



Evaluation of Strengthening Inclusion for Children with Disabilities in Chicago Head Start Programs through School and Community Partnerships (Year Two: 2024 - 2025)

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Table of Contents

1. Executive Summary – pg. 2
2. Introduction – pg. 3
3. Background – pg. 5
4. Methodology – pg. 7
5. Findings – pg. 9
6. Lessons Learned &
Recommendations – pg. 18
7. Conclusion – pg. 24
8. References – pg. 25

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Executive Summary

Objective: Over the 2023-2024 and 2024-2025 school years, Chicago's six federal Head Start (HS) grant recipients and Chicago Public Schools (CPS) partnered to implement a pilot project to improve the delivery of special education services from CPS providers to children with disabilities enrolled in community-based HS programs. This change helped eliminate disruptions to children's education and made critical services more accessible for families. This evaluation measured the process by which these changes in special education service delivery were made, the experiences of the individuals involved and gathered suggestions for future project improvement efforts.



Methods: A mixed methods evaluation approach was used for both years. Participants included CPS and HS teachers, staff, related service providers and project planning team members. The quantitative data was collected through a survey that was conducted at the beginning and end of the school year, measuring pre- and post-pilot implementation reflections on skills, collaboration, communication and project processes. The qualitative data was collected through interviews and/or focus groups. Participants discussed their perspective on successes and challenges that were experienced during the pilot project planning and implementation processes, as well as hopes and suggestions for the future. Additionally, meeting notes, agendas and presentations were analyzed to track key events and decision-making timelines.

Results: Though there were many improvements suggested by CPS and HS staff from year one to year two of the pilot project including training, communication and collaboration, staff also highlighted continued challenges with staff shortages, challenging behaviors in classrooms and lack of clarity on the future of the project. The pilot helped reveal systemic barriers that prevented scaling of the model and ultimately lead to the discontinuation of the pilot after the 2024-2025 School Year. Thus, lessons learned prior to and during implementation by both CPS and HS were documented, including creating clear expectations and receiving full team buy-in from the beginning, as well as establishing regular communication opportunities.

Conclusion: Although this pilot project will not continue as is, this foundational work identified what is needed from the early childhood education (ECE) community to implement and scale a model of community-based special education services in Chicago. The strong partnership developed between CPS and HS as a result of this pilot project will continue to foster communication and collaboration with a shared aim of improving special education service delivery for young children with disabilities enrolled in community-based early childhood education programs.

Introduction

For over two years Chicago's Head Start (HS) Recipients and Chicago Public Schools (CPS) have partnered to develop, implement, assess and institutionalize feasible strategies and approaches for delivering special education services to children with disabilities in the HS programs in which they are enrolled. This project was implemented to eliminate disruptions to children's education and to ensure access to inclusive special education services for children enrolled in community-based early childhood programs in Chicago. In the end, the goal is to have positive outcomes for young children with disabilities and their families. The pilot project was launched in the 2023-2024 school year and continued during the 2024-2025 school year.

Evaluation Purpose

Chicago has a robust mixed delivery system for early childhood education, including the option for families to choose to enroll their children in public school programs through CPS, as well as community-based organizations like HS. Legally, CPS is the designated agency in Chicago responsible for providing special education services for all preschool age children (ages 3-5) with disabilities, regardless of where they receive their education¹. Prior to implementing this pilot project, the only option for children with disabilities enrolled in HS programs to receive their special education services was to leave their community-based classroom and be transported via bus to and from a CPS classroom, which caused significant disruptions in a student's day, created stress for children and families, and often led to delays and disruptions in services due to transportation shortages and issues with school assignment and communication between HS and CPS.

Thus, for the last two years, project team members consisting of cross-organizational program managers, program and policy experts, researchers and experienced early childhood special education consultants from both HS and CPS have been working together to implement a pilot project to improve special education services. During the 2023-2024 school year, 40 students received CPS special education services in their HS classrooms. The [Year One Evaluation](#) found that strong relationships were established and continually being built, but improvements in training and communication were needed. Therefore, the goal for year two of the pilot project (2024-2025 school year) was to continue providing services for children with disabilities, while also focusing on improving staff communication, training and

onboarding into the pilot project and providing professional development opportunities for all HS and CPS staff involved in this pilot project.

The purpose of this evaluation (*Advara IRB Exemption #Pro00075060, MOD02237963*) was to continue to document and understand the roadblocks and facilitators to implementing this collaborative pilot project that worked to improve special education services for children with disabilities in HS programs within Chicago. The goal of understanding this process was to optimize, systematize and scale this approach so that it can be available to all children for whom a community-based early education program is their least restrictive environment. Though focused within the context of the Chicago early education system, similar work to improve inclusion practices is being conducted all around the nation. Lessons learned and findings from both years of this evaluation can be useful to these other locales.

Research Questions

The evaluation of the second year of the pilot project focused on the following questions:

1. Pilot Project Experience

What were the facilitators and barriers experienced by CPS and HS teachers, staff and related service providers during this early childhood special education systems-change process (year 2 of the pilot project), specifically regarding:

- Training/professional development opportunities
- Communication, collaboration and relationship development resources and practices
- Sustainability planning

2. Changes in Beliefs

Were there changes in beliefs and/or skills among HS and CPS staff throughout the school year in providing services to children with disabilities?

3. Future Recommendations

What are the recommendations for improving this project next year and beyond?

Background

Project Model Continued

The same project model from year one was continued for year two of the pilot. CPS itinerant special education teachers traveled to the community-based early education programs to provide services for students in their HS classrooms. Additionally, CPS speech-language pathologists and/or social workers were also deployed to serve students in their HS classrooms if indicated in the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) (a plan created for a child after being evaluated by professionals that lays out their special education service needs). This model eliminated the need for the students to travel to CPS locations to receive their special education services, as they previously were required.

To be eligible to receive services within the pilot project, the student had to meet the following qualifications:

- Be enrolled in one of the six HS pilot sites selected (more details below)
- Have an IEP that included up to 275 minutes per week for early childhood special education services, excluding other related service minutes (e.g., speech pathology or social work)
- If a student at one of the pilot sites only receives speech-related services, they are also still eligible

Additionally, the same 6 HS sites from year one of the pilot project (one site from each of the HS Recipients) were selected to continue. Throughout the school year, 11 CPS itinerant teachers were assigned to this project, along with 12 RSPs (6 Speech Language Pathologists and 6 Social Workers). **34 total students received services within this pilot project during the 2024-2025 school year.**

Cross-Organizational Collaboration Continued

For year two of the pilot project, the frequent collaboration and communication among Advisory Subcommittee members who helped implement and monitor the pilot project in HS sites continued. The Advisory subcommittee members consisted of the following cross-organizational key players:

Advisory Subcommittee:

Twice monthly meetings centered around developing and implementing the pilot project that were attended by:

- Disabilities Coordinators from each of the six Head Start Recipients
- Staff from CPS Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD)
- Additional project implementation staff (i.e., programmatic, policy and research specialists)

Additionally, quarterly meetings were held with the following Advisory Committee members to provide program updates and discuss sustainability planning.

Advisory Committee:

Quarterly meetings centered around decision-making related to this project that were attended by leadership from:

- Each of the six Head Start Recipients
- CPS Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD)
- Office of Early Childhood Education (OECE)
- Advisory Subcommittee Members

Methodology

Approach

To get a deeper understanding of the experiences of implementing this pilot project, the same mixed methods evaluation approach was continued for year two of the pilot project evaluation.

Qualitative Data:

The main qualitative data was collected through interviews and focus groups with CPS and HS teachers, HS site staff, RSPs and Advisory Subcommittee members. These interviews and focus groups were conducted between February – April 2025, a breakdown of participants can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1:

Staff Affiliation	1:1 Interviews	Focus Group Attendees	Emailed Responses
CPS Itinerant Teachers	1	0	0
Head Start Lead & Assistant Teachers	9	0	0
Head Start Site Staff	2	0	0
Related Service Providers (RSPs)	3	0	0
Advisory Subcommittee Members	1	5	2
TOTAL	16	5	2
TOTAL INDIVIDUALS ENGAGED: 23			

Quantitative Data:

Quantitative data was collected through online surveys distributed to all project participants at two separate timepoints:

1. Pre-survey conducted October – November 2024
2. Post-survey conducted May – June 2025

These surveys inventoried the project staff's skills, collaboration, communication and program processes pre- and post-project implementation. The pre- and post-survey results were also compared to track any potential changes in beliefs, mindsets or skills over time.

Additionally, another survey was conducted measuring the experience of attendees of an all-day in-person pilot project training held by Start Early on September 17, 2024.

A breakdown of participation numbers can be seen in Figure 2.

Figure 2:

Staff Affiliation	Sept 17 Training Survey	Pre-Survey	Post-Survey
CPS Itinerant Teachers	6	4	8
Head Start Lead Teachers	4	9	7
Head Start Assistant Teachers	4	8	4
Head Start Site Staff	13	10	3
Related Service Providers (RSPs)	3	5	6
Advisory Subcommittee Members	N/A	11	10
TOTAL INDIVIDUALS ENGAGED	30	47	38

Findings

The following findings are based on feedback from the pre- and post-surveys and interviews and/or focus groups with HS and CPS staff. Quotes from interview/focus groups are displayed in the light purple boxes throughout.

Strong Transition from Year One to Year Two:

For CPS and HS staff that were involved in the pilot both years, their reflections on differences between year one and year two highlighted strong improvements for the following reasons:

- Sites/classrooms participating in the pilot had mostly the same staff from year one to year two, creating stability in relationship building for staff and students
- Of the CPS staff coming into HS classrooms, they had experience in at least one of the following areas, making it easier for HS teachers to connect and collaborate:
 - Prior experience with this pilot project
 - Working with children with disabilities
 - Working within the CPS system
- There was more time between HS and CPS teams to improve communication and collaboration, build relationships and better understand systems
- CPS and HS staff felt better equipped starting the year with a general understanding of the model/expectations, which was greatly helped by having a training on the model at the beginning of the school year, which is detailed more below.

"I'm really appreciative that we have the same teachers as last year, because we didn't have to start over... they've really become part of us."

- HS Staff

"Our [CPS Itinerant Teacher], because she had a relationship with our teachers prior, was able to go to other classrooms and talk to the teachers. So, I think having [CPS Itinerant Teachers] here for past 2 years is really helping our teachers."

- HS Staff

Beginning of School Year Training

One of the highlighted improvements from year one of the pilot project to year two was the all-day training that was provided by Start Early for all CPS and HS staff involved in the pilot project. This training took place at the beginning of the school year (September 17, 2024) and brought all the collaborating team members together to learn in detail about the pilot project, inclusion practices, communication and collaboration as well as overall goals and expectations of their role and the pilot project itself.

CPS and HS staff were able to ask questions and connect with fellow pilot project team members. Since not all individuals who were involved in the pilot were able to attend, the training was recorded and shared with all pilot project staff to watch asynchronously as needed.

There were 10 CPS and 20 HS attendees (30 in total), 11 were new to the pilot and 19 participated in the pilot the previous year. Based on findings from the evaluation survey conducted after the September 17 training (Figure 3), attendees responded:

"It was nice to be able to go and get more information and so I could see in a larger context...the model of moving to more inclusion."

- HS Teacher

"We were invited to a Start Early training on inclusion this year, so I was able to meet some more of the administrative staff and connect. And then the itinerant teachers were there too, so that way I was able to... meet some people and get their information. I think that helped."

- RSP

Figure 3:

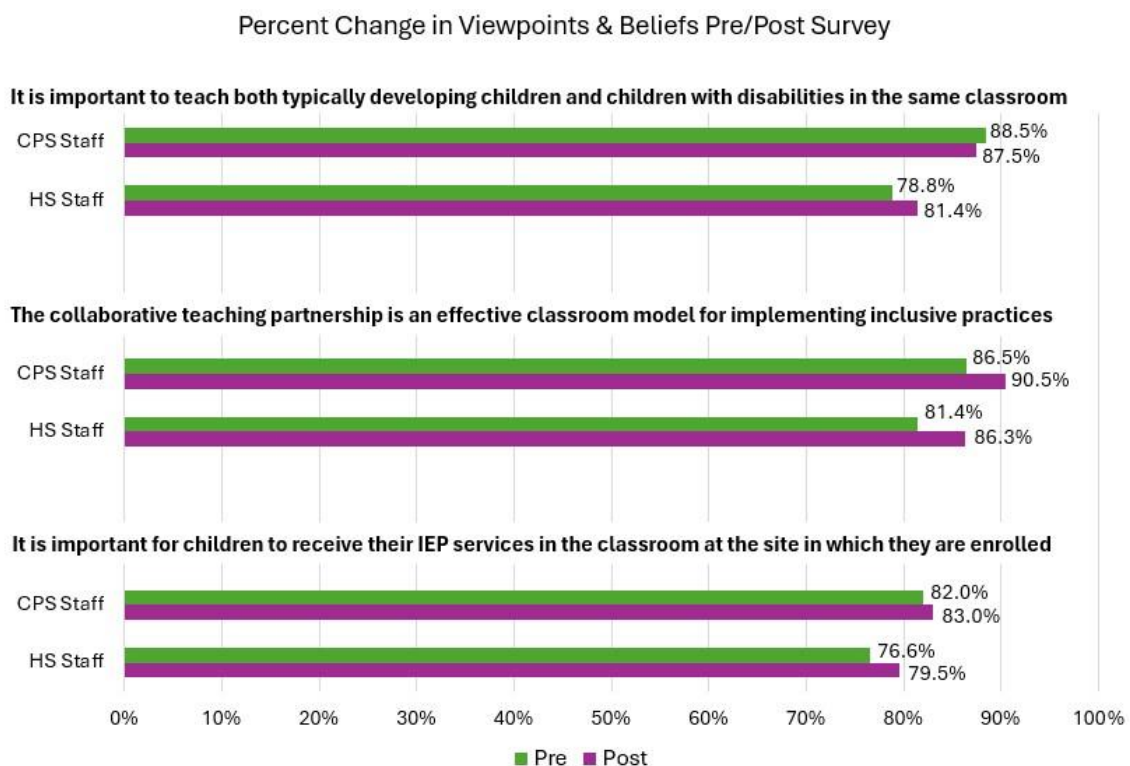


Overall, there was strong satisfaction with the training experience. All 30 attendees rating that they were either “strongly satisfied” ($n = 26$) or “satisfied” ($n = 4$).

Changes in Beliefs & Experiences:

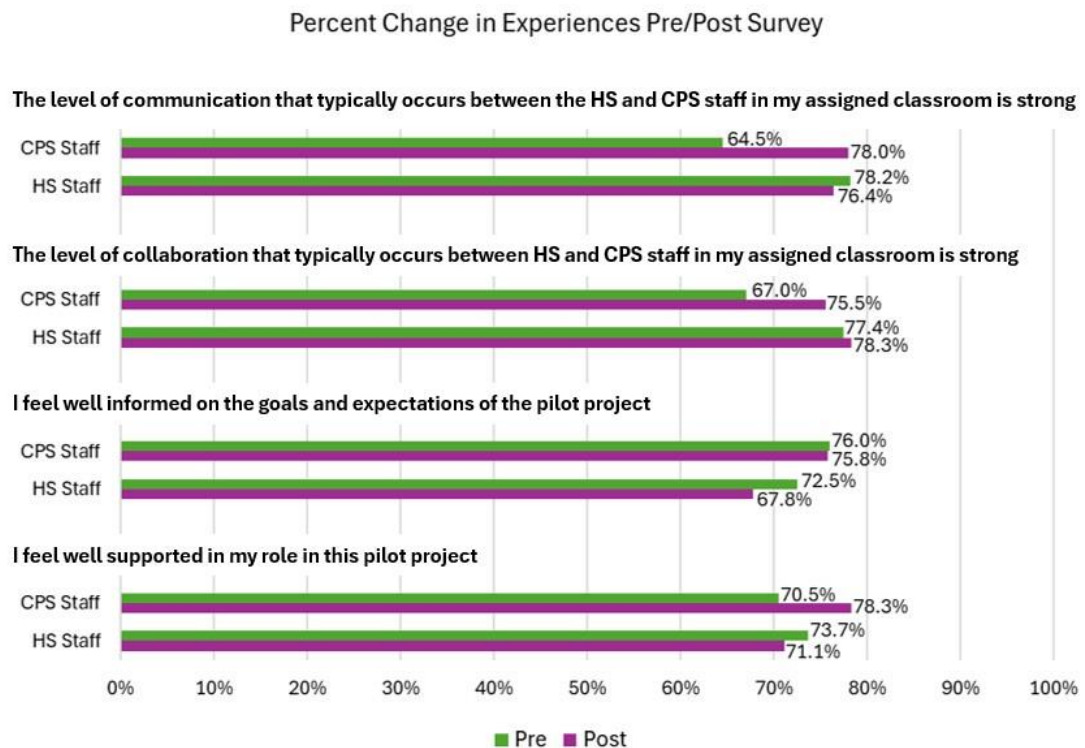
Comparing changes in the average percentage agreement for pre- and post-survey responses by role (Figure 4) saw mostly positive increases among HS and CPS staff regarding the importance of inclusion, the co-teaching model and for children with disabilities to receive their services in their HS classrooms. The overall average percentage change in agreement between pre- and post-survey results was +2.4% (pre = 82.3%, post = 84.7%)

Figure 4:



When looking into changes in the average percentage agreement for pre- and post-survey responses by role (Figure 5) about staff experiences in the pilot project, a mix of increases and decreases in percentage agreement among HS and CPS staff were captured; however, the overall average percentage change in agreement between pre- and post-survey results was +2.7% (pre = 72.5%, post = 75.2%)

Figure 5:



Though the overall change in percentage agreement was positive, there are a mix of positive and negative differences seen within the pre- and post-survey results. In order to better understand this, the researchers relied more on the evidence from the qualitative data to discern positive and challenging experiences, as well as suggestions for improvement.

In addition to this, the evaluators also considered that some decreases in scores could be due to response-shift bias², a phenomenon where post-test results are lower than pre-test scores because participants gained knowledge during the intervention, or because the post-survey was conducted after the news was shared with programs that the pilot project would not be continuing next school year. Thus, diving deeper into the qualitative data allowed for more nuanced information and details about CPS and HS staff experiences to be gathered with additional context.

Positive Experiences During Year Two:

CPS and HS staff reported the following aspects as positive experiences they observed over the year(s) participating in this pilot project:

Improved HS Staff Support and Skill Building:

- CPS staff provided guidance, resources, modeling and general support for HS class within their classroom, increasing knowledge and skill development among HS staff
 - Specifically, on managing challenging behaviors and best serving children with disabilities
 - CPS staff are also able to increase HS teachers' knowledge of what and how to prepare their students for kindergarten, many of which will be attending a CPS school
- The consistent and extended amount of time that CPS staff spent in HS classrooms to understand dynamics, children and staff, allowed for more development and improvement due to their deeper understanding, not just a "pop in" observer
- CPS and HS staff reported a quicker and stronger building of trust and understanding with one another in the classroom
- CPS staff provided extra support and insight for HS staff for other children with disabilities in their programs (note: this was often done outside the scope of pilot project roles or responsibilities)

"Our relationship has been wonderful. She's given us great information and resources, not only as a support and as a guide, but also being from the special education field she is able to give us a little bit more training, more to help us out."
– HS Teacher

"I was a teacher in the classroom for like 16 years, and I never had someone with me that... saw what I was struggling with, knew the students very intimately, knew their strengths, knew what their challenges were... I just think that it has been so helpful just having them on site... They really get to know the families and the kids, and can see like, 'Oh, something's going on with that kid, because last week they were great all week'... and they can immediately respond to that."
– HS Staff

Improved Classroom Behaviors and Logistics:

- Children in the pilot did not have to leave and come back to their HS site throughout the day, this lessened the logistical and behavioral challenges that often accompany transitions
- CPS and HS staff and parents noticed that the children who were receiving services in the pilot project saw improvements in their developmental trajectories
- In addition to the children who received services in the pilot project, having additional support and services delivered in the classroom positively impacted all children, not just those receiving services

"I'm very pleased that my classroom got to be a part of this pilot to experience what it would be like to have someone with expertise and be able to give that concentrated service to that child, it makes me feel calm inside. Okay, they're going to get some direct services along with their classmates... So that was really nice."

- HS Assistant Teacher

Stronger Communication and Relationships Between CPS and HS Staff Outside of the Classroom:

- The strengthening of relationships and trust was also seen in the cross-organizational planning team
 - HS teams learned how to navigate CPS structure, cutting down wait time on responses, time needed to solve problems and general frustration between the two organizations
 - Additionally, CPS admin teams communicated more directly with admin staff at their CPS sites to streamline information about the pilot project

"I feel that communication is so important, and that collaboration. Because it's really helped move things along a lot quicker, or even giving us the knowledge of... how to maneuver through certain things."

- Subcommittee Member

This strengthened communication and collaboration between the cross-organizational planning team was done through the continued regular meetings and direct and timely email correspondence. Their relationships and the trust built amongst each other allowed them to have candid, productive conversations regarding any roadblocks faced.

Challenging Experiences During Year Two:

Though there were improvements seen in the pilot project in year two, CPS and HS staff also explained their experiences with new or continued challenges:

Speech Language Pathologists (SLP)/RSP Shortages District and Nation-Wide

- CPS and other school districts nation-wide were facing a significant shortage of SLPs to serve their students, creating a sense of burnout among staff
- Justification for using SLPs for the pilot project were hard to communicate with RSPs, and RSP Leadership was not bought-in to the importance of using RSP resources for this pilot project

"SLPs had the viewpoint of 'if we can't even service the kids that we have in CPS, how are we servicing the kids at HS or anywhere else?'"

- CPS Staff

Scheduling and Collaboration Misalignment Between HS and CPS Staff:

- CPS and HS staff did not have enough time to communicate and collaborate about their students outside of their time spent in the classroom delivering services
- There were no uniform communication and scheduling practices among CPS and HS staff across sites, making changes in schedules among CPS staff challenging for HS sites that often have a lot of visitors, observers or need for coverage in classrooms

"We are in a Head Start program. We have a lot of visitors... communication is very important, we need to know each other's schedule, and please respect each other's time."

- HS Staff

Out of Scope Support Asks from CPS Roles:

- CPS staff were asked by HS staff for extra support to screen additional children, advice about children not in the pilot or additional disabilities-related resources

"[HS staff ask] can you observe 4 kids in another room? And I'm like... I try to support, but you should probably reach out to the team about some of those behaviors, because it's starting to become a lot of kids who they believe should have some extra supports."

- RSP

Some CPS staff were happy to provide this extra support; some were either not sure if they could provide this support or were

concerned about these asks becoming more frequent and unmanageable if they started accepting.

Continued Challenging Behavior in Classrooms:

- Though the pilot helped mitigate some children's issues with classroom transitions, there were still many challenging behaviors among the vast majority of children, negatively impacting children with and without disabilities, as well as leading to staff burnout
- CPS and HS staff expressed their interest in engaging more with parents, as challenging behaviors cannot be managed just in HS programs. Additional educational opportunities with parents may help address more of the "root cause" of behavioral problems

"When you're dealing with behavior day in and day out, it becomes stressful... It's draining to have to deal with it... When it's happening every day all day, and it's social emotional, and you can't get them to self-regulate... and it's turning physical, and they're having a meltdown. It's not just one, not two. We only have 8 children, 6 of them can't even self-regulate. All, every transition is a meltdown."
- HS Staff

Variety in Service Delivery Model Implementation of the Pilot Project:

- Some HS teachers and CPS service providers saw the need for and provided one-on-one services out of the classroom, some did not, highlighting concern about staff understanding the model
- Concern about pilot project fidelity (i.e., service implementation looking different depending on the classroom)

"They stay in the classroom, help them during our classroom routine, but I also expect they can pull out the kid because the kids, sometimes they just want to play with them, the CPS teacher, you know they want to have one on one time to make them specialized."
- HS Staff

Staff Stressed About Whether Project Will or Will Not Continue:

- Since the pilot provided additional support and temporary relief to some HS teachers, the uncertainty of the future of this work created general unease amongst staff

Pilot Project CPS Itinerant Services Discontinued for the Next School Year

Although students and staff were seeing positive improvements experienced in the pilot project, the ultimate decision was made to end the continuation of CPS itinerant services (CPS Itinerant Teachers and RSPs coming to HS classrooms) after the 2024-2025 school year. The decision to end these services was communicated by CPS Leadership during an Advisory meeting in Late February 2025. CPS cited the following reasons for discontinuing the pilot project:

- Caseload limits among their itinerant staff, including the shortage of SLPs
- CPS personnel limitations on serving children over a certain threshold of IEP minutes per week
- Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) ratio guidance stating the potential of this project to serve 108 total students and only serving about 32-37% of that total capacity

In response to these reasons for discontinuing the pilot project after the 2024-2025 school year, HS team members acknowledged the impact of the shortage of SLPs on the ability to continue and/or expand the pilot; however, they argued that the additional challenges cited were imposed by CPS, limiting their ability to reach more students from the beginning of this work.

Although the itinerant services will not continue after the 2024-2025 school year, CPS and HS agreed that they are both committed to continuing their frequent communication and collaboration and working together on shared professional development opportunities. Discussions among the CPS and HS teams continue in the hopes of developing additional creative solutions to support dually enrolled students, as well as HS staff.

Lessons Learned & Recommendations

Year two of the pilot project presented an opportunity for the planning team to build on experiences, relationships, and lessons learned from year one of implementation. While this specific pilot is now discontinued, the lessons learned across these two years of implementation contributed to the following recommendations that may be helpful for planning purposes if Chicago or other communities embark on similar work in the future. These recommendations are based on both aspects of the pilot that were identified as positive, as well as those that were identified by key project participants as gaps in the model implemented in Chicago.

Establish a Strong Partnership

Implementing a new model for early childhood special education service delivery required a change in the existing partnership structure between HS and CPS. The two entities worked to establish a more strategic relationship by facilitating open dialogue and creative solutions to existing barriers and issues present with service delivery. These efforts showed mixed success, with key players across both entities agreeing that aspects of the overall partnership at the administrative and systems level were strengthened, while the absence of more comprehensive and clear goals and expectations of collaboration and program implementation between HS and CPS led to confusion among educators and staff involved in implementation of the pilot.

Future implementation of this pilot model should begin with strong partnership-building activities that aim to bring all involved interested parties together around shared priorities and objectives. **Key players across settings need to agree on both the “how” and “why” of community-based service implementation for there to be enough buy-in so that all aspects of the model are implemented with fidelity.** One model to consider following to achieve this level of relationship-building and agreement prior to implementation is the Community Inclusion Team model³, pioneered by Early CHOICES and supported by ISBE.

Establishing a structured partnership lays the foundation for the planning team to thoughtfully plan out the launch of the model, including ensuring that all interested parties are informed and giving input on model design and launch, and there is agreement on meeting cadence and communication methods.

Engage in Detailed Planning & Preparation

Prior to implementation of a community-based service model that involves partners working across different systems of education where there is some level of variation in philosophy, standards and structure, the planning team should follow some important initial steps to bring entities closer to alignment. The planning team should collaboratively lay out the expectations, goals and intent with all parties involved explicitly from the beginning and ensure that buy-in has been secured from all participants prior to implementation.

Based on the experience in the CPS/HS pilot, the following may be helpful for the planning team to discuss and come to agreement on:

- What is the ultimate goal or long-term plan that implementation of this model is working toward (i.e., is this a first step in systemic change, or stop gap experiment not meant for expansion)?
- How does the team define success? For example, do a certain number of children need to be served to consider the model successful? Or are there certain measures the team will follow to determine if the model is working for the children who are served? What about measures that determine if the model works for staff?
- Are there challenges in the system that will present barriers to implementation? Are there solutions that can be achieved prior to implementation? If not, how will implementation account for these challenges?
- Which leaders should be engaged in this work? What does support and buy-in look like from each party involved in this work?

In addition to defining project goals, identifying barriers, and agreeing on ways of working, **the planning team will need to intentionally address differences in philosophy and practice that exist across the school-based and community-based educational settings that may make it difficult for staff to work together or cause confusion if the expectations are ill-defined.**

Examples from this pilot that may be helpful to think about in the future include the following:

- Expectations for the teaching partnership: what is the role of the itinerant teacher vs. the HS teacher? How do they partner together?
- Who can the itinerant teachers serve under the school district's model? Will the district-defined role work in the HS context?
- Which children are eligible to participate in the model? Do all parties agree on the eligibility criteria?
- Which staff are eligible to participate in the pilot? Do all parties agree on the eligibility criteria?
- How will the project team respond to various risks, including things like staff turnover and staffing shortages?
- Is involvement of each entity's legal team necessary to confirm that the model is in compliance with relevant laws and regulations?

Feedback on the experiences of participants involved in the implementation of the pilot project in Chicago suggests some direction for answering the questions outlined above.

Identify and Address Systemic Barriers to Implementation

Anticipating risks to project implementation will require **exploring and identifying solutions to systemic barriers that have prevented the model from being the prevailing choice for service delivery**. This pilot identified that the shortage of RSPs – particularly SLPs – is a systemic issue that posed a barrier to both implementation and scaling of the model. This was especially true in a system where children with only SLP minutes on their IEP were not eligible for transportation, thus often not served under the traditional dual enrollment model of children traveling to receive their services. Instead, the pilot model changed that by bringing the services to the children, which in turn increased the demand for SLP services.

Systemic solutions to this challenge should explore:

- 1) Increasing compensation and improving benefits for RSPs
- 2) Investing in degree pathways and scholarship programs to promote entry into this workforce

While the workforce shortage is likely to be a systemic barrier that exists across different locales, there may be other barriers that are unique to specific communities or school districts. For example, in Chicago, the district-defined role of the itinerant early childhood special education teacher led to restrictions on which children were eligible to participate in the pilot. Namely, children with over 120 instructional minutes per week on their IEP were not eligible to be served by the itinerant teachers and therefore could not participate in the pilot. This restriction led to lower enrollment numbers than the project planning team hoped to achieve. Barriers such as this should be identified and problem-solved by the planning team prior to implementation to ensure the model is successful and can be implemented at scale.

Once implementation has started, the planning team should consistently check-in on whether barriers are continuing to prevent the model from meeting its goals and how they can work together to develop potential solutions.

Define Roles of Staff and Provide Training and Ongoing Professional Development

Beginning implementation with an in-person training for all staff involved in the project provides a strong start for communicating roles and responsibilities and developing partnerships. The training should clearly outline the expectations for teachers by covering the following:

- Model expectations and overall project goals and vision
- Promotion of understanding and mutual respect across systems through a presentation of district and HS program similarities and differences
- Model referral process & eligibility qualifications

- Staff role expectations, including direct service for children vs. consultation and collaboration between the district and HS teacher and between the teachers and RSPs and the overall scope of each role
- Communication protocols, including expectations for meeting cadence and communication with the planning team, other staff and parents
- Classroom structure & curriculum, assessment tools and parent communication protocols

This training should be repeated for new staff hired during the school year. In addition to this training, district staff should receive onboarding information and an introduction to their assigned HS site to learn more about staff roles, day-to-day operations and organizational culture.

Throughout the school year, the planning team should also develop and host ongoing professional development (PD) for staff involved in implementation. This could include the following:

- Guidance and check-ins throughout the year to reassure staff that they are implementing the pilot well, and to address issues they face
- Additional PD opportunities throughout the year on topics such as:
 - Concrete examples/demonstrations on managing difficult behaviors and classroom distractions
 - Best practices/tools for collaboration and communication to implement for busy teachers in classrooms
 - Mental health support for all teachers and staff provided to help address behavior challenges in children served

One method for addressing some of these needs is to **establish regular communities of practice, where teachers and RSPs engage in peer learning to share challenges and promising practices.** To be successful, these communities of practice need to be held on a regular schedule that works for all involved staff, and be considerate of accessibility such as specific language, location or technological needs.

Establish Communication Pathways and Collaboration Expectations

In addition to establishing partnership structures for the planning team and ensuring that staff involved in implementation are trained on expectations for practice, **the model should also prioritize collaboration and communication between district and HS staff, as well as between staff and parents.** Specifically, the model should:

- Require teaching teams to commit to meeting and communicating as a means of relationship and trust building
- Require protected time for all pilot classroom staff to meet to collaborate, consult on individual children, including about learning goals and strategies for providing services and accommodations. This is especially important in year one at the beginning of the school year and may require an outside party to set up times and help facilitate relationship building, such as through the communities of practice mentioned above
- Ensure that all staff, including HS, district teachers and RSPs regularly communicate to parents about challenging behaviors and child progress and answer any questions parents have
- Provide resources for parents to support their children at home
- Connect families with mental health services and other resources for coping with challenging behaviors
- Provide parents with avenues for giving input and feedback on whether their child's needs are being met through the model

Conclusion

Overall, this pilot project focused on providing access to community-based early childhood special education in Chicago **provided services for 74 students over the two years of implementation** (40 students in School Year 2023-2024, and 34 students in School Year 2024-2025). This included students who received speech-only services in their least restrictive environment, some of whom would have most likely otherwise not have received their IEP services without the existence of this pilot.

HS and CPS staff and families saw the benefits of the pilot model for themselves and for the children. Piloting this model highlighted that there were many aspects that provided benefits over the dual enrollment model (HS students traveling to and from CPS programs throughout their school day) and also allowed the project planning team to identify the major systemic barriers preventing the model from being scaled across the whole city of Chicago. These identified barriers now provide a roadmap for CPS and HS to work together toward achieving better inclusive practices through community-based early childhood special education services. As they work toward eliminating or mitigating these systemic barriers, CPS and HS will also work together to continue engaging in shared PD on improving inclusive practices in the dual enrollment model.

While Chicago works toward systems improvements that make a model for community-based services more feasible, other communities and districts can use the documentation of this foundational work to inform their own efforts to establish more inclusive models for early childhood special education service delivery.

References

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