NYC DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION & SINGLE STOP

CONNECTING FAMILIES TO PUBLIC BENEFITS

LEVERAGING NYC’S COMMUNITY SCHOOLS AS PUBLIC BENEFITS HUBS

PHASE 1: DISCOVERY + PROOF OF CONCEPT
PROJECT CREDITS

Connecting Families to Public Benefits documents a project undertaken by the NYC Department of Education, Single Stop, and the Public Policy Lab – a nonprofit innovation lab for government.

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ABOUT THE PPL

The Public Policy Lab is a tax-exempt 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

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THE CHALLENGE

Many New York City students face attendance and learning barriers related to hunger, homelessness, and lack of access to healthcare and immigration support.
How Do Community Schools Support New York City Students and Their Families?

The New York City Department of Education knows that students who are missing school regularly or whose essential needs are not being met — from going hungry to not having glasses to read — face critical obstacles to learning in the classroom.

The New York City Community Schools Initiative is a central strategy of the New York City Department of Education (DOE) to achieve an equitable education system where all students have the resources they need to succeed. Each of the 227 Community Schools is paired with a lead Community Based Organization (CBO) who works alongside the School Leadership Team to provide extended learning time, family programming, attendance improvement strategies, and a wide array of health care supports. These Community School partnerships not only ensure that students receive high-quality instruction, but also connect their families and neighborhoods to social services and helpful resources.

Recognizing that hunger and housing instability are major causes of stress in students’ lives, the DOE is partnering with Single Stop, a national benefits-enrollment-navigator, and the Public Policy Lab to explore how Community Schools might offer benefits enrollment on-site so that families can get the help they need and students can learn without impediment.

A. PS 196
Total Enrollment: 357
In Poverty: 89.1%
Students of Color: 98%

B. MS 582
Total Enrollment: 261
In Poverty: 76.2%
Students of Color: 97%

C. Bushwick School of Social Justice
Total Enrollment: 261
In Poverty: 100%
Students of Color: 80%

D. Academy of Environmental Leadership
Total Enrollment: 309
In Poverty: 100%
Students of Color: 97%

E. Catherine and Count Basie Middle School
Total Enrollment: 442
In Poverty: 74.9%
Students of Color: 100%
What Are Public Benefits and What Keeps Families from Using Them?

Public benefit programs offer food, housing, healthcare, and legal supports to individuals and families in need – but there are many barriers to enrollment.

Public benefits programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), can provide valuable supports to families – and students – in times of need. However, we know that many people who are eligible for these services do not apply. An evaluation commissioned by the Robin Hood Foundation estimated that about 560,000 eligible New Yorkers were not receiving SNAP benefits – also known as food stamps – in 2014 (Civis Analytics, 2016).

A 2008 study cites several common barriers that low-income New Yorkers face when applying for public benefits (Pedulla, 2008):

1. confusion about the rules and regulations associated with public benefits
2. uncertainty about necessary documents and how to acquire them
3. difficulty with English

Can we leverage the position of Community Schools as a trusted neighborhood partner to address these common barriers?

Over the course of this project, the Public Policy Lab team spent time with staff at five New York City Community Schools to understand how they currently serve families. In our conversations, we heard of many barriers to connecting families to public benefits.

“I review the [SNAP decision] letter with them. They can’t read the English.”
Community School Staff Member

“Parents don’t want to come off as weak.”
Community School Director

“Benefits are available but people don’t know if they qualify or what they are. [We have to] educate families that don’t have a stable immigration status—they are afraid.”
Principal
Allowing families to enroll in public benefits in a trusted environment — their child’s Community School — will help many more New York City families get the support they need and will lead to improvements in family engagement, student attendance, and academic achievement.
How Can Existing School Systems Support the Benefits Enrollment Process?

Our preliminary research suggested that to test our hypothesis, we needed to activate key staff in Community Schools to form networks of benefits support for families.

School staff spend time with students and families every day – they have deep relationships that make it possible to spot signs of struggle. CBO staff, on the other hand, have deep expertise in benefits systems and are well-equipped to provide families with detailed benefits information.

In this initiative, we experimented with creating a pipeline in which school staff identify families in need and connect them to the in-school CBO office for benefits screening. The in-school CBO office then refers these families to an external CBO case worker who, instead of scheduling an appointment with the referred family at her office, will meet with them at school to help them apply for benefits.

Proof-of-Concept Program Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outreach</th>
<th>Refer</th>
<th>Enroll</th>
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DOE
Parent Coordinator
The parent coordinator is a DOE school staff member who serves as the main point-of-contact for students’ parents and guardians. Parent coordinators communicate school information to parents and guardians and coordinate family programming. In this effort, we asked parent coordinators to send several message blasts to families informing them of the benefits enrollment services being offered at school.

DOE/CBO
Community School Director
The community school director is typically employed by the school’s lead CBO partner and works with the school’s leadership team to assess community needs and coordinate relevant service delivery. We asked community school directors to be responsible for communicating the benefits enrollment initiative to teachers and other school staff. They also assigned team members to do parent outreach, intake, and referral.

CBO
Case Worker
Most lead CBOs have caseworkers on their staff who help people enroll in benefits, but most do not connect those case workers to Community Schools. In this effort, CBOs assigned a case worker to hold office hours at our pilot Community Schools. This case worker set up appointments with interested school parents and guardians to meet with them at school and help them apply for SNAP benefits.
How Did We Test This Idea?

In this proof-of-concept effort, the project team conducted research in five New York City public schools, spending time with school staff to understand how they currently offer services to parents. From this understanding of the enrollment landscape, we developed five design questions to explore various support mechanisms. We created protocols to test each question and asked staff at four schools to execute these protocols over a period of three weeks (one of our research sites was unable to participate as a test site). Each participating school was given a set of materials and a digital platform to test; three of the schools were able to successfully execute the proof-of-concept protocol. During this time, case workers from designated CBOs were assigned to each participating school to meet with interested parents and help them with their benefits applications. We tracked outcomes during this period using multiple qualitative and quantitative assessments.

What is a Proof of Concept?

When designing programs through human-centered methods, we begin by doing a quick sprint of research, design, and evaluation in order to test whether the concept we are exploring is viable and worth further investment. We refer to these sprints as ‘proofs of concept’ because they are meant to investigate behavior change rather than test exact program models or tools.

The goal is to rapidly—and at low cost—use proofs of concept to answer three questions:

1. Is the desired behavior change viable in a real-life context?
2. What are the necessary preconditions for success in a later pilot deployment?
3. What aspects need further research or testing before piloting?

“A lot of people need hand-holding. Some need a little shove.... They would rather starve then take a handout.”

- Parent Coordinator
What Were Our 5 Design Questions?

The project team provided staff with designed outreach materials and a school-specific digital environment for screening and referrals. Given that this was a proof of concept, however, the team’s learning goals were less about the specifics of the materials themselves and more about the behavior change that the tools could create. Through this process, the team focused on exploring five major design questions.

1. Will parents contact school staff if they’re informed about in-school benefit support?

How'd we test it? We created content for multiple communications channels, including flyers and sample messages for text and email. School and CBO staff used these materials to inform families of the benefits enrollment program.

How'd it go? Staff liked the pre-cooked content and sent out the messages, but tailored them to fit their own context. They received dozens of inquiries in response.

What's the next step? While lots of parents responded to the messages, many dropped out before getting effectively connected to a benefits enroller. In Phase 2, we will focus on why family members drop out of the process and how to strengthen the pipeline.

“I feel you need to do phone, text, email, and anything else possible…”
- Parent Coordinator
2 Will school staff refer parents to the CBO office if we can help them spot students in need?

How'd we test it? The design team created a set of posters encouraging school staff to watch for signs of need and refer families to the in-school CBO office.

How'd it go? CBO staff told us it was a good concept, but the wrong tool. While they’re enthusiastic about connecting with school staff about available services, they think that the posters got lost in already crowded school walls.

What's the next step? In Phase 2, we’ll test alternate ways of reaching school staff, both through digital and in-person means, such as beginning-of-the-year professional development days. We’ll also explore how school attendance teams can leverage existing attendance trackers to identify and connect the families of struggling students with public benefits.

3 Can school staff connect parents and guardians to a benefits enroller by using an online screening and referral tool?

How'd we test it? Program partner Single Stop provided a digital environment (specific to our lead CBOs) that allowed key staff, during a conversation with a parent or guardian, to input household information, estimate the benefits the family might be eligible for, and send a referral straight to an assigned case worker.

How'd it go? CBO staff used the technology and found that it was valuable as a way to quickly book appointments with a case worker, using a shared digital system instead of emails, phone calls, and paper forms. The benefits estimate is helpful and encouraging to families, but the time necessary to fill out the digital form seems too great for a busy school setting.

What's the next step? In Phase 2, we will test a more streamlined intake form that makes it even quicker and easier to get a benefits estimate and book an appointment with a case worker.
4. Is it effective for CBO staff to engage and screen family members at high-attendance school events?

How’d we test it? The team identified several events scheduled during the pilot period and asked CBO staff to attend and attempt to screen families for benefits eligibility.

How’d it go? This concept is a staff favorite. During the pilot period, they attended a parent-teacher conference, handed out flyers at a family ‘cookshop’ event, and handed out dozens of flyers at school dismissal. While they were not able to do any on-the-spot screenings, the ‘cookshop’ event yielded two referrals for benefits enrollment.

What’s the next step? In Phase 2, we will explore which school events are best for connecting with parents and guardians, how to increase on-the-spot screenings, and how to engage CBO case workers in this effort.

5. If a benefits enroller holds regular ‘office hours’ at school, will parents and guardians attend and apply?

How’d we test it? We asked each partnering CBO to send a case worker specializing in benefits enrollment to our pilot schools at set times during the pilot period. This case worker received referrals from school staff and made appointments to meet with school.

How’d it go? The experience was mostly positive, with case workers spending regular time in schools and scheduling multiple appointments during a three-week period. Everyone reported that the idea seems valuable, but that office hours without appointments felt useless.

What’s the next step? The trick here will be to get the frequency right. In Phase 2, we’ll test how often enrollers should be in schools – twice monthly? only as-needed? – as well as how to get the most value out of the hours they spend at school.
OUR FINDINGS

Staff at Community Schools are motivated and able to help families with benefits. To be most successful, however, they need on-the-ground champions and to be empowered to adapt a general program model to their specific school context.
Is the Desired Behavior Change Viable in a Real-Life Context?

Yes. In our proof-of-concept trial, we saw DOE and CBO staff in three schools successfully take on new or increased responsibilities.

With a minimum of new tools and training, staff were able to conduct family outreach and then screen, refer, and enroll eligible parents and guardians in public benefits. We see the behavior change in school staff as the primary indicator that the concept is viable. Regarding behavior change among families, the short duration of the test period limits our results but initial findings are positive: CBO caseworkers held a total of six office hours sessions in school, and during the one-month trial period, a total of 16 family members were referred to benefits enrollment specialists, seven completed their appointments, and two applications were initiated and successfully completed. Based on the number of households per school and the benefits participation rate for each of their community districts (Civis Analytics, 2016), we estimate that the target population of eligible unenrolled households, across three schools, numbered approximately 90 – meaning that even with a minimal intervention, we were able to generate a 17% referral rate.

For Future Efforts, What Are the Necessary Preconditions for Success?

Get the timing right. Work in public schools is driven by the 10-month school calendar. Any large-scale programmatic change should reflect this by allowing administration and school staff to plan and prepare for launch during lower-demand times of year. Based on our interviews with school staff, programs should be launched in either October or January to have maximum impact. Also, a pilot program designed to enroll parents in benefits should run for at least six months to allow parents time to navigate the process.

Empower champions at multiple levels. A successful pilot initiative should be embraced and explicitly endorsed by school administration – likely an assistant principal who can represent the vision of the initiative, observe pilot activities, and troubleshoot as challenges arise. Just as important, a pilot should be managed day-to-day by a champion who has knowledge of benefits programs and regular contact with the relevant school and CBO staff. In many cases, the community school director would be the best champion for an initiative of this type.

Allow for variation. Public schools vary greatly in terms of programmatic offerings, management dynamics, institutional partnerships, and staff capacity for extra-curricular responsibilities. A successful pilot initiative should recognize this variation, allowing the champions at the school level to customize the assignment of roles and responsibilities, the structure and content of communications campaigns, and the frequency of caseworker office hours.
What Are Our Plans for Phase 2?

DOE, Single Stop, and the Public Policy Lab hope to conduct a Phase 2 pilot in the 2017-18 school year. We imagine a Phase 2 pilot process launching in fall of 2017 and lasting through the end of the 2018 school year. We would dedicate September, October, and November to discovery and design activities and December to implementation planning and staff training, allowing us to launch pilots in schools in January, just after the winter break.

Beyond having a longer timeline to allow for sufficient planning and training with staff, our aspiration for Phase 2 is to pilot interventions in a much larger set of schools. More pilot sites would allow us to explore our hypothesis and design questions across a variety of school contexts; DOE supports rolling the pilots out across the entire Community Schools portfolio. In addition, to better understand barriers to application and to design refined communications and digital tools, we would engage many more parents, guardians, and students in our discovery and design activities.

The intended outcome of Phase 2 is a program model and an associated suite of tools or materials, field-tested in a variety of settings and ready for roll-out to all Community Schools across New York City – and perhaps farther afield.

“Overall, it was a great program. I think it went well for the little bit of time we had.”

- Community Engagement Coordinator
Acknowledgments

Many dedicated professionals took part in the creation of this work. The roles and titles below reflect participants' status at the completion of Phase 1 in 2017.

Project Participants

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Could New York City Community Schools Be Hubs for Public Benefits Enrollment?

Many New York City students face attendance and learning barriers related to financial and housing instability. New York City’s 227 Community Schools tackle this challenge by acting as neighborhood hubs where students – and their families – receive essential social services in addition to high-quality instruction. What if, alongside after-school programs, tutoring, and vision clinics, Community Schools could improve student outcomes by offering public benefits enrollment on site?

This booklet documents a collaboration between the New York City Department of Education’s Office of Community Schools, the Public Policy Lab, and Single Stop to explore that question (The Challenge, page 3). You’ll see how we tested ways of activating networks of benefits enrollment support within schools (Our Hypothesis, page 6). Finally, you’ll find an evaluation of this proof-of-concept effort and our plans for a Phase 2 pilot program (Our Findings, page 12).