

The Impact of City Connects

Progress Report 2024



cityconnects



Mary E. Walsh
Center for Thriving Children



BOSTON COLLEGE

Dear colleagues and friends,

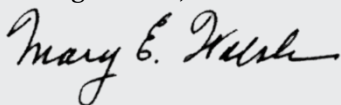
City Connects is pleased to release its 2024 Progress Report. The studies presented in this report provide new evidence of positive outcomes resulting from the City Connects intervention. As City Connects expands to serve an ever-growing number of students and families across the United States and in Dublin, Ireland, we continue to build our evidence base. We are encouraged by these findings.

We are grateful to the City Connects Coordinators, Program Managers, and implementation partners who bring City Connects to their communities. We are thankful for the support and partnership of schools and communities across the U.S. (in Massachusetts, Ohio, Minnesota, Indiana, and New York) and in Dublin, Ireland. We are grateful to the superintendents, administrators, principals, teachers, student support professionals, school staff, data liaisons, and others who have helped to introduce and implement City Connects in their communities and supported this work in their schools. We are thankful to our university partners in implementation: the National Centre for City Connects Ireland at Mary Immaculate College in Limerick, Ireland and the Center for Vibrant Schools at Marian University in Indianapolis, Indiana. Through these partnerships, we have established regional centers allowing City Connects to expand thoughtfully, and with fidelity, to distant locations. We are extremely grateful to our vast network of community partners, who make it possible to deliver tailored supports, services, and enrichment opportunities to children and their families.

We are deeply appreciative of the longstanding support of Boston College and the Lynch School of Education and Human Development. We are grateful to each of the generous foundations and donors who have supported our work for more than 20 years. Their continuing commitment to City Connects has allowed us to serve thousands of students in our hometown of Boston and has enabled our expansion into additional schools across Massachusetts, into new states, and to our first international site in Dublin, Ireland. We remain deeply grateful to an anonymous donor, whose significant endowment gift to our Center in late 2021 has ensured that our work will continue long into the future. The support for our mission from a broad base of foundations, government sources, individuals, and organizations has allowed us to continue this critical work.

City Connects makes a difference for children throughout their lives, helping them to achieve and thrive in their classrooms and in their communities. We are grateful to each and every person who makes this work possible, and we look forward to continuing our work together.

With gratitude,



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Office of the Mayor, City of Indianapolis, IN

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Introduction

For more than 60 years, research has concluded that socioeconomic background is a significant factor affecting students' academic achievement (Harrington, 1962; Coleman et al., 1966). Contexts beyond the school are critical, accounting for up to two-thirds of the variance in student achievement (Rothstein, 2010). Current research continues to confirm the impact of out-of-school factors on academic achievement and life chances (Gamoran et al., 2012; Duncan and Murnane, 2014; Black et al., 2017). For children living in poverty, these out-of-school challenges can be pervasive and severe, impeding their academic success and ability to thrive in school and in life. Evidence of the harmful effects of poverty on child development and success in school continues to grow (Duncan & Murnane, 2011; King and Maholmes, 2012; Reardon, 2013; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019). Berliner (2013) identifies poverty as the single most critical factor to address in education reform.

This collective work points to a clear area of need: in order to ensure that all students can achieve and thrive, schools need a systemic approach to addressing out-of-school disadvantage (Bryk et al., 2010; Walsh & Murphy, 2003). Though much research has been dedicated to documenting the consequences of inequality, less has focused on practical approaches to reduce inequality in educational outcomes (Carter & Reardon, 2014). The need for such approaches persists in importance (Tach et al., 2020).

City Connects emerged in response to this need for a systemic approach to supporting students. City Connects is an evidence-based approach to addressing out-of-school factors that can impact children's ability to achieve and thrive (Walsh & Brabeck, 2006). Starting more than twenty years ago in a single Boston Public school, City Connects continues to grow its footprint and expand its impact. The partnership includes Boston College, schools and school districts, and a vast network of community agencies. It now also includes Marian University's Center for Vibrant Schools (Indianapolis, IN) and Mary Immaculate College's National Centre for City Connects Ireland (Limerick, Ireland)—partnering universities that serve as local leaders for implementing City Connects.

Interest in educating the “whole child”—generally described as “Integrated Student Support”—has grown in the worlds of practice, research, and policy (e.g., Moore et al., 2014, 2017). Integrated Student Support programs like City Connects can offer schools a systematic way to meet students' out-of-school needs, unlocking their potential in the classroom and beyond.

There is growing support for this work at the federal level, as the Covid-19 pandemic clearly illuminated the out-of-school needs of children and the importance of addressing them. Educators, researchers, and policy makers are increasingly looking to an array of approaches to offering comprehensive supports and services to children and families, transforming schools into hubs for support, bringing together not only academics, but other services and programs from the community to help children and families thrive. This approach to schooling dovetails with the work of City Connects, which engages resources in the school and community to provide the right supports, services, and enrichment opportunities to all students.

Evidence demonstrates that being in a school that implements City Connects makes a difference for students. In elementary school, students in schools with City Connects significantly outperform their peers on report card scores in reading, writing, and math, and on statewide test scores in math and English language arts (Walsh et al., 2014;

Lawson et al., in press). After leaving City Connects and moving on to middle school, students scored higher on statewide math and English language arts tests than comparison peers who were never enrolled in a school implementing City Connects (Walsh et al., 2014). Students previously enrolled in elementary schools with City Connects later demonstrated lower rates of chronic absenteeism and dropped out of high school at about half the rate of comparison students (City Connects, 2014; Lee-St. John et al., 2018). Further, students who experienced City Connects in elementary school had a significantly higher probability of enrolling in post-secondary education programs, and for those who enrolled, a significantly higher probability of graduating from two- and four-year college.

What is City Connects?

City Connects was developed in response to the need for a systemic way to address the out-of-school factors that can impede a student's ability to succeed and thrive in school (Walsh & Brabeck, 2006). It is an evidence-based approach to helping students—academically, socially, emotionally, and physically—by connecting them to a tailored set of prevention, intervention, and enrichment services in their school and community. When a school implements City Connects, effective student support becomes central to its mission and day-to-day operations. Local community agency partners become central to the school's role in supporting students, and data can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention.

Student support is not one-size-fits-all. The City Connects practice recognizes this and considers every student's individual strengths, needs, and interests by connecting each to a unique combination of enrichments and services—whether it includes an afterschool arts program, a medical or dental screening, joining a sports team, an emergency mental health service, or obtaining a library card. At the core of the practice is the City Connects Coordinator—a master's-trained school counselor, social worker, or mental health professional—who meets with each classroom teacher and others in the school to discuss the strengths, needs, and interests of every child. They consider four domains of development: academic, social/emotional/behavioral growth, physical health, and family. The Coordinator then consults the family and links each child to the tailored set of services and enrichments that best addresses the student's unique combination of strengths and needs. Coordinators serve as hubs of student support in their schools, working closely with teachers, school staff, community partners, and families. Coordinators do this work effectively because they work to cultivate partnerships with community agencies, serving as a point of contact in schools for both community partners and families, helping to bridge the gap between a student's comprehensive strengths, needs, and interests and the right supports.

Why City Connects?

Every student deserves the opportunity to learn and thrive in school, but for many students—particularly those living in poverty—out-of-school factors can impede their success. While schools and districts recognize the need to address these factors, they often lack a systematic way of doing so.

City Connects can meet this need. It offers an approach, grounded in developmental science, to addressing these out-of-school factors. There are **four core principles** of effective practice emerging from the developmental sciences that have informed the development of City Connects and continue to guide the work of addressing the out-of-school factors that impact achievement. Effective practice is **comprehensive, customized, coordinated, and continuous**. City Connects operationalizes these principles and puts them into practice.

COMPREHENSIVE

Children develop across biological, psychological, and social domains (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Ford & Lerner, 1992; Cassels & Evans, 2020). 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, 2005).

As a **comprehensive** approach, City Connects considers the overlapping impact of four developmental domains on children’s readiness to learn and thrive in school. This comprehensive approach makes it possible to seek the underlying cause behind an apparent challenge and respond appropriately. For example, what surfaces as an academic need may have social-emotional roots. See Figure 1.

FIGURE 1. The interaction of children’s developmental domains



Supports and services are identified in all of these areas at the levels of prevention/enrichment, early intervention, or intensive intervention.

CUSTOMIZED

Child development is dynamic and complex, and each child experiences a unique interaction between personal characteristics and their environment (Cicchetti & Sroufe, 2000). As a result, no two children's experiences or developmental trajectories are identical (Sameroff, 2009). Moreover, developmental science points to the value of addressing children's strengths in addition to their needs, creating conditions for resilience (Masten, 2016, 2018) and pointing to the power of strengths and resilience in the context of adversity (Ellis et al., 2022). Thus, to be effective, student support practices must tailor approaches in ways that consider the individual strengths, needs, and interests of every student in a school.

The City Connects practice considers both strengths and needs of every student in a school across these domains, as well as the student's particular interests, and connects each to services at appropriate levels of intensity in a **customized** way. The practice ensures that each and every child in a school is considered individually to find the unique combination of supports, services, and enrichment opportunities that will help that child thrive. Customization makes it possible to respond to an identified root cause behind a challenge observed by teachers and others in the school. For example, if the comprehensive review of a student's strengths and needs reveals a possible social-emotional cause for an academic struggle, then offering a social-emotional support—for example, a leadership opportunity or a social skills group—may lead to academic improvement.

Customization also occurs at the level of the school. Research indicates that the climate and overall social conditions of schools have consequences for academic development (Berkowitz et al., 2017; Thapa et al., 2013). To widen opportunities for enrichment, for prevention purposes, and also in cases when a need becomes evident within or across entire grade levels, supports are brought into the school to serve large numbers of students.

COORDINATED

Developmental science points out the mutually influential relationships among a child and his or her home, school, and neighborhood (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Lerner et al., 2015). There is evidence that learning itself interacts with and occurs across these domains (National Research Council, 2015). Student support must therefore align efforts across these contexts, which is especially important for children at economic disadvantage (Dearing et al., 2016; Coll et al., 2000; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016, 2019). 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 et al., 2003; D'Agostino, 2013). Coordination requires communication and systems for aligning the efforts of these people and groups.

City Connects is **coordinated**, structurally linking districts and schools with community partners to make available the full array of supports and services students may need.

This partnership includes structures to enable coordination. For example, core processes ensure teacher input in a review of strengths and needs of every child, close collaboration with families in developing and carrying out individual support plans, and regular communication with community agencies providing services.

CONTINUOUS

Developmental science suggests that continuity of care in a safe, predictable, and stable environment positively impacts development (Waters et al., 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 and beyond (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000; Black et al., 2017). There is also growing evidence that not only early experience of deprivation but also the accumulation of exposure to deprivation over time has serious consequences for healthy development (Evans et al., 2012). As a result, children may need varying levels of responsive support across the continuum of their development. Developmental science makes clear that, given appropriate attention to contexts, the course of a child's development can be altered and enhanced. In fact, opportunities appear to trump even family income as a predictor of improved educational attainment and life chances (Dearing et al., 2023).

To ensure that student support is **continuous**, City Connects developed a practice in which the individual strengths and needs of every student are reviewed every year, and in which a secure, proprietary database makes it easy to follow up on each student's service referrals and progress throughout the school year and across years. While it isn't possible to predict what events might take place in a student's life, it is possible to respond with consistency and care.

What distinguishes City Connects?

Although City Connects shares the goal of providing comprehensive, integrated student support with other programs and models, several features of City Connects are distinct:

Grounding in developmental science. As described in detail above, several decades of theoretical and empirical research on the nature of child development have informed both the development of City Connects and its continuous improvement. This grounding helps ensure that the model is sensitive to, and responds to, the reality of how children grow and how they can best be supported.

Attention to four developmental domains to understand root causes. City Connects seeks to understand individual children's strengths and areas of challenge in academics, social/emotional/behavioral, physical health, and family domains. In seeking this understanding, City Connects builds on its grounding in developmental science to determine not just the surface issues, but the underlying reasons for any challenges.

Awareness of both strengths and needs of each child. Developmental science also supports City Connects' focus not only on individual needs but also on a child's strengths as a key strategy to promote positive development.

A process for capturing the voice of every child. Through an annual process that uses age-appropriate surveys and follow-up conversations, City Connects gathers information about each child's interests, including activities they would like to try.

Belief in schools as the epicenter of support. Based on a deep and ever-evolving awareness of how schools function, City Connects offers a way to enhance and transform roles and structures that are already present in a school, making them more effective and efficient in their support for students.

Highly-trained Coordinator of student support. In every school implementing City Connects, a master's-trained school counselor, social worker, or related professional, holding state licensure in his or her field, serves as a City Connects Coordinator. These requirements ensure that the Coordinator has the professional skills needed to identify root causes that can reveal which supports will most benefit a student.

For each student, a tailored support plan that reflects the teacher's input. Through a defined and documented process that is supported by a proprietary software system, every year, each student in the school receives a customized support plan. The City Connects Coordinator meets with each teacher individually to discuss every student in the class. In light of each student's unique strengths, needs, and interests, a support plan of services and enrichment opportunities is drafted.

For students at significant risk, an in-depth review and goals. When the teacher—or anyone—in a school implementing City Connects has significant concerns about a student, the Coordinator initiates a structured process for an in-depth review. This meeting involves school staff representing multiple professions, such as teachers, student support staff, and school administration.

Defined paths of collaboration with families and community agencies. Cultivating and maintaining community partnerships is a key aspect of the Coordinator role. The City Connects practice and its proprietary software make it possible to identify appropriate school- and community-based supports for students and to collaborate with families in decisions about services, referrals, and delivery. Coordinators build deep relationships with both families and community partners, gaining knowledge of the context in which children are developing.

Alignment with existing school initiatives and best practices. City Connects dovetails with many of the programs and initiatives that schools and districts may already have in place. For example, City Connects aligns with the multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) described in federal legislation calling for academic and social/emotional/behavioral supports at different levels of intensity (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). Furthermore, City Connects is holistic, expanding the reach of the MTSS framework by considering domains beyond academics and social/emotional/behavioral, to include physical health and family.

Fidelity monitoring system. Through the proprietary software system, information can be automatically compiled to show the degree to which City Connects is being delivered in any location and network-wide. Developed with reference to research in implementation science, the system supports scaling and sustainability.

Positive outcomes for students, schools, and communities. Strong evidence points to City Connects' effectiveness in supporting positive outcomes for children and youth, both in academic achievement and indicators of life chances. This research is among the strongest support available for the effectiveness of Integrated Student Support. Annual confidential surveys show high levels of satisfaction among principals, teachers, and community agencies who work with City Connects.

Evidence that benefits outweigh costs. Research by experts in economic studies of educational interventions shows an 11:1 return on investment for City Connects. When the costs of all services and supports (e.g., medical services, enrichments, counseling) are taken into account, researchers found that benefits still outweigh the costs with a 3:1 ratio (Bowden et al., 2015, 2017, 2018).

A robust body of research demonstrating the effectiveness of the intervention. Over more than 20 years, City Connects continues to amass a growing body of evidence demonstrating that being in a school that implements City Connects makes a difference for students. The consistency of these findings across methods, samples, and sites argues that City Connects is not merely associated with, but causes, these benefits for students.

- In **elementary school**, students who attend schools implementing City Connects significantly outperform their peers on report card scores in reading, writing, and math (Walsh et al., 2014). A 2020 study showed that students randomly assigned to schools implementing City Connects via a school choice lottery demonstrated significantly higher statewide test scores by grade 5 than peers who were not randomly assigned to City Connects (City Connects, 2020).
- After leaving City Connects and moving on to **middle school**, students scored higher on statewide math and English language arts tests than comparison peers who were never enrolled in a school implementing City Connects (Walsh et al., 2014).

- Students previously enrolled in elementary schools with City Connects later demonstrated lower rates of chronic absenteeism and dropped out of **high school** at about half the rate of comparison students (City Connects, 2014).
- Once City Connects students graduate from high school, they significantly surpass comparison peers in both **enrollment and degree completion at two- and four-year colleges** (Pollack et al., 2023).

Together, these recent findings support the claim that rigorous integrated student support can sustain the benefits of other supports (such as preschool) and yield long-lasting enhancements to students' life chances.

The story of our growth

Since its inception in the 1990s, City Connects has grown from a local collaboration to a nationally and internationally recognized model of Integrated Student Support. As an intervention that values evidence, City Connects has continued to collect and analyze data on its effectiveness, with a consistent set of findings that shows City Connects makes a difference for students.

START UP

The partnership that led to City Connects began when Boston College researchers, school leaders from Boston Public Schools, and local community agencies jointly recognized that out-of-school factors have a significant influence on students' experiences in school. Traditionally, school-based efforts to address these factors could be unsystematic, uncoordinated, and lacking structure. Community agencies that could provide the needed supports and resources often lacked clear connections to schools, and therefore, to the students who could benefit from their services. Research pointed to growing evidence from the developmental sciences that could inform an effective approach.

Together, stakeholders from the schools, the community, and the university worked to develop a system to address these out-of-school factors in order to better support students and to define a practice that systematized the work traditionally done in schools by school counselors, nurses, psychologists, community partners, and others. The result was City Connects. It was designed to permit data collection and measurement of outcomes, and was initially implemented in one Boston school in the fall of 2000.

REPLICATE

Over more than 20 years, City Connects has gradually expanded and has proved to be replicable. In 2007-08, City Connects launched in additional schools in a new geographic area of the city of Boston. In fall of 2008, implementation began in several urban Catholic schools in Boston and in City Connects' first "distant site" in Dayton, Ohio. Two years later, City Connects' success led to the program's launch in several "Turnaround" (consistently low-performing) schools in Boston Public Schools, as well as in public schools in Springfield, Massachusetts.

During this replication phase, City Connects' evidence base grew dramatically, demonstrating that students in City Connects schools outperform their peers in measures of academic achievement and thriving in elementary school, with benefits persisting into middle school, high school, and beyond.

SCALE

As City Connects' evidence base has continued to expand, interest in City Connects as a comprehensive approach to supporting all students has grown nationally and internationally.

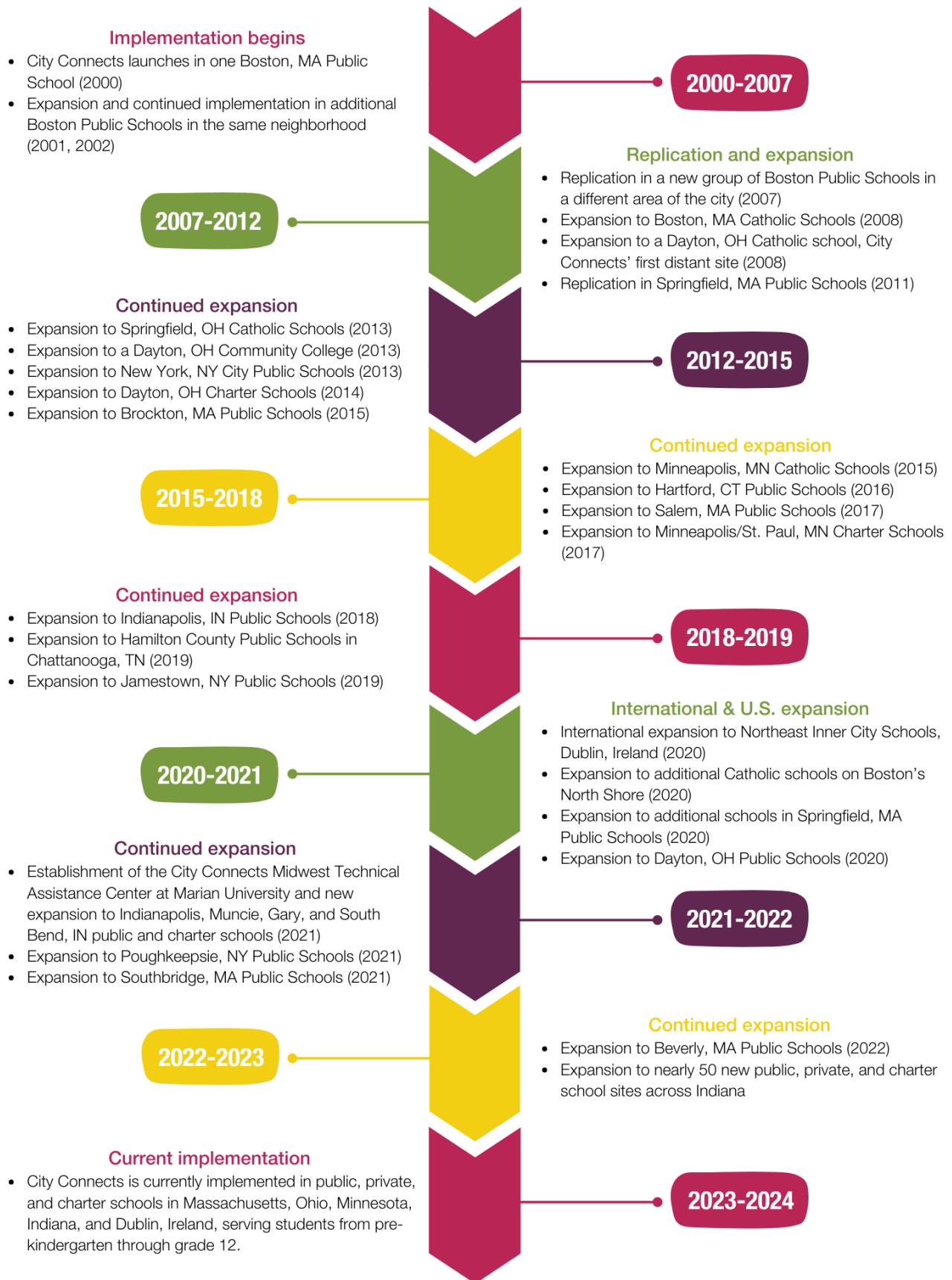
In 2020, in a partnership initiated by one of Ireland's leading teacher preparation institutions, Mary Immaculate College in Limerick, City Connects leadership began collaborating with civic leaders in the North East Inner City (NEIC) neighborhood of Dublin, Ireland. The Irish Department of Education and Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth, together with the NEIC community, led an effort to launch City Connects in ten Dublin primary schools in fall 2020. Over the next four years, City Connects was implemented with growing success in these ten schools, leading the Irish Department of Education to establish the National Centre for City Connects in Ireland at Mary Immaculate College in May 2024.

In 2021, through a partnership with the Center for Vibrant Schools at Marian University, City Connects launched its first U.S. Technical Assistance Center. The TA Center serves as a cornerstone of implementation in Indiana and Ohio. The TA Center collaborates with City Connects at Boston College to provide coaching, supervision, and oversight for City Connects in these areas. Through this collaboration, City Connects is reaching students across Indiana—in Indianapolis, Bloomington, Fort Wayne, Gary, South Bend, Muncie, northwest Indiana communities, and other cities and towns, including the Metropolitan School District of Shakamak (representing City Connects' expansion into its first rural school setting).

City Connects is now recognized widely as a comprehensive approach to student support. It is cost-effective and yields lasting and significant positive outcomes for children's achievement and life chances. It is currently implemented in public, charter, private, and Catholic schools across more than 40 U.S. cities and towns and in ten schools in the North East Inner City (NEIC) section of Dublin. In the 2022-23 school year, nearly 50,000 students were served.

City Connects has expanded at a managed and intentional pace. This gradual expansion has allowed the implementation of City Connects to grow in alignment with its ongoing evaluation. This has also allowed for continuous improvement: learnings in new contexts have been shared with the wider network to allow for ever-deepening understanding of how the same evidence-based model comprehensive student support can be delivered in different settings. Figure 2 illustrates the growth and development of City Connects.

FIGURE 2. Timeline of City Connects' expansion



Model and implementation

Model

The City Connects model is grounded in the literature on implementation science informing sustainable interventions (Foley et al., 2015). Before City Connects begins implementation, a steering committee is formed, typically in the spring, with representation from both City Connects and the school or district. This committee engages in several stages of planning. First, City Connects works with the school or district to conduct a needs assessment, seeking the input of principals, teachers, families, students, and community agencies to understand current strengths and needs in the area of student support. An environmental scan identifies a range of agencies and resources in the community. Next, City Connects reports findings to the school or district and, if the decision is made to move forward with implementation, provides infrastructure and supports, including recommendations for recruiting and hiring, and an orientation process for principals. This process enables a shared vision for success and alignment of priorities. Following this planning process, implementation is launched, typically at the start of an academic year.

THE CITY CONNECTS COORDINATOR

At the core of the practice is the City Connects Coordinator in each school, trained as a licensed school counselor, school social worker, or mental health professional who connects students to a customized set of services through collaboration with families, teachers, school staff, and community agencies. The Coordinator follows standardized practices, codified in the City Connects Practice Manual, as shown in Figure 3 and detailed in the components below.

In some settings, the Coordinator is a new position created in the school, and in others, an existing position, such as a school counselor role, is redefined to include responsibility for implementing the City Connects model. Depending on the size of the school, two Coordinators may be hired. Typically, there is one Coordinator for every 400 students in the school.

The Coordinator is central to several core components of the City Connects model. Through these practice elements, the Coordinator collaborates with classroom teachers and other student support professionals in the school to develop a tailored individual support plan for each student in the school.

WHOLE CLASS REVIEW

The Coordinator works with each classroom teacher to review each and every student in the class and develop customized support plans addressing their individual strengths and needs and considering their interests. There are five aspects of the Whole Class Review (WCR):

- Identifying the strengths, needs, and interests of each student across four domains (academic, social/emotional/behavioral, physical health, and family)

- Developing an individual student support plan for each student that leads to identifying and locating appropriate school- and/or community-based services and enrichments targeting the student’s strengths, needs, and interests
- Establishing the connection between these service providers and individual children and their families
- Documenting and tracking the delivery of services and prevention and enrichment opportunities
- Following up to ensure appropriateness of fit

As they conduct the WCR, at the most general level, the teacher and Coordinator group the students in a class into “tiers” related to students’ individual strengths and areas of risk. The process of tiering helps Coordinators and teachers to identify the unique strengths and needs of each and every child to ensure the right combination of services is delivered. Tiers include: strengths and minimal risk (Tier 1); strengths and mild (Tier 2a) to moderate (Tier 2b) risk; or strengths and severe risk (Tier 3).

INDIVIDUAL STUDENT REVIEW

Students identified as having intensive needs, at any point during the school year, receive a further in-depth conversation called an Individual Student Review (ISR). A wider team of professionals discusses and develops specific measurable goals and strategies for the student. The ISR is conducted by a student support team—an existing school structure that can include school psychologists, teachers, principals, nurses, and occasionally community agency staff members—that is typically led by the Coordinator. The Coordinator communicates with the family before and after the ISR. Typically, 8% to 10% of the students in a school receive an ISR in a given year.

COMMUNITY AGENCY PARTNERSHIPS

A critical aspect of the Coordinator’s role is developing and maintaining partnerships with local community agencies and institutions. Coordinators conduct research and outreach to identify appropriate partners in their communities and work to foster relationships with local agencies. These relationships are vital to providing all students with the supports, services, and enrichment opportunities they need to thrive. Across the City Connects network in 2022-23, nearly 360,000 services were delivered with the help of more than 1,200 community agency partners.

CONNECTING STUDENTS TO SERVICES, TRACKING, AND FOLLOWING UP

During and after these conversations with teachers, school staff, and community agency representatives, City Connects Coordinators connect each student to the particular enrichments, supports, and services that will best meet their strengths and needs. Coordinators work closely with families as students are referred and connected to enrichments and services.

To aid with the process, and to permit streamlined tracking and follow-up, City Connects has developed a proprietary web-based student support information system, called MyConnects. The system allows for secure collection of data on student reviews, individual student plans, service referrals, and providers (both school-based

and community agencies) who deliver services. The database systematizes the work of referring students to services, contributing to efficiency and allowing one Coordinator to serve 400 students effectively. MyConnects data are used for three purposes: 1) tracking and record-keeping at the individual and school level; 2) monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the intervention throughout the school year; and 3) conducting research on the effectiveness of the intervention.

Services can be classified into three broad categories: 1) prevention and enrichment (e.g., after-school programs, academic and arts enrichments, sports, youth development programs); 2) early intervention (e.g., behavioral interventions, health and social skills interventions, mentoring, tutoring, parent/family supports); and 3) intensive or crisis intervention (e.g., attendance support, counseling, health/medical services, therapeutic mentoring, psychiatric services). Each category includes services of many different types. The tailoring of services for each student is accomplished through different combinations of quantity and type of services from these three broad categories.

Figure 3 provides a visual overview of the core work of the City Connects Coordinator within the context of the school and community.

FIGURE 3. The City Connects core practice



THE PROGRAM MANAGER

The work of the Coordinator is guided by a local Program Manager, who typically oversees the practice in a district or geographic region. Program Managers are responsible for the recruitment, development, supervision, and evaluation of City Connects Coordinators. They deliver group professional development to their teams every other week, drawing on a City Connects-provided library of resources. Program Managers also offer coaching and support through regular one-to-one meetings with Coordinators, observation of core practice elements, and formative feedback. They are ambassadors of the City Connects program, working collaboratively with school leadership and administration to build a strong partnership and support implementation in the school. Moreover, they help cultivate and maintain strong partnerships with community agencies in their region.

Program Managers participate in regular professional development offered by City Connects at Boston College. They receive support for their work assisting Coordinators to navigate specific school contexts as they implement the City Connects model. Program Managers across the City Connects network come together regularly as a learning community, through meetings and professional development opportunities, to share insights and solve problems. They also provide key communication to the City Connects organization about local context, practice, and implementation of the model.

Moreover, Program Managers support data collection to facilitate program evaluation and fidelity monitoring. They utilize data in MyConnects to ensure that the City Connects intervention is being implemented with fidelity across their school sites, as described in the section that follows.

IMPLEMENTING WITH FIDELITY

City Connects developed a fidelity monitoring system to ensure consistent delivery of the practice across all sites. Reports from the fidelity monitoring system support the work of the Program Managers—and in turn, Coordinators—by quantifying implementation itself to highlight areas of strength and areas for potential improvement. Grounded in research on implementation science, the system was designed to provide a snapshot of fidelity across core components of the practice, including Whole Class Review, Individual Student Review, Community Partnerships, and Family Partnerships. The fidelity system utilizes information collected in MyConnects during the course of regular implementation in schools. Reports offer both an overall picture of fidelity and component-by-component information. Program Managers can see at a glance which components of the practice are being implemented successfully, and can also identify areas that could benefit from further coaching and support. Program Managers can view fidelity data across a district or region and at the individual school level. Furthermore, the fidelity monitoring system allows City Connects leadership and central staff to collaborate and consult with Program Managers, improving practice and supporting scaling and sustainability.

Context of implementation

City Connects in the U.S. was implemented in 165 schools across five states, totaling 47,976 students, in the 2022-23 school year. Schools served students ranging from pre-kindergarten through grade 12 in public, private (including Catholic and other religiously affiliated schools), and charter schools, with a majority of schools serving students in kindergarten through eighth grades. Table 1 presents a summary of pre-kindergarten through grade 12 student characteristics for schools implementing City Connects in each state in which the intervention is implemented, as well as an average across all U.S. schools in the City Connects network.

TABLE 1. City Connects student demographic characteristics from the 2022-23 school year, grades PK-12

	MA public	MA private	IN public	IN private	MN private	OH private	City Connects
# of Schools	69	16	19	46	11	3	166†
# of Students	22,962	4,093	6,102	11,083	2,092	1,085	47,976†
Female %	48%*	46%	48%*	51%	52%	53%	48.8%
Race/Ethnicity %							
African American/Black	14%*	29%	58%*	12%	28%	26%	21.2%
Asian	3%*	5%	1%*	5%	8%	2%	3.4%
Hispanic	57%*	28%	19%*	39%	45%	21%	43.8%
Multi-racial and Other	4%*	20%	7%*	13%	7%	11%	8.0%
White	23%*	39%	15%*	43%	19%	49%	28.4%
Economically Disadvantaged %	76%*	54%	78%*	54%	76%	59%	68.9%
Students with Disabilities %	26%*	4%	17%*	9%	7%~	7%	17.7%
English Language Learners %	18%*	NA	16%*	19%~	39%	19%	17.1%

Source: City Connects database unless otherwise indicated by *.

~ Indicates some missing data. In some cases, race/ethnicity percentages add up to more than 100% because different types of schools might have used different reporting standards for identifying racial or ethnic groups.

* State education department websites (profiles.doe.mass.edu; education.ohio.gov; education.mn.gov/mde/data; in.gov/doe/it/data-center-and-reports)

† The total number of schools and students differs from the sum across columns, as two schools (one NY school and one MN school) were included in the total counts for City Connects schools but were not presented in this table in separate columns. These schools were the only schools in their district implementing City Connects, and the determination not to display statistics for individual schools maximizes the protection of students' privacy when reporting disaggregated data for one or more student subgroups.

The information on student demographics presented in Table 1 highlights the significant academic and financial needs of students in City Connects schools. In these schools, overall, nearly 70% of the population are students of color. More than 17% of students in City Connects schools are students with disabilities. Over 17% are English Language Learners. The differences across districts highlight the varied contexts in which City Connects is implemented.

Reviews and services

During the Whole Class Review process, as described above, the City Connects Coordinator and teacher group students into three tiers based on their individual strengths and areas of risk: 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). In addition to serving as a general indication of the levels of intensity of support that may be needed for individual students, information about tiers in aggregate form can be helpful to those working to support students in a school or district. Table 2 shows the number and percentages of students in each tier across all districts.

TABLE 2. Number and percentage of students placed in each tier across all City Connects sites, 2022-23

	Number	Percentage
Tier 1 (minimal risk)	19,803	42%
Tier 2a (mild risk)	14,335	30%
Tier 2b (moderate risk)	9,010	19%
Tier 3 (intensive risk)	4,309	9%
TOTAL	47,457	100%

Source: MyConnects database, 2022-23. Student counts differ from those in other places in this report because students without a tier assigned are excluded.

Students identified as having strengths and severe risks (Tier 3) will be considered for referral to an Individual Student Review. In some cases, students experiencing significant risks are already receiving targeted supports and follow-up. Others are reviewed by a wider team of professionals, which may include school psychologists, teachers, principals, nurses, and occasionally community agency staff members. The team assesses the strengths, needs, and interests of the individual student and develops a plan with specific, measurable goals and strategies. Students—in any tier assignment—who are identified as having more intensive needs at any time during the school year will receive an Individual Student Review. The Individual Student Review process is described in more detail above. In 2022-23, across the City Connects network, 7% of students received this in-depth review.

Across all City Connects sites, Coordinators work to build and maintain relationships with local community agencies that provide services to their students. These services range in intensity from prevention and enrichment services, such as arts, sports, or youth development, to intensive or crisis interventions, like mental health counseling or violence intervention. In 2022-23, City Connects worked with more than 1,200 community partners to deliver nearly 360,000 services to students.

Table 3 shows the numbers and percentages of services delivered across categories.

TABLE 3. Total number of services delivered to students, by category, 2022-23

	Service N	Category %	Total % of Services
Category 1 (Prevention & Enrichment)			
Academic Skills and Interests	38,545	27%	
Arts-based Services	7,547	5%	
Classroom Support	9,838	7%	
High School, College, and Career Assistance	10,441	7%	
Screening - Hearing	11,430	8%	
Screening - Postural/Scoliosis	3,378	2%	
Screening - BMI	2,069	1%	
Screening - Vision	15,987	11%	
Sports or Physical Activity	11,063	8%	
Youth Development	34,923	24%	
Category Total	145,221		41%
Category 2 (Early Intervention)			
Behavioral Support	24,758	15%	
Donations	18,717	11%	
Language Services for Students and Families	807	<1%	
Family Assistance and Support	18,442	11%	
Family Conference/Meeting	1,009	1%	
Family Engagement	26,618	16%	
Health Programming	12,930	8%	
Literacy Support	20,087	12%	
Math Support	12,574	7%	
Mentoring	2,334	1%	
Psychosocial Group	2,609	2%	
Social Skills	23,720	14%	
Transition Assistance	636	<1%	
Tutoring	3,952	2%	
Category Total	169,193		47%
Category 3 (Intensive/Crisis Intervention)			
Accommodations and Adaptations	6,522	15%	
Attendance Support	13,164	31%	
Counseling	9,057	21%	
Crisis Intervention	2,441	6%	
Health/Medical Intervention	6,593	15%	
Occupational/Physical Therapy	581	1%	
Special Education Evaluation	453	1%	
Speech and Language	2,701	6%	
Violence Intervention	1,450	3%	
Category Total	42,962		12%
GRAND TOTAL	357,376		

Source: MyConnects database, 2022-23.

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

TABLE 4. Mean number of services and percent of services by student tier, 2022-23

	# of Students	Mean # of Services (Std. Deviation)	1-2 Services	3-4 Services	5+ Services
Tier 1 (minimal risk)	19,540	6.5 (5.3)	20.7%	24.5%	54.8%
Tier 2a (mild risk)	14,177	8.0 (6.0)	13.7%	20.3%	66.1%
Tier 2b (moderate risk)	8,932	8.5 (6.0)	10.1%	17.6%	72.3%
Tier 3 (intensive risk)	4,283	9.1 (6.2)	9.0%	14.5%	76.6%
TOTAL	46,932	7.5 (5.8)	15.5%	21.0%	63.5%

Source: MyConnects database, 2022-23. Student counts differ from those in other tables because students without a tier assigned or students without a service delivered are excluded.

Table 4 shows that the mean number of services per student is smallest in Tier 1 (6.5) and largest in Tier 3 (9.1). Additionally, the percentage of students receiving 1-2 services is highest for Tier 1 and lowest for Tier 3. The corresponding proportions for 5+ services are the highest in Tier 3 and lowest in Tier 1. In other words, on average, students experiencing higher risk receive more services. Students in the lowest risk level (Tier 1) are more likely than their counterparts in higher risk levels to receive 1-2 services (as opposed to 3-4 or 5+ services). However, it should be noted that in all tiers, more than 79% of students receive three or more services, and over 63% of students receive 5 or more services.

Table 5 presents the mean number of services per category for each student tier. Category 1 services are classified as prevention and enrichment services, such as sports programs and arts academic enrichment. Category 2 services are considered early intervention services, including tutoring and behavioral support. Category 3 services are intensive or crisis intervention services, such as occupational/physical therapy and violence intervention.

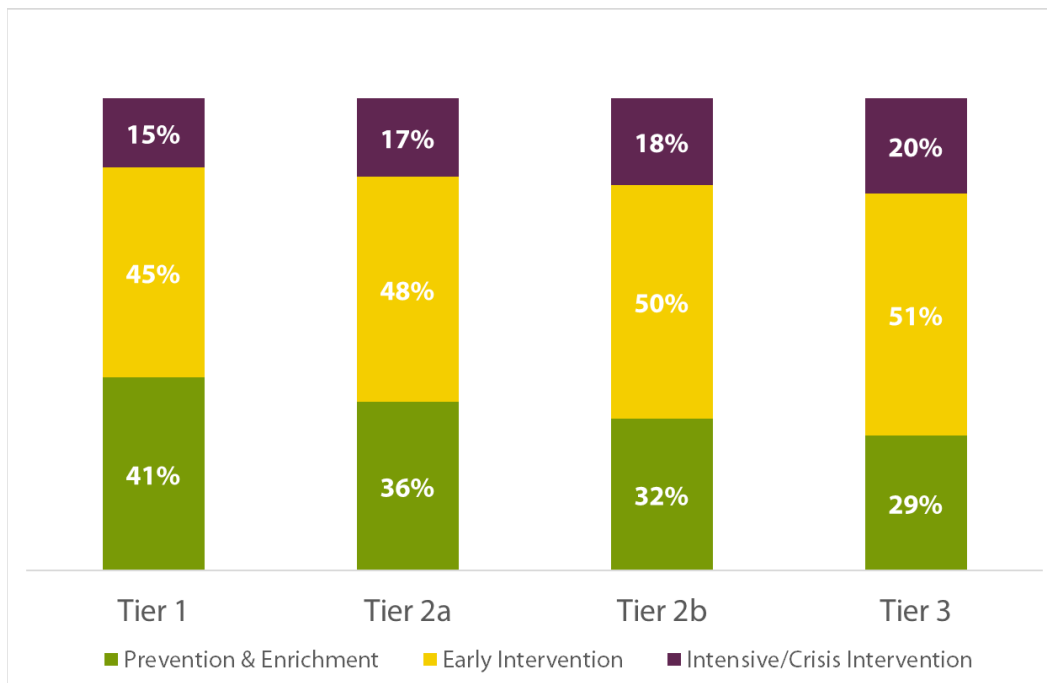
TABLE 5. Mean number of services by category, for each student tier, 2022-23

Mean Number of Services per Student (Std. Deviation)				
	# of Students	Category 1: Prevention and Enrichment	Category 2: Early Intervention Services	Category 3: Intensive or Crisis Intervention Services
Tier 1 (minimal risk)	19,540	3.1 (2.6)	3.6 (3.4)	1.63 (0.9)
Tier 2a (mild risk)	14,177	3.3 (2.6)	4.4 (3.8)	1.92 (1.3)
Tier 2b (moderate risk)	8,932	3.1 (2.5)	4.6 (3.7)	2.09 (1.3)
Tier 3 (intensive risk)	4,283	3.0 (2.4)	5.12 (3.9)	2.28 (1.5)

Source: MyConnects database, 2022-23. Student counts differ from those in other tables because students without a tier assigned or students without a service delivered are excluded.

Figure 4 presents a breakdown of the proportion of services from each category (1, 2, and 3) for all tiers of risk (1, 2a, 2b, and 3). It is notable that students experiencing more intensive risk receive, on average, more services from category 3. Students at all tiers, on average, received most of their services from category 2, relatively fewer from category 1, and the smallest percentage of services from category 3.

FIGURE 4. Proportion of services by category, for each student tier, 2022-23



Source: MyConnects database, 2022-23.

CITY CONNECTS ON THE GROUND

As shown in the tables and figure above, students in schools implementing City Connects, regardless of the tier to which their unique profile of strengths and needs aligns, receive multiple supports, services, and enrichment opportunities. The following vignettes illustrate the array of services a school and an individual student may receive. While the vignettes are based on real data, all names of people and organizations have been changed, along with other details, to protect confidentiality.

THE SCHOOL

The students described in these vignettes attend the same public elementary school. The school serves over 500 students in kindergarten through grade 8. It is located in an urban neighborhood in a large U.S. city. In the school district overall, roughly 85% of students are people of color, nearly one third are English language learners, and almost 70% are economically disadvantaged (as defined by their participation in state-administered programs). This single school has partnerships with over 50 community agencies. In addition to services provided by these agencies, students may receive services through the district or the school itself. Some services are universally offered to all students in the school, or all students in a special grouping (e.g., grade level or gender). Others are provided to smaller numbers of students based on their individual strengths and needs. As part of the City Connects approach, the Coordinator identified and contacted partners that can best serve the school and its students based on ongoing monitoring of school and student needs. For each student described below, services were added or adjusted based on their progress throughout the course of the academic year.

MAE'S STORY

Mae is a female student who was in grade 3 last year. Through the City Connects Whole Class Review process last year, the Coordinator and Mae's teacher observed strengths and minimal risk (Tier 1). Academics was an area of strength, though her teacher noticed Mae's tendency to be a perfectionist, sometimes resulting in Mae "shutting down" when she struggled. The teacher and Coordinator also discussed Mae's family. Mae's mother is a single parent to seven children, one of whom has significant medical and educational needs.

The City Connects Coordinator at Mae's school referred her to the school counselor for informal check-ins. Through those sessions, and in collaboration with Mae's teachers, the Coordinator determined that Mae could benefit from more formal counseling. The Coordinator also learned that Mae liked to run, and is a talented runner.

The Coordinator connected Mae to several programs in the community. Mae was accepted into an early accelerated college preparation program. In addition, Mae was referred to a program focused on academic and social-emotional skill development, which provided her with academic support and counseling. The Coordinator also helped Mae enroll in a program offering both soccer and literacy enrichment activities as well as a year-round track program to further build on her academic strengths and her interest in running.

The enrichments and services Mae receives are part of a continuous plan of support. For example, Mae attended a sleep-away camp over the summer between third and fourth grade, which was fully funded through partnerships established by the Coordinator. Now, as Mae transitions into grade 4, several supports remain in place. Mae continues to receive academic support and counseling, and she participates in athletic programs offered through local community partners. Mae told the Coordinator that she would like to join a club soccer team in fourth grade, instead of some of the other athletic programs she has participated in previously. The Coordinator was thrilled to see Mae advocate for herself; advocacy was an area of focus for the Coordinator's and the school counselor's work with Mae.

Over two academic years, the Coordinator and school have partnered successfully with Mae's family to support her. Mae's mother is very involved with the school, and the Coordinator has helped to arrange transportation for Mae to programs and activities whenever needed. Mae has also built relationships with other trusted adults in the school who are able to provide support. Now, in grade 4, Mae is comfortable reaching out to the Coordinator any time she is struggling or simply wants to connect.

KARIM'S STORY

Karim is a male student in grade 4. Through the City Connects Whole Class Review process, the Coordinator and Karim's teacher observed strengths as well as areas of need that together indicated moderate risk (Tier 2b). A significant area of strength for Karim was academics; he scores at or above his grade level in all academic areas, and in previous school years, has participated in programs for students demonstrating advanced academic abilities.

At the same time, Karim experienced significant behavioral and social-emotional challenges. These included impulsivity, difficulty staying on task, challenges with regulation, and frequent interpersonal conflicts with his peers. Karim had experienced trauma from a domestic violence situation that necessitated his family's relocation.

Karim's family was experiencing financial and housing insecurity, and they needed support obtaining necessities such as clothing.

The City Connects Coordinator was able to locate housing for Karim's family, although it was not near the school. The Coordinator then worked with the school district to arrange transportation for Karim and his siblings so they could continue to attend their school, helping the family to avoid another transition.

The Coordinator referred Karim to both school counseling and counseling provided by a community partner in the school building to support his social-emotional needs. The Coordinator also worked with Karim's family and providers to obtain the appropriate consents that would allow her to communicate as needed with Karim's teachers, pediatrician, therapist, and social worker. Karim also joined a soccer program and a free track program that provides social-emotional support.

Through conversations with his teachers, the Coordinator learned that Karim can be an excellent role model for younger students. He was frequently observed positively engaging with younger students. As a result, Karim now helps with reading interventions in the kindergarten classes and leads games for kindergarten students during recess.

The teachers and staff at Karim's school have witnessed a significant improvement across the social/emotional/behavioral domain. The team has implemented supports (such as scheduled breaks) to manage his impulsivity and behavioral challenges. Karim has built strong and positive relationships with school staff—particularly with the school behavioral health team—who have noted his friendly and charismatic personality. His family will soon relocate to a home closer to his school.

Outcomes for students

Ongoing evaluation of City Connects has produced a consistent set of findings that demonstrate its long-lasting impact. The evidence that City Connects benefits students has converged across various methods, different samples, and multiple sites. Across these methodologies and samples, studies show that attending a school that implements City Connects makes a difference for students through each stage of their development. Beginning in elementary school, after leaving City Connects and moving on to middle and high schools, and into their postsecondary years, City Connects students outperform comparison peers on measures of academic achievement, other measures of success, and enhanced life chances and opportunities.

At the elementary level, students enrolled in City Connects schools experience better academic and non-cognitive outcomes than their peers who never experienced City Connects. These outcomes include stronger academic effort, higher report card scores, better attendance, and improved performance on statewide tests. These outcomes persist as students move beyond elementary school.

Stronger academic effort

- City Connects students significantly outperform comparison students in academic effort in grades 3 through 5, as reflected in teacher ratings (City Connects, 2010; Khanani et al., 2021).

Higher report card scores

- 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).
- A study applying a difference-in-differences analysis found that City Connects students who had significantly lower report card scores in reading and math at the beginning of implementation demonstrated significantly greater improvement in those scores, catching up to comparison peers in reading by grade 5 and math by grade 4, and outperforming comparison students in math by the end of grade 5 (City Connects, 2016).
- Experiencing City Connects in sixth grade led to significant gains in middle school academic achievement (beyond the positive effects of attending a City Connects middle school) when school characteristics were taken into account (City Connects, 2016).

Higher attendance

- City Connects students were found to have a significantly lower total number of days absent than students from the comparison group beginning in grade 4 and continuing through grade 12 (City Connects, 2014).

Higher performance on statewide tests

- 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). The beneficial effects were not only statistically significant but also practically significant, with effect sizes ranging from 0.29 to 0.67 (An, 2015).
- A study drawing on a natural experiment taking advantage of the cutoff for kindergarten enrollment demonstrated that students experiencing an additional year of City Connects performed significantly better on statewide tests of English language arts in grade 3 and math in grades 3 and 5 than students who did not have that year of City Connects (City Connects, 2016).
- 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).
- Positive findings related to performance on state tests were replicated in Boston with students enrolled in schools with “Turnaround” (consistently low-performing) designation. After just one year of implementation of City Connects, gaps in student performance between Turnaround schools and comparison schools were narrowed to insignificant levels for grade 3 English and grades 3, 4, and 5 math. After two years, gaps narrowed to insignificant levels for grade 4 and 5 English (City Connects, 2016).
- Positive findings seen in Boston Public Schools replicated in Springfield, MA schools designated as “Transformation” schools, a reform model for consistently low-performing schools. After three years of implementation of City Connects, gaps in student performance between Transformation schools and comparison schools narrowed to insignificant levels for statewide test scores in both English and math at grades 3, 4, and 5. For grade 3 math, grade 4 English and math, and grade 5 English, these gap reductions exceeded What Works Clearinghouse standards for substantively important effect sizes (City Connects, 2016).
- Later findings further confirmed the benefits of City Connects in Springfield, MA. Statewide test scores in math and English language arts in schools that adopted City Connects improved by approximately 0.40 standard deviations by the time the schools were in their fifth year of implementing the model. These findings are robust to a number of sensitivity tests, suggesting a causal relationship between the implementation of City Connects and improved academic achievement. These findings further support the replicability of City Connects in new geographic areas (City Connects, 2022).

- Findings also replicated in Catholic schools in Boston. For example, for math, scores in sixth grade were significantly higher for students in City Connects Catholic schools than for those in comparison schools after controlling for demographics. Also, lower-income students in schools implementing City Connects started out with slightly lower language scores in third grade than lower-income students in comparison schools, but surpassed them by sixth grade (Shields et al., 2016).
- In a large-scale study, students who were randomly assigned to City Connects schools in kindergarten scored significantly higher than their peers randomly assigned to comparison schools on fifth grade statewide ELA and mathematics tests. These findings suggest that City Connects causes improvements in academic performance for elementary school students (City Connects, 2020).
- Findings related to the complementary nature between City Connects and preschool programs suggest that City Connects sustains positive effects of preschool on elementary school math performance. On average, students who received both preschool and City Connects had significantly higher math report card scores in third and fourth grade than preschool-only students. Moreover, on average, students who received both preschool and City Connects had significantly higher math report card scores (first through third grades) and reading report card scores (first and third grades) than City Connects-only students. Students who received both preschool and City Connects also scored significantly higher on a fourth grade standardized test of ELA than students who received City Connects-only. These findings suggest that preschool and City Connects programs complement each other to support student performance in elementary school, and may do so differently across grades, subject areas, and measures (City Connects, 2020).

Improved non-cognitive outcomes

- There is evidence that students who experience City Connects as kindergarteners demonstrate better behavior and effort later in elementary school. Students who were randomly assigned to City Connects schools in kindergarten were reported by teachers in elementary school to have better effort and behavior than their peers randomly assigned to comparison schools. These findings suggest that City Connects causes improvements in student behavior and effort in elementary school (City Connects, 2022).

As they move into middle and high school, students who experience City Connects in elementary school outperform comparison peers on indicators of educational success and life chances. City Connects makes a positive impact on retention in grade, chronic absenteeism, and high school dropout.

Less likely to repeat a grade

- 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).

Less likely to be chronically absent

- 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).

Less likely to drop out of high school

- 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 schools without City Connects at the same time (Walsh et al., 2017).

As they graduate from high school, students who experienced City Connects in elementary school are more likely to enroll in, and graduate from, postsecondary institutions.

- There is evidence that City Connects has a long-term, positive effect on students' academic achievement from elementary school through college. On average, students who received City Connects in elementary school had a significantly higher probability of enrolling in postsecondary education than comparison peers. Among students who enrolled in postsecondary education, students who received City Connects in elementary school had a significantly higher probability of graduating than comparison peers, on average (Pollack et al., 2023).

Mitigating the adverse impact of school mobility on achievement and behavior in middle school

In the United States, millions of K-12 students change schools every year. Students who change schools more frequently are more likely to belong to racial/ethnic minority groups and low-income households living in urban areas (Ashby, 2010). Previous studies show that school change causes disruptions in learning and is associated with adverse academic outcomes (Hanushek et al., 2004; Reynolds et al., 2009; Goldhaber et al., 2022) and long-term behavior problems (Herbers et al., 2013; Winsper et al., 2016), especially for marginalized student groups.

The disruption from school changes during middle school can be especially challenging because the children are entering a more advanced academic environment and a unique stage of child development. The combination of out-of-school challenges leading to school changes and the difficulties students may encounter in adapting to the new school environment puts additional pressure on mobile students. Traditionally, schools have limited resources to address out-of-school challenges, which leaves mobile students' needs unmet.

When students move to a middle school implementing the City Connects model, following the initial support in navigating the transition, the Coordinator immediately works with the classroom teacher to assess the needs and strengths of the student. Coordinators connect students to appropriately tailored services and resources in the community and the school. These supports are especially beneficial if the students' families recently moved into the neighborhood and lack information about local resources. Through the Coordinators' work, teachers and staff in the school have a better understanding of the challenges faced by mobile students and can provide them with more suitable support.

This study seeks to understand:

Does comprehensive student support mitigate the adverse impact of school changes in middle school, and if so, how?

Researchers utilized a quasi-experimental approach to explore the effects of receiving the City Connects intervention after changing schools on students' academic achievement and behavior.¹

Students included in the analysis

The analytic sample was drawn from students who attended Boston Public Schools between 2001-02 and 2015-16 for part or all of the middle school grades (6-8).

The treatment group for this analysis consisted of 433 students who moved to a school implementing City Connects in middle school years but had never received the intervention in the past; who received the intervention for at least one year between sixth and eighth grades; and for whom at least one outcome indicator before and after the exposure to the City Connects intervention can be observed. The comparison group included 24,000 students who

¹ In the literature, if students change schools after finishing the highest grade offered by the previous school, the transition is referred to as a structural school change. In contrast, if students change to a school offering the same highest grade as the previous school, the transition is referred to as a non-structural school change. This study focuses on non-structural school changes as they are more disruptive to learning.

changed schools in middle school grades but never received the City Connects intervention. The two groups were comparable in most observable characteristics.

Analytic methods and results

The analysis used student-level longitudinal data, which allowed us to track students over time as long as they stayed in the system. Therefore, the study analyzed within-student variation before and after school changes. It compared students who received the City Connects intervention after school changes with students who did not receive the City Connects intervention after school changes during middle school grades. Researchers first used a difference-in-differences research design to estimate the effect of receiving the City Connects intervention after school changes on student achievement and behavior. Academic achievement was measured by statewide standardized assessments on math and English language arts (ELA). Behavior was measured by two proxy variables: days absent and whether a student experienced chronic absenteeism (defined as missing ten percent or more of the school days in a school year). The use of these variables as proxies is supported by studies that have shown the close association between absenteeism and behavioral issues (e.g., Gubbels et al., 2019; Ingul, et al., 2012). Next, researchers used an event study design to estimate the dynamic effects and test the balance of the pre-treatment period between the treatment and comparison groups. Researchers also addressed the heterogeneous treatment effect embedded in the difference-in-differences analysis by applying the Callaway and Sant’Anna (2021) method to test the robustness of the results.

The results from the difference-in-differences analysis (Table 6) showed that students who received the City Connects intervention after changing schools scored higher in statewide math assessments (effect size 0.15). Scores did not differ for ELA. Students who receive City Connects intervention after changing schools demonstrate better behavior outcomes (on average, 1.6 fewer days of absent days and 5.3 percentage points lower in the probability of chronic absenteeism). The effects on math, days absent, and chronic absenteeism are both practically and statistically significant.

Results from the event studies analysis (Figure 5 and Figure 6) showed the dynamic effects of receiving City Connects intervention after school changes. In these figures, the vertical line represents the pre-transition year. To the right of the vertical line, point estimates represent the difference in indicator value between students who transitioned into a school with City Connects and those who never experienced City Connects.

As seen in Figure 5, for both math and ELA, students in City Connects schools outperformed comparison peers. The improvements in math scores are statistically significant and persistent over time. As seen in Figure 6, students in City Connects schools experienced fewer days absent and lower probabilities of chronic absenteeism than comparison peers.

- Students who receive the City Connects intervention after moving to a new middle school have better achievement than students who never receive the City Connects intervention after changing schools, with an increase of 0.15 standard deviations in math assessment.
- Students who receive the City Connects intervention after moving to a new middle school show better behavior than students who never receive the City Connects intervention after changing schools, with a reduction of 1.6 days of absence and a decrease of 5.3 percentage points of experiencing chronic absenteeism.
- The findings indicate the importance of comprehensive student support in mitigating the adverse impacts of school changes in middle school grades. Urban school districts with high student mobility should allocate resources and provide comprehensive student support to address the out-of-school factors related to school changes.

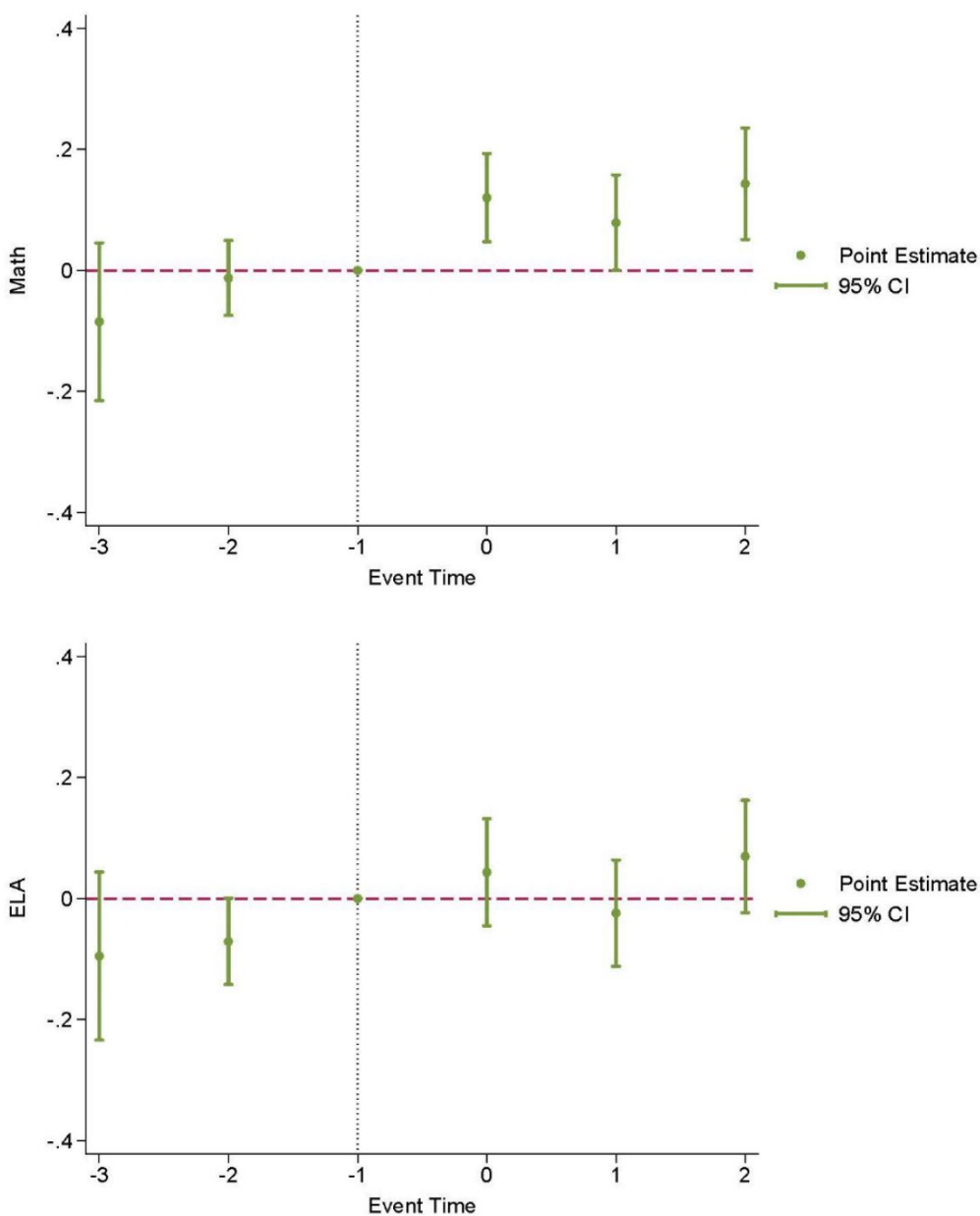
TABLE 6. Effects of City Connects intervention for students changing schools in middle school

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Math	ELA	Days absent	Chronic absenteeism
Effect size of City Connects	0.152	0.107	-1.566	-0.053
(Standard Error)	(0.037)	(0.044)	(0.646)	(0.020)

Source: Boston Public Schools data, 2001-02 through 2015-16

Note. Estimates for math and ELA are in units of standard deviations. Chronic absenteeism is measured as a probability. The analysis controlled for free or reduced-price lunch, special education status, school, school year, grade, zip code, and individual fixed effects. Math and ELA achievements are standardized by grade-subject-year within the sample. Robust standard errors are clustered at the student level to correct for correlations in the errors among repeated student observations.

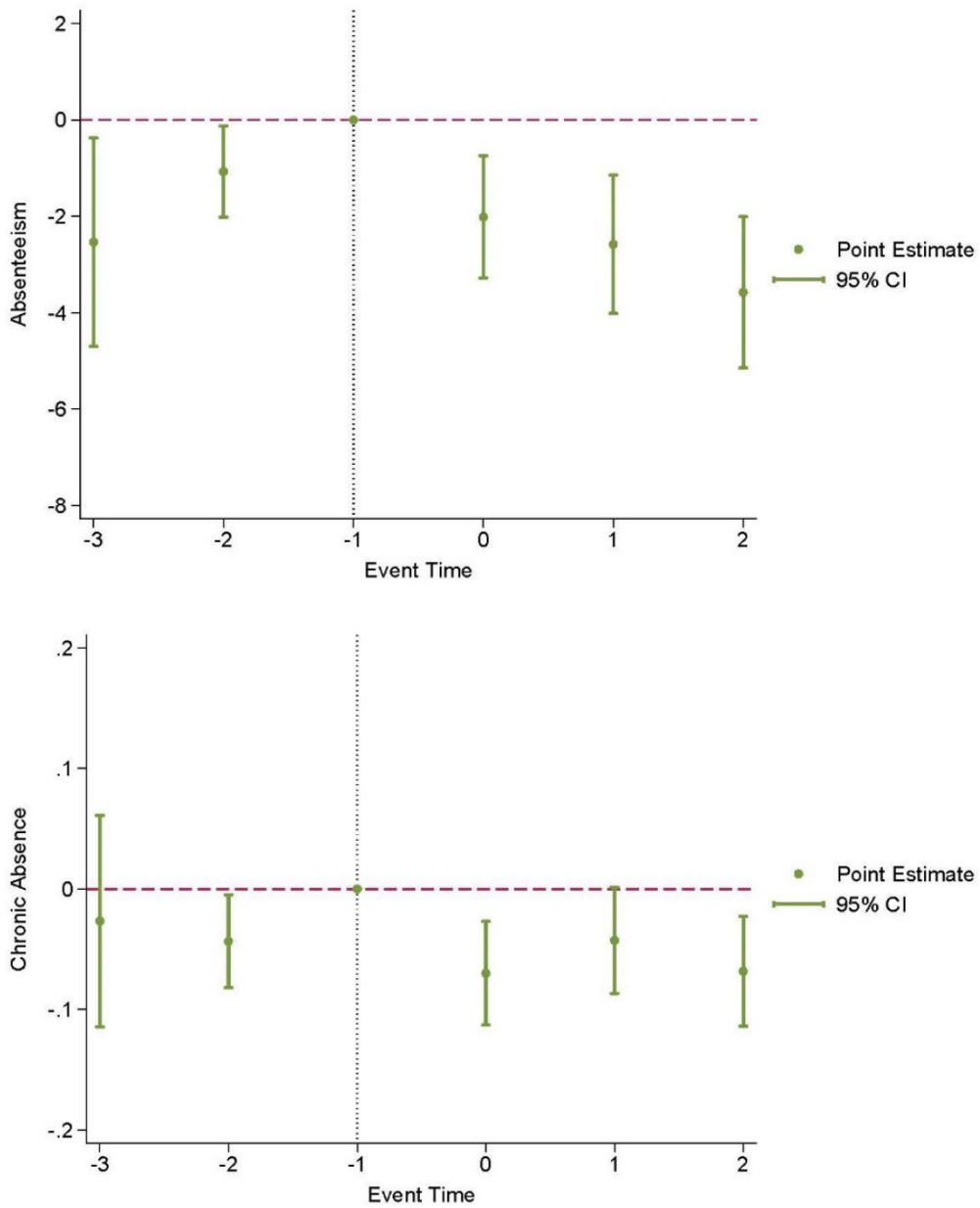
FIGURE 5. The effects of City Connects on academic achievement (standard deviation) for students changing schools in middle school



Source: Boston Public Schools data, 2001-02 through 2015-16

Note. The vertical axis shows estimated results in units of standard deviations. The horizontal axis represents the event time (school year) relative to the first year a student receives the City Connects intervention after school changes. Event time “-1” represents the year before the transition, serving as reference time. The analysis controlled for free or reduced-price lunch, special education status, school, school year, grade, zip code, and individual fixed effects. Math and ELA achievements are standardized by grade-subject-year within the analytic sample. Robust standard errors are clustered at the student level to correct for correlations in the errors among repeated student observations.

FIGURE 6. The Impact of City Connects on absenteeism (standard deviation) for students changing schools in middle school



Source: Boston Public Schools data, 2001-02 through 2015-16

Note. The vertical axis shows estimated results in days of absence and the probability of experiencing chronic absenteeism. The horizontal axis represents the event time (school year) relative to the first year a student receives the City Connects intervention after school changes. Event time “-1” represents the year before the student before the transition, serving as reference time. The analysis controlled for free or reduced-price lunch, special education status, school, school year, grade, zip code, and individual fixed effects. Robust standard errors are clustered at the student level to correct for correlations in the errors among repeated student observations.

Mitigating disproportionality in special education placement

A growing concern in the United States education system is the appropriateness of referrals to special education. In particular, some traditionally marginalized students, such as Black males, tend to be disproportionately placed in special education.

Placement in special education is appropriate when a student has a disability that requires support. While some disabilities arise from biological causes, others are linked to various socioeconomic mechanisms, such as poverty and childhood trauma (Grindal et al., 2019). These factors contribute to developmental or behavioral problems among marginalized students, making it crucial to implement appropriate accommodations whenever required by disabilities.

At the same time, studies suggest that in high-poverty schools, special education is frequently used more than is necessary (Skiba et al., 2006). The trend is especially prominent for disability categories with less medical clarity, such as learning disabilities or emotional disturbance.

The disproportionality in special education placement is partly due to limited resources available to support marginalized students (Skiba et al., 2006). Another reason for disproportionality is inappropriate placement (i.e., inaccurate assessment of a disability, which may follow from an inappropriate referral). The adverse effects of this disproportionality include lack of appropriate, needed support and potential stigmatization from being labeled with a disability. Such adverse effects may further exacerbate the difficulties marginalized students encounter.

Comprehensive student support approaches like City Connects may help mitigate disproportionality in two ways. First, such approaches aim to address the out-of-school factors that affect student success in school—factors that may be especially acute for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The right support may ultimately improve students' ability to learn in the classroom. Second, comprehensive student support interventions provide appropriate services based on students' needs (in addition to their strengths and interests), potentially reducing inappropriate special education referrals and placement.

This study sought to address the following research questions:

To what extent do school-level special education placements differ after the introduction of City Connects?

To what extent do school-level placement rates differ by race?

The study utilized quasi-experimental research designs to estimate the effects of comprehensive student support on the school-level likelihood of special education placement in the years following the implementation of City Connects. The hypothesis is that participation in comprehensive student support programs reduces the likelihood of disproportionate use of special education for schools serving marginalized students.

Schools included in the analysis

The study used school-level information from two urban school districts in Massachusetts: Boston Public Schools (BPS) and Springfield Public Schools (SPS). Both school districts have implemented City Connects in many schools during this period. All schools in BPS and SPS spanning 2004-05 to 2015-16 were included in the analysis, except schools that implemented City Connects before 2004. The analytical sample for this study comprised 140 elementary and middle schools in the two districts. Approximately 40% of these schools (N = 57) received City Connects for at least one year between 2004-05 and 2015-2016 school year.

Both school districts serve racially/ethnically and socioeconomically diverse student populations and have among the highest rates of special education placement across U.S. school districts. Most students with disabilities fall under the judgmental category (i.e., those that do not definitively arise from biological causes; examples include specific learning disabilities, communication disorders, or emotional disturbance).

Analytic methods

The analyses used generalized difference-in-differences models with two-way fixed effects regressions, whereby the study estimates changes in the proportion of students placed in special education for City Connects schools in the years following the first few years of implementation relative to the pre-treatment period. Such an analysis is robust to pre-existing differences in schools, and it only requires that the treatment and comparison schools demonstrate parallel trends in the outcome measure in the pre-treatment period. Parallel trends offer strong evidence that comparison schools provide an appropriate counterfactual for what would have occurred to treatment schools in the post-treatment period had they not received treatment.

The proportion of special education students in a school is the outcome variable. Baseline measures of the proportions of students of color and economically disadvantaged students and school-level academic achievements serve as covariates. The study employs a weighting procedure to match City Connects schools to comparison schools using these characteristics.

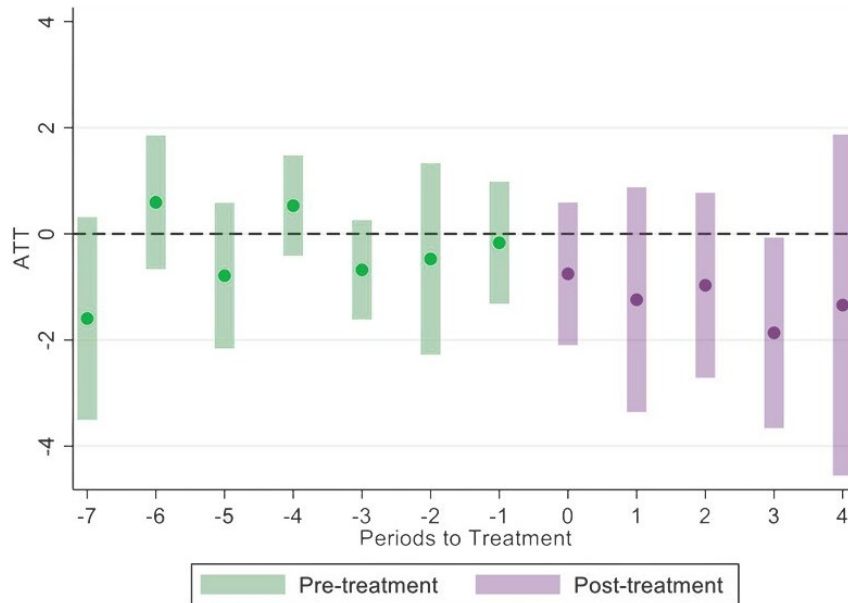
Simply stated, this analysis investigated whether the introduction of City Connects to schools affects their overall special education classification rates. The model was also estimated for the proportion of Black and Black male students in special education. The estimator developed by Callaway and Sant'Anna (2021) was used to address the heterogeneous treatment effect embedded in two-way fixed effects that could lead to biases. Event studies were applied to provide evidence of parallel pre-trend.

Results

The two-way fixed effect estimate showed that, on average, special education placement rates at schools that adopted City Connects decreased in the years following implementation by 1.30 percentage points (statistically significant at $p < .10$) relative to changes in comparison schools. This result represents a 6.5% drop in special education placement from the previous rate of 20%. The estimates are robust to school-level demographic changes, turnaround status, and student mobility.

Results from the event study (Figure 7) and Callaway and Sant’Anna’s (2021) method showed that all estimates in the post-treatment period reflected declines in special education placement rates following City Connects implementation in schools.

FIGURE 7. The effects of City Connects on school-level special education placement rates – event studies



Note. Model estimates are based on the Callaway & Sant’Anna (2021) estimator. Baseline covariates include math and ELA achievements.

The subgroup analyses showed evidence that Black students and Black male students had a similar pattern of decrease in rates of special education placement (1.5 percentage points) upon implementation of City Connects in schools, although the decrease was not statistically significant.

Findings from this study suggest that providing a comprehensive student support program in schools could decrease the probability of special education placement for marginalized students. The study provides evidence that comprehensive student support may mitigate socioeconomic factors that may lead to disability classification and may also increase the accuracy of special education referrals, reducing disproportionality in special education placement. This, in turn, allows special educational support resources to be allocated more effectively.

- Schools that began implementing City Connects later demonstrated a significantly lower rate of special education placements, representing a 6.5% decline from prior rates.
- The finding that City Connects schools demonstrate lower rates of special education placement also holds for Black students in general and for Black male students in particular, although the decrease was not statistically significant.
- Findings are consistent with the theory that comprehensive student support addresses out-of-school factors that may later lead to disability classification and also allows schools to refer students to special education with greater accuracy and appropriateness.

The protective nature of family strengths on school attendance and academic achievement

Acting out in school with externalizing behaviors such as defiance, aggression, impulsivity, or peer difficulties is one of the most common reasons that students are referred to mental health services. Such behaviors are also associated with poorer academic performance and lower levels of school connectedness (Hinshaw, 1992; Mazzucchelli & Sanders, 2018; Kearney et al., 2020). These difficulties could be symptomatic of a range of root causes, and are often exacerbated when students have other disadvantages or marginalized identities (Scherr & Mayer, 2019).

However, children's development is significantly impacted not only by the risks they encounter but also by their strengths and resources across academic, social-emotional, health, and family domains that can buffer against risks across contexts (Masten & Tellegen, 2012). Children's relationships with caregivers and strengths within the family domain (e.g., parental support, parenting practices) may be protective for children who are at higher risk of adverse school-based outcomes (Masten & Tellegen, 2012; Bøe et al., 2014).

To promote greater equity for students with externalizing behaviors, researchers examined potential protective factors that can promote success for children in City Connects schools. The study aimed to address the following research question:

To what extent do family strengths serve as a protective factor for students with externalizing behavioral challenges?

For this study, researchers hypothesized that students with externalizing behavior difficulties who have strengths identified within the family domain (during the annual City Connects review of strengths and needs across developmental domains) are less likely to have poorer school outcomes, such as lower academic achievement and attendance rates, compared to peers without identified family strengths. In other words, family strengths may moderate the relationship between externalizing behaviors and student outcomes.

Students included in the sample

City Connects Coordinators use a proprietary database (MyConnects) to track the strengths, needs, and service referrals of each student over time. This study drew upon information from this source, focusing on 2018-19 data from third through ninth grade students (N = 3,280) attending 20 public schools in Springfield, MA. The analysis also included student attendance rates and scores on statewide math and English language arts (ELA) assessments.

This sample largely included students of color (69% Latinx/Hispanic, 19% Black) from low-income families (78%). While grades 3 through 9 were represented in the study, most students (88%) were in grades 3 through 5.

Of the students included in the sample, over half (52%) had at least one identified externalizing behavioral need. This could include aggression with others, challenging or poor peer relationships, disrespectful behaviors, difficulty with transitions, lack of maturity, lack of self-regulation, or impulsivity.

A quarter of the students in the sample had between three and seven family strengths reported, 27% had two, 36% had one, and 13% had no family strengths identified. Identified family strengths included school-family

communication, strong family relationships, consistent routines, effective behavior management strategies, caregiver/child interactions, and the family’s support for learning.

Analytic methods

A regression analysis was used to examine the relationship between two predictor variables (the number of family strengths (0, 1, 2, 3+) and whether or not the student demonstrated externalizing behaviors) and each of three outcome variables (ELA score, math score, and attendance rate). Next, a moderation analysis was conducted using linear regression to examine the interaction effect of externalizing behaviors and family strengths on each of those outcomes. Students’ gender, race/ethnicity, grade level, and school type were included in the model as control variables.

Results

The regression analysis revealed statistically significant relationships between having at least three identified family strengths and attendance rate, math, and ELA scores ($p < .01$). Students with one or two identified family strengths also had significantly higher attendance rates, compared to their peers without any family strengths ($p < .01$). Importantly, there was a negative association that is statistically significant between externalizing behaviors and attendance rate/standardized test scores ($p < .01$). The moderation analysis revealed statistically significant interactions between externalizing behaviors and family strengths for math and ELA test scores ($p < .01$), as well as attendance rate ($p = .03$).

FIGURE 8. Student attendance: Relationship between family strengths and externalizing behaviors

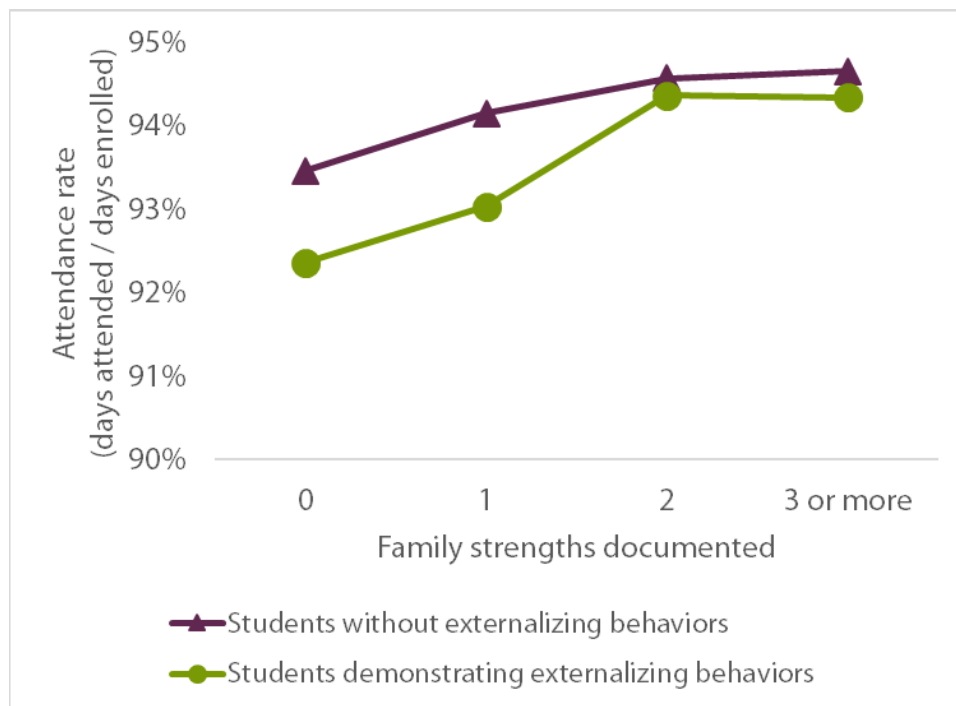


FIGURE 9. English language arts achievement: Relationship between family strengths and externalizing behaviors

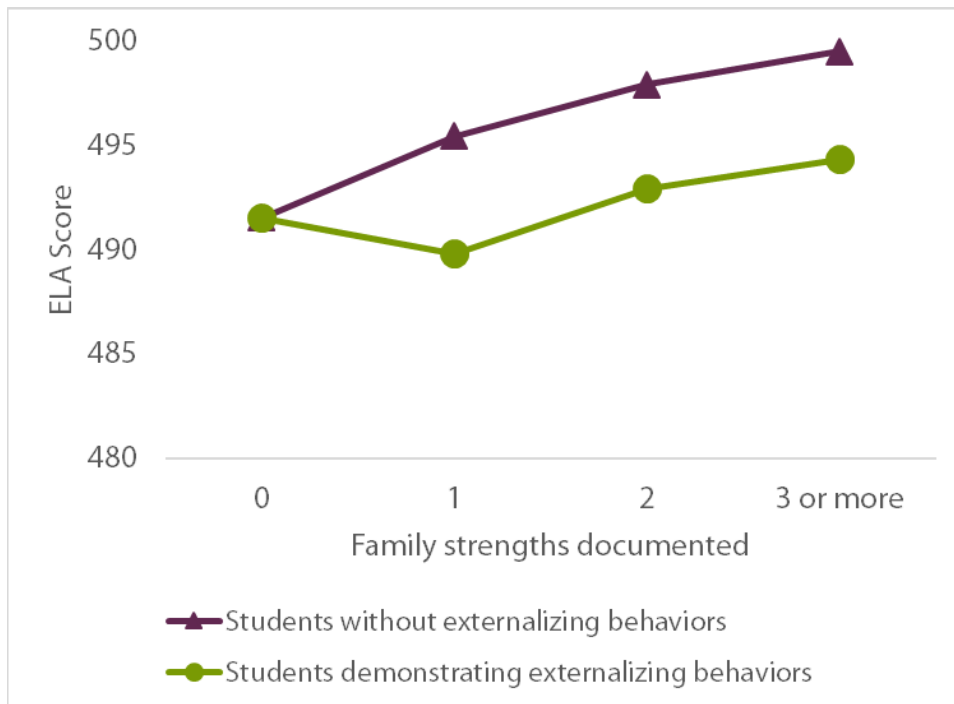
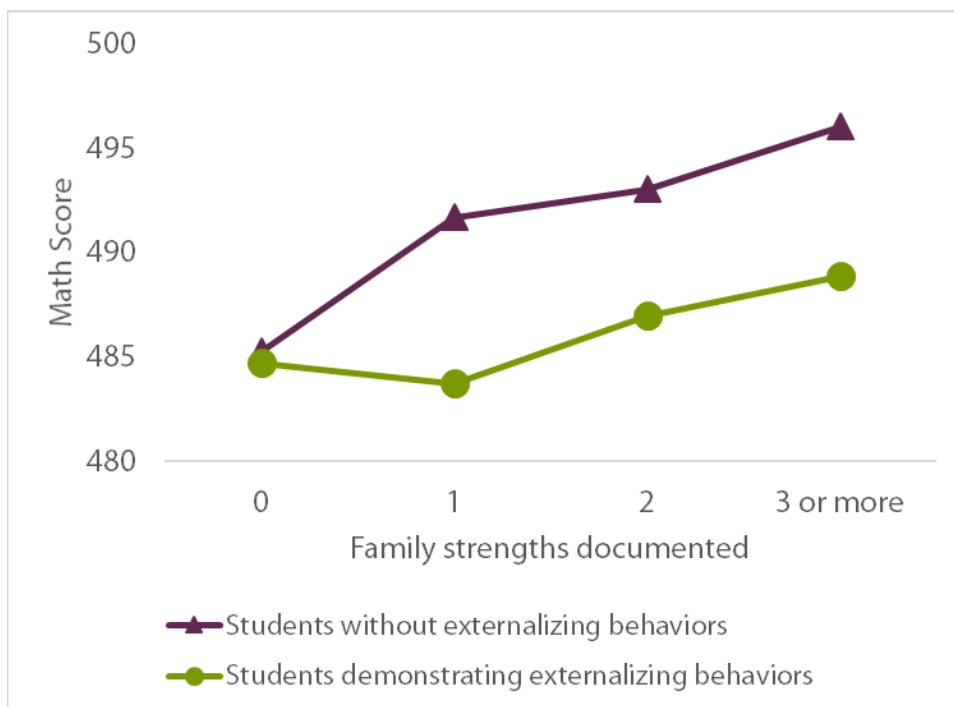


FIGURE 10. Mathematics achievement: Relationship between family strengths and externalizing behaviors



This study shows that, within City Connects schools serving a high percentage of students of color and low-income families, higher levels of family strength (two or more) are associated with better attendance rates and can be protective for students with externalizing behaviors (see Figure 8). Higher levels of strength within the family system decrease the association between externalizing behaviors and low attendance rates.

The protective nature of family strengths on attendance rate does not fully translate to students' academic achievement. Overall, students' scores on ELA and math assessments were significantly lower when they had externalizing behaviors, even when there were high levels of family strength (Figures 9 and 10). However, students with the highest level of family strength and externalizing behaviors had higher test scores than students with no recorded family strength and no externalizing behaviors, without statistical significance.

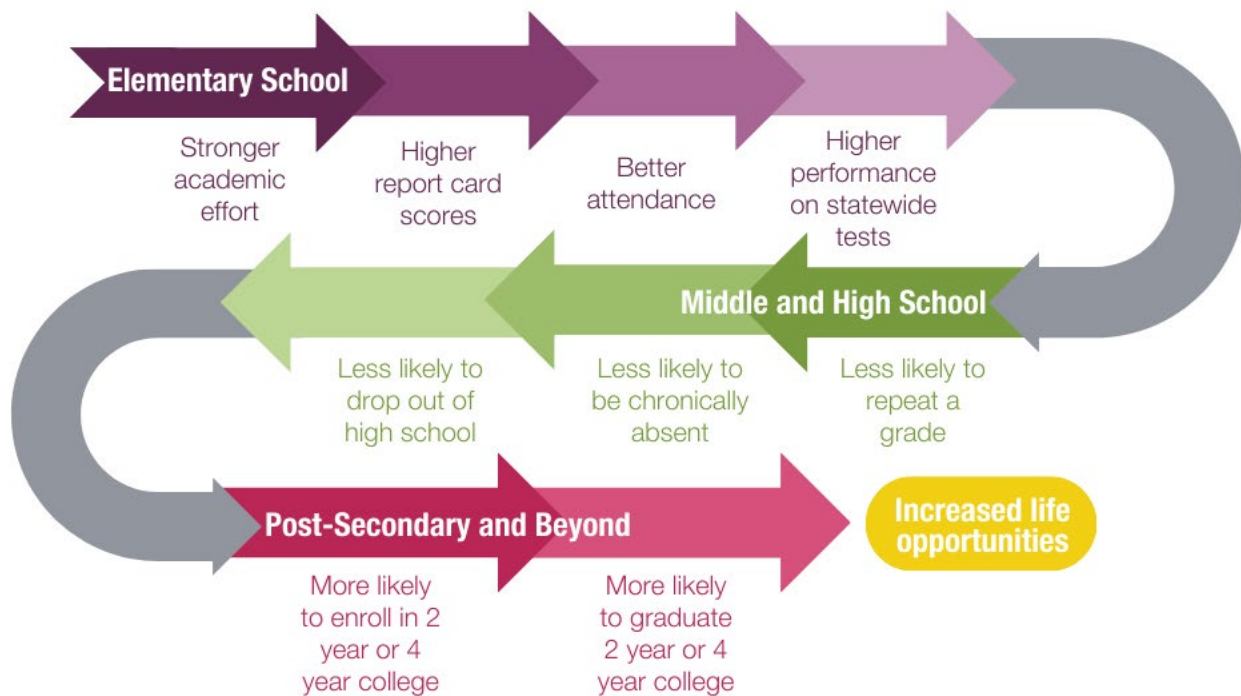
This study provides evidence that for students with externalizing behavior challenges in City Connects schools, fostering strengths within the family system may improve students' attendance and connectedness to school. It is important to note that the directionality of the relationships between variables is difficult to disentangle. For example, while it is suggested that high levels of recorded family strengths can lead to higher attendance, they may be attributable to children's high attendance rates.

- While children with externalizing behavior challenges in City Connects schools demonstrate lower attendance rates than their peers, this relationship differs with the presence of family strengths. Higher levels (2 or more) of family strengths are associated with better attendance and can be protective for students with externalizing behaviors.
- Students with externalizing behaviors who had the highest level of family strengths had higher math and ELA test scores than students without externalizing behaviors who had no recorded family strengths (although the difference was not statistically significant).
- Support from family is related to success in school for all students in City Connects schools. In particular, there is evidence that for students in City Connects schools who act out, family support can make an important difference.

Summary of converging findings

Over more than 20 years, ongoing evaluation of City Connects has produced a consistent set of findings demonstrating that attending a school with City Connects makes a difference for students. City Connects students outperform comparison peers on measures of academic achievement, measures of success and thriving, and enhanced life chances and opportunities through each stage of their development, beginning in elementary school and continuing to post-secondary education. The figure below illustrates City Connects' impact on students, from the time they are enrolled in City Connects elementary schools, through middle and high school, and into their post-secondary years and beyond.

FIGURE 11. The lifetime impact of City Connects



The results of prior and more recent evaluation studies demonstrate the positive effects of City Connects over many years, across methodological approaches, sites, and samples. Consistently, studies show that City Connects students 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.

School and community stakeholder feedback

Each spring, City Connects conducts confidential surveys of principals, teachers, and community agency partners who work with City Connects. The surveys are designed to assess participants' satisfaction with City Connects and to identify both strengths of the partnership and opportunities to improve the implementation of the practice. Surveys are administered electronically using the Qualtrics survey tool. All principals are surveyed annually. Teachers are surveyed every year during the first three years of implementation of City Connects in their district, then every other year after that. Community partners are surveyed in years two and three, then every other year after that. Participants from the spring of 2023 are described below.

- **Principals** from all City Connects sites were invited to participate in the survey, including: Boston, Springfield, Salem, Southbridge, and Beverly, Massachusetts public school principals; Boston, Massachusetts Catholic school principals; Dayton and Springfield, Ohio school principals; Minneapolis, Minnesota Catholic and charter school principals; Poughkeepsie, New York public school principals; and principals from public, private, Catholic, and charter schools throughout Indiana. Indiana schools are located in and around the communities of Bloomington, Fort Wayne, Gary, Indianapolis, Muncie, and South Bend.
- **Teachers** invited to participate in the survey included Boston, Southbridge, and Beverly, Massachusetts public school teachers; Boston, Massachusetts Catholic school teachers; Dayton and Springfield, Ohio teachers; Minneapolis, Minnesota Catholic and charter school teachers; Poughkeepsie, New York public school teachers; and teachers from public, private, Catholic, and charter schools throughout Indiana.
- **Community partners**—who might work with public, charter, Catholic, and private schools in their regions—were invited to participate in Boston and Southbridge, Massachusetts; Dayton and Springfield, Ohio; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Poughkeepsie, New York; and throughout Indiana.

In this section, we report on principal, teacher, and community partner feedback. The findings below are presented in aggregate across all City Connects sites.

Principal feedback

Principals and administrators across the network were invited to participate in the stakeholder feedback survey.² Across all districts, 90% of principals reported satisfaction with City Connects and 89% would recommend City Connects to another principal. Overall, 73% of principals report having more time for their core work, and 84% reported that student support had improved in their schools as a result of City Connects. In the words of one Indiana principal,

² The survey was sent to 281 administrators (i.e., principals and assistant principals) across districts, and 167 (59%) participated. Not every principal responded to every question. Therefore, item-level Ns may vary.

“We did not have an organized student support team before [our City Connects Coordinator] came to our school. She has helped us develop a sustainable structure for the support team that has benefitted teachers, students, and families.”

Principals were also likely to agree with statements related to City Connects’ promoting equity:

- 85% of principals agreed that City Connects supports the strengths of each and every student in their school.
- 84% of principals agreed that City Connects addresses the needs of each and every student in their school.
- 83% of principals agreed that City Connects expands opportunities for each and every student in their school.

Principals’ responses also revealed that Coordinators’ work with families is an area of strength across the network: 90% of principals reported that they were satisfied with the supports the Coordinator provides to families (e.g., family outreach, following up with families, assisting with parent meetings). When asked to identify ways the City Connects Coordinator works with families in the school, a majority of principals reported that Coordinators reached out to families on behalf of the school (90%); connected families to services such as translation, housing, or transportation (89%); and served as a point of contact for families in the school (81%).

In the words of one Minneapolis, Minnesota principal,

“The services and supports [Coordinator] provided were so incredibly helpful to the students and families at [our school]. I can’t imagine where we would be without her.”

In addition to being satisfied with City Connects’ work with families, principals also reported satisfaction on a range of Coordinator-provided supports. See Table 7.

TABLE 7. Percentage of principals satisfied with the Coordinator-provided supports in each area

I am satisfied with the support City Connects provides to:	N = 167
Students (e.g., securing services, providing individual support, running lunch groups)	91%
Families (e.g., family outreach, following up with families, assisting with parent meetings)	90%
Principals/administrators (e.g., coordinating Student Support Team, supporting administrative activities)	90%
Community partnerships (e.g. maintaining communication with agencies, following up to secure services, coordinating agency work in the school)	90%
The school (e.g., their presence on the playground, bus and lunch duty)	89%
Teachers (e.g., conducting Whole Class Reviews and assisting with behavior challenges in the classroom)	87%

Source: City Connects 2023 principal survey

Principals reported on how helpful they found various aspects of City Connects in their schools. As shown in Table 8, a large majority of principals (88% or more for all items) found each aspect of the program helpful, with coordination of Whole Class Reviews and individual and small group student support being the highest-rated program aspects at 94% satisfaction each.

TABLE 8. Percentage of principals rating specific program aspects as (somewhat/very) helpful

The following aspects of City Connects have been somewhat/very helpful in my school:	N = 166
Coordination of Whole Class Reviews	94%
Individual and small group student support	94%
Students being connected to services	93%
Facilitation of the Student Support Team	92%
Management of relationships with community agencies	91%
Focus on health	90%
Student support data (e.g., Mid-year report, End-of-year report)	89%
Behavior management support	88%

Source: City Connects 2023 principal survey

Principals also reported on the impact of City Connects on other dimensions of education and the school environment. Table 9 below presents the findings.

TABLE 9. Percentage of principals rating City Connects as (somewhat/very) helpful at impacting the following

City Connects has been somewhat/very helpful in impacting the following:	N = 163
Student health and wellbeing	91%
School climate	91%
The quality of supports and enrichments provide to students in the school	88%
Student classroom behavior	87%
Teacher ability to support students in the classroom	85%
The number of community-based service providers in the school	85%
Student learning/academic achievement (i.e., grades)	84%
Teacher ability to focus on instruction	84%
The appropriateness of Special Education referrals	84%

Source: City Connects 2023 principal survey

As the table above shows, 84% or more of all principals found City Connects to be helpful at impacting particular characteristics of their schools, with student health and wellbeing and school climate as particular areas of strength.

In the words of one Springfield, Massachusetts public school principal,

“My City Connects Coordinator is phenomenal. [Coordinator] can be counted on to go above the call of duty to support the entire school community.”

Teacher feedback

Teachers from City Connects’ partner schools (see above) were invited to participate in a survey in spring 2023³. Teachers reported satisfaction with City Connects (83%) and that they would recommend City Connects to a colleague (82%). Overall, 84% are satisfied with the supports provided to students, 82% are satisfied with the supports City Connects provides to the school, and 80% are satisfied with the supports they receive as teachers.

Teachers were also likely to agree with statements related to City Connects’ promoting equity:

- 79% of teachers agreed that City Connects supports the strengths of each and every student in their school.
- 78% of teachers agreed that City Connects expands opportunities and addresses the needs of each and every student in their school.

Teachers were also asked about the Whole Class Review process, in which the teacher and Coordinator review the strengths and needs of each individual student across academic, social/emotional/behavioral, health, and family domains. As shown in Table 10, teachers report that this process influences various aspects of their work with students.

³ The survey was sent to 1,912 teachers, and 1,013 (53%) participated. Not every teacher answered every question. Therefore, item-level Ns may vary.

TABLE 10. Percentage of teachers who agree with each statement about the Whole Class Review

I agree that:	N = 760
The Whole Class/Grade Review process enhanced my awareness of my students as individuals.	85%
The Whole Class/Grade Review process enhanced my awareness of the dynamics of my class as a whole.	83%
The Whole Class/Grade Review process increased my empathy for students.	83%
The Whole Class/Grade Review process made me more patient with students because I better understand the non-academic issues that contribute to their struggles in class.	82%
The Whole Class/Grade Review process has helped me think about the factors that influence student behavior before I react to the behavior.	82%
The Whole Class/Grade Review was helpful to me.	79%
The Whole Class/Grade Review process added to my knowledge of the non-academic aspects of my students' lives (e.g., neighborhood and family context).	79%
The Whole Class/Grade Review supported my ability to identify new options for working with my students.	77%
The Whole Class/Grade Review provided knowledge that I used to differentiate instruction.	71%

Source: City Connects 2023 teacher survey

In the words of a Boston teacher,

“The opportunity to discuss each student has been really helpful. Sometimes in education we only talk about struggling students, but having a protocol that allows adults to talk about all students is refreshing! Every [student] gets what they need as a result.”

In addition to the Whole Class Review process, teachers were also asked to respond to a set of questions regarding the Individual Student Review, which 62% of teachers reported participating in. During the Individual Student Review (or ISR), the Coordinator convenes a team to discuss strengths, needs, and specific goals for students experiencing intensive risk. In addition to the Coordinator and teacher, the team may include a principal or assistant principal, a school nurse or other support staff member, community agency representatives, and/or family members.

Teachers who participated in the Individual Student Review process had positive feedback: 90% agreed that students who would benefit from an Individual Student Review received one, and 88% felt that the goals and objectives set for students were on target. Furthermore, 83% of teachers agreed that having a tailored plan in place for the student(s) who received an Individual Student Review made a difference to them as teachers. A majority of teachers were satisfied with the follow-up after the review *and* the quality of services their students received as a result of it (81%). In the words of an Indiana teacher,

“Not only does this program help meet families on their terms to provide support for struggling family needs or student needs, but the ISR meetings bring everyone onto the same page in a safe, supportive environment. This is most helpful for the students who struggle to follow through; there is a mechanism by which teachers, parents, and the Coordinator can all work together to hold students accountable—or provide additional support should they continue struggling!”

Teachers also responded to a set of questions regarding the specific ways City Connects Coordinators supported their work. Coordinators’ ability to serve as a source of knowledge about student support, to support teachers in their work with families, to obtain services for students, to be someone to talk to and problem solve with, and to help manage challenging student behavior were among teachers’ top-rated supports.

An Ohio teacher described their City Connects Coordinator in this way:

“It seems that she has all the answers to help our students. If it’s not readily available, she will research and find a solution to our challenges.”

Teachers also reported on the helpfulness of City Connects in addressing other issues in the classroom. For example, 70% or more of teachers reported that City Connects helps them to address the behavior of students in their classroom, ensure students are coming to class better prepared to learn, and follow through with securing non-academic supports for their students.

Collaborating with families is a critical piece of the City Connects Coordinators’ role, and Coordinators can support teachers in this area of work. Overall, 84% of teachers reported that Coordinators serve as a point of contact for families in the school, and 89% report that the Coordinator is a source of support for families. Overall, 83% of teachers agreed that Coordinators supported them in having difficult or sensitive conversations with families, and two thirds (67%) reported that Coordinators contacted families on their behalf. Nearly all teachers (93%) agreed that the Coordinator increased their own awareness of the services available for families, such as translation, housing, and transportation. A majority of teachers (84%) felt that the support and enrichment services their students received were a good fit for their needs.

A Minnesota teacher reported,

“City Connects is a great bridge between schools and families by helping families get needed support in a non-threatening and confidential manner. The wrap-around services are essential for our families.”

Community agency feedback

Community agency partners who work with schools implementing City Connects (see list above) were invited to take part in a survey in the spring of 2023.⁴ Like the principals and teachers who were surveyed, community partners reported high levels of satisfaction with City Connects. For example, 94% of community partners reported overall satisfaction with City Connects, and 96% would recommend City Connects to another agency. Further, 96% felt that City Connects was effective at identifying the needs of the students they work with, and 92% agree that City Connects is effective at matching students to services.

In the words of one community partner in Ohio,

“The City Connects Coordinators are very involved in their community and their schools. They make partnerships easy as they are always willing to learn and create more partnerships/programs when they see a need.”

According to a community partner in Minnesota,

“We work closely with [Coordinator] at [School], and she does a great job of connecting kids who need our services, and also working with parents who are not ready to connect with us yet. We think the program is amazing!”

Community partners were also asked to indicate their level of satisfaction when working with schools with City Connects and schools without City Connects across specific aspects of school-related work, such as communication, referrals, and follow-up. Participants were first asked to respond to a set of survey questions pertaining to their work with schools implementing City Connects. They were then prompted to answer the same set of questions related to their work with other (“non-City Connects”) schools.

Across these dimensions of positive collaboration, community partners tended to be more satisfied with City Connects schools than schools without City Connects. The results are shown in Table 11.

⁴ The survey was sent to 385 community agency representatives who may have partnered with City Connects during the 2022-23 school year. Of those, 67 (17%) participated in the survey. Note that some survey recipients did not participate because they did not work with a school implementing City Connects. Not every community agency respondent answered every question. Therefore, item-level Ns may vary.

TABLE 11. Percentage of community partners who are satisfied (very/somewhat) with dimensions of partnership with City Connects and non-City Connects schools

I am satisfied with:	City Connects Schools N = 47	Non-City Connects Schools N = 36
Communication with primary contact	94%	89%
Referral process (e.g., identifying students that would benefit from your services)	85%	69%
Follow-up on service delivery (e.g., checking to ensure the student(s) received the service)	89%	75%
Effectiveness of your partnership in reaching goals	87%	83%
Providing you with feedback that would improve service delivery, when appropriate	79%	69%
Providing opportunities for you to provide feedback to the school	79%	69%
The cultural competence of your primary contact in the school	96%	92%

Source: City Connects 2023 community partner survey

As the table illustrates, across all dimensions, partners were more satisfied in their work with City Connects schools than with non-City Connects schools, particularly in the areas of follow-up on service delivery and the referral process.

A community partner in Boston described working with City Connects in this way:

“My partnerships vary between schools. However, [in schools with] City Connect Coordinators, I have clear and open communication. Both [Coordinators] are motivated and excited to get more kids enrolled into the program.”

Conclusions

More than twenty years ago, a diverse group of Boston College faculty, Boston Public Schools leaders, teachers and school staff, researchers, practitioners, Boston-area community agency partners, and local families came together with the goal of designing an evidence-based, school-based practice to better support children and families. They approached this work holistically, believing that by considering students' strengths and needs, schools could connect each student to the customized set of prevention, intervention, and enrichment services that would best support their learning and healthy development. Since launching in a single Boston Public school in 2000, City Connects has expanded to public, private, Catholic, and charter schools across more than 40 U.S. cities and towns, as well as Dublin, Ireland. Throughout this period of growth, and particularly in the past several years, interest in "Integrated Student Support" models—like City Connects—has increased among practitioners, researchers, and policy makers. Addressing out-of-school factors in a comprehensive, coordinated, customized, and continuous way for each and every student in a school is at the core of the City Connects practice.

City Connects is distinct from other approaches to student support in several significant ways. It is grounded in developmental science: decades of theoretical and empirical research on child development has informed City Connects' practice and continuous improvement. City Connects considers four developmental domains—academic, social/emotional/behavioral, physical health, and family—to uncover and address not just the surface issues, but the root cause of challenges. Most critically, City Connects builds a system of student support in every school.

City Connects sees schools as an epicenter of support for children and families. Schools implementing City Connects transform their pre-existing structures and roles, making them more systematic and systemic in supporting students. A highly-trained Coordinator in each school ensures that a tailored support plan is developed for every student. Additionally, for students at significant risk, an in-depth, structured review is held. Critically, the City Connects practice includes defined paths of collaboration with families and community agencies, who are key partners in student success.

City Connects is unique in its use of data to both monitor its implementation and evaluate its effectiveness. Through the use of its proprietary software, practitioners are able to monitor and continuously improve their work. More than twenty years of rigorous evaluation suggests positive outcomes for students, schools, and communities, including both academic achievement and improved life chances, reflected in such outcomes as improved effort, better grades, better attendance, and improved performance on state tests. After leaving City Connects, students experience benefits such as lower rates of high school dropout and higher rates of enrollment in, and graduation from, post-secondary institutions. Annual feedback surveys consistently find high levels of satisfaction among principals, teachers, and community agencies who partner with City Connects.

Increasingly, schools and districts are seeking effective ways of addressing the out-of-school factors that influence students' thriving in school. City Connects offers an example of an effective practice that makes a difference in students' lives, both in school and beyond.

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