Expanding the Early Childhood Vision

Lorraine Hansberry Child-Parent Center
Chicago, Illinois
Edith Allen Coleman, Principal

PROFILE
Grades: PK-8
School Enrollment: 606
District Enrollment: 426,812
Community: Urban
Percentages of students:
• African-American: 99
• Asian: 0
• Hispanic: 1
• Native-American: 0
• White: 0
Poverty rate*: 98 percent
English language learners: 0 percent
PK program location: School
PK program funding: Federal funding

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS
• School offers literacy-rich settings to children from low-income families.
• Students are more likely to graduate high school than are other children from poor families.
• Professional development partnership with university supports teachers.

*Poverty rate determined by percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch
PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT AND ENHANCED SUPPORT

The Lorraine Hansberry Child-Parent Center is an early intervention program that offers a comprehensive system of academic and social supports children from disadvantaged backgrounds in order to prepare them for success in school.

Located in North Lawndale, a low-income community on Chicago’s West Side, Hansberry was one of the first child-parent centers launched in 1967 by the Chicago Public Schools. The center uses Title I funds to help address the dearth of quality early childhood programs for 3- and 4-year-olds in impoverished areas. The city-wide initiative helps parents become more engaged in their children's development. The centers focus on PK-3 alignment to extend the benefits of small class sizes, highly qualified staff and early intervention strategies into first, second and third grades. While district budget cuts over the years have diminished some aspects of the program’s ability to have a PK-3 focus, the essence of the original program has been sustained at Hansberry and other child-parent centers, where principals seek to make connections with early elementary grades. In 15 sites across the city, the program has served more than 100,000 children over the past 39 years.

At Hansberry, parents or guardians of 3- and 4-year-olds commit to at least a half-day of volunteer time each week. Parents receive support from a parent resource teacher, who addresses topics such as nutrition, personal development and effective strategies for parent-child interactions. Along with being active participants in the classroom, parents also have the opportunity to take GED classes and other courses to improve their education and enhance their career skills. Over the years, a number of parents have been motivated to go back to school and earn degrees. Both the business manager and community resource officer at Hansberry are also parents of children in the school.

PK-3 ALIGNMENT
A FOCUS ON LITERACY

Hansberry is fully integrated into the Daniel Webster School, which houses kindergarten through eighth grade. The Child-Parent Center includes a collaboration program that begins at 7 a.m. and gives parents the option of keeping their children for after-school activities until 5 p.m. The staff includes a certified instructional leader, two parent aides and two teacher assistants. Two half-day PK programs run from 9 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. and again from 12:15 p.m. to 2:45 p.m.

“We really see ourselves as one school,” says Edith Allen-Coleman, principal of the center. “There is no separation. We look at education as sequential, and we believe the foundation is set in PK and the early grades and that it has such a connection to students’ success.”

Creating a seamless PK-3 continuum is reflected in an emphasis on providing opportunities to meet across grade levels to teachers. Because the school has a well-developed fine arts program, along with physical education and library units, Allen-Coleman is able to structure blocks of teacher planning time into the school day: Teachers meet while students attend these other activities.
These meetings are focused on developing research-based teaching and learning strategies, analyzing evidence of students’ work, and using data to improve instruction. “We make sure we don’t meet in isolation,” Allen-Coleman says. “Everyone understands what takes place at each grade level. There’s no confusion about what’s necessary to prepare these children.”

Ensuring that students develop sound literacy skills is a significant focus of PK-3 learning at Hansberry. Because students come from families living in poverty, they often have little exposure to a literacy-rich environment with books or magazines. The Child-Parent Center helps fill that void. A lead literacy teacher works with students from PK through eighth grade, and a reading specialist assists teachers and students in kindergarten through third grade. A primary intervention teacher also works with K-3 students who need more intensive support in reading. Partnership Read is a collaborative project that Hansberry and the Daniel Webster School have developed with the University of Illinois at Chicago. For the past four years, professors from the university’s school of education have worked closely with teachers to help them be more strategic about standard-based instruction. While the partnership formed around improving the quality of children’s reading experiences, the initiative has expanded to include other core academic areas, such as math, science and social studies.

An action team at the school includes teacher representatives from PK through eighth grade. They meet frequently to discuss alignment issues and to work on school-wide improvement planning. Allen-Coleman describes the team as a think tank, an incubator for ideas and best practices that build a collaborative approach to improving teaching and learning.

PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP
AN EQUAL PARTNER

Allen-Coleman’s long career in early childhood education serves as a strong foundation for her role as school leader. Working at the Daniel Webster School for 36 years, she has experience teaching kindergarten through third-grade classes. When Hansberry moved from an off-site location into the Webster School in 1976, Allen-Coleman became an active contributor to the center’s development. She served as the parent resource teacher responsible for helping parents become more active in the program and make connections between the child-parent center and Webster school.

Allen-Coleman draws from these lessons in her current position as principal. “I try to be a facilitator who provides guidance to teachers and adapts to different situations,” she says. “The days when the principal knows all and sees all are over.”

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
HIGH EXPECTATIONS DRIVE STRATEGIES

Teachers at Hansberry and Webster have regular opportunities at the school and in the district to improve their own instructional knowledge. A centerpiece of professional development, possible through a partnership with the University of Illinois at Chicago, is a technique called a “gallery walk.” During this exercise, evidence of student work from each grade level is mounted on the wall and university professors and
teachers from Hansberry and Webster meet in groups to analyze the material. By comparing the work to specific academic standards students are expected to meet, teachers receive feedback from the professors on ways to enhance classroom lessons.

Allen-Coleman also taps the expertise of her own highly qualified staff to provide ongoing professional development. Because child-parent centers are operated by Chicago Public Schools, teachers at Hansberry must have a bachelor’s degree and an early childhood certificate.

Lead teachers, parent resource teachers and literacy teachers all provide daily support to colleagues across grade levels and subject areas. The school also has an established fine arts program that includes theater, dance and music enrichment. Staff from the Chicago Community Trust, a local organization that promotes integration of the arts in schools, provides support for teachers looking to use art to enhance students’ learning experiences.

**RESULTS**

**A HISTORY OF SUCCESS**

Allen-Coleman believes that the benefits of intensive early literacy support, consistent parental engagement, and learning environments enhanced by partnerships with universities and community groups have been evident in myriad ways.

Elementary school teachers report that students who have attended Hansberry demonstrate stronger language development, are more familiar with the school routine, and are prepared to learn more quickly. Hansberry students also graduate from high school and attend college in higher percentages than most low-income students in the city. Each year, the most qualified eighth-grade students in Chicago are invited by the school district to take an entrance exam for admission to the best high schools. This year, 50 percent of eighth graders who attended the Child-Parent program at Daniel Webster were invited to sit for the exam. This is an impressive achievement in a city where, according to a 2005 report from the Consortium on Chicago School Research, only 54 percent of Chicago public school students even graduate from high school.

While the Daniel Webster School did not meet Adequate Yearly Progress in 2005, the school is showing signs of significant progress. For example, the percentage of seventh graders meeting science standards on the state's assessment exam increased from 39 percent in 2003-04 to 70 percent the following year. Fifty-one percent of eighth graders met reading standards in 2004-05, compared to 45 percent the previous year.

Chicago’s child-parent centers have also demonstrated long-range results. In 2004, a professor of social work at the University of Wisconsin found that compared to other children from low-income families who had experiences in Head Start or other early childhood settings, students who attended the centers in the 1980s were nearly 30 percent more likely to have graduated from high school and 40 percent less likely to have repeated a grade.