



# GOAL CONNECT: LIVING WITH PURPOSE

PROGRESS REPORT 2018

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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## Background

Across America, children in high-poverty urban schools face out-of-school challenges that impede their success in the classroom and in life. In the 1960's, the Coleman Report and others concluded that socioeconomic background is a significant factor affecting students' academic achievement (Harrington, 1962; Coleman et al., 1966). Current research confirms that contexts beyond the school are critical, accounting for up to two-thirds of the variance in student achievement (Phillips et al., 1998; Rothstein, 2010).

There is now growing national recognition that schools need interventions like City Connects—evidence-based ways to provide comprehensive supports to students in schools. The national nonprofit research firm Child Trends has produced two reports on the evidence base for this work, which they term “integrated student support” (Moore et al., 2014, 2017). These reports concluded that broadly, the evidence for positive outcomes for students is promising.

With strong evidence that comprehensive student support benefits students, the next research frontier is to better understand how. In October 2017, the Center for Optimized Student Support, which houses City Connects, hosted the first national research conference on integrated student support. Researchers from across the country and beyond the U.S. convened to review the evidence and set a research agenda. At the conference, a broad consensus emerged that researchers must now seek to understand more deeply how integrated student support works, including the relative importance of different elements and features of specific interventions and the influence of, and impact on, the context of implementation.

In alignment with this call to research, we offer in this report an in-depth picture of the City Connects intervention and its implementation. We begin with the story of our growth and a rationale for City Connects. Next, we offer context on our current sites of implementation, followed by a description of elements of the City Connects model, including reviews of student strengths and needs and connections to services in the school and community. We present data illustrating the nature and scope of implementation of these elements of the intervention. We also describe the impact that the intervention has on schools, as reported by teachers and principals, and communities, as reported by community partner agencies.

## START UP

The partnership that led to City Connects began in the early 1990s. Researchers and leaders at Boston College, a Boston Public elementary school, and community agencies began to explore

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**FIGURE 1.** Timeline of City Connects' expansion





## What Happens Outside of School?

What happens outside of school can greatly impact what happens inside of school. For students living in poverty, out-of-school factors can be pervasive and severe. Students and their families may struggle with hunger, housing, medical issues, or other needs. A lack of time or resources may mean that needs remain unmet and connections that would benefit a student or a family are not made.

The City Connects approach to addressing these out-of-school factors is grounded in developmental science. **Four core principles** of effective practice emerging from the developmental sciences have informed the development of City Connects and guide the work of addressing the out-of-school factors that impact achievement.

### COMPREHENSIVE

Children develop across biological, psychological, and social domains (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Ford & Lerner, 1992). Each domain is simultaneously impacting each of the other domains (Rutter, 2007). For this reason, student support must take different developmental domains into account. At the same time, children's needs span a continuum of intensity, from mild to severe. Therefore, student support must be offered at various levels of intensity: prevention, early intervention, and intensive/crisis intervention (Adelman & Taylor, 2006).

### CUSTOMIZED

Child development is dynamic and complex, and each child experiences a unique interaction between personal characteristics and environment (Cicchetti & Sroufe, 2000). As a result, no two children's experiences or developmental trajectories are identical (Sameroff, 2009). Also, developmental science points to the value of addressing children's strengths in addition to their needs, creating conditions for resilience (Masten & Tellgen, 2012). Thus, to be effective, student support practices must take into account and tailor approaches based on the individual strengths and needs of every student in a school.

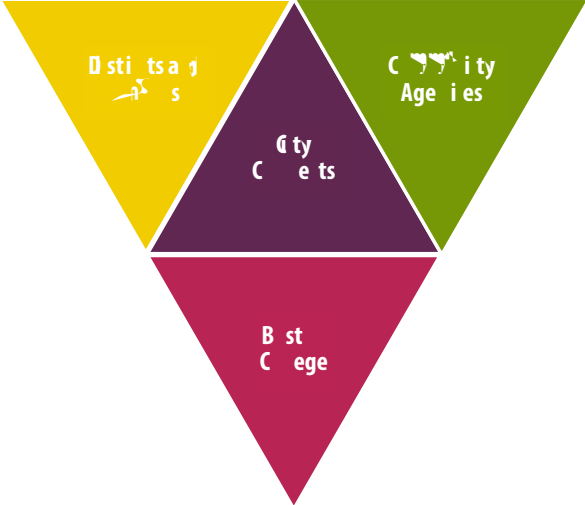
### COORDINATED

Developmental science points out the mutually influential relationships among a child and his or her home, school, and neighborhood (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Aligning efforts across these contexts is especially important for children at economic disadvantage (Dearing et al., 2016; Garcia Coll et al., 1996). For example, given the critical role of families in children's development, it is important that student support plans be coordinated with family collaboration. Also, effective student support involves an assessment of strengths and needs with teacher input. To provide the full array of supports students need, schools should leverage the work of providers and resources from the community (Brabeck & Walsh, 2003; D'Agostino, 2013). Coordination requires communication and systems for aligning the efforts of these people and groups.

## CONTINUOUS

Developmental science suggests that continuity of care in a safe, predictable, and stable environment positively impacts development (Waters, Weinfeld, & Hamilton, 2000). Implementation of student support should promote this continuity and stability. Further, connecting students to the supports that best match their evolving strengths and needs is an iterative process because development is dynamic and changes over time. For example, early childhood experiences affect what happens in elementary school a

**FIGURE 3.** The City Connects partnership



This partnership includes structures to enable coordination. For example, core processes ensure teacher input in



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Figure 4 provides a visual overview of the core work of the City Connects Coordinator within the context of the school and community.

**FIGURE 4.** The City Connects core practice

FEEDB





# Reviews and services

During the Whole Class Review process, as described above, the City Connects Coordinator and teacher group students into three tiers: strengths and minimal risk (Tier 1), strengths and mild to moderate risk (Tier 2), or strengths and severe risk (Tier 3). Tier 2 is divided into two levels: 2a (mild risk) and 2b (moderate risk). Table 2 shows the number and percentages of students in each tier across all districts.

**TABLE 2.** Number of students placed in each tier across all City Connects sites, 2016-17

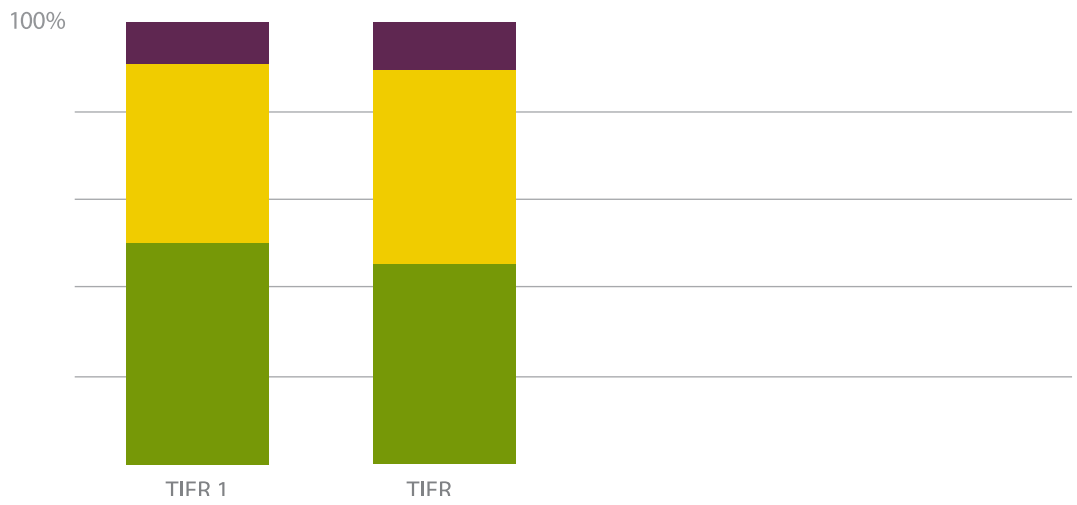


Tables 4 and 5 and Figure 5 illustrate the distribution by tier of students receiving different services.

**TABLE 4.** Number of services by student tier, 2016-17

	# of students	# of students receiving 1 service	# of students receiving 2 services	# of students receiving 3 services	# of students receiving 4 services

**FIGURE 5.** Proportion of student in each tier receiving categories of services, 2016-17



In the 2016-17 academic year, Micah received nine services/enrichment opportunities. Four of these were supports offered to the full school. These included The Arts Project, a program that aligns with the school's literacy curriculum; City Seeds, a program that offers students in urban schools experience with gardening; Play to Learn, a program that builds social-emotional skills through games; and another school-based program that builds social-emotional skills through events involving students and staff. Micah received two services offered to his grade or class: a health screening procedure and a field trip to a historical site. Finally, Micah received three individually tailored enrichments and supports. The Coordinator connected him to a music program that offers performance opportunities, which was a match for his specific musical interests, and because transportation was available. He was also connected to an after-school program that provides homework help as well as enrichment activities in science, soccer, basketball, and arts and crafts; and Fitness Fun, a before-school program that coordinates indoor and outdoor group activities.

## BRAYDEN'S STORY

Brayden is a male student in grade 5. The Coordinator and teacher observed strengths as well as information and behaviors indicating intensive educational risk for this student (Tier 3). During the Whole Class Review conversation, the teacher noted that Brayden's academic strengths include reading fluency, enjoyment of school, and a capacity for hard work. Brayden is below grade level in reading comprehension and writing. He is noted for his good intentions and for the fact that he loves positive attention. He sometimes struggles with transitions, which can lead to unpredictable behavior. Health strengths include the fact that he is active and has appropriate clothing and good hygiene. He is often hungry, and has challenges with sleep and medication compliance. Family strengths include the fact that his mother is in communication with the school and has been receptive to resources and supports; his father is also involved. The family has experienced stressors including homelessness.

In the 2016-17 academic year, Brayden received fifteen services/enrichment opportunities. Four of these were supports offered to the full school. These included four of the supports described above: The Arts Project; City Seeds; Play to Learn; and a school-based program promoting social-emotional skills. One of the enrichments Brayden received was provided for his entire grade—a field trip to a museum. The ten remaining supports and services were individually tailored to his specific strengths and needs. Two were family assistance services related to housing which were specific to the family's circumstances and which were set up through communication between the Coordinator and Brayden's mother. A third was a medical service, also set up in collaboration with the family, tailored to meet the identified need for support with medication compliance. Other supports included two additional medical services, a family conference, an intervention service that helped address the student's struggles with transitions, a crisis intervention, attendance support, and a behavior support service.



## Outcomes: Academic Achievement

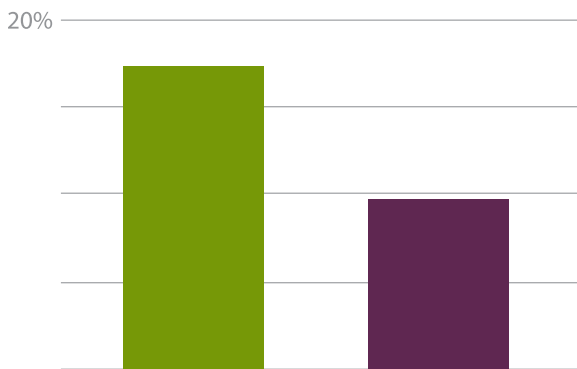
A consistent set of findings demonstrates that being in a City Connects school makes a difference. Beginning in elementary school, and after leaving the City Connects and moving on to middle schools, City Connects students outperform comparison peers on measures of academic achievement:

- Despite starting with lower report card scores in first grade, students in City Connects schools demonstrated significantly higher scores than those in comparison schools in reading, writing, and math by the end of fifth grade. The magnitude of these positive effects was as large as the negative effects of poverty (City Connects, 2010).
- English language learners (ELL) experienced significantly larger treatment benefits on literacy outcomes than non-ELL students. By third grade, ELL students in City Connects schools demonstrated similar reading report card scores to those proficient in English in comparison schools, thereby eliminating the achievement gap in reading between ELL and non-ELL students (City Connects, 2010).
- Immigrant students who experienced City Connects significantly outperformed immigrant students who never experienced the intervention on both reading and math achievement test scores. City Connects also narrowed achievement gaps between immigrant students and their English-proficient peers (Dearing et al., 2016).
- Students who experienced City Connects in elementary school significantly outperformed comparison peers on measures of academic achievement (statewide test scores in English and mathematics and grade point averages) in grades 6, 7, and 8 (Walsh et al., 2014)

Beyond academic achievement, students who experience City Connects in elementary school outperform comparison peers on indicators of educational success and life chances:

- City Connects students at greatest educational risk demonstrated lower rates of retention (being held back in grade) than comparable students never enrolled in City Connects (City Connects, 2012).
- Students enrolled in City Connects elementary schools demonstrated lower rates of chronic absenteeism in middle and high school (defined as being absent from school 10% of days or more) than students in comparison schools (City Connects, 2014).
- Once they reached high school, students previously enrolled in a City Connects school from kindergarten through grade 5 dropped out of school at about half the rate of students enrolled in non-City Connects schools at the same time (Walsh et al., 2017). See Figure 6.

**FIGURE 6.** Cumulative percentage of students who drop out from high school, comparison vs. City Connects students





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- Lower-income students in City Connects schools started out with slightly lower language scores in third grade than lower-income students in comparison schools, but surpassed them by sixth grade.
- The rate of math, reading, and language achievement growth was significantly higher for students in City Connects than for students in comparison schools.

The results of evaluation studies demonstrate the positive effects of City Connects repeatedly, across methodological approaches, sites, and samples. Consistently, across methods, City Connects students are seen to significantly outperform comparison peers on a variety of measures of academic achievement and thriving. The accumulation of evidence now permits an argument that City Connects causes these benefits for students (City Connects, 2016).

## Measuring satisfaction

Each spring City Connects conducts confidential surveys of principals, teachers, and community partners who work with City Connects. The survey is administered electronically using the Qualtrics survey tool. Principals across all districts are surveyed annually. Teachers and community partners are surveyed every other year after three years of implementation in a district. The online surveys are designed to assess participants' satisfaction with City Connects and to identify both strengths and opportunities for improvement.

The findings below are presented in aggregate across all districts. They were calculated using the most recent survey data available from Boston and Springfield, MA; New York City; Hartford, CT; Dayton and Springfield, OH Catholic and charter schools; Boston Catholic schools; and Minneapolis, MN Catholic schools. For principals, all data was collected in the spring of 2017. For teachers and community partners, who are surveyed on a rotating basis as described above, the data used was collected in the springs of 2016 and 2017.

### Principal satisfaction

In the spring of 2017, public, Catholic, and charter school principals and administrators at all sites were invited to participate in City Connects annual satisfaction survey.<sup>1</sup> Across all districts, 92% of principals reported satisfaction with City Connects, and 94% would recommend City Connects to another principal. Three quarters (75%) report having more time for their core work, and 94% reported that student support had improved in their schools as a result of City Connects. In the words of a Boston principal,

*"City Connects has been a great asset to our school. The Coordinator has been instrumental in helping us to improve our communication with families and to provide more support for our teachers. We have seen a significant increase in student support and a decrease in teacher stress since we started working with City Connects."*

Principals reported that Coordinators communicating with and supporting families was a particular area of strength for the intervention: 87% of principals report that the Coordinator plays an important role engaging families, and 91% report being satisfied with the supports that the Coordinator provides for families. When asked to identify ways the City Connects Coordinator works with families in the school, a majority of principals reported that Coordinators served as a point of contact for families in the school (86%), reached out to families on behalf of the school (88%), supported teachers in having difficult or sensitive conversations with families (83%), connected families to services (80%), and supported families with transitions (77%).

In addition to being satisfied with City Connects' work with families, principals also reported satisfaction on a range of Coordinator-provided supports. See Table 6.

<sup>1</sup> The survey was sent to 114 principals and assistant principals across districts, and 88 (77%) participated. Not every principal responded to every question. Therefore, item-level Ns may vary.

**TABLE 6.** Percentage of principals satisfied with the Coordinator-provided supports in each area

I am satisfied with the support City Connects provides to:	N=82
Students (e.g., securing services, providing individual support, running lunch groups)	91%
Teachers (e.g., conducting Whole Class Reviews and assisting with behavior challenges in the classroom)	89%
Families (e.g., family outreach, following up with families, assisting with parent meetings)	91%
Principals/Administrators (e.g., coordinating Student Support Team, supporting administrative activities)	90%
The School (e.g., their presence on the playground, bus and lunch duty)	85%
Community Partnerships (e.g. maintaining communication with agencies, following up to secure services, coordinating agency work in the school)	88%

*Principals' Testimonials*

Principals also reported on how helpful they found various aspects of City Connects in their schools. As shown in Table 7, a large majority of principals (89% or more for all items) found each aspect of the program helpful, with coordination of Whole Class Reviews and connecting students to services being the highest-rated program aspects. In the words of a Boston principal,

*“The support that we have received from City Connects has been tremendous. We have been able to coordinate our services better and connect students to services that we otherwise would not have been able to do. This has been a great benefit to our school and our students.”*

**TABLE 7.** Percentage of principals rating specific program aspects as (somewhat/very) helpful

Principals also reported on other features of the program's impact. For example, 90% or more of principals rated City Connects as somewhat or very helpful at impacting the following: student academic achievement (90%),



Teachers also reported on the helpfulness of City Connects in addressing other issues. For example, 83% of teachers reported that City Connects helps them to follow through in securing non-academic supports for their students. More than three quarters of teachers agreed that City Connects helped them to address student behavior, to ensure students came to class prepared to learn, and to help them connect with students' families. 73% of teachers reported that City Connects helped make their classrooms more conducive to learning and more than half of teachers agreed that City Connects helps them increase the amount of time available to prepare for instruction.

City Connects Coordinators also support teachers through their work with families. Teachers report that Coordinators support their work by serving as a point of contact for families in the school (76%) and increasing teacher awareness of the services available for families, such as translation, housing, and transportation (71%). More than half (57%) of teachers agreed that Coordinators supported them in having difficult or sensitive conversations with families, and 60% reported that Coordinators contacted families on their behalf. In the words of an Ohio teacher,





## Community Agency Partners

Community agency partners across all City Connects districts were invited to take part in a



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City Connects is an approach to providing supports to students that align with effective practices emerging from the developmental sciences. By design, specific features of the intervention enable these effective practices. For example, City Connects is **comprehensive**. It provides a codified practice for paying attention to the different domains in which students are developing: academic/social/emotional/behavioral, health, and family. Both strengths and needs in all of these domains are considered through a guided process for conversations between the City Connects Coordinator, classroom teachers, and other staff in the school. It is also **customized**. Each student's developmental trajectory is unique, so the City Connects Coordinator meets with every classroom teacher individually to discuss each student in the class, one by one, considering both strengths and needs across developmental domains. This enables the Coordinator to connect each student to a tailored set of prevention, enrichment, early intervention, and/or intensive supports. These connections are **coordinated**: the City Connects database and communication practices ensure that not only the classroom teacher but also the student's family and any community partners remain in close communication with the Coordinator. Finally, to ensure **continuous** support, the database includes reminders and protocols for tracking the effectiveness of supports throughout the school year and across school years. The ongoing communication that Coordinators maintain with teachers, families, and community partners contributes to the stability and continuity of care that developmental science identifies as critical to supporting students' growth.

The City Connects intervention is feasible because the intervention model supports both comprehensiveness and efficiency. The practice database enables Coordinators to tailor supports, quickly identifying the right service providers from among hundreds of community partners in a city. Individual students can be connected to a constellation of services that best address their individual strengths and needs. While students experiencing intensive needs often receive more services, the majority of students receive at least three services in a given academic year. Students experiencing any level of risk may receive supports from any category.

Findings from surveys of principals and teachers demonstrate the beneficial impact of City Connects on schools. Both of these groups note that their own work is enhanced because of City Connects. Principals point out the benefits to collaboration with families, and teachers report that City Connects increases their patience and empathy, because they have a deeper understanding of the out-of-school lives of their students. Clarity of understanding and closer collaborations lead to stronger relationships, enhancing the network of support surrounding each student.

The research on City Connects demonstrates that paying attention to the individual strengths and needs of every student makes a difference.



## OHIO PUBLIC SCHOOLS

City Connects launched the Dayton Early College Academy, at both the elementary and high school level, in the fall of 2014. In its first year, City Connects collaborated with 20 community partners to deliver 1,162 services to students at DECA Prep and DECA. In its third year of implementation, during the 2016-17 school year, the number of partners had grown to 39, and the number of services delivered to DECA Prep and DECA students had increased tenfold, to 11,806.

## NEW YORK CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Three years of evaluation data show that City Connects has been appreciated by principals and teachers

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