

Making the preschool magic last as children get older ^[1]

How one school's efforts to support parents and families has led to success

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Source: The Hechinger Report

Format: Article

Publication Date: 25 Aug 2018

AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

When Mariano Agosto's fiancée died a year after the birth of their daughter, Melanie, Agosto was scared and lost. A friend suggested a nearby early childhood education center in Chicago's historic Logan Square neighborhood might be able to help him and his little girl. Melanie was about 2 years old when Agosto visited Christopher House for a three-day "trial run" of the program. He quickly realized school officials were not only concerned about his daughter's well-being and education, but about his.

He was sold. "What do you need?" Agosto recalled his daughter's teachers asking him. "Do you need to speak to someone? Food? Clothing? Shelter?"

"It took a load off me," Agosto said.

Many of the nation's top preschools have found that the magic ingredient in supporting kids and boosting their academic success is involving parents and providing intensive support to families. Christopher House, a nonprofit that runs a high-performing elementary charter school and a small network of public preschools in some of Chicago's poorest neighborhoods, has infused parental support into its model. And it has taken its efforts beyond the preschool years in an attempt to tackle fade-out, a problem that notoriously afflicts even top preschools. Too often, after launching kids into school far ahead of their peers, even high-quality preschools with intensive family support see students' academic gains slowly diminish. After a few years, the effects are often hard to discern.

To make the preschool magic last, the Christopher House network accepts children from newborns to fifth-graders, embracing the whole family as a part of the child's success from one grade to the next.

After graduating from the preschool, most kids stay in the program, attending Christopher House's public elementary charter school, which follows the same wraparound-style and provides ongoing services to families. The organization will soon begin construction of a middle school, allowing students to remain in its program through eighth grade.

In just a few years of operation, the school ranks at the top of Chicago Public Schools in academic performance. Experts and teachers say this success demonstrates that meeting a family's needs outside of school helps kids focus better in school and, ultimately, achieve more, whether they're 4 or in fourth grade.

"You can't teach a child without family," said Karen Ross-Williams, director of early childhood and youth development for Christopher House. "This is what makes the difference, when you're able to partner with the family."

Lori Baas, CEO of Christopher House, said she commonly hears preschool advocates claim they prepared kids for kindergarten, and blame grade schools for any fade-out; elementary school staffers point the finger of blame back at the preschools, claiming they failed to prepare kids for kindergarten.

"We have one continuum of education that takes full accountability," Baas said. "There's no fade-out here ... there cannot be ... If there's fade-out amongst our kids through eighth grade, then we've done something wrong."

Staffers at Christopher House say the program is successful in preparing kids for school: Nearly 75 percent of 5-year-olds who have attended the early childhood program for at least two years are kindergarten-ready. Last year, Christopher House was ranked in the top 1 percent of the 473 Chicago public schools rated by the district. Nearly 79 percent of Christopher House's elementary third-grade students and 77 percent of fourth-graders are at or above grade level in reading. The school's third- and fourth-grade students have shown so much improvement from one year to the next, they are in the 99th percentile in reading growth. Many of these students got their start in Christopher House's early childhood program, including 80 percent of kindergarten students in the 2017-18 school year, and more than 40 percent of the elementary students overall.

Although intensive family supports can be costly, research shows the need is clear. Trauma and stress, brought on by factors like poverty, food and housing insecurity, and violence in the community can impede the brain's development and lead to long-term mental and physical health issues. Schools like Christopher House try to reduce the impact of these negative experiences by addressing them head-on,

providing early interventions in the form of high-quality education and family supports.

Christopher House teacher Jordan Reece said outside issues clearly interfere with her students in the classroom. “If your family is living paycheck-to-paycheck ... having that on your mind is a lot heavier than whatever’s going on in the classroom that day,” Reece said. “If you’re coming to school hungry, it can be very hard to focus. If you know you’re going home and lights might be out or [your parents] are unsure about rent for the month, it’s a bigger concern than doing a math worksheet. All of that takes up brain space and makes it harder to focus on what’s happening in the classroom.”

This approach of serving children and their families has been tried to some degree by hundreds of organizations and schools across the country. Among the programs that have adopted a wraparound or community-schools model are the Harlem Children’s Zone in New York City and various federally-funded Promise Neighborhoods nationwide. Many of these programs have found that they have more success in closing the achievement gap when they first find solutions for issues outside of classrooms and make sure families’ basic needs are met. Christopher House officials say the program is unique because it offers both schooling and help with basic needs under one roof. They are encouraged that the program has already managed to expand and sustain its model in different neighborhoods and meet varying family needs, while also ranking among the top schools in Chicago — a feat few programs have been able to achieve.

Christopher House began in 1906 as a settlement house in Chicago’s Logan Square neighborhood on the city’s northwest side. In 1965, it became a federally funded Head Start center. Over the years it expanded to seven locations before consolidating into its three current sites, which include a new campus, Belmont Cragin, built in 2013. That location houses an early childhood program, an afterschool program, a charter elementary school, office space for dozens of support staff members and a food pantry. Christopher House receives both public and private funding, including funds from the federal Head Start program and Chicago Public Schools. Children are given priority admission based on factors like family income and whether they have a disability. Over 90 percent of the students in the Christopher House program qualify for free or reduced-price lunch and more than 50 percent across the three schools are English language learners.

The preschool’s focus is twofold: to provide an excellent education to children and stability to both children and their families. Teachers of infants and toddlers stay with the same children from age 6 weeks to 3 years, ensuring they know each child’s family circumstances and dynamics well. This shows parents “we’re in this for the long haul,” Ross-Williams said. “You have us and we have you.”

When children start at the school, their parents are encouraged to take a questionnaire about their lives, which lets school officials know issues, from substance abuse and domestic violence to unemployment, they’re struggling with most. Parents then get help setting and prioritizing goals and receive one-on-one help from a school official to make progress toward those goals. Each fall, parents sit down with a parent educator to take a new questionnaire and discuss their needs. The school pays for nine full-time parent advocates at its early childhood programs and two at the elementary school.

Families can receive crisis and trauma counseling, home visits and even doula services. Parents and guardians can attend a parent school to learn how to budget, plan a healthy diet and interact with their children in a way that encourages learning. Families can get free food through the school’s food pantry; the school also offers families clothing, if needed, and emergency financial assistance to help pay rent or security deposits.

Parents and school officials at Christopher House say the programs have had an impact: Parents have become more self-sufficient, been able to remain in stable housing, put food on their tables, and support their kids’ academics at home. Through parenting classes, many have learned how to build a good relationship with their kids and, in some cases, have come to understand that behavior that may be accepted in some cultures, such as hitting kids for misbehaving, is harmful.

Although the services are free to those who qualify, Christopher House expects a lot in return, primarily in the form of parental involvement. Beyond attending parenting classes, parents are encouraged to participate in school events, serve on the parent council, and take on leadership roles. Parents of preschoolers are invited to classrooms to see teaching in action so they will know how to support learning at home. They also receive weekly homework bags for their children that include the week’s lessons and “questions of the day.” Parents and children write letters to each other which are later read during classroom circle time.

Research shows this kind of involvement can have a big influence on kids: During the earliest years of school, children’s relationships with their families have a more powerful impact on their academic achievement than in-school factors. When schools provide leadership opportunities for parents, offer academic and other classes for parents, and engage parents at school and in their child’s education, improved student attendance rates, improved achievement and grades and better homework completion rates have been reported. One study found that when families have positive interactions with staff and feel welcome at a school, students have fewer behavior problems and are less likely to repeat grades. Schools are more likely to show academic improvement.

Eric Bruns, Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at the University of Washington School of Medicine, said it is important that schools adopting a wraparound model provide parents formal, intensive support when their children are very young. “It’s almost just a universal truism that the earlier you start working with a family that shows any sign of need for extra support, the earlier you intervene, the better the outcomes you’re going to achieve,” said Bruns, whose research focuses on wraparound models.

But making this happen in a school is not without challenges. The organization must raise \$2 million in private money each year from corporations, foundations, and individuals. In addition to the cost of services, the bill for constructing Christopher House’s new Belmont Cragin campus was \$16 million.

Paying for all these extra services leaves the school struggling to offer teachers a salary competitive with that paid in Chicago’s traditional

public school districts. Christopher House teachers start at between \$46,000 and \$50,000 a year. Teachers with only a bachelor's degree in Chicago's traditional public district schools earn over \$51,000 to start and receive regular salary "bumps" which increase their salaries at a rate Christopher House officials say is difficult to afford. As Christopher House teachers gain experience and are eligible for much higher salaries elsewhere, turnover becomes a real possibility. The school is trying to use private money to raise the salaries of all teachers, and especially its early childhood teachers, whose pay currently lags behind that of their peers teaching at the elementary level. Nationwide, early childhood educators are paid less than teachers at the kindergarten level and above.

The varying needs of parents and families, which require more than generic courses and options, present staff at Christopher House with an additional challenge. To address these needs, the Christopher House schools assign each family a contact person. In addition, every teacher, parent educator, and social worker on the Christopher House staff participates in training to learn how to work with students coming from trauma.

Gloria Kuechenberg, director of family support services at Christopher House, tracks responses from family questionnaires on a detailed spreadsheet that shows priority needs and the differences in those needs across school locations. At the Belmont Cragin location, for example, 17 percent of parents have "vulnerable" employment. At the Uptown location, education is the biggest concern for families. Sixty percent of Belmont Cragin families live in single-parent homes, compared to 44 percent at the other two Christopher House locations. Kuechenberg takes this into account when planning programming for parents at each school.

While Christopher House educators say their support of families is the secret ingredient to students' success, academics are also key. Christopher House's baby, toddler and preschool programs are accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), which looks at dozens of indicators to measure quality.

The school's early childhood classrooms, like those at most good preschools, are organized into centers where kids can play with sand and water tables, sculpt clay, or work with teachers in small groups. The classrooms also boast resources one might expect to find only in an expensive suburban preschool: The rooms are large and bright, with doors that lead out to a toddler-sized playground on the side of the building; new books, toys and art supplies fill pristine bookshelves.

Child-to-teacher ratios are lower than those required in Chicago's childcare programs. Each infant classroom has one lead teacher and two assistant teachers for up to eight kids; the state requires only one staff member for every four kids age 6 weeks to 14 months, and allows up to 12 infants per classroom. Early childhood teachers at Christopher House complete at least 84 hours of development training at in-house sessions — more than five times the professional development hours required by the state. All staff members at Christopher House receive \$250 for any additional training sessions they choose to complete outside of the school.

One morning in a Christopher House preschool classroom in Belmont Cragin, 20 children were scattered around the room, participating in "center time." Student artwork, a sign of a high-quality program, decorated the walls of the room. One boy sat on the ground in the center of the classroom, carefully adding blocks to a perilously tall tower. Three children played dress-up in the back corner of the room, giggling as they adorned themselves with capes and fairy wings. At other centers around the room, the 3-to 5-year-old children played with sand, finger painted, and read books. Four teachers monitored the class.

As the end of center time neared, one teacher stood up. "Ok let's help your friends and clean up," she said in a friendly but firm voice.

The children quickly put blocks back on shelves and washed their hands clean of sand and paint. They hopped, rolled, and meandered over to the far side of the room, where they sat criss-cross-applesauce on a large blue rug under a wall of windows to read a book together.

Tuition for these students is free, save for a small income-based fee for afterschool care. And when these students graduate, they will have a spot in the organization's elementary school, a public charter school in the same building, and the services to their families will continue.

There's a long waiting list, but families who get a spot for their kids consider themselves lucky, and say the benefits can be profound. Mariano Agosto, the man whose fiancée died after their daughter was born, says Melanie is thriving. Now 8, she loves to tinker and is fascinated by science, technology, engineering, and math activities. She enjoys singing, dancing and wants to be a veterinarian.

As for Agosto, with help from Christopher House, he was able to see a therapist to cope with his fiancée's death. The school also gave him access to its computer lab so he could search for jobs. With the support of the school, Agosto completed mechanics school and is waiting to take his certification test. He's deeply involved with Christopher House, serving on the parent council and even dresses up as Santa Claus for the school's holiday event.

Agosto says he doesn't know where he'd be without the school and its services. "They basically guided me through it to where I am."

This story about early childhood education was produced by The Hechinger Report, a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education. Sign up for the Hechinger newsletter.

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