

i3 Grant Tests the Potential & Reach of One of the Country's Oldest PreK-3rd Programs

By [Paul Nyhan](#) — December 9, 2013

This guest post was written by Paul Nyhan, a journalist and early education expert. He writes about early education at [Thrive by Five Washington](#).

In the next few months, guest blogger Paul Nyhan will provide a window onto four places around the country where federal grant programs, including [Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge](#), the [Social Innovation Fund](#), [Investing in Innovation](#), and [Promise Neighborhoods](#), are triggering changes in [early childhood](#) systems. In this post, the third in Nyhan's series, he explores a University of Minnesota Investing in Innovation grant to expand a Chicago pre-K model. The first post in the series was "[Washington Races Forward In First Year of its Early Learning Challenge Grant](#)." The second post was "[Amid Financial Collapse, Detroit Builds a Promising Early Learning Model](#)."

When the University of Minnesota won an Investing in Innovation (i3) grant two years ago, it bet that it could expand one of the nation's most successful PreK-3rd grade programs from only 10 Chicago schools to schools around the Midwest.

On one level the gamble was pretty basic. The grant would breathe new life into one of the most well-regarded and second oldest federally-funded early education programs in the U.S., Child-Parent Centers, by spreading its approach to public schools in Minnesota and Wisconsin. At the same time, it would reinvigorate the program in

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Chicago, where it was born 46 years ago and has operated ever since.

If you dug a little deeper, it became clear the \$15 million grant was actually a complex and incredibly ambitious bet on expanding a PreK-3rd grade model originally designed largely for Chicago's poorest African American families to suburban, rural, and urban schools home to dozens of cultures and languages.

Today, the i3 plan is playing for even higher stakes. At a time when the public is more focused on the benefits of [preschool](#) than it has been in decades, this grant is asking whether Child-Parent Centers and PreK-3rd grade in general could play major roles in reforming public schools.

"The spotlight is definitely on us. We are trying to figure out if it works. Show how it works and why it works, so we can (expand) it to other kinds of families in other regions," said Mallory Warner-Richter, the i3 grant's project manager.

The Child-Parent Center model certainly deserves part of the spotlight, but too rarely gets it. As Congress reviews new proposals to dramatically expand public [pre-kindergarten](#), legislators are citing Michigan's HighScope Perry [Preschool](#), North Carolina's Abecedarian project and New Jersey's Abbott programs. But they rarely mention Illinois's less expensive Child-Parent Centers.

It is often overlooked, even though it's the only research-reviewed PreK-3rd grade program that can show decades of positive outcomes among its former students, ranging from better high school graduation rates to less time in jail. If the grant proves CPC works in new types of communities, that could well change.

A Good Start

During its first two years, the i3 work got off to a quick start. Within eight months, the project team helped open [pre-kindergarten](#) classrooms of no more than 17 children each at 26 sites, serving 2,350 students. These classrooms were spread across six school districts in two states. In Chicago, they set about restoring Child-Parent Centers that had been eroded by years of budget cuts.

In the first year, the team created [pre-kindergarten](#) leadership groups – a Head Teacher, Parent Resource Teacher and School Community Representative – at each school and began offering focused professional development in that grade. One of the grant's key partners, the [Erikson Institute](#) is developing comprehensive professional development in PreK-3rd work for i3 schools and sites. Schools also started aligning curricula and family engagement between pre-k and kindergarten. Each year, the team will expand these efforts to the next higher grade, until they reach third grade and a total of 9,000 students in the grant's fifth and final year.

But outside forces threatened to derail the work almost before it got started. In the first year, for example, Chicago teachers went on strike for eight days and Chicago Public Schools decided to close roughly 50 schools, including those with new or revived Child-Parent Centers.



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“That could have crushed just about any project. Despite all of that they were able to get five districts in two states going, and in most of these schools they had not seen the CPC model before,” said Erika Gaylor, who is leading an outside evaluation of the project for SRI International.

What also threatened to slow things down was measuring the progress and impact of the grant’s changes on students from often highly mobile poor families. One of the goals of the federal i3 program is to expand evidence-based and evaluated programs. But the i3 grant was trying to evaluate some tricky practices, such as parental engagement.

“We are measuring every way we can. Parents reporting on parents. Teachers reporting on parent involvement. Principals reporting on parent involvement,” Gaylor said.

The magic grease that kept things moving, and a lesson for other regions considering similar work, was flexibility. The CPC model prescribes six core strategies: high-quality PreK-3rd grades; aligned curriculum; parental involvement and engagement; collaborative leadership teams; continuity and stability; and professional development. But it lets schools decide how to implement these ideas. The approach, for example, doesn’t require a specific curriculum, though a school needs to align whatever it chooses from pre-K through third grade.

Another reason the grant went relatively smoothly was that its team chose schools and districts that had already committed to early education. This meant school leaders and teachers were often receptive to CPC ideas.

“There had to be buy in before we even got started,” said Erin Lease, assistant project manager on the i3 grant.

This early work is already producing promising preliminary results.

In i3 schools, children who participated in all three defining elements of Child-Parent Centers – full-day pre-K, high family involvement, and enrollment at centers with full-time outreach staff – had a rate of chronic absences that was 65 percent lower than students who didn’t participate in programs with the three elements, according to University of Minnesota Professor Arthur Reynolds, who is leading the grant work. Absenteeism in [preschool](#) can set a pattern for chronic absenteeism in elementary, middle, and high school and has been associated with higher high school dropout rates, he added.

Far bigger tests loom in the future. At the beginning of kindergarten, first, second, and third grade children will be assessed on early literacy, reading, math, social skills/problem behaviors, and school readiness. Students will be tested every year.

The most important test, though, will come 30 years from now, when researchers will learn if early intervention from pre-K through third grade led to long-term success among alumnae, such as higher rates of high school graduation and homeownership and lower rates of incarceration and drug use.

That is exactly what researchers found when they followed children for 25 years after they left Chicago's Child-Parent Centers. A [landmark study](#) reported students who spent four to six years at a Child-Parent Center – roughly equivalent to PreK-3rd grade – were more likely to graduate from high school and reach higher socio-economic status and less likely to have been arrested or incarcerated, compared to a control group.¹

Despite this success, the Child-Parent Center program was a shell of its former self by the time the University of Minnesota won an i3 award in 2011. At the program's highpoint in the mid-1980s, Chicago boasted 25 Child-Parent Centers that ran from [preschool](#) through third grade and served 1,500 students. By 2009, there were 10 centers left that offered only pre-k to 670 students. (For more details, read "[What's Been Cut: The Story of the Child-Parent Centers.](#)")

The man who led the breakthrough research on CPC's impact, Professor Arthur Reynolds of the University of Minnesota's [Human Capital Research Collaborative](#), was determined to reinvigorate and expand the program with an i3 grant.

When Reynolds and a team of 10 education and non-profit agencies, including Chicago Public Schools and Illinois State University, applied they weren't interested in simply restoring the old model. Instead, the group wanted to update it to reflect decades of research on high-quality early learning and demographics of the modern family. Overall, he wanted to position CPC in the middle of the education debate, and that meant putting principals at the middle of the CPC model.

With the principal as a linchpin, "the main thing was to re-establish a lot of the culture of the program, the leadership team," Reynolds said. "The leadership team, in a lot of ways, was lost in the CPC program."

A Lesson of Flexibility: One Size of Parental Engagement Doesn't Fit All

If you want to understand the i3 grant, and why flexibility is perhaps its key ingredient, you need to understand how it is spreading the Child-Parent Center's approach to parental engagement to new schools.

Parents are at the heart of the CPC. If you can engage parents in their child's education in pre-K, the thinking goes, they are more likely to stay engaged through the first four years of elementary school, giving their child a better chance of success in school and ultimately life.

So, in the CPC model parents have their own classroom – a Parent Resource Room often complete with cribs, washers and dryers – and teacher charged with encouraging parents to take an active role in their child's education. This Parent Resource Teacher does everything from recruiting classroom volunteers and chatting with parents at drop-off to visiting families at home and helping them find needed services.

Sometimes they simply help a child get to school.

One morning at Peck Elementary School's Child-Parent Center in Chicago a student did not show up because his family's car broke down. The Parent Resource teacher picked up the phone, called a few families she knew in the neighborhood, and found the child a ride to school.

A key to spreading the Parent-Resource idea is flexibility. The grant team leaves a lot of the execution to individual schools. In fact, the term Parent Resources is only mentioned a handful of times in the i3 grant application.

Why? What engages parents in inner-city neighborhoods of Chicago may not work in Saint Paul Public Schools, where nearly half of the 39,000 students speak foreign languages, ranging from Laotian to Spanish. If the i3 grant is going to successfully expand the Child-Parent Center model, it has to adapt.

"We know parent involvement is important... However, what specifically parent involvement is that looks different culture to culture," said Momoko Hayakawa, a research scientist at the Minneapolis-based Human Capital Research Collaborative, which is leading implementation of the grant.

So, the grant team suggested that each Parent Resource Teacher start a school year by conducting a needs assessment that asks parents what type of workshops and activities they want. Then the teacher can develop a parent-involvement calendar that reflects those interests.

At one school, parents may want GED classes. At another they may come for Zumba. And somewhere else they may ask for parenting classes.

With all this variety and flexibility it wasn't easy to measure parental engagement in the first two years of the grant.

Initially, teachers sent home parent surveys, but too many never came back. So, they began collecting sign-in sheets at parent events and recording who came, when they came and what they did. Then they used this information to build a database. Today, a Parent Resource Teacher can create monthly reports about which parents are coming to school and what they are doing. Then they can adjust their teaching.

Data collection, however, remains a work in progress.

"Really it is the data collection that has been the biggest challenge," Hayakawa said.

Sustaining Early Progress

Despite early challenges, the project is off to a good start. But the biggest challenges lay in the future.

Building a sustainable PreK-3rd grade system is demanding, sometimes tedious and occasionally frustrating work. In schools covered by the grant, educators need to align the often different worlds of [preschool](#) and K-3, connecting these grades with common

curricula, professional development, and most importantly a shared sense of mission. This work can take years, if not decades.

And the project needs to keep students in the same school for four to five years. This is no easy task given that the project focuses on low-income families struggling with immigration issues, homelessness, illiteracy, or other symptoms of entrenched poverty. This may be one of the biggest challenges the project faces.

All of this alignment, professional development and student retention, demands a strong and sustained commitment from teachers, principals, superintendents, and policymakers, who are particularly important to future funding.²

And there is no guarantee the current commitments from all four groups will remain after the grant ends in 2017. But, there are encouraging signs.

By choosing schools that already supported early education, the project laid a solid foundation. Two years ago, for example, Saint Paul Public Schools committed Title I funds to [preschool](#) for the first time, following the lead of Chicago Public Schools, which was the first district to do that more than 40 years ago. Now other schools could tap Title I funds to finance work begun by the i3 grant.

“Schools have to come up with their own stakes,” Professor Reynolds said. “It is not just an appendage, it has to be integrated. Too often people see PreK-3rd as an early education issue. PreK-3rd is really a school reform model.”

In many ways, Saint Paul Public Schools and its superintendent Valeria Silva hold the future of the i3 grant. If the diverse urban school district can show that Chicago’s Child-Parent Centers boosted academic achievement among its nearly 40,000 students, the program and the PreK-3rd grade model will gain attention and potentially bigger roles in the debate over how to reform public education.

Superintendent Silva is clearly committed to early education – she has promoted [preschool](#) in her schools for years – and now she is committed to the Child-Parent Center’s PreK-3rd grade approach.

“We need more time with our kids, not more time in the day, more time in the year, more time to give them opportunities,” Silva said.

The University of Minnesota and the [Human Capital Research Collaborative](#) are leading the i3 grant project, but the initiative is the collaborative work of 10 current partners:

- Human Capital Research Collaborative at University of Minnesota
- New Schools Project at Erikson Institute
- Center for the Study of Education Policy at Illinois State University
- SRI International
- Chicago Public Schools
- Woodlawn Children’s Promise Community
- St. Paul Public Schools
- Bethel King Child Development Center
- St. Paul Promise Neighborhood
- District 65 (Evanston/Skokie, IL)
- [Child Care](#) Center of Evanston

- Unit 5 (Normal, IL)

Updated 12/11/13 at 1:00 p.m. to reflect project partners.

1. Latest findings from Chicago Longitudinal Study published in Science Magazine 6/9/2011. Foundation for Child Development →

2. Into the Fray: How a Funders Coalition Restored Momentum for Early Learning in Minnesota. September 2012. Foundation for Child Development. →

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