

The Project:

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.

“The benefit [of this pilot] is not having such young kids with high needs split their day and be bussed. I think that’s amazing.”

– RSP

This change in special education service delivery:

- Reduced educational disruptions by eliminating the need for HS students to travel by bus midday to CPS locations
- Made critical services more accessible for students and families

The Model:

Students at the HS sites that were chosen to be a part of this project were eligible for the pilot if they:

- Had an Individualized Education Program with up to 275 minutes per week for early childhood special education services, excluding other related service minutes (e.g., speech pathology or social work), or
- Only received speech-related services

Pilot Project Participants

Role	2023-2024 Count	2024-2025 Count
HS Sites/Classrooms	6	6
CPS Itinerant Teachers	12	11
Related Service Providers (RSP) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speech Language Pathologists (SLP) • Social Workers 	13	12
Students	40	34

The Evaluation:

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 project improvement efforts. These findings were collected through:

1. Surveys to HS and CPS staff, conducted at the beginning and end of the school year
2. Interviews and focus groups with HS and CPS staff, conducted in the middle of the school year
3. Meeting notes, agendas and presentations



Results:

Positive Experiences:

- Improvements in developmental trajectories and decreased logistical and behavioral challenges for students in the pilot project due to them receiving their additional support in their HS classroom
- An increase in CPS and HS staff agreement on:
 - The importance of children with disabilities to receive their special education services in their HS classroom
 - The importance of inclusion
 - The effectiveness of co-teaching for implementing inclusive practices
- CPS staff provided guidance, resources, modeling, and general support for HS staff within their classroom, increasing knowledge and skill development among HS staff
- HS and CPS teachers built strong relationships with one in year one and there was a smooth transition into year two of the project, with most staff continuing in the same classrooms, creating stability in trust building and classroom experience
- Increased training at the beginning of the second year of the pilot to (re)orient staff on the importance of inclusion, the pilot project model, and facilitate networking and connections amongst HS and CPS staff
- Stronger communication amongst CPS and HS program planning staff through regular meetings and collaboration, building trust and allowing for more candid, productive conversations focused on problem solving

“Not only students benefit because they’re receiving what they need, but I think that teachers are benefiting, and teachers appreciate the support and the feedback.”

– CPS 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 and their challenges... I just think that it has been so helpful having them on site... They really get to know the families and the kids.”

- HS Staff

Challenges Faced:

- Speech Language Pathologists (SLP)/RSP shortages district and nation-wide, creating a sense of burnout among staff
- Scheduling and collaboration misalignment between HS and CPS staff, including a lack of set time to communicate with one another on day-to-day activities and strategies
- Differing instructional approaches among CPS and HS staff, and/or differing pilot project model structure expectations and views of effectiveness
- Continued confusion around the pilot model processes, roles and expectations, including out of scope support asks from HS staff to CPS staff, such as conducting additional disabilities screenings, or asking for guidance about children not in the pilot project
- Continued challenging classroom behaviors, decreasing focus and group learning time
- Lack of set contact person or system for staff and parents, resulting in communication and administrative challenges
- Increased stress for staff on uncertainty of if pilot project would continue the following year

“It just really wasn’t a priority to have that communication and collaboration... and I truly think that if we could have really sat down and had some serious conversations, that maybe we could have made more progress sooner.”

– CPS Teacher

“I don’t want to make [the CPS teacher’s] role into, “well now when you come in, I don’t have to “deal” with this child anymore.” That’s one of the challenges, not to just use the teachers...but to be clear about what the lines are.”

– HS Teacher

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. Although these services will not continue, CPS and HS agreed that they are both committed to continuing their frequent communication and collaboration and working together on shared professional development opportunities.

Lessons Learned & Recommendations for Improvement:

The lessons learned across the two years of implementation contributed to the following recommendations that may be helpful for planning purposes for similar work that may be conducted in the future. These recommendations are based on 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.

Setting a Strong Partnership Foundation & Program Planning

Establish a strong partnership: Begin with robust partnership building activities that bring all parties together around the shared priorities and objectives. Key players across settings need to agree on the “how” and “why” of community-based service implementation. This should set a foundation for enough buy-in so that all aspects of the model are thoughtfully planned out and implemented with fidelity.

“When you’re talking about bringing CPS and Head Start together...it’s a common language we’re trying to develop, an inclusion language that’s mutual.”

– Advisory Subcommittee

Engage in detailed planning and preparation: The planning team should collaboratively lay out the expectations, goals, and intent with all parties involved explicitly from the beginning. This may include discussing:

1. What is the ultimate goal or long-term plan for this program?
2. How does the team define success?
3. Are there challenges in the system that will present barriers to implementation?
4. Which leaders should be engaged in this work, and what does their engagement look like?

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.

Identify and address systemic barriers to implementation: Identify solutions to systemic barriers that have prevented the model from being the prevailing choice for service delivery. Workforce shortages are likely to be a systemic barrier that exist across multiple locales, but there may be additional barriers that are unique to communities. 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.

Thoughtful Implementation

Define roles of staff and provide detailed training on model for staff: 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 following:

1. Model expectations and project goals
2. The promotion of understanding and mutual respect across the district and community-based systems and models
3. Model referral process and eligibility qualifications
4. Staff role expectations, including direct service for children vs. consultation and collaboration between the all teachers
5. Communication protocols, including meeting cadence and prioritization
6. Classroom structure and curriculum
7. Parent communication protocols and expectations

“Training is very important... it seems to be that sometimes boundaries are kind of overstepped. So, I just think some more like clear guidance, some more clear expectations on roles would be very important.”

– RSP

This training should be repeated for new staff hired during the school year.

Establish communication pathways and collaboration expectations with model staff: The model should prioritize collaboration and communication between district and community-based staff in the classroom. This could include requiring teaching teams to commit to set, protected meeting times to build trust and ensure consistent communication to consult on children and align on learning goals and strategies.

Conduct ongoing professional development for model staff: The planning team should develop and host ongoing professional development for all staff involved in the implementation. This could include:

- Guidance and check-ins on the model
- Managing difficult behaviors and classroom distractions
- Best practices and tools for collaboration between staff
- Mental health support for all teachers and staff.

One method of addressing some of these needs is to establish regular communities of practice for teachers and staff involved in the program to engage in peer learning to share challenges and promising practices.

Establish communication pathways and collaboration expectations with parents and families: All program staff should be regularly communicating to parents about:

- Their child's progress
- Resources for supporting their children's needs at home
- Resources for family mental health services and supports
- An opportunity for input and feedback regarding their child's needs
- Answering any additional questions

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.** HS and CPS staff and families saw the benefits of the pilot model for themselves and for the children. Piloting this model 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.

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.