they are an impetus, not an impediment to progress.

As I continue to lead this historic organization, which has been dedicated to improving and advancing the lives of Black children and their families for more than 45 years, I am humbled by the extraordinary work undertaken by so many committed activists and advocates, teachers and leaders, policymakers and parents. Inspired by the work of so many who remain committed to the collective work and responsibility of improving the lives of Black children and families, I am fortified—in steadfast in the belief of our ancestors that, “we shall march on, ‘til victory is won!”

TOBEKA G. GREEN
President & CEO, NBCDI
Foreword:

RESILIENCE AND VULNERABILITY IN AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN

BARBARA T. BOWMAN, PH.D.
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Resilience is an asset for all children. It is particularly important for African American children who face the continuing legacy of slavery, intolerance and rejection. Today, this legacy is represented by both external and internal stressors: external ones in the form of explicit and implicit acts of prejudice and discrimination, and internal ones characterized by feelings of inadequacy and defensiveness. Resilience is the ability of children to remain positive or recover quickly in the face of stressful experiences. It confers protection from external and internal threats.

Stress is an inevitable part of every life, and children cannot be protected from it. Resilient children, however, are able to use their personal resources and interpersonal relationships to cope with stress and “bounce back” from times when they are overwhelmed and defeated. The more resilient we can help children become, the more likely they are to move toward satisfying personal and social goals. If we can understand why some children are more resilient—better able to weather stress without apparent debilitating aftereffects—we can promote resilience in all our children.

What does a resilient child look like? They are children who know how to get what they need; they have a range of adaptive skills, chief among which are ones to engage others to help them get what they need. Vulnerable children have stressors that overwhelm their ability to adapt. Decades of research has shown that early and too heavy stresses set up a pattern of failure that undermines the child’s sense of competence and effectance—there is a mismatch between their competence and the demands of their environment. For many African American children, the stress of being Black in America is overlaid with problems of toxic environments: poverty (poor nutrition, housing, health care); family and community dysfunction (poor schools, substance abuse, poor community services); and, perhaps most serious, hopelessness.

Erik Erikson wrote about the absence of hope as a major threat to development. Children whose early experiences were neglectful and/or abusive, whose families were unavailable and/or unresponsive, children who live in disorganized and unsupportive communities, and children who have untreated physical and mental health problems are vulnerable to beliefs about themselves and the world that limit their ability to engage and solve problems. A poor match between the kind of support a child needs and the caregiving provided by the responsible adults can result in excessive anger or hopelessness, neither of which leads to resilience.

It is difficult to predict what experiences children will feel as stressful; some children seem to be born with the ability to adapt to a wider range of challenges than others. They are able to develop and learn well in less than ideal circumstances. They are better than most in responding to the stresses they face and gain confidence from their successes. These are the exceptional children. But even they can succumb when stress is too great. The vast majority of resilient...
children are not naturally resilient; they are made that way by the kind of care they receive, particularly early in life. Many children’s development and learning is disrupted because their experiences fail to prepare them for life challenges.

What are the challenges for African American children? The list is long, and this volume outlines some challenges: Coates asserts that too few resources support children and families. However, all the authors make reference to education as the center of the problem for many African American children and families. School failure, without a doubt, is the most virulent and damaging factor in the lives of African American children. Poor schools undermine resilience.

What is needed for schools to support resilience? First, positive relationships with adults are critical. Children need things like responsive and reliable support, protection from fear and shame, affection, help in resolving conflict, skills and information, reciprocal interaction and respect.1 Significant relationships are formed when teachers connect with children emotionally and socially. Such relationships support the child’s capacity to use others for comfort and hope, guidance and support, to self-regulate and cope with stress. Second, resilience is encouraged when teachers teach the skills and knowledge that enable success. Children must have opportunities to learn the academic, as well as the social skills, that lead to achievement. Perhaps, most of all, children need schools that recognize that the greatest danger to the African American child is “to feel that the color of his/her skin, the background of his/her parents, or the fashion of his/her clothes, rather than his/her wish and his/her will to learn, will decide his/her worth.”2

Schools do not build resilience alone. Families and communities are crucial to children’s ability to tolerate stress and engage challenges. Generally African Americans parents want what is in their child’s best interest, but are frequently unaware of the differences between their world and that of schools. Often segregated and isolated, African Americans are alienated from schools and teachers who know little about them or how to engage with them in support of their children. Nevertheless, it is essential for families to make the effort to partner with school staff, monitoring their responsibilities to their children, and holding the school staff accountable. It is equally important for schools to engage with families and communities, treating them with dignity and respect, being sensitive to family and cultural characteristics, and responding to family and parental choices.

It is difficult to overrate the importance of resiliency for African American children, which is why this book is so important. It recognizes and provides clear analysis of some of the problems African American families face, and makes recommendations for improvement. It provides guidance for families and schools to bridge the gap so that resilience and education are promoted.
THROUGH THE LENS OF CULTURE:

Envisioning Effective, Powerful Partnerships Between Black Families and Early Childhood Programs

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This essay asserts that the task of engagement with Black* families requires acknowledging and harnessing the passion, energy, values, beliefs, and commitment Black families bring to rearing and educating their children and partnering with them to create meaningful, powerful and authentic relationships that strengthen Black child outcomes. To do so will require developing a strengths perspective and dismantling deficit perceptions regarding Black families, understanding Black culture(s) and diversity, developing the capacity of early childhood practitioners, administrators and other professionals to work effectively with Black families, and committing time, energy, hard work and resources to building and sustaining family-school partnerships.

The need to strengthen Black family-school relationships is based on five factors: 1) the prevalence of Black children (birth to age 8) in non-familial care and education settings in the United States; 2) the persistence of racial disparities and poorer educational and developmental outcomes for Black children, compared to Asian American and White children on a range of developmental (e.g., low birth weight) and educational (e.g., 4th grade reading and math achievement) measures; 3) the demographic imperative in which children of color, including Black children, are transforming the United States into a nation without a single ethnic/racial majority; 4) growing inequality which threatens the economic, political and social well-being of the nation; and 5) research evidence that suggests effective school and family partnerships strengthen educational outcomes, including those for children in poverty.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BLACK FAMILY AND SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT FOR IMPROVED CHILD OUTCOMES

Research demonstrates that when families and schools cooperate, children have better educational outcomes, so it should not be surprising that Black children benefit significantly when their families actively engage in their education. In addition to experiencing academic gains, students whose families are engaged in early care and education programs also adapt better to school, have fewer behavior problems, attend school regularly, complete homework, and have better social skills and higher self-esteem. These gains are further extended by linking students and their families with resources in their broader community.

Parents and families accomplish this through the learning opportunities they provide at home and in the community at-large, as well as through involvement with their child’s school. Meaningful involvement also serves to increase parents’ social influence as they interact with other parents and teachers, thereby enhancing their understanding of school practices, policies, and resources. Developing mechanisms to promote high quality and intensive school-family-community engagement initiatives should be one of Illinois’ top priorities in its efforts to strengthen the educational outcomes of young Black children.

BETWEEN 2011 AND 2013:

56% OF BLACK CHILDREN ATTENDED PRESCHOOL. THIS IS HIGHER THAN THE NATIONAL AVERAGE.
Culturally grounded childrearing traditions, values and practices employed within Black families have protected Black children and promoted their psychological, social, physical, spiritual and cognitive well-being in the midst of a society that rarely sees their beauty or humanity.
While it is widely recognized that family and community engagement are significant contributors to a child’s school success, differences exist in the capacity of individual families and communities to support student learning and engagement with schools. Black families and low-income communities in particular often face multiple barriers to forming partnerships with schools, including teachers and other program personnel who have low expectations for their engagement and little understanding or respect for their culture and experiences. Teachers identify impediments to family engagement including the stressful life circumstances of families and/or their lack of understanding of school policies and practices. These challenges are amplified in low-income communities, where families are struggling to meet their basic needs, face persistent violence and trauma, and live in neighborhoods that lack key conveniences and resources (e.g., health clinics, pharmacies, grocery stores, parks, libraries, child and adult enrichment programs). Given the high percentage of children living in poverty in Illinois, and that poverty rates are disproportionately high for Black children, these challenges underscore the barriers to school success for thousands of young children and their families across the state.

A critical variable in effective family engagement is the early care and education teacher. It is especially important that early childhood educators of Black students are knowledgeable and respectful of the culture, values and beliefs of students’ families; have an understanding of positive racial identity development; and are able to support families in meaningful ways. Although not specifically referring to Black families, one study reported that only 7% of college administrators believe their teacher education programs adequately prepare their graduates to engage effectively with families or communities. This could, in part, explain why many family and community engagement strategies typically reflect mainstream, middle-class cultural values and practices, and fail to take into account the complexity of family arrangements across race, ethnicity and social class. Few models are tailored to successfully engage minority and low-income families who historically may have had lower levels of involvement with their children’s schools and consequently, have been labeled as “difficult to engage” and “uninterested” in their children’s academic success. Further, Black parents may engage in practices to better understand the strengths and needs of Black families, their culture, race and social class, may influence their engagement with schools; may not employ a strengths-based approach to families; and may fail to appreciate how factors, such as perceived racial bias, may influence parental engagement. Also, school personnel may not sufficiently recognize how the culture of early childhood care and education programs may contribute to alienating families. Family engagement initiatives must take into account that trust must be built and earned between early childhood staff and Black families. Families need sufficient experience with school/program staff to learn that school staff are dependable, qualified, fair, and have their child’s best interest at heart. While early childhood programs and elementary schools bear the primary responsibility for structuring and providing education for young Black children, this is not a charge that these programs should take on alone. To achieve academic excellence for Black children, it is critical that early care and education programs work in close cooperation with families and the surrounding community. Although early childhood school-family-community partnerships take different forms, intensive and proactive family and community engagement enables the programs to better understand the strengths and needs of Black families, their culture (e.g., values, beliefs about parenting and childrearing), and to utilize community resources to support and enhance learning. These critical partnerships also provide opportunities for Black parents, guardians and families to be more actively involved in shaping their child’s education and development, beginning at birth and extending through high school.

FROM 2010 TO 2013: THE PERCENTAGE OF BLACK CHILDREN ENROLLED IN PRESCHOOL INCREASED.

ENVISIONING CHANGE

Successful school-family-community partnerships involving Black families require schools to take a leadership role in establishing clear goals and strategies to engage families. Initiatives currently exist in numerous communities across Illinois, and most include education and training for both teachers and families. However, the efforts are typically not strategic and robust and rarely have an impact on school achievement or closing opportunity/achievement gaps. To be effective, these partnerships should offer a variety of opportunities for Black families and the community to be involved, and include activities based in the school, out in the community, and in the child’s home. In addition, family engagement programs may fail to adequately engage with families to understand how factors, such as culture, race and social class, may influence their engagement with schools; may not employ a strengths-based approach to families; and may fail to appreciate how factors, such as perceived racial bias, may influence parental engagement. Also, school personnel may not sufficiently recognize how the culture of early childhood care and education programs may contribute to alienating families. Family engagement initiatives must take into account that trust must be built and earned between early childhood staff and Black families. Families need sufficient experience with school/program staff to learn that school staff are dependable, qualified, fair, and have their child’s best interest at heart.
Culturally grounded childrearing traditions, values and practices employed within Black families have protected Black children and promoted their psychological, social, physical, spiritual, and cognitive well-being in the midst of a society that rarely sees their beauty, genius or humanity. Too many early childhood programs have not sufficiently recognized, appreciated or understood the strengths of Black parenting and childrearing, nor enlisted the capacities of Black parents and families as true partners in the development and education of Black children. Further, the process of engagement has not focused on developing relationships that are based on trust, reciprocity and knowledge of Black cultures.

Cultures shape who children and adults are and how they experience the world. Through participation in everyday cultural practices (e.g., feeding, bedtime, going to preschool) young children learn systems, identity, culturally appropriate forms of verbal and non-verbal communication, values, beliefs, moral standards, acceptable emotional expression, behavioral norms and roles intended to develop the competencies appropriate to their culture. Black children are socialized into their culture through regular interaction with caregivers, adults and children. Cultural patterns of thinking and behaving are internalized, becoming part of individual and group identity. The family is the key institution in which most children acquire culturally relevant and informed knowledge about themselves and their place in the world. It is also the institution that supports adult caregivers as parents and grandparents, among other salient childrearing roles. Culture is not a static phenomenon—the cultural practices of Black families in 1815 are probably not the same as those practiced by Black families in 2015. The circumstances and challenges families encounter in a particular time and place will contribute to cultural change through processes of adaptation. In addition, individuals are immersed in multiple cultural settings, which may require new adaptations in order to effectively function within them and between them. Black families help children understand how to negotiate different cultural expectations and terrains (e.g., home, school, religious institution). When Black parents enroll their children in early childhood programs they and their children may experience cognitive and cultural dissonance due to differences in family and program cultures. Family engagement strategies can help both Black families and early childhood programs negotiate and understand cultural differences through communication, relationship development and inquiry processes that support the differences, challenges and strengths all parties contribute.
Regrettably, there is a dearth of research on Black families from the perspective of strengths and on childrearing in diverse populations of Black Americans (e.g., southern Blacks compared to northern, Haitian Americans, Kenyan Americans, middle class Black parents). Indeed, the vast majority of studies on Black families have explored presumed deficits in their functioning, organization, coping, and childrearing. There are important exceptions to this trend. Common features of Black families identified in this body of research are multigenerational families and households committed to the rearing of children; importance of children; strong kinship bonds; strong work orientation; significance of educational attainment; flexible gender role assignment; racial socialization practices to combat the psychological effects of racism; significant paternal engagement in childrearing; socialization of children to respect elders; adaptation to adversity; religiosity and spirituality; and patterns of self-help and collective action. Further, research has shown that Black single mothers want to be engaged with schools in supporting their child’s education; receive sufficient support from family networks; engage in parenting skills that emphasize educational achievement; and encourage the development of racial pride and self-respect.

While early childhood practitioners and family engagement efforts may benefit from understanding research on Black families, they will have to develop and document individual strengths as they build relationships with specific families. Family strengths are, “Those traits that facilitate the ability of the family to meet the needs of its members and the demands made upon it by systems outside the family unit – they are necessary for the survival, maintenance, and advancement of family networks.” A strengths perspective does not ignore the challenges Black families encounter in a society in which White supremacy and racial oppression continue to affect Black lives. Rather, it urges early childhood practitioners to develop relationships with families that reveal the strengths (e.g., knowledge of their children, racial socialization practices, coping strategies, ways of knowing the world, social support networks, values that support education) that can be leveraged to support the development of the child, family, early childhood practitioner and program. Because of the diversity within Black communities (e.g., social class, immigration history, sexual orientation and expression, language) and individual differences (e.g., psychological coping), practitioners must always assume that what might be reported in research may or may not apply to a specific individual or family.

It is critical to develop engagement strategies that recognize the cultural diversity that exists within Black individuals, families and communities. A perception of a monolithic “Black culture” or that Black identity means the same thing to every Black individual denies the complexity of human development. The Black population in the United States is diverse: 14 percent of individuals in the 2010 U. S. Census (42 million people) identified as Black. Given the complexity of culture and individual development it is unlikely that they will all engage in the same or similar cultural practices. Sixteen percent of Black children under the age of five are immigrants or the children of immigrants from Africa, the Caribbean or Latin America, and many are children for whom English is a new language. Further, despite the reported religiosity of Black Americans, 11 percent are atheists. Understanding variability among the complex worlds of Black families in the U.S. is essential for effective family engagement.

Despite the fact that “family engagement” is a construct that early childhood educators and practitioners endorse, it may not be valued or understood by all Black families. Black families may be distrustful of schools and early childhood practitioners because of past negative experiences in which they felt discriminated against due to their race or social class; or, they may come from cultures in which parental involvement in schools is an unknown construct. Experiences with racism and racial discrimination may contribute to the reluctance of parents and caregivers to trust or believe messages from program staff that appear to welcome their participation. Those who wish to successfully engage Black families may need to appreciate how race and racism may shape or influence the participation of some parents with early childhood practitioners, and work to create practice that is consciously and intentionally anti-racist. Many Black families engage in racial socialization practices with their children that help to “armor” them against an environment that stigmatizes blackness and devalues them. (Hughes, 2003). Knowledge of and appreciation for how Black families address racism in rearing their children may help early childhood practitioners engage parents...
more productively. The work of practitioners is to know the Black families with whom they work and, in the process, develop trusting relationships, recognize the strengths families have, the challenges they must meet, and the adaptations they make to ensure their children’s well-being and educational success.

Clearly, early childhood programs cannot have a one-size-fits-all Black Americans approach to family engagement, but will need to consider the experiences, culture, language and strengths of specific Black families, and their communities, in developing family engagement strategies and initiatives. Regardless of where young students live or who their parents are, schools and communities have an obligation to support the engagement of each student’s parents, guardians and other significant caregivers. There is no single “best” approach to school-family-community engagement, and schools in Black communities, in particular, often struggle to find meaningful ways to engage families. Nevertheless, to be successful, schools serving young Black learners must receive feedback and have active and broad-based family and community engagement.24

*Black refers to all individuals living in the United States who identify as Black, African American or of African descent. It includes those individuals who are descendents of Africans enslaved or indentured in the United States prior to 1865 and immigrants from the African diaspora.

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**ILLINOIS DEMOGRAPHICS RELATED TO YOUNG BLACK CHILDREN AND FAMILIES**

- One in five live in poverty.
- 46% of Black children under age 6 in Illinois live in poverty compared to 28% of Latino children and 12% of White children.
- Between 2008 and 2010, median family income in Illinois declined by 3.2%.
- From 2009-2010 the child poverty rate in Illinois for Black children (40.9%) exceeded the national average (37.3%), in contrast to Latino children (25.9% in Illinois) and (31.6% nationally) and White children (10.2% in Illinois) and (12.5% nationally).

**IN A 2007 SURVEY OF ILLINOIS PARENTS,**

- 96% of Whites,
- 83% of Latinos,
- 76% of Blacks

REPORTED FEELING THAT THEIR CHILDREN WERE USUALLY SAFE AT SCHOOL.

- 43% of Head Start children in Illinois are Black, in comparison to 34% of Latino children and 22% of White children.
- As measured by performance on the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 4th grade national assessments: 12% of Black 4th graders in Illinois were proficient in reading compared to 18% of Latinos and 45% of Whites; and in math 14% of Black children in Illinois were proficient, compared to 20% of Latinos and 51% of White children.
- In 2009-2010 poverty rates for single mother households in Illinois were 46.6% for Black mothers, compared to 40.7% for Latinas, and 30.4% for Whites; and for single father households poverty rates for Black fathers were 37%, compared to 22.9% for Latinos and 14.9% for Whites.
- A survey of Illinois parents reported that 59% of Black children had mothers who reported that their overall health was excellent or very good, compared to 47% of Latino children and 74% of White children.25
**Point of Proof:**

**OUNCE OF PREVENTION FUND**

**CHICAGO, ILLINOIS**

**WHAT MAKES THIS PROJECT A “POINT OF PROOF?”**

Educare Chicago’s school embraces our community’s most vulnerable children and families with programming, resources and instructional support to develop early learning skills and engage parents in nurturing their children’s academic readiness. Since 2000, Educare Chicago has primarily served Black children and families, and we are making a measurable, long-term difference in their lives. Our program outcomes demonstrate how Educare is closing the achievement gap for low-income families, and that our students sustain learning gains in elementary school.

**WHAT IS THIS PROJECT’S ELEVATOR SPEECH?**

Founded in 1982, the Ounce of Prevention Fund (the Ounce) is a nonprofit organization based in Chicago. Its mission is to give children in poverty the best chance for success in school and in life by advocating for and providing the highest quality care and education from birth to age five. The Ounce owns and operates Educare Chicago in direct service of this mission. Founded in 2000, Educare Chicago is a school committed to demonstrating that high-quality early education can prevent the persistent achievement gap among children from low-income communities. We have developed strong public and private philanthropic partnerships that support our full-day, full-year Educare model.

In 2004, the Ounce joined with Buffet Early Childhood Fund to support the development of other local public-private partnerships in diverse communities across the country to serve at-risk children and families. This joint initiative is the Educare network of schools, which now includes 21 schools, based on the Educare Chicago model.

**WHO PARTICIPATES IN THIS PROJECT?**

Located in Chicago’s Grand Boulevard neighborhood, Educare Chicago serves at-risk children ages six weeks to five years. Currently, the school serves 145 children and families from across Chicago in its full-day, full-year program. Approximately 98% of Educare Chicago students are Black, and 100% of our school’s population is below the poverty line. To qualify for enrollment in Educare Chicago, families must fall within the poverty guidelines updated periodically in the *Federal Register* by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services under the authority of 42 U.S.C. 9902(2). In 2015, the qualifying income for a family of four was $24,250.

**HOW DOES THIS PROJECT DEFINE SUCCESS?**

Educare’s key outcomes ensure that children are prepared for a successful transition to kindergarten and narrow the achievement gap for at-risk students. These goals are measured in terms of a child’s school (kindergarten) readiness, early literacy and vocabulary, and social and emotional skills.

To drive longer term outcomes, Educare Chicago and the Ounce have partnered with the University of Chicago Urban Education Institute and the University of Chicago Charter Schools to envision and develop a birth-to-college continuum: a coherent set of education experiences and supports for students and families, as well as the professionals and organizations that serve them. The continuum is characterized by evidence-based, high-quality experiences and supports for students and their families.

**HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN THIS PROJECT IS SUCCESSFUL?**

Ensuring that children are prepared for a successful transition to kindergarten and narrowing the achievement gap for at-risk children are Educare’s key desired outcomes.

Educare Chicago, as part of the Educare network of schools, serves approximately 3,000 children and guides professional development for 900 early childhood staff. National evaluation of Educare schools has been conducted by the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (FPG) since 2005.

FPG leads the Educare Implementation Study, which assesses the Educare model in terms of a child’s school readiness, early literacy and vocabulary, social and emotional skills, and classroom quality across the network of schools. A number of nationally normed and widely used tests are used to collect data for the implementation study.
Low-income children typically enter kindergarten with vocabulary levels and pre-literacy skills well below their middle-class peers. Using the Peabody Picture Vocabulary test, our findings indicate that kindergarten-bound Educare children score an average of 95, near the national average (100) and higher than most low-income children in other large studies of early achievement. The earlier the child enrolled in Educare, the higher his/her vocabulary score. Children who entered Educare before age 2 scored an average of 98.2 on this measure.

Kindergarten teachers note that problems with social skills, inability to follow directions and difficulty doing independent and group work are possible causes of a child’s difficult transition into kindergarten. Our study shows that Educare children enter kindergarten exhibiting average or above average social-emotional skills, which help the children deal with new demands, new teachers and new peers. To assess our impact, Educare uses the Devereaux Early Childhood Assessment, a nationally normed assessment that measures behavior.

Good classroom quality enhances child outcomes in the areas of language, vocabulary, early math and social skills. A number of assessments are used to measure quality in the classroom including the Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS-R), the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-R) and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). Average Educare scores for ITERS-R and ECERS-R in 2014 were between 5 and 7, which indicate high quality. CLASS scores in 2014 were in the high to moderately high range, 3.4-6.3.

In addition to the implementation study, Educare Chicago is also involved in a follow-up study, which specifically tracks a number of Educare children and families after they leave Educare, and enter the Chicago school system. Several important findings are revealed through this study, including:

- Parents in the study reported that Educare Chicago was instrumental in ensuring that their child was prepared for kindergarten socio-emotionally, behaviorally and academically.

- On average, 74% of former Educare parents were seen as having the same level or more participation than their peers, as indicated by K-3 classroom teachers. When parents are involved, students have better test scores and higher grades, enroll in higher level classes, attend school and pass their classes, develop better social skills, graduate from high school, attend college and find productive work.

- In qualitative research, the majority of Educare parents described positive parenting attitudes, practices and beliefs. The parents reported a willingness to communicate with teachers about their child, and described specific ways in which they tried to support their child’s learning in the home.

Change the first five years, and you change everything.
Parents described how they valued education as a “way to a better future” for their child, tried to support their child’s learning by being available to assist with homework and recognized the positive impact of communicating with their child’s teacher. Parents credited learning these values and strategies for supporting their child to their experiences with Educare staff.

Input from our families and staff also serves as an important measure for our school’s success. We regularly survey both our parents and staff members to ensure our program has met the needs these groups express.

WHAT MAKES IT SUCCESSFUL?

The Educare model’s theory of change includes four core domains of practice that, in the context of strong school leadership and tightly linked community partners, aim to enhance achievement and the overall well-being of Educare children and families, driving measurable outcomes:

1. High-quality teaching practices create individualized experiences for our children, helping them to develop the social and academic skills they need to succeed in school and in life.
2. Data, developed in conjunction with our research partners, is used to tailor instruction to meet each child’s developmental needs, as well as to continuously improve our overall program.
3. Engaged families are supported so they can develop strong bonds with their children and become champions for their child’s education.
4. Professional development is embedded in schools so we have well-trained, well-supported teachers and staff working with our children.

These domains are highly interdependent. Without all four in place, working together, Educare Chicago would not experience its current level of success.

Key partnerships also drive Educare Chicago’s effectiveness and success. We work closely with Head Start, Early Head Start; Chicago Public Schools; University of Chicago Urban Education Institute; University of Chicago Charter Schools; as well as with private philanthropists and local community organizations to ensure that staff, children and families have access to the right resources to grow and thrive.
WHAT CHALLENGES HAS IT FACED?
While early education has been gaining ground as a bipartisan issue, funding for early education remains a challenge in Illinois. Most recently, the state’s financing for Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP), one of Educare Chicago’s funding streams, was suspended. Though the Illinois state government restored the CCAP money, programs were affected by temporary income loss. Educare Chicago was able to weather this budgetary crisis because the Ounce uses a blend of public and private funding.

Continued support by state and federal funding remains a top priority for the program, but ensuring its sustainability is a challenge. By educating lawmakers on the importance and the value of early learning from both a public policy and economic perspective, we advocate for family-centered policies that remove barriers for participation in early childhood programs.

Family eligibility to access our school is also a challenge, and an issue for broader consideration when working with Black families. Working to bridge funder requirements and widen the definition of eligibility, to include not only families well below the poverty line but also those barely sustaining their basic needs, is how we ensure that families are eligible for our program, and that they remain eligible.

HOW IS THIS PROJECT SUSTAINABLE?
Since its inception in 2000, Educare Chicago has served as a model for early learning programs. Not only has the school sustained itself and grown in the last 15 years, it is the inspiration behind the national network of schools.

For financial sustainability, the Ounce uses public and private funding to support the work of our national organization, including Educare Chicago. Specifically, Head Start and Early Head Start generally fund 50-60% of Educare Chicago’s operational costs. Our blended funding stream also draws on Illinois Preschool for All funding, Illinois Child Care Assistance Program dollars and private philanthropy.

Family engagement is a key component of Educare Chicago’s model and is critical to the school’s success and sustainability. Parents who are involved become more confident in the school’s efforts, become more involved in their child’s development and are our strongest ambassadors to the community. The school engages parents and guardians through parent/caregiver support meetings, involvement in their child’s activities and activities that help them in their own efforts as adults and primary providers. In 2013, Educare Chicago parents of Educare graduates formed the Educare Chicago Alumni Network (ECAN). ECAN parents serve as our strongest recruiters and most vocal ambassadors for the positive impact and work at Educare Chicago.

All of these Educare components working together have had a positive impact on the future of the Black child in Chicago.

HOW IS THIS PROJECT REPLICABLE?
We just opened our 21st Educare School in San Jose, Calif. The Educare model has been proven replicable when implemented with fidelity and integrity. Part of what makes Educare “Educare” across the country is our ability to provide consistent technical assistance, training, program design and supports to ensure authentic replication and sustainability of our project.

Our advice to others who wish to be successful in this work is to build strong partnerships focused on a common goal, which should be articulated early and consistently. Also, look for models—such as Educare—at the local, state and national levels that employ research and data to develop high-quality practices and create a culture of continuous improvement.

WHAT IS THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT THING PEOPLE SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THIS PROJECT?
Recently, we asked parents at Educare Chicago to share what being a parent helps them to learn. One parent responded: “I learn different things about my daughter every day. She’s different from my other child, and I’ve learned that I need to come up with different ways to help her. Educare helps me to find new ways to work with her by participating in more classroom activities.”

Many parents answered similarly, illustrating the influence that Educare Chicago has on both parents and children. Parents in our 2014 follow-up study describe how they value education as the “way to a better future” for their children.

In a 2009 interview, President Barack Obama stated that education was the most important issue for the Black community in the United States. He went on to tell a small group of reporters from Black media outlets, “If we close the achievement gap, then a big chunk of economic inequality in this society is diminished.”

We want Educare Chicago to play that role of equalizer in the City of Chicago. Change the first five years, and you change everything.
Using Reading and Writing
To Nurture The Intellectual Development of Black Boys

Alfred W. Tatum, Ph.D.
Dean of the College of Education and Director of the Reading Clinic
University of Illinois at Chicago

For more than two decades, I have studied the literacy development of Black boys. It has become clear that taking an uncompromising stance to advance their literacy development across the pre-K to 12 spectrum is crucial as higher levels of literacy correlate with access to advanced educational opportunities. Moreover, the ability to read and write well is a form of protection against the disproportionate mistreatment and exclusion of Black boys from enrichment opportunities in schools. This exclusion is compounded when boys are not focused on their long-term educational trajectories. In practice, critical literacy-related variables, including reading and writing instruction, assessment practices and curricular materials, fall short in moving Black boys to advanced levels of reading and writing. In short, the roles of literacy development for Black boys are not clearly defined.

School-sanctioned literacy practices, informed by a narrow framing of instructional assessments, compromise the literacy development of Black boys. Additionally, current educational practices and policies lack the historical foundation to advance the reading, writing and intellectual development of Black boys. My review of policy authorizations at the local, state and national levels (e.g., No Child Left Behind, Race to The Top, five-year school improvement plans) led me to conclude that failure is being openly authorized for Black boys through adoption of the slow-growth literacy orientation that frames literacy authorizations. For example, many school district websites indicate that only a certain percentage of Black children are expected to read at a proficient level after a designated period of time. This point is illustrated in the chart below, which outlines Minneapolis Public Schools’ Acceleration 2020 plan.

If 24% of students are reading at a proficient level in year one, literacy plans are developed to have 32% and 40% of students meet standards by years two and three, respectively. The chart illustrates, however, that a large percentage of students are forecasted to languish below proficiency. It is not uncommon to see these public displays of prolonged and projected failure. In practice, it is the national standard for “urban” or “at risk” student populations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District Measures</th>
<th>Target Rationale</th>
<th>Current Performance SY13-14 (unless otherwise noted) SY14-15</th>
<th>SY14-15</th>
<th>SY15-16</th>
<th>SY16-17</th>
<th>SY17-18</th>
<th>SY18-19</th>
<th>SY19-20</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading proficiency</td>
<td>5% annual increase overall</td>
<td>42% 47% 52% 57% 62% 67% 72%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading proficiency - Students of Color</td>
<td>8% annual increase for Students of Color (SOC) Eliminate achievement gap</td>
<td>24% 32% 40% 48% 56% 64% 72%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Data Source: www.mpls.k12.mn.us
Supporting information provided annually. Performance data by race/ethnicity and program (ELL, Sped, FRL)
CHALLENGING CURRENT PRACTICES AND AUTHORIZATION

To challenge current authorizations and practices that have little chance of shattering the persistent literacy gap between high-performing and low-performing readers, I began with two questions:

1. Why are educators missing the mark with regard to growing the reading and writing of low-academically performing students, specifically Black boys in this case, across urban, suburban, and rural schools?

2. What can be learned from the types of reading and writing that engaged Black men and youth across a 300-year historical span in the United States?

My goals for investigating these questions were two-fold. First, I was interested in nurturing the next generation of young Black male writers while simultaneously researching practices that lead to this aim. I adopted a focus on writing because I have observed that boys can fake reading, but they cannot fake writing. Good writing, in my estimation, is also the true intellectual literacy enterprise that requires Black boys to use their knowledge, language and information from texts to communicate in meaningful ways. Secondly, I wanted to conceptualize and implement an exponential-growth literacy model that results in Black elementary-aged boys reading at advanced levels. This model would counter the slow-growth literacy orientation described earlier. It was critical that several things be evident during the exponential-growth orientation. There has to be evidence of:

1. Language development
2. Skill and knowledge development
3. Intellectual development
4. Personal development

Through this model, clear indicators that Black boys are becoming better readers and writers, and learning information from a wide range of fiction and nonfiction texts, would be evidenced. The historical record of reading and writing among Black men and youth indicates that reading and writing experiences were grounded in four human development platforms: defining self, becoming resilient, engaging others and building capacity for future generations.2 These platforms are not sanctioned in the most recently adopted U.S. literacy reforms. Therefore, I developed a literacy model that encompasses current reading research and a strong historical foundation in an effort to yield exponential growth for Black boys.
USING AN EXPONENTIAL-GROWTH LITERACY ORIENTATION WITH ELEMENTARY-AGED BLACK BOYS

In 2010, I created an outreach initiative in an elementary school for fourth- and fifth-grade boys, called Boys College, to pilot an exponential-growth literacy model. The model, which had multiple dimensions, was designed to engage high-performing and low-performing readers with challenging texts across multiple disciplines while concurrently strengthening their concept of reading: provide opportunities to decode multi-syllabic words; improving reading fluency; apply new vocabulary; improve comprehension monitoring; engage them in close readings of text; and demonstrate comprehension through reading and writing across two texts. All dimensions occurred in one hour of instruction to align with an exponential-growth orientation designed to accelerate reading achievement:

Each lesson was anchored by one fictional text (e.g., classics, poetry) and one to three pages of non-fiction texts across disciplines (e.g., philosophy, sociology, law, psychology, biology, engineering). As a teacher and researcher, I charged Black boys to read and write across two challenging, developmentally appropriate texts in a supportive instructional environment that focused on their personal and academic growth. The key was engaging Black boys with both powerful instruction and powerful texts. For example, boys read excerpts from James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* and Ralph Waldo Emerson’s *Self-Reliance*. They realized that all texts belong to them regardless of the author’s race. More importantly, they became better readers and writers as their intellectual development was nurtured.3

While the exponential-growth literacy orientation was initially conceptualized for Black boys, girls and boys across ethnicities benefitted from the model in a university reading clinic setting. The program was implemented as a 14-hour intervention at the University of Illinois at Chicago’s Reading Clinic, and has served more than 60 students since 2012. The Gray Diagnostic Reading Test was administered as a pre- and post-test to measure grade year gains. During the first program year, 83% of students demonstrated gains, while 100% did so during the second year.

The model is now part of a three-year research study being conducted across five Chicago schools with a total of 1,000 Black boys. Black graduate students with an interest in the literacy development are providing the instruction. Each neighborhood school has a predominantly African American student population with an average poverty rate of 97%.

It is not my goal to uplift this model as the only one for advancing the literacy development of Black boys, but it is important to adopt an exponential-growth orientation as slow-growth models are working to the prolonged detriment of Black boys. The literacy growth experienced by Black boys will be driven by the authorizations and practices we put in place at the federal and state levels, where the prevailing orientation is currently slow-growth. The reading, writing, and intellectual development of Black boys are at stake. The time is now for our community to advocate for an exponential-growth orientation to what is both possible and necessary to ensure their intellectual potential is fulfilled.
Since 2003, Black students’ 4th grade reading scores have increased by 5 points, compared to White students’ scores, which have increased by 3 points.
**Point of Proof:**

**GOVERNORS STATE UNIVERSITY**

UNIVERSITY PARK, ILLINOIS

**WHAT MAKES THIS PROJECT A “POINT OF PROOF?”**

Governors State University Family Development Center (FDC) is a high-quality early childhood education center that provides accredited, developmentally appropriate education and support services to pregnant women and children up to 5 years of age. Using a comprehensive Early Head Start model, a research-based curriculum, measurable outcomes and parent engagement to set child centered goals, we have both increased access to health care and ensured children are ready for kindergarten.

**WHAT IS THIS PROJECT’S ELEVATOR SPEECH?**

Using a comprehensive approach incorporating Early Head Start and National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) standards, our goal is to start working with the child and family before birth through age five. If we can start early and provide education and support to the entire family using research-based best practices, parents learn to be the child’s first, best educator and advocate, and children leave FDC prepared to learn. A child leaves the program for kindergarten, but continues to achieve, because we have supported the family in their educational journey.

**WHO PARTICIPATES IN THIS PROJECT?**

The project is open to any pregnant woman or child in the community, including Governors State University students, faculty and the surrounding communities of Chicago Southland. Our funding sources include Early Head Start and state Preschool For All, so the majority (54%) of our enrollment is low income or at risk for school failure as defined by our community assessment.

**OUR PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS:**

- 66% of participants are Black; 22% are White; 7% are Biracial; 5% are Latino; and less than 5% are Asian or Native American
- 70% of participants are from single-parent families, and 30% are from two-parent families
- 42% of participants are on Medicaid, and 10% are children with diagnosed disabilities

**HOW DOES THIS PROJECT DEFINE SUCCESS?**

FDC went through a rigorous strategic planning process, and has measurable goals and objectives for student success: By 2020 all children in the program will be at or above 90% of age expected norms of development by the end of each school year. The norms align with school readiness outcomes for Head Start and the State of Illinois Early Learning standards.

To track progress toward this goal, child outcomes on indicators for school readiness are assessed. Achievement is aggregated and measured three times a year using a criterion referenced, authentic assessment called Teaching Strategies GOLD. Teaching Strategies GOLD is a reliable, authentic assessment of children’s progress developed by Teaching Strategies, Inc. Assessment is based on teacher observations and documentation using photo, video and audio recordings. Measuring achievement this frequently allows teachers to analyze data for each child and their classroom, and make necessary curriculum changes quickly. Each child has an individualized curriculum and, by the end of each year, achievement scores are measured and bench-marked against our goals. Professional development is targeted based on child outcomes data.

Health care indicators are tracked during the school year and are reported at the end of the year. Indicators include access to a medical home, percent of children up to date on a schedule of preventative well child visits, and percent of children up to date on their immunizations.

We keep close track of health outcomes by screening all children at or within 45 days of enrollment. Vision, hearing and dental are screened within 45 days of enrollment for all children under the age of three. Children are also screened for any development issues within this period. If children seem to be delayed or developmentally delayed, or are identified to have a specific disability, they are
referred early so they can receive services needed to bring their development to appropriate age level. Following the initial assessment, children are then screened every six months to ensure they remain on track. At age three, all children are screened annually for vision, hearing and language issues.

HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN THIS PROJECT IS SUCCESSFUL?

**School Readiness Indicators**

We consider the project successful when the children are successful. All children enrolled in FDC early childhood education programs are meeting or exceeding 92% of the indicators for school readiness. Math and literacy skills continue to be the most challenging to improve. Identifying names and letters, engaging in conversation, counting, quantifying, and understanding spatial relationships and shapes are the objectives most in need of improvement, and on which teachers focus specialized instruction.

**DATA ON 172 CHILDREN, 63% BLACK AND 22% WHITE, FROM 2013 INDICATE THAT THE MAJORITY OF CHILDREN ARE MEETING OR EXCEEDING THE FOLLOWING SCHOOL READINESS INDICATORS:**
AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN PERFORM SLIGHTLY BETTER IN LANGUAGE SKILLS, WITH SCORES BETWEEN ONE AND FIVE PERCENTAGE POINTS HIGHER.

White children perform slightly better in math skills, with scores between one and five percentage points higher.\(^1\)

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**THE 2015 DATA ON CHILDREN FROM BIRTH TO KINDERGARTEN reveals few differences in outcomes between African American and White children: 103 African American children, 58% of whom are male, and 33 White children, 52% of whom are male, are included in this data on school readiness indicators, which demonstrates minor differences in Language and Math skills:**

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Health Indicators
Keeping children healthy is an important aspect to school readiness. Ill children miss many days of school and cannot concentrate. We have procedures that require children to stay up to date on immunizations and a schedule of well-child visits from birth to age five, but, most importantly, we assist families in finding needed care when it is not available or children are not up to date.

In 2010, the first year of tracking health indicators, only 53% of children were up to date on well child visits, although 86% had access to a medical home. This year, 97% of children were up to date on well child visits and 100% have access to a medical home. In 2010, 65% of children were up to date on their immunizations when entering the program. By the end of school year 2014-2015, 96% were up to date on all immunizations.

We also know the project is successful because parents bring their children back year after year. When parents move away or lose a subsidy, or leave because they think we are priced too high, 90% return because the cheaper or “other” program is not as high quality or doesn’t provide the same supports as FDC.

WHAT MAKES IT SUCCESSFUL?
FDC is successful because we use a process of continuous improvement. We set high expectations for children and teachers. Once we meet a goal, objective or benchmark, we move the bar higher. We use the accreditation standards for the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and use reliable, valid tools to measure progress in the quality of our program. In addition to measuring children's progress, we measure classroom quality using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales (ECERS) and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). Both measures are reliable and have been shown to correlate with children’s readiness for school.

A key element of our success is collaboration with university faculty and the community to provide supports for children and families. As an Early Head Start program, we have family support and health workers on staff, and access to community advisory committees. Our Health Services Advisory Committee provides advice and best practice information to our Health Services Director. It also assists in finding needed services, such as where to access dental care for low-income families.

As a university program, we collaborate with several departments, including Education; Special Education; Social Work; Psychology and Counseling; Nursing; Occupational and Speech Therapy; Physical Therapy and Communication Disorders. Professors bring students to observe and assess children, with parent permission, and offer professional development at no cost to FDC staff.

If a child is having problems adjusting to the demands of a classroom environment, we work with the family to make referrals and classroom modifications. If the child is still having behavior issues in a classroom, we work with our mental health consultant to provide support to the family and offer free counseling. Only if the family refuses to cooperate will we consider suspension, and that is after all other avenues have been exhausted. According to research, being suspended from school is a risk factor for dropping out in later years, and Black students are suspended at higher rates. If children are not in school, even preschool, they cannot learn and will not meet indicators for school readiness. By intervening early and providing supports in a culturally sensitive manner, FDC has lowered expulsion rates. Since implementing this process two years ago, we have not suspended a child.

WHAT CHALLENGES HAS IT FACED?
Programs at FDC are funded through a combination of state and federal funds, and parent tuition. Sustainable funding is always an issue in this era of budget cuts and state deficits. By diversifying funding, and achieving recognition through accreditation and a high level on the state quality rating system, FDC has achieved sustainability through a mix of state, federal and private funding. Federal Early Head Start funding comprises 44%; state Preschool for All funding, 15%; tuition and fee payments from the parents, 40%; and private donations comprise 1% of all revenue.

Currently, the state of Illinois does not have a budget, and drastic cuts have been made to Child Care Assistance programs and social service providers. These changes have not yet impacted our budget, but will do so negatively if they continue. The only state funding that has been increased for the current year is Preschool for All, and our allocation was restored to 2012 levels on July 1, 2015.

HOW IS THIS PROJECT SUSTAINABLE?
We believe that providing the highest quality services makes FDC sustainable. Our programs have achieved accreditation through NAEYC, and been awarded a GOLD level rating through the Illinois state child care system. We believe this makes us more valuable to both families and funders. Tuition for our services is comparable to the local market rate for accredited centers, and we are always seeking private and public funding to enhance services. If we are not responsive to the community, enrollment will drop, as will revenue. Grants provide enough revenue to enhance
the quality of our services and allows us to give discounted services to families. Combining grant funding with parent payments make us less dependent on either funding stream.

We engage families and the community on several advisory committees, and request feedback from families on an annual basis so we can continue to provide relevant, quality services. We believe this contributes to sustainability because we are able to adapt to the needs of the community more quickly.

**HOW IS THIS PROJECT REPLICABLE?**

The leadership of the University and program have high expectations, and require that FDC operate all programs using the latest research on high quality, developmentally appropriate comprehensive services. Early Childhood Education programs throughout the state can collaborate with universities to secure access to counseling, nursing, social work and other interns that provide critical student and family support services. Program staff can also create advisory committees, inviting faculty to participate and inform best practice implementation to drive a culture of continuous improvement.

Accreditation standards from NAEYC provide a framework for excellence, which has been replicated nationwide. Operating the NAEYC standards to fidelity assures a high quality program that allows all children to achieve at high levels. The use of a continuous improvement model with valid, reliable measures also contributes to high quality and is replicable. Child care programs can contact their Child Care Resource and Referral agency for training and assistance on how to use reliable tools such as the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales.

**WHAT IS THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT THING PEOPLE SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THIS PROJECT?**

High quality, high expectations and comprehensive support for families level the playing field for children. All children can succeed, and it is the responsibility of caring adults, including parents and education professionals, to ensure children’s success. A comprehensive model, based on high quality teaching standards that support the child and family, are keys to success for all children.
MOVING BEYOND EXCLUSION TO INCLUSION:
The Significance of Culturally Responsive Teaching to Black Students

ANGELA SEARCY, M.S., D.T.
Erikson Institute

Statistics show exclusionary discipline, or the permanent removal of a student from a school, is used at disproportionately high rates with African American students.¹ This type of discipline implies that the reasons behind inappropriate behavior lie within the individual student. However, teaching in a way that is incompatible with how students learn puts students at risk for both academic and behavioral difficulties. When the teacher’s style of instruction does not match the student’s style of learning, misbehavior can result.² In practice, misbehavior may be the function of teachers’ failure to meet the needs of diverse students.³

To meet the challenges of increasingly diverse students, who vary in culture and language, research demonstrates that educators must employ theoretically sound and culturally-responsive teaching techniques.⁴ Literature on culturally-responsive teaching illustrates that “the academic achievement of ethnically diverse students will improve when they are taught through their own cultural and experiential filters.”⁵ Moreover, applying a culturally-responsive pedagogy has been shown to enhance student engagement and reduce student alienation and apathy.⁶

Culturally-responsive teaching is a useful strategy through which faculty can deliver instruction. It is defined as “using the cultural characteristics, experiences and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively.”⁷ It involves helping students to maintain cultural integrity through instructor use of student cultures as a medium for learning.⁸ More specifically, culturally-responsive teaching acknowledges diversity by adding multicultural content and instructional strategies to curriculum.⁹ It involves cultural scaffolding that is tailored to the learner’s own culture and experience.¹⁰
Many theorists have explored the influence of culture on learning and development. Lev Vygotsky, Howard Gardner and Jerome Bruner all emphasized the role of culture and context. Caring communities of culturally responsive teaching correspond closely with Vygotsky’s belief that social interaction is central to cognition. As in the culturally responsive framework, Gardener focused on the importance of individual learner strengths, and Burner described how “meanings are created and negotiated within communities.”

This model also embraces a variety of instructional techniques. Rita Dunn asserts, “Children are not failing because of curriculum. Students can learn almost any subject matter when they are taught with methods and approaches that are responsive to their learning style strengths.” Research has demonstrated that “when students are taught with approaches that match their preferences they demonstrate statistically high achievement.”

In conclusion, culturally-responsive teaching has the potential to mitigate the disproportionate rate at which African American students are subject to exclusionary discipline as the result of inappropriate behavior. To lessen the frequency with which African American students are disciplined for misbehavior, teachers must analyze the cultural and contextual factors influencing their behavior and learning, and deliver instruction in a more culturally-responsive manner. This strategy will better meet the instructional needs of African American students, increasing their overall engagement and supporting positive academic outcomes. Ultimately, culturally-responsive strategies require teachers to ask themselves what schools require of students: to learn something new about themselves and their classroom environments, and to adapt their behavior accordingly.

Culturally-responsive teaching has the potential to mitigate the disproportionate rate at which African American students are subject to exclusionary discipline as the result of inappropriate behavior.

### Comparison of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) Practices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicators of CRT (Ladson-Billings, 2001)</th>
<th>Descriptive Characteristics of CRT (Gay, 2000)</th>
<th>Funds of Knowledge (Moll et al., 1992)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic Achievement</strong> Teacher:</td>
<td>CRT is Empowering Teacher encourages academic competence, personal competence, courage, and the will to act.</td>
<td>1. Teachers identify knowledge, skills, and practices that enable modest-income families to live their lives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Presumes students capable.</td>
<td>CRT is Transformative Teacher recognizes existing strength and accomplishments of students and enhancing them further in the instructional process.</td>
<td>2. Teaching learning process is improved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Delineates achievement in classroom context.</td>
<td>CRT is Comprehensive Teachers teach the whole child.</td>
<td>3. Educational excellence supported.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Knows content, learner, and learners’ style.</td>
<td>CRT is Multidimensional Teachers make use of encompassing curriculum, content, learning contexts, classroom climate, student-teacher relationships, instructional techniques, and performance assessments.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Supports curricular critical consciousness.</td>
<td>CRT is Validating Teacher uses cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of CLD learners to make learning more relevant and effective.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Encourages academic achievement.</td>
<td>CRT is Socially Conscious Teacher: 1. Knows larger sociopolitical context (school, community, nation, and world).</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Cultural Competence</strong> Teacher:</td>
<td>CRT is Emancipatory Teacher lifts the veil of presumed absolute authority from conceptions of scholarly truths typically taught in schools.</td>
<td>1. Teachers enter students’ homes as learners, conducting household interviews and observations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Understands culture and role of culture in education.</td>
<td>CRT is Comprehensive Teachers teach the whole child.</td>
<td>2. Later, teachers reflect on the meaning of their findings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Takes responsibility for learning about students’ culture and community.</td>
<td>CRT is Multidimensional Teachers make use of encompassing curriculum, content, learning contexts, classroom climate, student-teacher relationships, instructional techniques, and performance assessments.</td>
<td>3. Teachers collaborate to devise appropriate teaching practices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Uses students’ culture as basis for learning.</td>
<td>CRT is Validating Teacher uses cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of CLD learners to make learning more relevant and effective.</td>
<td>4. Relationships between students’ families and teachers are strengthened.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Promotes flexible use of students’ local and global cultures.</td>
<td>CRT is Socially Conscious Teacher: 1. Knows larger sociopolitical context (school, community, nation, and world).</td>
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Point of Proof:

ERIKSON INSTITUTE NEW SCHOOLS PROJECT

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

WHAT MAKES THIS PROJECT A “POINT OF PROOF?”

New Schools Project (NSP) builds sustainable capacity for high-quality early childhood teaching in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and has been a part of Erikson Institute since 2003. Since then, NSP has supported 39 schools and principals, over 500 teachers and over 10,000 students. In 2013, to strengthen learning communities across schools, NSP created a Leadership Circle to expand and continue its work building the leadership capacity of teachers at schools that have completed an intensive three-year partnership.

NSP’s focus on Pre-K to third grade teacher effectiveness draws on research documenting that high-quality teaching and the alignment of educational experiences across the early grades, can reverse patterns of underachievement and promote children’s long-term school success (Reynolds, et al, 2001). Our interventions ensure that children from all social, cultural, racial and language backgrounds love coming to school and thrive intellectually. We support teachers in developing high expectations for children, culturally-informed practices, appropriate assessment strategies and effective engagement with families.

2015 is NSP’s first year partnering with a network within CPS instead of working with individual schools. By supporting Network Six, we are able to work with schools in close proximity to each other, allowing NSP to implement Pre-K to third grade interventions that have administrative continuity and support from the network chief, staff, principal and teachers. This model creates a stronger platform to leverage change within and across neighborhood schools.

WHAT IS THIS PROJECT’S ELEVATOR SPEECH?

NSP establishes partnerships with public school administrators and teachers to advance third grade as a unique educational period that sets the foundation for children’s long-term school success. Research documents that high quality, cohesive teaching from preschool through third grade yields enduring benefits for children’s learning. NSP partnerships advance quality teaching practices in third grade that target oral language and literacy learning in all content areas (literature, the arts, social studies, sciences, and mathematics), and that recognize young children’s developmental talents and needs inclusive of cultural, linguistic and developmental differences.

WHO PARTICIPATES IN THIS PROJECT?

NSP is currently partnering with over 15 schools, serving diverse neighborhoods of Chicago. We have a history and presence partnering with Chicago’s Austin neighborhood.

In 2013–14, the New Schools Project served more than 2,600 Pre-K to third grade students enrolled in racially and linguistically diverse partner schools in Chicago: 90% of these students were from low-income communities; 39% of students were African American; 38% were Hispanic; 2% were Multi-racial; and 1% were Asian.

More than 140 teachers, teacher assistants and content specialists received intensive professional development support during the same school year. Teachers had an average of 10.4 years of experience, and 71% had advanced degrees. New teachers with less than three years of experience made up about 14.5% of the NSP participants. Additionally, 47% of teachers were white; 41% African American; 8% Hispanic; 2% Multi-racial; and 2% other.

Our interventions ensure that children from all social, cultural, racial and language backgrounds love coming to school, and thrive intellectually.
HOW DOES THIS PROJECT DEFINE SUCCESS?

NSP’s goal is to create third grade models of excellence in oral language and literacy development that are sustainable and replicable in CPS and beyond. Success is characterized by schools with strong Pre-K to third grade leadership teams that convene grade level, cross grade level and school-wide staff meetings to address the school’s culture and climate, curriculum, teaching practices and student data. Student data shows evidence of learning in oral and written language, as well as content area learning. Teachers in successful schools contribute to and participate in Teacher Professional Development initiatives, including professional writing, presenting at local, regional and professional conferences, hosting classroom visits from teachers at other schools, making presentations in teacher preparation programs, mentoring student teachers, pursuing advanced degree or credentials and leading professional development sessions at their schools. Family participation and satisfaction is also an important factor of a successful school. Parent, staff and children’s school climate ratings consistently improve and finally, there is evidence of the school engaging families in children’s learning and collaborating with them to achieve school goals.

Erikson’s New School Project provides intentional, ongoing and multi-faceted professional development in language and literacy development to third grade school teams and if we strengthen third grade teachers’ knowledge of and ability to implement effective beginning reading instruction, then we will successfully improve the quality of our youngest children’s school experience and they will become proficient readers by third grade.

HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN THIS PROJECT IS SUCCESSFUL?

Success is achieved when we gather evidence of a robust third grade professional learning community, including school administrators, teachers and support staff at a school. In successful schools, there is alignment within and across grade levels in curriculum, teaching practices and assessment outcomes. There is also a practice of intellectually rigorous, content rich, developmentally appropriate, culturally- and linguistically-responsive teaching that permeates the school. As a result of having these things in place, student learning consistently and continuously increases as measured by key formative assessments, including CLASS, Reading 3D, DIBELS, and the TRC assessment. Summative assessment data, such as NWEA MAP reading scores, also steadily increase.

In 2013, a higher percent of students in partner schools were meeting or exceeding 3rd grade targets on the ISAT compared to students in other schools across the district. For ISAT reading scores, an average of 50.1% of students in partner schools met or exceeded the target in comparison to the CPS average of 45.3%.
NSP gathers evidence on teacher practice change in different ways over time, including teaching practices in writing and reading (via pre/post self-assessment and independent observation). Teachers rated how their participation in learning communities and collaborative work among colleagues contributed to their professional development.

Following are the percentages of 2013 teacher participants who believed NSP contributed to their professional development somewhat or a lot:

- 91% said it contributed to professional satisfaction
- 91% said it contributed to shared goals for teaching and learning
- 89% said it contributed to the effectiveness of their teaching
- 87% said it contributed to their ability to support the learning of individual students

WHAT MAKES IT SUCCESSFUL?

NSP is successful because our philosophy and practice are based on the core belief that all children are capable learners and that they bring to classrooms the ability to develop successfully through effective, culturally-informed teaching strategies, teachers with high expectations for child learning, strong curriculum, responsive classroom communities and experienced third grade teachers.

NSP staff are well trained in child development, teaching practices, and content knowledge across the curriculum. They carry this rich knowledge base to professional development initiatives along with a well-honed understanding of how to recognize, utilize and celebrate children and families’ unique culture, language, dialect and abilities in classroom learning.

WHAT CHALLENGES HAS IT FACED?

There have been many challenges in NSP efforts over the past three to five years. Severe budget problems at the state and city levels have limited funds available for public schools, including professional development of teachers. Within CPS, 55 schools have closed in the city’s highest need, most economically-challenged neighborhoods, affecting predominately Black families. Some of the schools most heavily impacted by the closings were the schools that we support.

The fall 2013 introduction of a new teacher evaluation system requires partners who work in schools to gauge outcomes in terms of the state and district’s goals. This is challenging for both our staff and teachers as these goals do not always align with what we know about developmentally appropriate, culturally- and linguistically-responsive best teaching practices in Pre-K to third grade.

HOW IS THIS PROJECT SUSTAINABLE?

Erikson Institute aggressively raises funds for NSP from local and national foundations. Erickson raises the majority of the funding for our work. In the past, it was common to fully fund the partnership so that schools did not have to pay for the cost of our support. This year, we have asked each school we serve to pay 20% of our cost. It costs over $100,000 a year to support a school at our most intense level of partnership, which spans three years and includes an on-site Erikson facilitator two days a week. All schools at this level are currently paying $15,000 for our services. This relatively new funding structure is significant as it reflects the school administrators’ commitment to our shared work. When a school invests its own budget in an initiative, its affects are more likely to be sustained beyond the partnership. This is an extraordinary time in Chicago because of the budget crisis at the state and district level. However, despite money hardships this year, schools have made the financial commitment to NSP because they value our work. For some schools, paying a portion of their fees was not an option this year because they did not have the funds. In these cases, NSP committed to raising enough philanthropic dollars to cover the full cost of the partnership.

HOW IS THIS PROJECT REPLICABLE?

NPS provides strategic support for specific goals over a four-month period, with intensive support for up to three years. It leverages a well-defined intervention philosophy and structure designed to improve teaching and learning as part the partnership process. NSP defines a set of commitments to which schools agree, an intervention timeline, fee structure and contract to guide partnerships. NSP teachers, facilitators, and faculty share best practices from these resources and experiences with colleagues through presentations at national conferences and regional symposia, where Pre-K to third grade leaders are encouraged to adopt and apply them.

WHAT IS THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT THING PEOPLE SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THIS PROJECT?

Improving school outcomes for Black children, as with all children, requires sustained professional support for administrators and teachers on the front lines. Professional learning communities should guide collaborative work across a multidisciplinary team that believes in students’ inherent academic potential, and the team’s ability to help them fulfill it in a caring instructional setting that prioritizes parents as critical partners in transforming outcomes for students.
SOCIAL EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE:
The Missing but Necessary Ingredient in Facilitating Black Children’s Academic Outcomes & Positive Development

MARISHA HUMPHRIES, PH.D.
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Fostering social and emotional health in children as a part of healthy child development must be a national priority. The integration of emotional, cognitive and social skills is needed for children to develop in age-appropriate ways, and promote their positive developmental and academic outcomes. This essay will focus on Black children’s positive social emotional development and ways in which teachers can support this development in classrooms. There will be a focus on utilizing culturally- and contextually-relevant strategies to support Black children’s social emotional development in schools.

As evidenced by the need for the National Black Child Development Institute to create briefs such as these, there is minimal research on the positive development of Black children. The extant research has overwhelmingly focused on Black children’s negative development with little to no focus on their normative or positive development. This lack of diversity and understanding of their normative and positive development is evidenced by the misperception and labeling of Black children. Many Black children’s emotions and behaviors are misinterpreted as problematic. There is a bias that Black children are loud, emotional and disruptive. There is an urgent need to understand emotional expression among Black children from a Black cultural perspective, and not to simply compare Black children to White children, deeming any differences as Black child deficits. Furthermore, if we truly want to facilitate their academic achievement, we must examine the connection between Black children’s emotionality and their academic outcomes, as well as how to support their emotional and social development in school.

Emotions are fundamental to children’s academic and cognitive achievement. Children’s learning can be facilitated or impeded by emotions. Children who are unable to regulate their emotions and behavior are unable to actively engage in learning. Research has found a significant relationship between low-income Black parents’ positive emotionality and children’s school readiness and academic achievement. Social emotional competence (SEC) abilities have been linked to school readiness and academic success. Social emotional learning (SEL) entails a child’s ability to identify emotions in themselves and others; manage their emotions appropriately; have positive interactions with teachers and peers; and solve problems effectively.

Over the last 20 years, there has been a push, in both research and school communities, to support children’s social emotional development in schools. In 2004, Illinois became the first state to adopt state learning standards for SEL. The purpose of SEL programs is to facilitate students’ positive social and emotional competence abilities, increasing academic performance and prosocial behaviors. However, these programs have, historically, been based on research that does not focus on the positive or normative development of minority children. Rather, this research has overwhelmingly focused on White middle-class children. Furthermore, minority children, especially those attending urban schools, have been targeted for SEL program implementation. As a result, these programs have been criticized for a lack of cultural diversity. If the SEL programs targeting Black children are not based on normative and positive development research of Black children, but, instead, on that of White children, what are these programs doing for and to our children? These programs do not align with cultural orientations of Black children and families. “There are many urban African American children who are well adjusted, and it is important to explore the factors related to their competency...” The few programs that have attempted to address the lack of cultural diversity in SEL programs have merely changed the physical features of the characters in program materials to various shades of brown. Color alone does not address cultural issues. Cultural diversity of Black children and families is deeper than skin color. SEL program materials need to reflect and support the cultural backgrounds of their students. Teachers want and need curricula and materials to mirror the
Culturally-relevant SEL programming increases both teachers’ and children’s engagement with program materials, and increases implementation fidelity. More importantly, it has a positive impact on children’s academic, social, and emotional development.

Black children’s social emotional competence and learning is negatively impacted by pervasive racial inequalities. Often, teachers are aware of issues related to race. However, they do not understand how it impacts Black children. Ignoring issues of race undermines the intent of SEL. Educators need to understand that SEL efforts must address issues of race and its connection to Black children’s academic outcomes and development.

ROLE OF TEACHERS

Teachers are key contributors to students’ social and emotional development. They help create a positive environment for learning. Without this positive environment, children are placed at risk of having negative academic outcomes. For instance, Black and other racial/ethnic minority children are more likely to be in low-quality classrooms, which negatively impacts their academic, social, and emotional outcomes. However, teachers who create a positive emotional classroom climate were responsive to and labeled Black children’s emotions positively. Children in these classrooms engaged in more social competence behaviors.

Although our society expects teachers to manage the emotional lives of their students, the current structure, demands and climate of schools can impede teachers’ SEL work.

In a recent qualitative study of early childhood teachers (pre-kindergarten through 3rd grade) from urban schools, teachers indicated that it was their professional responsibility to teach and support children’s SEC abilities. This sentiment was reported in spite of the mounting pressures reported to be facing their schools. Furthermore, teachers indicated that in order to instruct effectively, children need to have a solid foundation in social emotional competence abilities, and that these abilities need to be developed prior to addressing academics. This has significant implications for how school curricula are developed and implemented, as well as how schools of education and alternative pre-service education programs prepare and train teachers and school administrators. There is a need to have explicit instruction and training in SEL for pre-service teachers.

In order to facilitate SEL work, SEL programming should be integrated into the structure and academic curricula taking place in the classroom. Consistent with past reviews of early childhood classroom-based interventions, programs that were integrated into the culture of the classroom were found to be more effective. The seamless integration of SEL programming into the classroom structure increases implementation fidelity. For example, the integration of social-emotional skills into
literacy instruction has been found to promote children's positive social-emotional and academic outcomes. 20 This integration reduces the perception that SEC is separate from academics. When teachers deliver SEL programs, as opposed to non-school staff, they have been effective in promoting positive child development outcomes (e.g., SEC skill development, positive social behavior, increased academic performance), while also decreasing conduct problems and emotional distress. 21

Black children's positive behaviors and abilities often go unnoticed. Teachers often miss their positive behaviors because there is an over-focus on the negative or problematic behaviors of Black children, especially those from urban and economically stressed environments. 22 Teachers may view children's engagement and interactions with their peers in the classroom (i.e., being off task, talking) as interfering with the learning environment, 23 and not see how these behaviors also highlight children's positive social skills. The lack of attention to Black children's positive social and emotional behaviors yields a one-dimensional and incomplete presentation of their abilities.

Children's social and emotional skills can also suffer benign neglect due to the increased focus on high-stakes student testing. 24 The connection of standardized test scores to teacher salaries, job security and school closures has resulted in schools singularly focusing on academic content like mathematics, reading and science. School administrators have diverted attention and resources away from supporting students' social emotional competence abilities. There is a false and dangerous assumption that, by singularly focusing on the academics of reading, mathematics and science, we will elevate children's academic performance, and reduce the education gap between White and Black and Brown students. This false assumption is crippling Black children. The focus on the achievement gap and engaging in “gap gazing” distorts the educational issue of Black children. Biased assessment methods facilitates and widens the gap. This singular and distorted focus reifies racial stereotypes and negative believes about Black students. We must move beyond achievement gap rhetoric to acknowledge the promise of Black children. 25

Teaching academic skills (including math and literacy) should not be in opposition or competition with developing children's social emotional competence abilities. 26 It is very difficult for children to engage in and learn academic material, as well as interact socially in age-appropriate ways with classmates, if they are unable to manage their social and emotional selves. Successful schools and teachers not only prepare children academically, but support children's social emotional competence skills, thereby promoting success well into adulthood. 27 Academic success in the classroom is not achieved by ignoring the fact that children are human beings. We need to develop the whole child. The inclusion of SEC and SEL into schools is a way of supporting the whole Black child.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

To facilitate Black children's positive social emotional development in classrooms, the following culturally- and contextually-relevant strategies are proposed:

- Conduct and utilize research on the normative and positive development of Black children's social emotional competence abilities. Utilize this developmental research to develop culturally-relevant SEL programs.

- Integrate social emotional competence strategies into academics. For example, utilizing literacy as a means to promote and teach Black children social emotional competence skills.

- Implement effective teacher training, both pre- and in-service, in SEL. This includes educating future teachers on the importance of supporting Black students SEC abilities, understanding how SEC abilities are related to academic outcomes, and how to integrate SEC into their lesson plans.

- Explicit training for educators on the intersection of race and SEL. This includes how specific SEL standards and Black children’s positive racial identity facilitates positive academic and developmental outcomes.

- Incorporate the voices of key stakeholders, from both the school and children's communities, in the development of SEL programs. This inclusion can potentially improve SEL programs by making them more contextually and culturally relevant.

**CONCLUSION**

Social emotional competency (SEC) and social emotional learning (SEL) programs are gaining national acclaim and momentum given that they encourage students' successful academic performance and prosocial behaviors. 28 Although these programs, in general, have shown empirical promise, there is still much to be learned in terms of implementation with Black children and in diverse urban school contexts.
There is an urgent need to understand emotional expression among Black children from a Black cultural perspective, and not to simply compare Black children to White children, deeming any differences as Black child deficits.
**Point of Proof:**

**RILEY EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM: HARVEY SCHOOL DISTRICT 152**

**HARVEY, ILLINOIS**

**WHAT MAKES THIS PROJECT A “POINT OF PROOF?”**

Riley Early Childhood Center is a Gold Circle of Quality Program based on Excelerate Illinois, the state’s quality rating and improvement system for early learning and development programs. Gold Circle of Quality recognizes programs that meet or go beyond the highest quality goals in three areas: learning environment and teaching quality, administrative standards and staff training and education. Our program provides students and their families with the resources and tools they need to be successful. We believe that every African American child can learn regardless of their life’s circumstances. Feedback on our students indicates that they continue to be academically successful after leaving the program. Additionally, some of our parents have gone on to receive their GED, enroll in local colleges or enter the work force for the first time as a result of resources to which Riley connected them.

**WHAT IS THIS PROJECT’S ELEVATOR SPEECH?**

The Riley Early Childhood Program provides students with a high-quality Early Childhood education. Our program, in partnership with parents, is committed to identifying and addressing the needs of children and their families. The mission of our program states that we believe parents are their children’s first and most influential teacher. The vision of our program is that all children and families will receive the best quality services regardless of demographics, ZIP code or economics. Ultimately, the program seeks to lay the foundation for our children to become scholars and productive members of our global society. As a result of working closely with parents and community partners, 80% of our students are ready for kindergarten on their first day.

**WHO PARTICIPATES IN THIS PROJECT?**

Riley Early Childhood Center serves 240 Pre-K students from the communities of Harvey and Markham. Of these students, 78% are African American, 19% are Hispanic, and 3% are Native American, Multiracial or White. Our school district is over 97% low income, and its population has a variety of risk factors such as unemployment; English as second language; low educational attainment; homelessness/transience; and reliance on community assistance programs. Even though these challenges exist, our parents are not deterred from being active participants in our program. Since they want the best for their children, these factors make them even more committed to being our partners.

**HOW DOES THIS PROJECT DEFINE SUCCESS?**

Our program defines success as seeing improvement in our students’ academic and social emotional indicators, and the level of participation from parents. Students enrolled in our program exhibit multiple risk factors as defined by the Illinois State Board of Education and the Illinois Early Learning Council, including being children of teen parents; children of homeless families; children of families living in poverty or deep poverty; and children with two or more delays identified by a research-based screening tool. Since the mission of our program states that we believe parents are their children’s first and most influential teacher, we conduct a family interview to find out their specific family needs. As a team, we compile data from the interview and plan workshops to fulfill those needs. Over the years, we have offered the following workshop topics for families: kindergarten readiness skills; child development; goal setting workshops; money management; Daddy and Me groups; Mommy and Me groups; reading nights; and math and science nights. Additionally, families gain access to our community resource network; parent lending library; parent resource room; individualized learning plans; and developmental milestones checklists for their children. We also provide monthly newsletters and developmental literature to parents on a regular basis and, to promote literacy, we provide books to families on a monthly basis.

**HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN THIS PROJECT IS SUCCESSFUL?**

We know that our project is successful when significant growth is demonstrated by our students. At the beginning of last year, data from our M-Class Assessment, which measures students’ ability in alphabet recognition and vocabulary, showed that only 45% of our students were prepared for kindergarten. As a result of developing partnerships with the Greater Reading Foundation and offering workshops to our parents on kindergarten readiness skills, 80% of our students were prepared for kindergarten by the end of the school year.
Riley’s Work Sampling System, which assesses work collected three times per year, demonstrated significant improvement as well. This assessment evaluates children’s skills, knowledge, behavior and accomplishments across a wide variety of curriculum areas. By reflecting classroom goals and objectives, it helps teachers monitor children’s continuous progress and places children’s work within a broad developmental perspective. Riley’s goal is to have 100% of our children leave the program ready to learn and succeed on their first day of kindergarten, and we are making great strides in this effort as a result of parental support.

Further proof of our success is that, during the 2014-2015 school year, our program was awarded a Pre-K Expansion grant. This is a competitive grant designed to expand access to high-quality early learning opportunities. As a result, 40 new students in our area will have the opportunity to participate in a full-day Pre-K program.

By providing extra resources to program participants, such as a parent educator and curriculum coordinator, and providing our parents with extensive trainings and connecting them to resources they need in the community, Riley expects to see even more gains in student academic achievement during the next school year.

WHAT MAKES IT SUCCESSFUL?
This program is successful because we have dedicated staff, parents and members of the community who share a common goal: to provide our students with the foundation for success in school and life. Also, our stakeholders recognize their integral role to ensure that our program is a highly effective center of learning. Most importantly, we know that the work we do requires communication and commitment to, and collaboration with, parents and the broader community.

WHAT CHALLENGES HAS IT FACED?
In order for students to remain in our program, parents are required to participate in at least eight hours of service throughout the school year. Since the life and work circumstances of our families vary, we offer several options to meet this requirement. For example, we have two PTA meetings per month, one in the evening for those that work during the day, and one in the afternoon to accommodate those who work during evening hours. Also, we offer families the opportunity to volunteer from home by helping teachers prepare for classroom activities. For example, parents help cut out materials and make learning games for our students. For parents unable to attend our events, we make sure that the information or literature distributed is taken home by the students the very next day. We understand that our parents are unable to attend all of our events, but it is important that we do our part to ensure they remain actively engaged in their child’s life at school.

HOW IS THIS PROJECT SUSTAINABLE?
This program is 100% funded by the Illinois State Board of Education’s Preschool for All Grant. During President Obama’s State of the Union address, he called for Congress to support high quality preschool for all. He stated, “Research shows that one of the best investments we can make in a child's life is high-quality early education.” Since the federal government understands the importance of children receiving a high quality early childhood education, Riley doesn’t foresee any issues with receiving funding for our program. Despite the absence of an Illinois state budget, Preschool for All was funded in 2015.

HOW IS THIS PROJECT REPLICABLE?
In order for programs to be successful, Riley advises the following:

- Select dedicated administrator and staff members committed to the success of children and their families and embrace an “All Hands On Deck Philosophy”
- Create of a Professional Learning Community for staff
- Require that parents attend orientations with the principal and classroom teacher, during which the educational program, family support service offering and expectations for family involvement are outlined
- Distribution of a family handbook
- Conduct formal student assessments three times yearly to track progress
- Monitor student progress between assessments to ensure student learning goals are being met
- Create learning plans for each student and share them with parents
- Provide parents with the resources to reinforce classroom learning at home
• Interview families to identify what their needs are, and plan workshops focusing on those needs
• Provide a variety of options for parents to participate in the program
• Host workshops for families during the day and in the evening to accommodate parents school/work schedules

WHAT IS THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT THING PEOPLE SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THIS PROJECT?

Riley is here is to make a difference in the lives of the children and families we serve. We know that the work we do wouldn’t be possible without the support of our parents and community partners. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.” At Riley, we know that our program and our students will blaze a trail filled with success and accomplishment.

This program is successful because we have dedicated staff, parents and members of the community who share a common goal: to provide our students with the foundation for success in school and life.
A REFLECTION:

There Is Nothing Wrong with Black Students

JAWANZA KUNJUFU, PH.D.
African American Images

I have been an educational consultant to schools for over 40 years. Since 1954, with the landmark civil rights decision of Brown v. Board of Education, there has been a 66% decline in the number of African American educators. Presently, African American students represent 16% of the student body, but only 7% of school staff are African Americans, with Black male teachers representing merely one percent of staff. There are schools with no Black male teachers. Black male school staff are more likely security guards and janitors than gym teachers, administrators or classroom teachers. Seldom will you find a Black male teacher in the primary grades.

Why is this important? There are numerous research studies indicating an increase in test scores when students are the same race and gender as their instructor. Many Black students are relational learners. They need teachers who appreciate, respect and understand their culture.

I am reminded of Dr. Alisha Coleman-Kiner, who was the principal at Booker T. Washington High School in Memphis, Tenn., where the graduation rate was less than 50%. Her school was designated a recovery school, and she was allowed to select her staff. She had one criterion: If you want to teach in my school, you must love my students. The very next year, her graduation rate exceeded 80%. There is nothing wrong with Black students when teachers bond with them. This is the worse time in history for Black students to not have Black educators in the classroom, or to have teachers of all ethnicities who suspend or place Black students in special education rather than bond with and emotionally invest in them.

I am reminded of the success of Black children who are home-schooled. Presently, there are over 100,000 Black students being taught at home by their parents. In public schools, the median White score on state exams is 75%, while Black students score 35%. In contrast, Black students score 82% on state exams when they are home-schooled. There is no racial academic achievement gap when Black students are taught by loving parents.

If you want to teach in my school, you must love my students.

– Dr. Alisha Coleman-Kiner

I am encouraged by the work of Education Trust and The National Center for Urban School Transformation. They have identified hundreds of high-achieving schools in Black low-income communities. These schools have many similarities. First, their cultures have been crafted to drive achievement. School leaders believe the expectations set for students during school hours supersede external factors such as poverty, family instability and challenges in the broader community. Principals are strong, visionary instructional leaders. Teachers bond with students and demand that high expectations be met in their classrooms daily.

Pedagogy is culturally-responsive and congruent with the range of students’ learning styles. Cooperative learning strategies are utilized to connect with relational learners and build a sense of community among students. State exams are used for diagnostic, rather than evaluative, purposes.

Finally, I am reminded of the great success of Urban Prep in Chicago and Eagles Academy in New York. Both are male academies in low-income communities, and each has a 100% college acceptance rate. At Urban Prep, on the first day of school, all freshmen are given a college application. This is a bold and emboldening statement about the potential each boy represents and is being challenged to fulfill. You will not only graduate high school, you will attend and graduate college. At Eagles Academy, students receive mentors to encourage and inspire them to achieve at a level many initially believe is not possible. You can and will fulfill the greatness that your ancestry predestines you.

There is nothing wrong with Black students. But, there is much wrong with the schools, where they are being miseducated across Illinois and the United States.
Many Black students are relational learners. They need teachers who appreciate, respect and understand their culture.
**Point of Proof:**

WHITTIER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

HARVEY, ILLINOIS

**WHAT MAKES THIS PROJECT A “POINT OF PROOF?”**

Our principal, Roxie Thomas, has described Whittier Elementary (Whittier) as “an oasis in the desert.” It is an example of a “turnaround school” that has significantly raised student achievement scores and improved student behavior through cultural transformation. Although 98% of our students qualify for free lunch and come from challenging environments—where illegal drugs, homelessness and families struggling to survive on the income of one parent—they achieve academically, outpacing more well-resourced, middle-class, suburban schools.

Research shows that the best schools in America have school cultures that foster excellence and moral character. Whittier’s culture consist of shared expectations, values and patterns of behavior that define who we are, how we treat each other and how we do our work. Our motto is, “Failure is not an option.” The climate and culture of the school can be felt when you walk through our doors. Principal Roxie Thomas sets high expectations for behavior, and has established a firm structure and nurturing environment in which students are challenged academically and encouraged to strive daily for excellence. School culture frequently and publicly rewards students for academic performance, good behavior and perfect attendance.

**WHAT IS THIS PROJECT’S ELEVATOR SPEECH?**

Guided by Larry Lezotte’s Effective School Movement, Whittier’s mission statement was rewritten to reflect the culture shift Principal Thomas has led at the school. It is more than words on a banner in the school hallway, and elevates values Whittier staff and students embody each day when they walk into the building. It reads:

“Whittier is a diverse community of learners and a village promoting excellence where students are held to high standards. Whittier’s friendly and caring climate fosters a sense of community, and allows us to build relationships with students and families. We believe in teaching to the whole child so that they grow socially, emotionally and academically. We want students and staff to continue on a journey to be life-long learners.”

**WHO PARTICIPATES IN THIS PROJECT?**

Everyone. Participants include the principal, Roxie Thomas; an active leadership team; all teachers; support staff members; students; and parents. There are also a lot of wrap around services. Such support includes Blessings in A Backpack, a program that sends a book bag of food home every Friday to each student; Joyful Heart, a program that not only helps fulfill Christmas lists, but also provides clothes, jackets, boots, etc.; Big Rig Books, a nonprofit company that visits our school several times a year to give students free books; and the boy’s and girl’s CAPTURE program, two groups sponsored and run by Omega Psi Phi Fraternity and Galvin Professional Woman’s Group. These mentoring programs not only mentors students, but takes them on various field trips, and teaches them about coming of age issues.

**WHAT IS THE DEMOGRAPHIC COMPOSITION OF PARTICIPANTS IN THIS PROJECT, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO AGE, RACE AND FAMILY INCOME LEVEL?**

Grades K-6, where 98% of our students qualify for free lunch, come from very challenging environments where illegal drugs are the norm, single parent and broken families prevail, and our homeless population hovers around 36% and our mobility rate about 27%.

**HOW DOES THIS PROJECT DEFINE SUCCESS?**

Success is defined by no child at Whittier failing. At Whittier, failure is not an option. We look to data to help define success. We look at student assessment scores, attendance, grades and behavior. We also look at student and parent involvement. Students, parents and teachers take surveys to rate the school each year.
Critically, success is measured by student achievement data: ISAT, AIMS Web, and Discovery Education metrics. It is evaluated three times a year by the principal, reading coach and teachers. During “Data Days,” three full school days are used to examine the data for trends of strength and weakness. Struggling students are identified, and remediation plans developed. Low-performing students receive research-based intervention through Imagine Learning System 44 and Read 180.

HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN THIS PROJECT IS SUCCESSFUL?

In 2000, Whittier’s reading and math scores were 19% and 20%, respectively. Currently, the 2014 ISAT reading and math scores have risen to over 54% and 69%. In addition, the 2014 Student Academic Growth Component of report cards measured growth over a two-year period. Data shows Whittier students surpassed both the state and district average in student growth, demonstrating continual growth over a two-year period.

Many Whittier students go on to Brooks Middle School and take honors classes, are inducted into the National Honor Society, and continue on to study algebra at Thornton High School. Feedback from junior high teachers indicate that Whittier students are not only well behaved, but prepared for rigorous instruction. Out of six elementary schools in the district, junior high teachers report that they can always identify a Whittier graduate.

WHAT MAKES IT SUCCESSFUL?

Whittier is successful because we are constantly monitoring data and student progress, and utilizing research-based best practices. We are also successful because we “inspect what we expect” – meaning Principal Thomas and the reading coach monthly review student work, word walls, notebooks and journals, after which teachers receive feedback to help improve instruction.

We have created a unique school culture of excellence in which students want to come to school because they are afraid of what they will miss, both in terms of instructional activities and incentives for good grades, attendance or performance.

A caring and nurturing environment is the context for Whittier’s high expectations. We strive for excellence, and accept nothing less. This has become a seamless part of the culture in which new students know it without being told.

Whittier uses the following practices, programs and activities to successfully shape a school culture that drives academic achievement:
ACADEMIC SUPPORT

After-School Tutorials: Students receive an extra 1.5 hours of instruction on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Homework Help Club: Teachers volunteer their time to help students with homework.

Saturday School: Students come for three hours on Saturday for additional help in test preparation, including the “Each One, Reach One” intervention that pairs volunteer reading coaches with students targeted for extra literacy support.

Lunch Room Word Wall: Each morning, the principal announces a tier two word during announcements. Students who can say the word, spell it and tell the meaning get extra gym time.

Sight Word Buddy: Six grade students tutor first grade students on sight words.

Book Club: Students come to the library in the morning after breakfast to do book and novel studies as a group.

Book of the Month: In September there is a huge kick-off to celebrate and renew our pledge to read 25 books or 1,000,000 words during the school year. Read aloud activities continue in monthly assemblies and classroom based activities, which include competition between classrooms.

Parents’ Common Core Math Class: On Wednesday, Whittier hosts a two-hour help session for parents and students on how to understand and complete Common Core math problems.

Professional Development for Teachers: The principal and teachers receive training together from district consultants, specialists and one another, including classroom observation.

SPECIAL EVENTS AND ACTIVITIES

Accelerated Reading Fair: Students are required to read and be tested as part of the Accelerated Reading Program. For each passed test, students receive points that can be redeemed at a huge end-of-year fair at which a Reading King and Queen are crowned. Students also receive recognition for passing tests using a Steps to Success artifact displayed in hallways.

Family Reading and Math Nights: Students and families are invited to hear stories and play reading and math games, and students are able to sleepover at school during the spring event.

Awards Ceremony: Held twice yearly, students win large prizes and awards for perfect attendance, outstanding behavior and academic achievement.

WHAT CHALLENGES HAS IT FACED?

The children’s home and community environments present our biggest challenges. Often, we have to provide students with uniforms, clothing, school supplies and other basic needs, including toiletries and hygiene products. Due to the lack of running water and other utilities in some homes, children can bathe at school if necessary.

Despite the challenges that are the broader context for our students’ lives, Whittier has triumphed because we emphasize that poverty is a temporary condition that can be eradicated with a good education.

HOW IS THIS PROJECT SUSTAINABLE?

Funding to support academic interventions and the extensive program of incentives comes from several resources, primarily grants, Title One dollars and state sources, but also from donations made by the principal and others.

Parents play an enormous role in shaping the services provided, and the principal and staff at Whitter actively engage parents and community partners to support sustainability. A parent coordinator and volunteers provide weekly workshops on topics that range from crocheting to financial literacy. Whittier hosts an Oktoberfest that bring vendors to the school, including the library, local colleges, Costco and the Family Christian Health Center. Our parent team also provides children with the school supplies, uniforms and clothing they need, in addition to supporting an annual sports event for fathers and sons, and a Mother’s Day brunch.

Principal Thomas remains attuned to the needs of parents and the community. She attends all PTA meetings, hosts monthly “sip and chats,” where parents can talk informally with her, share stories and express concerns. Such informal conversations led to the request for a Common Core Parents Math Class, which taught parents new math methods so they can assist their children with homework.
Our children come from many different challenging environments, but when they walk into Whittier Elementary they feel like something special, because they are.

HOW IS THIS PROJECT REPLICABLE?

Whittier’s results can be replicated by putting strong leaders, who are willing to learn alongside teacher, in place at schools. Principal Thomas’ vision and commitment to Whitter’s children and families have driven school culture and academic achievement.

Whittier has a clear mission statement that guides the work of school leaders, administrators and classroom teachers daily. It is not just a banner in the hallway. Identifying ways to motivate your students through incentives, building programs to fit students’ needs, and providing engaging instruction and fun events all support the creation of a school culture of high academic, behavior and attendance expectations.

And, leaders must be willing to “inspect what they expect” to successfully turn around their schools. Accountability for administrators, teachers and students is critical to maintaining the standards of excellence that drive achievement.

It’s about high quality administration and teachers that have high expectations, not about programs. Teachers are held to the ultimate standard - the principal asks, “Would you want your own child to be in your classroom?”

Another important key factor is finding what motivates students to come to school. School should be filled with engaging learning activities, incentives and events so that students never want to miss a day of school for fear of missing out on the fun.

WHAT IS THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT THING PEOPLE SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THIS PROJECT?

Schools matter in determining a child’s success, not just the child’s background, home life and socio-economic status. Our children come from many different challenging environments, but when they walk into Whittier Elementary they feel like something special because they are.
ENGAGING FAMILIES:  

The ReCharge Approach

LEONETTE COATES  
Vice President  
Illinois Action for Children

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. This broad-based approach to supporting children by supporting families is a proven and effective means to address overarching issues of endemic 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 Bronfenbrenner 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.

- **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

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**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.
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 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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**Point of Proof:**

**CHICAGO COMMONS**

**CHICAGO, ILLINOIS**

**WHAT MAKES THIS PROJECT A “POINT OF PROOF”?’**

Since 1894, we have operated in neighborhoods where African American children, seniors and families are most at risk for poverty, violence and educational disadvantage, including West Humboldt Park, Pilsen, Back of the Yards and Grand Boulevard. The Chicago Commons Child Development Program believes that every child has the potential to be a powerful learner and a great citizen. Our rich learning environments foster children’s natural drive to explore, experiment, problem-solve and create. As early as infancy, children are fostered to collaborate and learn from each other and alongside adults who look at the “whole child” and the child’s many ways of learning, communicating and researching. Each child’s individual strengths, abilities, and potential are recognized and supported to help the child increase knowledge. Our program provides the necessary tools to help strengthen skills and develop self-sufficiency. Children’s self-confidence, skills and knowledge achieved in this environment support them throughout life.

**WHAT IS THIS PROJECT’S ELEVATOR SPEECH?**

Innovation has always been at the core of Chicago Commons’ approach to early childhood education. Chicago Commons opened one of the first kindergartens in Chicago more than 120 years ago using the Pestalozzi/Froebel method, a child-centered philosophy of education. Pestalozzi and Froebel introduced the concept of kindergarten early in the 1800’s, and created curricula based on the idea that children have unique needs and capabilities that are best addressed through “free work” and games. The Child Development Program is committed to the ongoing study and exploration of the Reggio Emilia Approach to early childhood education.

All of our programs are located in the inner city of Chicago, and it is important for us to incorporate an educational approach that connects our values and beliefs to the community. Our goals are to promote and foster lifelong learning through education; support families with young children; and promote leadership development and healthy life choices in communities where children are at-risk. We see children as capable and ready to learn, providing an environment that provokes and supports a sense of wonder, experimentation, thinking, and connections with nature and culture. Another goal is to foster parents becoming active participants in their children’s learning while listening to their perspectives and goals. These goals and values connect to Chicago Commons’ belief that every student has the potential to enjoy learning and, ultimately, be academically successful.

**WHO PARTICIPATES IN THIS PROJECT?**

Chicago Commons Child Development has four centers and partners with 12 private daycare centers throughout the City of Chicago, where low-income families can receive quality childcare services. The Chicago Commons Child Development Programs serve 1,180 children ranging from birth through age 12. Demographics of our student and family population are as follows:

- 29% are birth to age three
- 66% are preschool age
- 5% are school age
- 74% are Latino
- 27% are African American
- 28% of families are up to the 50% poverty level
- 60% of families are between the 50-100% poverty level

**EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES FOR THE 2014 PROGRAM YEAR INCLUDE:**

- At least 85% of children in both the infant-toddler and preschool program met or exceeded in cognitive and language skills.
- More than 85% of children in both the infant-toddler and preschool program met or exceeded the national standards in social emotional development.
- 85% of children increased math skills.
HOW DOES THIS PROJECT DEFINE SUCCESS?

Chicago Commons defines success using both qualitative and quantitative data. Developmental assessments are used to assist in planning for children to become school ready. The use of outcomes data is not the only means by which we define success. As part of our Reggio-inspired approach, we provide documentation panels, displayed in our halls and classrooms, that speak to the learning and experiences children receive. We call them studies or projects, and children and teachers actively learn together through them. Parents also share their stories of how well children do in school when transitioning to kindergarten.

We seek outcomes that develop children who pursue learning while having fun, and fulfill social, emotional, physical, language, cognitive, math and literacy educational domains. With Reggio being an Italian approach, it is not validated as a curriculum in the United States. Therefore, Chicago Commons uses the Creative Curriculum along with Teaching Strategies Gold as the formal assessment tools, both of which work well with our Reggio-inspired practice. The Teaching Strategies Gold Assessment data shows that our children, on average, are meeting or exceeding standards in the domains when leaving for kindergarten. Chicago Commons has an education specialist review checkpoint data, and provide training to support teachers in their classroom implementation. The long-term outcome is for children leaving our program to become leaders, problem-solvers and social communicators.

HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN THIS PROJECT IS SUCCESSFUL?

Parents are the true spokespersons on how the program has prepared their children to succeed. They provide teachers and site directors with testimonials of their children’s progress. The Chicago Commons Child Development Program works diligently to ensure that families receive quality services and support. We have built a unique infrastructure to support community partnerships at neighborhood sites with Head Start services.

Educational outcomes for the 2014 program year include:

- More than 85% of children in both the infant-toddler and preschool program met or exceeded the national standards in social emotional development.
- At least 85% of children in both the infant-toddler and preschool program met or exceeded in cognitive and language skills.
- 85% of children increased math skills.
WHAT MAKES IT SUCCESSFUL?

As an innovative child development program, Chicago Commons has demonstrated its passion in the core principles of the Reggio Emilia Philosophy. This approach has been successful because of the commitment and dedication of the Executive Director, Program Director, administrative staff, teachers and families. Many staff have been with our agency 10 years or more. This speaks to the level of commitment, dedication and passion of staff with established learning and understanding of the Reggio Approach.

The Reggio Approach is generally offered in more affluent neighborhoods. Chicago Commons has remained true to our commitment to provide these quality Early Childhood services in the neediest neighborhoods. Chicago Commons has invested years of professional development in teachers within our agency, providing outside opportunities for teachers to visit Reggio Emilia and other programs outside of the state. These years of professional development further demonstrate our program’s success and commitment to continued learning and improvement. Teaching teams have weekly curriculum development meetings, where two facilitators and four teachers collaborate on current classroom studies. The brainstorming and dialogue shared during these meetings assist teachers with strategies on how to extend children’s learning. This approach takes a level of involvement and commitment from both management and classroom staff to sustain it.

Each year, educators from around the world want to visit our program to learn how we have integrated Reggio Inspired values with Creative Curriculum to achieve this unique practice. Through continued program analysis and strategic planning, Chicago Commons Child Development has continued to improve program design and outcomes by collaborating locally and internationally, including work with partners from New Zealand, University of Chicago and the Department of Family Supportive Services to explore the importance of math and literacy in early childhood.

WHAT CHALLENGES HAS IT FACED?

The biggest challenge for Chicago Commons is making sure we successfully meet all funding requirements while maintaining our Reggio values and beliefs. This challenge adds additional pressure on teachers. Although the challenges have been great, our organizational structure is uniquely designed so that every content area has administrative support to achieve both funding and developmental goals. The systems used to monitor outcomes include monthly and annual program assessments. Each content area is monitored at least twice a year to ensure we remain in compliance with requirements from funders and accreditation agencies. As a result, all four childcare centers are accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), and have met the Gold standard of Excellence under the new Illinois ExceleRate guidelines.

Another challenge we face is maintaining quality teaching staff. Since the field is so competitive, other agencies try to recruit our teachers by offering more money. Many staff members have student loan debt and, no matter how dedicated they are and despite our comparable salaries and benefits, teachers leave, and the program must work to ensure that replacements are found who will deliver equally impactful programming.

HOW IS THIS PROJECT SUSTAINABLE?

We receive Child Care funding from the state, federal Head Start and Early Head Start funding, and CPS Community Partnership funding for Pre-School for All and Preventive Initiative. We operate four year-round centers (Nia Family Center, Paulo Freire Center, Guadalupano Family Center and Taylor Center) and provide support to 12 private daycare centers. Chicago Commons Child Development is 90% funded by state and federal dollars. The communities, where Chicago Commons programs are located, truly embrace the quality services we provide, and community partnerships sustain resources to support families we serve.

HOW IS THIS PROJECT REPLICABLE?

Over the years, our funding streams have increased. As we grew, Chicago Public Schools and the City of Chicago made offers to expand our services. Due to the high level of quality we provide, we were also asked by the City of Chicago to become a community partner. Chicago Commons has invested a lot of time and resources to provide this Reggio-inspired model of educational quality in the communities we serve. This approach takes significant commitment and time across the organization to establish and maintain a new way of learning and thinking about children. We advise programs to take small steps to invest the time and resources needed. Programs must be open and willing to shift perspectives on the complex dynamics of facilitating learning with young children. Asking questions about children’s capabilities and how best to develop them, looking at parent engagement and how to make it more meaningful, listening to parents’ voices and thinking differently about community and classroom environments are critical, as is a willingness to make mistakes and challenge your beliefs.
WHAT IS THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT THING PEOPLE SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THIS PROJECT?

This approach to learning is different in that it causes you to reassess your values about children and how they learn. As educators, we need to invest more in Black children being able to problem solve, socialize in a collaborative way through guidance from educators who respect and value children's thoughts, ideas and potential. We want Black children to become learners who are able to think critically, and develop solutions through investigation and making predictions. We want parents to understand that learning begins at birth, and the more opportunities we offer our children to express themselves through exploration, the more children will enjoy learning. Providing parents an opportunity to become active participants in their children's learning and development is one of the keys to early learning success.

Demographics should not define the amount of resources allocated to communities where African American children and their parents reside. In our resource-constrained communities, the empowerment that accompanies children's right to question and re-evaluate their surroundings is often absent in education. Often, children are expected to conform to overly strict norms that would not be required of middle class and affluent children. It is through children's involvement and participation in their education that the desire to learn increases. Through its inquiry-based practices, the Reggio Emilia approach empowers young Black children with tools to examine, evaluate and overcome social and economic barriers, motivating them enrich their lives and their communities in the process.

We want Black children to become learners who are able to think critically, and develop solutions through investigation and making predictions.
“SPEAK FIRE INTO THEM:”

African American Indigenous Knowledge and School Preparation

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INTRODUCTION

The common core and approaches that emphasize instructional efficacy, such as the Danielson Model, have generated a swell of interest in deliberate, and thoughtful engagement that builds parent/family and school coalitions. Cultural responsiveness and critical awareness are key concepts when developing parent/family and school coalitions. If these efforts are to be successful, it is essential that schools’ underlying assumptions and perceptions of parents/families be strengths-based as they influence interactions and relationships.

Underlying assumptions that malign African American culture as “deprived” thwart attempts to partner with parents/families in genuine and meaningful ways. This essay has several purposes. First, it seeks to explore the persistent and pervasive ways deficit thinking permeates educational discourse and practices. These deficit views on African American culture work to further marginalize African American families and students. Second, it seeks to expand discussions that use critical race approach to unearth and explore the ways in which African American culture lends itself to the development of children. This research focuses on American sayin’s as key components of the African American oral tradition. Third, this essay seeks to facilitate and extend critical dialogues that challenge underlying assumptions and perceptions to develop strategies and approaches that build parent/family and school coalitions. Finally, we emphasize the value of critical funds of knowledge approaches to ascertain the ways in which African American culture serves as a critical site for the development of conceptual skills valued in formalized academic and school settings.

DEFICIT THINKING AND THE MARGINALIZATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURE

The social construction of assessment and the data wrought from these assessments guides and centers around academic discourse on the underperformance and underachievement of African American students. Underperformance and underachievement are conceptual categories justified and informed by hegemonic ideology. In dialogue, these terms are used as normative concepts that have cultural meaning, from which far-reaching implications are made. For example, underperformance and underachievement are dialogically linked to social construction of smartness and achievement. As vexing and recurring themes in the teaching and learning of African American students, underachievement is fashioned from deficit ways of knowing that have resulted from and contributed to the systemization of unequal power relations. Deficit theorizing evolved from manipulated scientific inquiry which sought to establish a hierarchy of humanity based largely around cultural development distortion.

Hegemonic dialogues, inherited from these ways of thinking, put forth the perception of racialized and ethnically “othered” groups as culturally deprived. The theoretical assumptions and explanations that inform cultural deficit thinking are more transparent in educational discourse, particularly those discussions about “urban” schools, students and communities. The conflation of hegemonic perceptions and confounding cultural issues that underlie these discussions suggest cultural negligence and/or irresponsible parents as the primary reasons that student underachievement is “minoritized.” The underlying ways of knowing that fuel these perceptions are deeply rooted in cultural deficit theorizing.

Cultural deficit theorizing puts forth the premise that the so-called academic underperformance and achievement gap of African American students can be attributed to their natal culture. In fact, these models have been the most effective in shaping deeply held perceptions that African American culture undermines school achievement. Undergirding these dialogues is a persistent misperception that African American culture lacks the resources and processes to aid in the development of the requisite conceptual skills associated with school achievement. This perception is substantiated in the views of African American parents, articulated as an awareness of the language, processes and interactions that disregard them as resources in the cognitive development of their children. These deficit perceptions are further demonstrated in the normative perceptions of veteran and pre-service teachers, who communicated a belief that African American parents, as primary cultural transmitters, impart socio-cultural deficiencies to children that schools are obligated to correct.
African-centered and critical race theorists and pedagogues have been diligent in producing research that illuminates the ways in which education and schooling in America perpetuates inequity through hegemonic indoctrination. Of particular importance are those critical discussions which emphasize familial and institutional based systems of support; inequity in the distribution of resources; cultural discontinuities; resiliency and/or continued development of students from historically marginalized groups. Contrary to these ideological and theoretical advancements, deficit thinking still dominates public discourse in culturally charged terms such as “minority,” “disadvantaged,” “inner-city,” “at risk,” “urban” and/or “gap populations.” This language, and the underlying perceptions, are so pervasive that normative explanation of African American underachievement mechanically defaults to reasons that stem from cultural deficiency.

THE AFRICAN AMERICAN ORAL EPISTEMIC TRADITION AS A SITE FOR SKILL DEVELOPMENT

In consideration of the pervasive and proliferate ways in which cultural deficit thinking dominates and influences educational discourse, there is little research that explores the ways in which African American culture and parents foster conceptual skill development associated with academic readiness and achievement.

*Sayin’s* are unique linguistic tools used to transmit deeply structured African American cultural values and knowledge in a way that develops conceptual skills. The African American oral conceptualist way of teaching and learning, whether through proverbs, parables, narratives and/or *sayin’s*, much like riddles, are used to transmit underlying issues that structure a question, situation, belief or desire, bringing about a deeper cultural awareness and knowledge that shapes self-determination and re-enforces norms and values. In this context, African American “*sayins*” are identified as indigenous knowledge, shaped by hegemonic and counter-hegemonic (transformative resistance efforts) ways of knowing, and used as a teaching and learning strategy to transfer cultural knowledge and promote socio-cultural awareness. In the prism of hegemony, transformative resistance, skills and cultural development, “*sayins*” function as conceptual tools used to stimulate the higher level thinking needed to apprehend the complexity and contradictory nature of lived experience. The use and conceptualization of *sayin’s* engages the user and listener in a process of skills development, wherein the user must use or construct *sayin’s* that allude to the underlying issues that structure a question, feelings, context, observation and/or desire. The hearer of *sayin’s* must use verbal and non-verbal cues, memories, lessons and feelings to apprehend the underlying meanings and/or message(s) being conveyed.
The generalized use of oral conceptualist teaching and learning, within a continental African context, was a means to formulate, transmit and aid in the comprehension of deeper meanings and assumptions that structure abstract ideas and concepts. Oral conceptualism, as a process of knowledge production, is predicated upon the development of higher level conceptual skills just as folklore, proverbs, metaphors, songs and stories, sayin’s are linguistic tools used in the transmission of deep cultural values and ways of knowing. Sayin’s are generated from empirical experiential knowledge and encoded with symbolic references of the group’s cultural identity. The instructive value of culturally-specific linguistic tools is its use of knowledge that is known and unknown, according to Penfield and Duru.

**SPEAKING FIRE INTO THEM: THE RESEARCH & FINDINGS**

We collected over 100 sayin’s and corresponding explanations from 20-25 African Americans ranging in age from 18-95 years old, situated in four states across six cities throughout Southern and Midwestern states in the United States. In individual and/or group dialogues, participants were asked to recall sayin’s and discuss if sayin’s were used in their families to impart knowledge; the primary users; the context and situation in which they were used; meanings, interpretations, and purposes; perceptions; and impact. Sayin’s and their corresponding explanations were analyzed through an African-centered and critical race paradigm. They fell into three, larger overlapping and instructive categories: resistance, correction and guidance. Sayin’s vary from context and complexity, depending on the speaker and the hearer. They typically occur in dialogue as quick-witted statements, rhetorical questions, observations or corrections. The majority of participants identified a mother or grandmother as the primary users of sayin’s to convey underlying meanings, unspoken observations, ideas and/or concepts that worked to articulate deeply held values.

For example, Mother Mary, an 85-year-old elder who participated in the study, recalled when her husband was in the hospital dying of prostate cancer. The doctor entered the room to inform Mother Mary and her husband that he also had diabetes. Mother Mary and her husband paused, thinking that the doctor “had gone crazy.” She and her husband looked at each other and nodded to the doctor. As soon as the doctor left the room, Mother Mary and her husband chimed, “What white folks don’t want they give to us.” This particular saying is loaded with underlying messages that convey the value of resistance through social awareness and self-determination.

This sayin’, offered by Mother Mary, like all sayin’s, engages the speaker and the hearer in a process that ignites and necessitates the use of conceptual skills associated with academic achievement (e.g. analytical, synthesis and critical skills). She (Mother Mary) explained:

“We can’t believe everything they tell you. They’ll tell you anything just to make a fool out of you. You better know yourself. Think for yourself. They been telling us things ain’t been real for a long time. Just like it goes, what they don’t want they give to us, just ‘cause they can, but we don’t always want they cast offs. We can think for ourselves. Once upon a time, we might had to take they junk, but we ain’t got to no more.”

Mother Mary’s interpretation of the sayin’ has historical, socio-cultural and political implications. In that one very short sayin’, the speaker (Mother Mary in this case) is providing a history lesson while engaging the hearer in socio-cultural and political analysis. The hearer is required to make conceptual links to information that is known and unknown, which requires the utilization of higher order thinking skills.

Many of the sayin’s that pertain to education and schooling reflect the African American cultural perceptual awareness of education and schooling as a double-edged sword. This awareness is formulated from African American experiential knowledge, that education and schooling can be both liberating and oppressive. Education and schooling sayin’s are typically spoken to children and reiterated across the life span. These sayin’s communicate the African American cultural value of education while acknowledging one’s intelligence and the development of one’s intelligence as a matter of individual, family and community responsibility. Many of the sayin’s that related to education and schooling communicated deep cultural values were fashioned from the existential dilemma of what it means to be Black in America. These sayin’s worked to caution and make children aware of the dual purpose of education; they also sought to armor and prepare their children to resist objectification through the use of higher level thinking. The narratives of Frances and Gloria best demonstrate the complexity of sayin’s that centers on education and schooling.

Frances, a 42-year-old woman who grew up in North Carolina heard sayin’s all of her life. One particular sayin’ has been instrumental across her education and schooling experiences. She recalled that her mother after receiving her report card told her, as early as the 1st grade, “Don’t let them people dumb you.” Frances recalled, “Every year, from grade school through graduate school I remembered those words.” For Frances, that particular sayin’ comforted and reminded her that she is capable and smart even when there were overt and/or subtle messages that spoke contrary. That particular sayin’ empowered and helped her to manage feelings of frustration, fear and doubt experienced throughout her schooling experience. Issues related to self-determination and enhancements of academic self-concept are important concepts. The ways in which sayin’s actively engage school-aged children in a process of higher order thinking is critical to this discussion.
Similarly, Gloria, a 47-year-old single mother of two, born and raised in the Midwest, remembered that her mother used a *sayin’* similar to that of Frances’ mom. However, her mother always followed it up with another *sayin’*: “Don’t let them people dumb you, ’cause they’ll try. You got to work twice as hard, to get half the credit. Love you baby, now have a good day.” When asked about the underlying meaning, messages and interpretation, Gloria explained, “When she [her mother] said ‘them,’ I knew she was talking about the teachers and principals. Not necessarily them as people, but them as a system. We [Black people] are constantly being told or given messages that we aren’t smart. That *sayin’* tells me I shouldn’t believe those messages.” Implicit in Gloria’s analysis of that *sayin’* are the ways in which higher level thinking skills must be used to extrapolate meaning and relativity. Though Gloria may not have understood the underlying messages as a child, she acknowledges that *sayin’* over a course of time worked to ignite and scaffold her ability to think critically.

Like Frances, Gloria felt empowered by *sayin’s*, especially in the school context. “More so, *sayin’* gave me something from home to hold on to; it affirmed who I was. It allowed me to seek answers and gave me understanding of why school didn’t feel so good. It taught me to look inward and outward to solve problems and make decisions. Really and truly it laid the foundation for me to think,” Gloria said. Many of the participants in the original research agreed. Those individuals expressed a deeper value of education beyond the rhetoric of individualism as a core value in the discourse of educational hegemony, as summarized by Gloria, “Doing well in school was, for me, my momma, my sisters, my daddy, my family, to my people, and all that was communicated in those little *sayin’s*.”

**CONCLUSION**

The value of Black cultural ways of knowing have been devalued and marginalized in the wake of institutionalized deficit thinking. However, situated in the dialectical prism of hegemony, transformative resistance, skill and cultural development, African American *sayin’s* function as conceptual tools used to stimulate the higher level thinking associated with school achievement. The majority of participants indicated that they find themselves using these *sayin’s* to get through difficult and challenging situations. For many of the participants, *sayin’s* having been spoken to them as children across their development, and have taught them how to think in critical ways, and in consideration of other perspectives, structural issues, known and unknown barriers. Perhaps the words of another participant say it best. She said, “I find myself relying on these old *sayin’s* more than not. I’m reminded, that in spite of it all…I’m still here!”
If school leaders and educators are interested in building transformative parent/family/school coalitions that work to meet the needs of African American students, they must first become aware of the ways in which deficit thinking is normalized in their day-to-day engagement of African American students and families and teaching and learning in general. Secondly, they must actively resist normalized deficit models and methods of student engagement that marginalizes African American cultural competencies by seeking and using transformative ways of knowing. An indication of this paradigmatic shift is the obvious use of curricula materials and methods that centralize African American cultural ways of knowing. This essay presents a condensed decoding of African American sayings as a method of engagement that aligns school and home knowledge while igniting and strengthening critical and higher order thinking skills.

The process of decoding and utilizing African American sayings will shift school leaders and educators away from deficit based models and mental maps. They will benefit from the forging of new mental maps developed from the deeper exploration of African American culture to ascertain the ways of knowing that contribute to school success. This essay seeks to foster the creation of dialogues, models and methods that challenge parents, educators and school leaders to think in creative and bold ways that work toward the development of parent/family and school coalitions for the benefit of all children, specifically African American children.

**Underlying assumptions that malign African American culture as “deprived” thwarts attempts to partner with parents and families in genuine and meaningful ways.**
**Point of Proof:**

**COMMUNITY ORGANIZING AND FAMILY ISSUES (COFI)**

**CHICAGO, ILLINOIS**

**WHAT MAKES THIS PROJECT A “POINT OF PROOF?”**

Research finds that participation in high-quality early learning programs is the single most important investment we can make in assuring healthy and achieving futures for African American children. Yet fewer than half of all low-income children participate in such programs. Through this project, created by grassroots parent leaders, parents reach out to one another to identify and address preschool enrollment barriers. The result: Over 8 years, more than 10,000 low-income African American and Latino young children have been referred to Head Start and other early learning programs and are now on their way to school and life success.

**WHAT IS THIS PROJECT’S ELEVATOR SPEECH?**

Early Learning/Head Start Ambassadors is a project in which trained parent leaders – 98% of them low-income African American and Latina mothers and grandmothers – work in teams to engage parents of young children in 33 low-income Chicago neighborhoods (the program expanded to three new communities outside of Chicago this spring). The goal of outreach is to ensure children are participating in high-quality preschool programs and, if not, to make referrals. The project, initially the brainchild of a team of COFI-trained and supported African American parent leaders in Chicago’s Englewood community, is the product of three recognitions: 1) that participation in high quality early education programs is critical to the school and life success of low-income children; 2) that knowledge and practical barriers to program participation persist because policymakers and many program providers do not listen to or understand the lives of low-income parents; and 3) that parent-to-parent outreach works better than standard marketing campaigns to help parents understand the importance of early learning, and to get them the support needed to access quality programs.

As a result of its unique approach, the Early Learning/Head Start Ambassadors have referred over 10,000 low-income young children of color to quality early learning programs, and helped to rewrite the City of Chicago’s and the State of Illinois’ early learning system policies on parent outreach and engagement. The project is one way COFI fulfills its mission to develop the leadership capacities of low-income African American and Latino parents, and the goal is for them to have a full voice in the programs and policies affecting their families.

**WHO PARTICIPATES IN THIS PROJECT?**

To date, over 100 parent leaders (including four men who are fathers or grandfathers), approximately half are African American and half are Latino, have served as Early Learning/Head Start Ambassadors. Nearly all parent leaders live below the poverty line, and 46% are grandparents with caretaking responsibilities. All live in low-income West and South side neighborhoods of Chicago, including Englewood, West Englewood, Bronzeville, Pilsen-Little Village, North Lawndale, Garfield Park, Hermosa and Humboldt Park. The tens of thousands of families touched by the Ambassadors’ outreach are of a similar demographic profile. The Ambassadors engage these families through block-by-block canvassing and conversations, flyers in places that parents frequent (such as grocery stores and laundromats), and via presentations and conversations at community events. The Early Learning/Head Start Ambassadors project was created by low-income African American and Latino parents for low-income African American and Latino parents, and its success is driven by this community-based approach.
HOW DOES THIS PROJECT DEFINE SUCCESS?

At the parent-to-parent, face-to-face level, “success” is initially increasing parents’ understanding of the importance of early learning and, ultimately, getting an eligible but unenrolled child referred to a program. In the past four years, 10,445 children have been referred to Head Start or preschool.

Longer-term “success” is increased Head Start and preschool enrollment of low-income children of color who have been positioned for continued school success. At the macro level, “success” is low-income African American and Latino parent leaders working together to push for and create changes in City and State policy that incorporate parent-to-parent outreach and engagement in the marketing and provision of early learning programs. Another indicator of success is the number of Head Start and preschool parents who learn about and enroll in COFI leadership training.

HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN THIS PROJECT IS SUCCESSFUL?

The Early Learning/Head Start Ambassadors assiduously track: doors knocked; families with young children identified; conversations completed on the importance of early learning, enrollment barriers identified and parents’ interest in referrals to programs. In the past four years, 112,045 doors have been knocked on by 341 parent leaders who shared information about learning resources and referred children to programs. The City of Chicago tracks Head Start enrollments and assessed the Ambassadors program, finding it extremely effective in reaching families that don’t know about programs, hesitate to enroll their children or who are intimidated by the application processes. Since the program began, 100% of Head Start slots have been filled in sharp contrast to previous years in which under-enrollment was a perennial challenge at some centers.

COFI also documents the influence of Early Learning/Head Start Ambassadors in changing early learning policy at the local and state level: the City’s Ready to Learn initiative, and the State’s Hard To Reach Toolkit and Race to the Top initiative, are three policies that clearly bear the Head Start Ambassador stamp. All include strong policies to support parent outreach and engagement.

WHAT MAKES IT SUCCESSFUL?

The Early Learning/Head Start Ambassadors project is successful because it was created by grassroots African American and Latino parent leaders using their deep understanding and experience of their communities. In addition, feedback from over 5,000 parents on why eligible children were not participating in quality
programs, combined with the leaders’ great and growing systems change skills, honed COFI’s training and support strategy. What parent leaders learned through their experiences and conversations – captured in “Why Johnny Isn’t in Preschool” at www.cofionline.org – are addressed directly by the initiative they developed in response. Some parents told leaders that their children were better off being cared for at home or were unaware that they could combine family and center based care. Others were unaware of nearby programs or had no mode of transportation. Many found the enrollment process complicated, duplicative and confusing, and had been treated with disrespect by program staff.

The Early Learning/Head Start Ambassadors have listened carefully and with respect; have addressed awareness barriers in their conversations with and support of parents; have addressed program level barriers directly with local programs and community engagement; and, they have tackled structural barriers, such as transportation, confusing enrollment and policy fragmentation (“child care”, Head Start and State Pre-K) through policy advocacy (see their second report: “How We Got Johnny, Jada and Jose into Preschool” at www.cofionline.org).

To gain the skills and confidence needed to advocate for better early learning policies, COFI provides three phases of leadership training to parents, including workshops on the systems change process. The process and its ability to engage parents as full – and influential – partners in policy change are documented in the 2014 publication, The COFI Way: Policy & Systems Change, available at www.cofionline.org. Parents who have been through COFI’s leadership training meet with local, state, and national policy leaders to articulate their experience and their visions for change. Parents also conduct their own participatory research, often gathering data and surveys door-to-door in their communities.

WHAT CHALLENGES HAS IT FACED?

The major challenge has been the success of the program itself, with requests to expand it faster and wider than can be prudently done. Parents that serve as Early Learning/Head Start Ambassadors are all participants in COFI’s multi-year leadership development and organizing training. Since their training as community leaders spans three years at minimum, expansion must be incremental. A second challenge is that, with much funding coming from the public sector, financial support of the project is a year-by-year proposition in a City and State that are stretched financially. A third challenge is the sheer logistics of deploying Ambassadors where they are most needed, making sure they’re documenting outreach thoroughly, and supporting parent leaders who often face multiple crises in their own lives.

COFI addresses the first challenge by growing the work incrementally, and being honest about limitations on growth. It addresses the second challenge by seeking diverse sources of funds and keeping the model sufficiently flexible to contract if necessary. The third challenge is addressed through consistent delivery of its leadership training and support model to ensure parent leaders have the skills and resources critical to achieving outcomes.

HOW IS THIS PROJECT SUSTAINABLE?

Continued funding at some level is assured by the Ambassador program’s success. Without it, the City and the State would not meet federal mandates for enrollment. Although it is possible that the federal, state and local governments may decrease their investment in quality early learning in this age of “less government,” the overwhelming research on its importance and popular support make that unlikely. At the local level, support for the program is “baked” into the model as its design reflects the voices of tens of thousands of low-income parents, and Ambassadors are residents of the communities they serve.

HOW IS THIS PROJECT REPLICABLE?

COFI is committed to helping others replicate the Early Learning/Head Start Ambassadors model. Through federal and state funding, several Illinois communities are already adapting the approach. COFI’s Institute for Family Focused Organizing is a program space for introducing people around the country to the parent leadership and organizing model, Family Focused Organizing, that underlies the Early Learning/Head Start Ambassadors program. Also, COFI has developed a number of communications (available at www.cofionline.org) to encourage replication and adaption of its work.

WHAT IS THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT THING PEOPLE SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THIS PROJECT?

Parent leadership is key to increasing early learning enrollment, attendance and quality. Parents, however, are often ignored, treated with disrespect, and/or assumed to be disinterested in their children’s success. The Early Learning/Head Start Ambassadors project proves that low-income African American (and Latino and “other”) parents can be active, effective partners in early learning programs and policy development when intentionally and actively engaged.
At the parent-to-parent, face-to-face level, “success” is initially increasing parents’ understanding of the importance of early learning and, ultimately, getting an eligible but child referred to a program. In the past four years, 10,445 children have been referred to Head Start or preschool.
MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH:
Advancing a Holistic Approach to Early Childhood

Madelyn James
Director, Birth to Eight
Voices for Illinois Children

Often, there is a new initiative, approach or strategy that is touted as the silver bullet for changing the trajectory and outcomes for young children, particularly the most vulnerable. Many of the approaches or strategies focus on changing the individual. The complexity and uniqueness of the individual child and the interdependence and relationship to their family, community and the larger world, impact and shape the ultimate outcome for that child. It is shortsighted to imagine that if we focus on the individual, we will save more than a few. If we want to save more, we must focus on a holistic approach. The holistic approach conceptualizes a child nestled within a family system, the family system nested within a community system, and the community system nested within a larger ecological system. This approach endorses systems and policies that interact with families of children from birth to age eight, and acknowledges the cumulative impact of health, housing, education, community and parental economic factors, during this critical period for development. A holistic approach advocates for families and communities to have sufficient resources and investments that afford multiple layers of support. These multiple supports build a strong foundation and maximize the possibility that children will be on track for personal and academic success by third grade.

This interdisciplinary approach is not a new strategy. It has been used to advance policies and system changes that promote ample investments for children, birth through age eight, for more than 50 years. Over decades, research has supported the holistic approach based on positive outcomes achieved by Head Start, Chicago Child and Parent Centers (CPC), Perry Preschool, home visiting and other programs. These models demonstrate that if you focus on the young children within their family and community, there are increased short-term positive outcomes and larger sustained impacts for a lifetime. Head Start and the CPC demonstrated the efficacy of supporting families - working on high school and college completion, increasing parents’ employment skills - while children attended high quality, full-day early childhood programs.

And, there is a new interdisciplinary movement, called “dual” or “two generation” approach that is receiving national interest and substantial philanthropic funding. The focus of the dual generation approach is to provide investments to increase parents’ GED completion, improve their employment and life skills, support their acquisition of post-secondary education and career training and, simultaneously, provide high quality educational experiences for their children. The lack of resources in the current environment has created an urgency to utilize strategies for interdisciplinary cross collaboration and a willingness to leverage tools, often technology, designed to share resources and information across generations.
How would we visualize and structure systems differently if we took a holistic approach to early childhood? We would develop a comprehensive early childhood system at the state and federal levels that includes healthcare, education, housing, childcare, child welfare and parental economic security that is cohesive, family-friendly and integrates all supports needed from birth to eight.

Our health system would provide universal access to affordable physical, dental and mental health services, particularly for the first eight years of a child’s critical development. Families would successfully access the healthcare system that would have multiple entry points and be connected to community resources and supports. This seamless system would ensure that parents receive preventative care so they are at optimal health before conception; prenatal and parental education during pregnancy; postnatal access to universal screening and home visiting; and education on developing lifetime family wellness practices.

Our state education systems would be coordinated and aligned from birth to age eight with public-private healthcare systems to provide referrals, education and ongoing support to families. Home visiting systems for families with children, from birth through age five, would work in concert with family healthcare and private health providers to provide education on preventive, prenatal and postnatal care. Birth to preschool programs would provide education for families and communities on the importance of physical, cognitive and social emotional development for children, and the resources to support that development would be available. Community schools would link with agencies to provide onsite resources and services for both students and community members.

According to a recent report from the National Center for Children in Poverty, “there are almost 24 million children under the age of six living in poverty.” Families with children under six are one of the fastest growing populations living in poverty, facing homelessness and other challenges during a critical period of physical and emotional development for children. Poverty is a huge risk factor that impacts the ability of families to physically and emotionally nurture young children, increasing housing insecurity and transience during a time when families and children need stability, predictability and minimal household stress.

The National Center on Family Homelessness indicates young children whose families are homeless experience significantly higher rates of chronic illness, have higher rates of emotional and behavioral health issues and developmental delays. The reauthorization of the federal Child Care Development Block (CCDB) 2014 grant mandates that states develop policies on ensuring homeless families with young children are able to access early childcare programs. Negative outcomes could be significantly reduced with a housing policy that collaborates to assist families in registering their children in high quality childcare, finding affordable housing and prioritizing homeless (and other) families with young children for additional subsidies.
The reauthorization of CCDB also provides clear recommendations for all states to improve safety, training, monitoring and family-friendly access to childcare information and data. The federal act requires states to develop state plans and signals an expectation of intentional cross collaboration among state agencies and across public-private partnerships. A holistic, interdisciplinary early childhood system would support the growing federal expectation that state systems work together.

Recent research suggests that the very youngest children are the fastest growing population entering the child welfare system, and those infants and toddlers remain in the system the longest. A child welfare system integrated and aligned with other early childhood systems would have home visiting and mental health services, as well as supports for families fostering the youngest children. An intentional plan would encourage attachment relationships between primary caregivers/foster parents with infants, toddlers and young children would reduce the number of placements, prioritizing stability. The child welfare system, preschool programs and the Head Start system would collaborate to ensure there were preschool, childcare and early/Head Start slots allocated to children in the foster care system.

Lastly, public-private systems would work together to leverage investments that increase parental stability through Earned Income Tax Credits (EITC) and childcare tax credits; increase childcare subsidies; raise the minimum wage; provide paid parental leave; promote affordable housing and develop dual generational programs that ensure parents have employment that offers a living wage and benefits.

This holistic approach requires coordination across systems of care, and is more complex than focusing on individual solutions. And, it will likely take more time to implement. However, it is an approach with the potential to change the lives of the most vulnerable children, their families and communities, and create sustained, long-term positive outcomes for our future.
**Point of Proof:**

TRINITY UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
CHILD CARE CENTERS

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

WHAT MAKES THIS PROJECT A “POINT OF PROOF?”

Trinity Child Care Program (Trinity) takes pride in building daily opportunities for young children to thrive and achieve. Every goal created for children includes physical, cognitive, social and emotional development, all of which are essential to children getting ready for school. Our holistic and culturally-effective approach supports teachers and parents as they establish excellent foundations for young children.

All four Head Start classrooms are strategically developed, equipped for school readiness and demonstrate programs that yield high academic achievement. Classrooms are organized and programming prioritizes Afrocentric cultural awareness and parent participation.

Creative Curriculum/Teaching Strategies GOLD is utilized in each classroom, and 100% of students participate in school readiness activities that include science, technology, engineering/concept development, mathematics and art. All four Head Start Classrooms provide hands on experiences with computers and iPods for preschoolers transitioning out of the program for kindergarten.

WHAT IS THIS PROJECT’S ELEVATOR SPEECH?

Founded in 1977, Trinity currently provides Head Start services for income-eligible children living within the City of Chicago in the Auburn Gresham, Washington Heights, Roseland, Woodlawn, Greater Grand Crossing, Jackson Park and South Shore communities. In alignment with the Head Start initiatives, our mission is to provide children and families with a high quality, holistic, African-centered child development experience.

PARENTS OF HEAD START STUDENTS

66

ACCESSED JOB TRAINING; EDUCATIONAL TRAINING;
PARENT EDUCATION ACTIVITIES; EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE SERVICE; HOUSING ASSISTANCE; OR MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELING

100% OF ALL PARENTS PARTICIPATED IN PARENT TEACHER CONFERENCES, DURING WHICH INFORMATION ON SCHOOL READINESS AND ACHIEVEMENTS WERE SHARED

Trinity provides year-round, full-day, center-based services to 80 pre-school children and 52 infants and toddlers. Children leaving our Head Start program are prepared for Kindergarten – many of whom are accepted into selective-enrollment schools. As their child matriculates through the TUCC program, families are provided with the opportunity to participate in the program as shared decision-makers and program volunteers.

Our families are also provided with ongoing support from education and family service staff in areas affecting their health and welfare and that of their child. Trinity is committed to providing the entire family with comprehensive services that will have a positive effect on their overall quality of life.

Teachers are committed to the success of students and families, and exceed Head Start requirements for qualifications.

WHO PARTICIPATES IN THIS PROJECT?

Of 132 children ranging in age from 6 weeks to 5 years, 100% are African American, 48% are male and 52% are female. The majority of students are from single-parent households. However, 14 have two parents at home, and 25 Head Start students have a father or significant male involved in their life. Trinity’s students are part of
families experiencing significant challenges. In some cases, students have been placed in foster care, or have a non-parental legal guardian designated due to family instability or experienced homelessness.

**HOW DOES THIS PROJECT DEFINE SUCCESS?**

The goal is for Trinity’s students to make progress toward and achieve school readiness by the time they leave our program for kindergarten. We continuously assess language, mathematics, socio-emotional and motor skills to determine school readiness and address the individual developmental needs of students.

Additionally, parents play an active role in getting their child school ready through Trinity’s family reading program. Short-term goals are to link every child and family to culturally appropriate resources and materials. These outputs build toward the longer-term goal of getting children school ready by the time they complete preschool.

**HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN THIS PROJECT IS SUCCESSFUL?**

Teachers and site managers work smart and meaningfully to ensure the needs of the whole child are met, and that the family is supported as their child progresses toward school readiness.

During the 2014-2015 program year, the following outcomes were achieved by students:

- 70% of mathematics goals were met, and 22% were exceeded
- 67% of language development goals were met, and 19% were exceeded
- 65% of social emotional goals were met, and 29% were exceeded
- 79% of physical-fine motor skills goals were met, and 14% exceeded

Additionally student indicators of program success include:

- 100% of all children received Spanish and literacy instruction and activities to support school readiness
- 100% of Head Start children received a developmental screening during the course of the year
- Nine children were diagnosed with a disability, and seven received comprehensive special education services as a result
• 83 Head Start children in the program have medical homes

• 63 children received medical exams and were current for required immunizations

• 13 Head Start children were found to need ongoing medical treatment, and 100% received it

Indicators for parent engagement and family support are as follows:

• 66 parents of Head Start students accessed job training; educational training; parent education activities; emergency assistance service; housing assistance; or mental health counseling

• 100% of all parents participated in parent teacher conferences, during which information on school readiness and achievements were shared

There is room for improvement on all levels as we move forward. All staff continue to work together to make sure every child is ready for school, and that each of them, and their families, are affirmed and supported as part of that process.

WHAT MAKES IT SUCCESSFUL?

The foundation Trinity uses to build positive classroom dynamics is a well-educated, outcomes-oriented staff who embrace cultural understanding and our Afrocentric approach. Trinity classroom environments are organized and reflect Black achievements, including books on famous Blacks who provided major contributions to society. Children and parents are continuously introduced to books on Black culture and best practices for healthy living that affirm that culture.

Trinity is also committed to program improvement through policy clarification, improved hiring and credentialing practices, and continuous on-site monitoring to guide improvement. Results from monitoring efforts during the 2014-2015 program year were used for staff training, environmental changes to classrooms and setting goals for improved practices during the 2015-2016 school year.

Trinity also places a unique focus on the significance male role models play in driving school readiness for students, particularly Black boys. To that end, fathers are encouraged to drop children off in their classrooms daily, and seven male staff members have been recruited and intentionally placed at every level of program operation so that men remain visible, accessible role models for students.

WHAT CHALLENGES HAS IT FACED?

Trinity programs is always finding creative ideas and resources to motivate children and families to remain actively engaged on the path to school readiness. Our challenges is finding additional community support to help mentor young parents, some of whom are teenagers, in understanding their culture and identifying practical goals for living successful lives. Trinity has low staff turnover due to staff commitment to the mission and cultural educational principles for life, but there is a need for more community outreach to link both students and parents with the resources they need to thrive.

HOW IS THIS PROJECT SUSTAINABLE?

Trinity is funded by federal Head Start and child care funding and state preschool dollars. It has a long and rich history of effectiveness within the community, and is confident in its ability to retain public funding for its child care and preschool programs. In 2014, 84% of the budget was funded by federal and state dollars, 11% by in-kind support and 5% by parent events and fees.

HOW IS THIS PROJECT REPLICABLE?

Successful programs must have dedicated staff who believe every child can achieve goals and reach their full potential. Ongoing training in the area of cultural understanding is key for staff development to maintain a program similar to what is implemented at Trinity. Program assessments are also critical for success. Assessments should be conducted regularly and shared with all staff so improvements can be made and individual staff understand their keys role in achieving desired outcomes for students.

WHAT IS THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT THING PEOPLE SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THIS PROJECT?

Children leave the program meeting State School Readiness objectives for preschoolers. Parents leave with a better understanding of and creative ideas on how to support their children's academic development, as well as how to affirm Black children in a society that openly challenges their humanity.
ILLINOIS POLICY VARIABLES & BENCHMARKS

- Meets the American Academy of Pediatrics' EPSDT screening recommendations.¹
- State has adopted Medicaid Expansion.²
- Requires newborn screening for 31 metabolic deficiencies/disorders and core conditions.³
- Income eligibility for public health insurance (Medicaid/CHIP) at or above 200% of the federal policy level (FPL).⁴
- The state minimum wage is $8.25 per hour.⁵
- Child care regulations require one adult for every 10 children and the maximum class size is 20.⁶
- State supplements Early Head Start.⁷
- Sets copayments for child care subsidies at 10% of income for a family of three at 150% FPL.⁸
- Requires school districts to offer half day kindergarten as opposed to full day.⁹
- State has comprehensive, free-standing standards for social emotional learning at the K-12 level.¹⁰

Total state spending on PreK: $276,431,173

PreK enrollment: 75,231

State spending per child (PreK): $3,164

State spending supplement for Head Start (per child): $7,545

Federally-funded Head Start enrollment: 34,227
BEING BLACK IS NOT A RISK FACTOR: Statistics and Strengths-Based Solutions in the State of Illinois

ENDNOTES

FOREWORD: RESILIENCE AND VULNERABILITY IN AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN BY BARBARA T. BOWMAN


THROUGH THE LENS OF CULTURE: ENVISIONING EFFECTIVE POWERFUL PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN BLACK FAMILIES AND EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS


25. Additional References:

Illinois Demographics Related to Young Black Children and Families


Illinois Children and Families
Using Reading and Writing to NURTURE the INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT of BLACK BOYS

14. Additional References:
BEING BLACK IS NOT A RISK FACTOR: Statistics and Strengths-Based Solutions in the State of Illinois


ENGAGING FAMILIES: THE RECHARGE APPROACH


POLICY VARIABLES & BENCHMARKS


2. https://kaiserfamilyfoundation.files.wordpress.com/2015/05/current-status-of-the-medicaid-expansion-decisions-healthreform.png


A note about the use of the words African American and Black:

The descriptive terms “Black,” “African American” and “culture” are defined and used in so many different ways in social science literature that we believe a note of explanation is in order with respect to their use here. At the National Black Child Development Institute, we operate from the assumption that race and culture are separate concepts—race being based on skin color and culture being based on socialization. Because the characteristics and trends we are most concerned about in this discussion are both racial and cultural in origin, we use the term “Black” to describe children and families who are both racially Black and of African origin throughout the diaspora. To stay true to the language of other writers, however, African American also appears in their direct quotes and references to their original research, even where their descriptive reference is both racial and cultural.

When, however, we are specifically talking about cultural patterns, we use “African American” to describe learned values, traditions, beliefs and behaviors with specific reference to Black people of African ancestry, recognizing that there is variation between and within groups of specific geographic and historical origin as well as generational variations.
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NBCDI encourages a diverse presentation of ideas and opinions. Readers should note that an organization or idea’s inclusion in this report does not necessarily constitute an endorsement on behalf of NBCDI and that the findings, recommendations and conclusions presented in this report are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of NBCDI, nor of our funding partners.

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