

PARENTCORPS

A COLLABORATIVE EVIDENCE-BUILDING STRATEGY GUIDED BY FAMILY VOICE

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Housed at NYU Grossman School of Medicine’s Center for Early Childhood Health & Development, ParentCorps is a family-centered early childhood intervention designed to enhance the pre-K experience in historically disinvested neighborhoods. Its mission: to help schools partner with families to build a future where all children thrive. ParentCorps combines professional development for educators (to support school staff to form strong, culturally responsive relationships with families and promote children’s social-emotional development), a group-based family program (to support families to promote children’s healthy development), and a classroom-based social-emotional learning program (to help children learn to identify and communicate their feelings, develop a positive sense of self, build healthy relationships, and more).

From starting with one pilot in 2000 to significant expansion as part of New York City’s Pre-K for All, ParentCorps has invested in a range of evidence-building strategies, including randomized controlled trials, mixed methods studies, and data feedback loops to evaluate impact, inform

continuous improvement, and ensure alignment with practitioners' and families' lived experience.

Today, ParentCorps—fueled by a multidisciplinary team including researchers, social workers, and educators—serves more than 3,000 families annually, primarily families of color, in New York City, Detroit, Michigan, and Corpus Christi, Texas. In this case study, we focus on our evidence-building experiences in partnership with the NYC Department of Education's Division of Early Childhood Education, considering the needs and perspectives of policymakers who invest in and support programs at scale, and practitioners, including school leaders, social workers, pre-K teachers, and family support staff.

PARENTCORPS' APPROACH TO EVIDENCE BUILDING

The value ParentCorps places on data-informed decision making is evidenced by both our history of evidence building through RCTs and our responsive programmatic data collection. Led by a dedicated team, we have continuously strengthened our capacity to employ a broad range of methodologies to address critical questions and to fit the phase of inquiry.

2000–2002

An initial pilot in partnership with the Harlem Children's Zone illuminated the promise of a unique approach to bringing together families of pre-K children, honoring culture and affirming parents' autonomy to choose for themselves which evidence-based parenting strategies fit with their values, beliefs, and goals for their children.

2003–2010

We carried out two RCTs to evaluate impact in eighteen schools in high-poverty Brooklyn neighborhoods with more than 1,200 families. The first demonstrated short-term impact on children's social-emotional learning, evidence-based parenting practices, and greater parental involvement in children's learning. The second replicated these findings and demonstrated long-term impact on children's mental health (e.g., emotional and behavioral problems), academic achievement (e.g., reading at grade level), and physical health (e.g., obesity).

2010–2015

Using a range of evidence-building strategies, we expanded our understanding of ParentCorps' potential, including:

- Feasibility across settings (i.e., pre-K programs housed in elementary schools, in community-based organizations, and in Head Starts)
- Resonance and impact across diverse populations (i.e., immigrant families, Black, Latinx, and Asian American families)
- Theory of action
- Return on investment across the lifespan

It is important to note that, until this point, our team of researchers and practitioners largely drove our learning agenda, securing funds to answer questions *we* deemed critical.

2015–Present

The launch of our partnership with the NYC Department of Education in the context of the city's ambitious new universal pre-K initiative represented an inflection point. Though ParentCorps' initial RCTs yielded rich learnings, they taught us little about how to achieve scaled impact; how to work in partnership with a school district and pre-K programs to develop and operationalize evidence building; and how to prioritize the district's learning questions in addition to our own.

This phase of our work—to scale ParentCorps in more than fifty pre-K programs prioritized by concentrated poverty—generated key learnings:

- ***Shared understanding of evidence is critical.*** For instance, in early discussions with the NYC Department of Education, we invested deeply in policymakers' understanding of ParentCorps' theory of action, illustrating the relationship between our programs (the “what”), aspects of facilitation (the “how”), and proximal and long-term outcomes (the “why”). These discussions laid the foundation for ongoing dialogue about ParentCorps at scale, informing decisions on monitoring progress, evaluation, and evidence-based investments for children and families.
- ***Multiple strategies are needed to understand what lands for practitioners.*** In working with educators, ParentCorps aims to

build authentic relationships and create learning environments where shifts in beliefs are possible. For instance, in professional development, we invite educators to share candidly when they disagree with us or a colleague (“Tell us when you have a different perspective.”) or have negative or unspoken emotions (“permission to feel”) so that facilitators can tailor the space for these reflections. In data collection, we aim to create ample room for educators’ experiences and ideas for improvement. At multiple timepoints in programs, we seek ratings and open-ended feedback via surveys and coaching conversations. Each data collection strategy brings benefits (e.g., anonymity of online surveys) and limitations (e.g., discomfort with technology), and so we challenge ourselves to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach and consider whose perspectives may be excluded by any one method. Insights into practitioners’ experiences are critical to inform facilitation and content improvements.

- ***Scale and evidence building must evolve in tandem.*** Early on, policymakers expressed a priority to unlock ParentCorps’ model to serve as many children as possible across the city’s pre-K population. Thus, we co-created a strategy to “un-bundle” professional development to reach hundreds of pre-K programs (and thousands of pre-K teachers and leaders) prioritized by concentrated poverty and developed a new social-emotional learning tool to distribute universally (to 70,000 pre-K children and their families annually), helping create a shared language for children’s feelings at home and school. Importantly, we then developed new evidence-building plans in partnership with the NYC Department of Education to assess these innovations implemented at scale.

We worked to bridge the worlds of evidence and practice internally. With consultation from Project Evident (2018–2019), we bolstered our team’s capacity to articulate and apply iterative feedback loops and co-develop measures based on our coaches’ conceptualization of the essential elements through which ParentCorps promotes adult behavior change. By increasing our own internal curiosity, harnessing constructive frustration with status quo data processes, and strengthening our coaches’ comfort with and value for data, we made progress in building a learning culture that facilitates agile evidence building and program adaptation.

CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES

Over more than two decades, much has changed in both our program and our evidence-building approach. We have evolved from a strong focus on sharing the science of early childhood development with educators and families to adopting a broader approach (that also includes building authentic relationships, honoring culture, understanding race and racism, and practicing self-reflection) to transform the pre-K experience; from locating the problem in poverty alone to a much more expansive, evolving view of structural racism; and from leading a learning agenda ourselves to co-creating with the nation's largest school district.

Perhaps the biggest challenge for ParentCorps was in March 2020, when COVID-19 engulfed NYC as its early epicenter and forced abrupt school closures. Seemingly overnight, amid tremendous uncertainty and fear, we worked to take ParentCorps programs and evidence-building virtual.

In the earliest months of the pandemic, we considered every point of contact with families as an opportunity to assess need and inform rapid adaptation, both immediately and in what was sure to be an unpredictable school year to come. Touchpoints included trauma-informed phone surveys with parents participating in two ongoing RCTs and conversations with families attending group-based family programs (that had quickly adapted to virtual to preserve community). In parallel, we listened to teachers in the context of post-school closure coaching conversations and virtual facilitated professional development. These touchpoints helped us take the pulse of families and teachers at a hectic moment and, serendipitously, also convey that information to the school district, which urgently sought better understanding of family and teacher needs to inform resource allocation and other decisions.

The needs became clear, including support with grief and loss; finding predictability during uncertain circumstances; managing anxiety in self and others; connecting through empathy; and taking care of one's own mental health. These needs informed the adaptation of ParentCorps content and the development of new programs, including a four-session virtual program for parents (Parenting through the Pandemic), training of NYC's early childhood social worker workforce to facilitate this new program with families in historically disinvested neighborhoods most impacted by the pandemic, and both self-guided and virtual facilitated professional development for teachers and leaders. Alongside this rapid program adaptation and

development came nimble data collection to establish meaningful feedback loops around all program elements, prioritizing non-burdensome strategies (e.g., reducing survey length and frequency; increasing brief interim reporting to content creation teams).

In particular, supporting more than one hundred early childhood social workers to deliver Parenting through the Pandemic across NYC highlights the practitioner-led feedback loops we strive for. In a plan co-developed with the NYC Department of Education, we trained and coached the social workers to facilitate Parenting through the Pandemic and—after programs launched—utilized surveys to capture their facilitation experiences and their evolving understanding of families' needs. These data then informed each subsequent coaching session's design and content (e.g., including large and small group discussion; topic-driven coaching; opportunities for self-reflection; and modeling of facilitation). By leveraging the skills and infrastructure we had built for ongoing learning, we were able to support large-scale program delivery through crisis, rooted in responsive coaching that met a critical workforce's needs.

REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

ParentCorps' sustained commitment to evidence building of over twenty years is rooted in our core value for learning. By embedding a dedicated data team in our structure, leaning into our home institution's mission of discovery and available resources (e.g., expertise in population health and health equity; qualitative and quantitative methods; community based participatory research; data capture and visualization tools) and seeking funding for evidence building from philanthropic partners who share this value, we have become resilient to contextual challenges that might otherwise lead to the deprioritization of evidence building.

Especially through the ongoing crisis of COVID-19, a next-generation evidence approach has proven critical, enabling us to prioritize the needs of educators, children, and families over strict adherence to fidelity protocols, flexibly adapt programming, and avoid shutting down programs at a time when the home-school connection was vital. Years of building muscle around collaborative evidence building also meant that partners trusted us to make these adaptations, knowing we would accompany these changes with nimble data collection and collaborative, critical analysis of implementation and impact. Moving forward, this collaborative

evidence-building approach is central to our strategy to scale ParentCorps nationally.

NOTES

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