



# Making Connections: **Lessons from Cohort 1 of the Connection Conversations Program**

Report on Strategic Data Analysis Project



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# Making Connections: Lessons from Cohort 1 of the Connection Conversations Program

## Report on Strategic Data Analysis Project

During the fall of 2020, Stand for Children Illinois (Stand) launched Connection Conversations, a family engagement program based on voluntary school-to-home virtual visits between educators and parents/primary caregivers.

Adapted from Stand's in-person program, Connection Conversations was a response to the social restrictions implemented under the COVID-19 pandemic and the critical need for strengthening educator-family engagement during remote learning.

Fifteen elementary schools and one high school within Chicago Public Schools (CPS) were represented.\* They participated in Connection Conversations during the second academic quarter of the school year, early November 2020 – early February 2021.

This report provides an initial look at the experiences and perspectives of the program's inaugural cohort and is intended to provide program leaders with evidence for sharpening their understanding of the program's potential, calibrating participant supports, and developing strategic priorities for the next implementation cycle of Connection Conversations.

The findings and discussions in the report are based on multiple sources of information including focus groups with educators and caregivers, a caregiver survey, and two educator surveys.

The term “caregivers” refers to parents, grandparents, and other primary caregivers. The term “educators” refers to CPS school-based staff. Most educators who participated in the program were classroom teachers.

### By the Numbers

#### Program Activities

- 34 Educators trained
- 30 Educators visited families
- 92 Families received a visit
- 16 Schools represented

#### Learning Activities

- 18 Post-training educator survey respondents
- 7 Caregiver survey respondents
- 9 Caregiver focus group participants
- 10 Educator focus group participants
- 20 Post-program educator survey respondents

\* See Appendix.

# Program Details

The central tenet of the Connection Conversations program is that when parents and teachers have relationships of trust and are equal partners in the success of students, education can more fully address the needs of children. Traditional indicators of family engagement such as attendance at school do not fully gauge families' desire in supporting their children. The program aims to empower teachers, staff, families, and communities to build deep, lasting connections that focus on educating, developing, and supporting children.

## What is a Connection Conversation?

- It is a proactive, intentional engagement of a family through a voluntary, scheduled 30-minute videocall between an educator and caregiver.
- Conversations are centered around the caregiver's hopes and dreams for their child, not on student academic performance.

## What are the key strategies?

- Participation by the educator and caregiver is voluntary.
- Educators decide which families to invite to have a Connection Conversation. Student selection is not targeted based on behavior or academic performance.
- Educators are compensated for their time spent in the training session and for each Connection Conversation.

## What are the participation guidelines?

- Pre-kindergarten through 8th grade educators with a classroom roster are prioritized for participation.
- Educators get the approval of their principal to participate.
- Educators complete a 75-minute synchronous training session.
- One visit per family is eligible for educators' stipend.
- Educators may conduct Connection Conversations with as few or as many interested families on their rosters as they choose.

## What are the intended benefits?

- Build connection, empathy, and trust between educators and families.
- Accelerate student achievement through meaningful family engagement.

# Key Lessons

## Strengths to continue:

- Educators and caregivers **were universally positive about their experiences** in the Connection Conversations program.
- Connection Conversations created a unique opportunity for families **to see that educators care** about students.
- Educators and caregivers **developed a greater appreciation of one another** as whole people during Connection Conversations.
- Educators and caregivers believe that having a conversation **helped them feel more socially comfortable**.
- Educators and caregivers reported observing **more help-seeking** behaviors after Connection Conversations.
- Educators described **having more capacity** to inquire about, and respond to, students' needs after Connection Conversations.

## Areas for growth:

- Educators shared that conversations are challenging to facilitate and would **benefit from targeted training**.
- Educators reported improvements in student behavior, but caregivers **were not certain** that single visits led to change.
- Educators suggested it would be useful to **share experiences, best practices, and tips**.

**Connection Conversations help educators and caregivers establish trusting relationships, even when they cannot meet face-to-face.**

*- Program objective*

This report describes findings supported across multiple sources of information and people. We also heard perspectives, both positive and negative, that reflected more isolated experiences or comments. Such atypical observations can be important and informative. Given the limited number of educator and caregiver program participants, however, we prioritized highlighting lessons that were the most widely shared. It is also important to note that few caregivers completed the caregiver survey, even though all families were given an opportunity to do so either by paper or online. It is possible that the caregivers who completed the survey have views that were not strongly shared by other participating families. The structure of this program likely factored into higher response rates of educators compared to caregivers in providing their perspectives on the program. Stand had direct contact with participating educators because they registered to participate. Hence, Stand could send them invitations for focus groups and reminders to submit surveys. Caregiver participation in focus groups and surveys were only possible when educators informed caregivers of these opportunities.

# Evidence

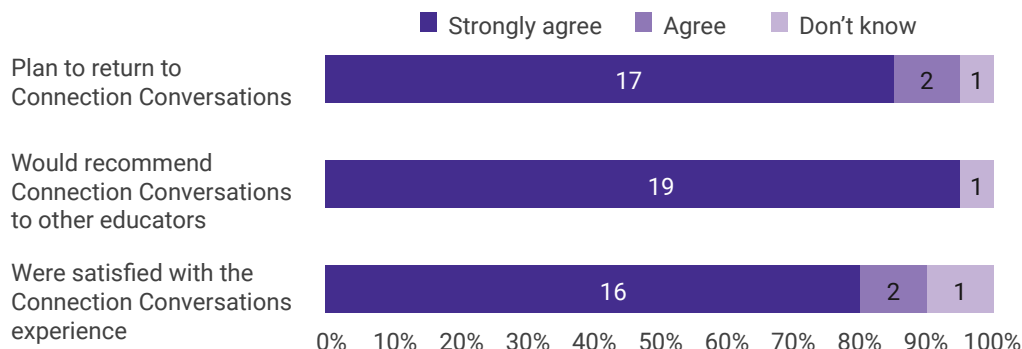


# Educators and caregivers were universally positive about their experiences in Connection Conversations.

Virtually every program participant reported that the Connection Conversations program was a positive, and for some, transformative experience. On the caregiver survey, all participants also indicated that the program was a positive experience for their child and that they would recommend the program to other caregivers. Similarly, over 90% of educators strongly agreed or agreed that they would recommend the program to colleagues. “I have nothing but good memories ... from my experience,” one educator shared.

Educators in focus groups expressed appreciation for the opportunity to talk with families and students outside of school. A caregiver noted the program was especially important during remote learning because communication from schools was often inconsistent.

## Educators were strongly satisfied with their Connection Conversations experience.



Source: Post-program educator survey (N=20). Response categories: Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly disagree, Don't know.

*“The program provides excellent opportunities for educators to build positive relationships with students and their families outside the limits of their classroom environments.”*

*- Educator*



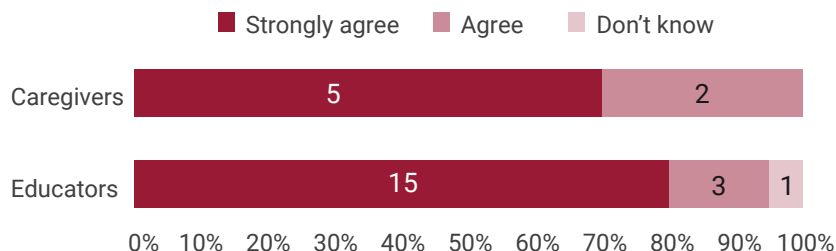
# Connection Conversations created a unique opportunity for families to see that educators care about students.

During focus groups, educators and caregivers described how having a Connection Conversation is an important mechanism for families to develop a new appreciation of educators. Specifically, they allow families to see the ways in which educators care about the well-being of students beyond how they are performing academically. During conversations, parents described witnessing the substantial time and consideration

educators invest in students. They also observed educators' efforts to support students across a range of issues. For their part, educators were aware of the opportunity that the conversations provided to show caregivers "that you are there for the right reasons." Both educators and caregivers indicated on surveys that conversations helped caregivers have more confidence that educators would be available for them if needed.

## Program participants believed Connection Conversations improved caregivers' confidence in educators.

*The extent to which participants agreed caregivers have more confidence that educators are available if needed.*



Source: Caregiver survey (N=7). Post-program educator survey (N=18).  
Responses: Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly disagree, Don't know.

*"I find it useful that they just knew that ... I wanted to just build more of a relationship, that **I actually care about the child outside of school.**"*

- Educator focus group

*"It was **amazing to know** there are teachers who genuinely care."*

- Caregiver survey

*"The parent said they liked having the conversation because **they saw that the educator worried/cared** about their internet connection and whether the student had everything they needed for remote learning."*

- Caregiver focus group

# Educators and caregivers developed a greater appreciation of one another as whole people during Connection Conversations.

During conversations, educators, caregivers, and students regularly learned new things about each other. All educator and caregiver participants described how these moments expanded their awareness that others have rich inner lives, nuanced home situations, and a variety of social relations. As a result, some

educators described having “better insight into parents and children.” Overall, educators reported learning more about their students’ lives. Some caregivers also reported gaining a new understanding of their own children’s interests and aspirations.

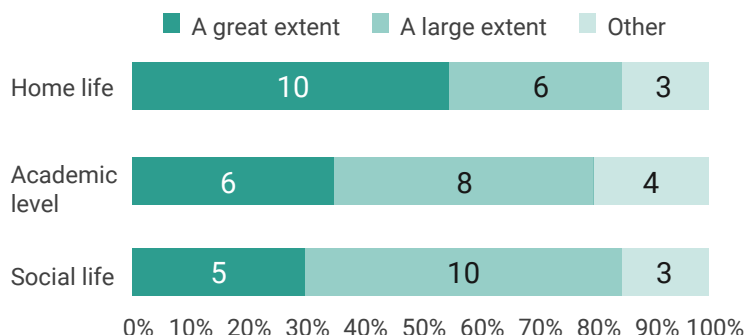


*“I get to see ‘behind the scenes’ at home which I usually don’t get to see otherwise. It’s just so cool to see the whole family and see how they interact and talk.”*

- Educator

## Educators learned more about their students during Connection Conversations.

*The extent to which educators reported learning more about students’...*



Source: Post-program educator survey (N=19). Responses: A great extent, A large extent, A moderate extent, A slight extent, Not at all.

*“One conversation was a ‘huge victory.’ The parent shared his education story with their child. It was **the child’s first time hearing that story about his father’s challenges with literacy.**”*

- Educator focus group

*“I was surprised to learn ... what [my daughter] wants to do later ... **it was a big surprise for me to know that she already has her mind on something.**”*

- Caregiver focus group

*“Educator shared she’s also **seen her families as more human** and parents just needing another adult to connect to, just like her.”*

- Educator focus group

*“Parent shared the **teacher learned what the family likes to do**, what the child likes to do in his free time, and what he wants to be when he grows up.”*

- Educator focus group

# Educators shared that conversations are challenging to facilitate and would benefit from targeted training.

Although conversations were often transformative experiences for participants, educators nonetheless reported some difficulty facilitating discussions. One challenge was that the program's standard prompt, asking caregivers to share their hopes and dreams for their child, did not always lead to robust discussion. In addition, caregivers regularly attempted to discuss specific concerns or problems their child was experiencing.

Finally, it was not always clear how to incorporate students into conversations when they decided to participate. Educators reported needing to improvise when conversations deviated from the official script, with some mixed results and inconsistency across educators. One educator shared that before the focus group, she was unaware of the different ways other educators conducted their conversations.



*"It would have been **nice to see a mock conversation** to understand how these visits/talks go, especially in the beginning."*

*- Post-training educator survey*

*"I would **like more suggestions for types of questions** that we can ask parents."*

*- Post-training educator survey*

*"I'd like a more **detailed peek at the structure** of one of the conversations."*

*- Post-training educator survey*

*"Maybe we could see **some possible scripted videos** of what this may look like."*

*- Post-training educator survey*

## Consideration Corner

The Connection Conversations virtual visits helped educator participants make two specific types of social connections (see pages 6 and 7). To build on these strengths, how might discussion protocols, sample discussions, and conversation guidelines be used to help educators:

- 1) indirectly and directly demonstrate their care for students and families; and
- 2) create opportunities for caregivers to share about their lives and experiences?

# Educators and caregivers believe that having a conversation helped them feel more socially comfortable.

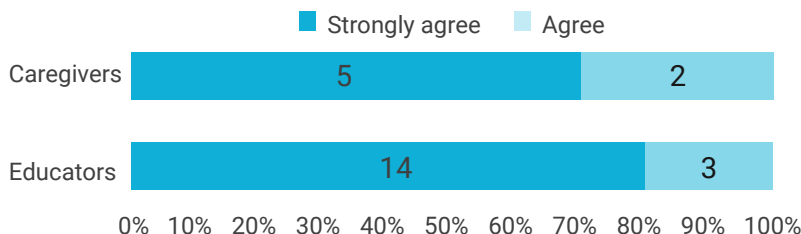
Both educators and caregivers described feeling more at ease communicating with each other after their conversations. "My guard has dropped down a little bit," one educator shared. "I think the formality has toned down a bit on both sides."

Another educator expressed that they used to receive very formal written messages from one parent, "but now they use emojis."

Some educators reported their improved comfort has also helped them be more relaxed when teaching virtually in front of families. All survey respondents agreed that caregivers are more willing and able to cooperate with educators after having a conversation. One educator thought that caregivers pick up the phone more because they better understand "why teachers do what they do."

## Educators and caregivers believed Connection Conversations improved caregivers' capacity to cooperate.

*The extent to which participants agreed caregivers are more willing and able to cooperate with educators*



Source: Caregiver survey (N=7). Post-program educator survey (N=18).  
Responses: Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly disagree, Don't know.

*"I just feel a lot more comfortable in front of the families, because I've had a chance to show them who I really am. And that just helps my comfort level with essentially teaching in front of these families daily."*  
- Educator

# Educators and caregivers reported observing more help-seeking behaviors after Connection Conversations.

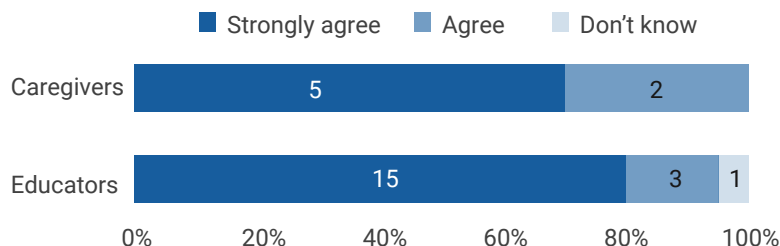
Focus group participants noted that caregivers and students seemed more likely to ask for help and support after families had a Connection Conversation. Educators observed more students asking for guidance from them and other school staff.

Educators also shared stories of caregivers asking for additional resources for their students. In one case, an

educator told how a caregiver asked them to help their child with math homework. Similarly, parents in focus groups said that they felt it was easier to talk with educators about their concerns because of the conversation. This view was widely shared, as all survey respondents agreed that caregivers felt more comfortable sharing their concerns and questions.

## Educators and caregivers believed Connection Conversations improved caregivers' comfort with help seeking.

*The extent to which participants agreed caregivers feel more comfortable sharing concerns and questions*



Source: Caregiver survey (N=7). Post-program educator survey (N=19).  
Responses: Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly disagree, Don't know.

*"Educator said he's seen his students be 'more proactive' with their guidance counselor because of advice he gave them and their parents during the conversation."*

- Educator focus group

*"Educator said that the young person has been more engaged in asking for more resources and coaching since the conversation."*

- Educator focus group

*"Caregiver said she feels more comfortable reaching out to the counselor with any questions about how her child is doing. She believes these conversations might do the same for other parents."*

- Caregiver focus group

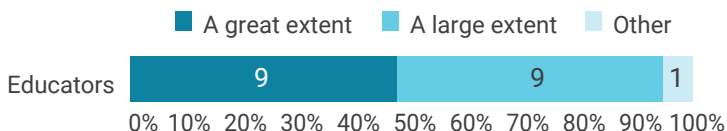
**CONNECTION  
CONVERSATIONS**

# Educators described having more capacity to inquire about, and respond to, students' needs after Connection Conversations.

In focus groups, educators reported feeling less reactionary to disruptive student behavior after having their conversations. They described being more curious and compassionate about the underlying needs shaping students' behavior given what they learned from families. "When you know those types of personal things about students," one educator remarked, "their behavior starts to make more sense." On the survey, virtually all educators indicated they were better able to use insights from conversations with families to consider students' needs when planning instruction.

## Educators believe the information shared by families helps their instruction.

*The extent to which educators believe they are better able to consider students' needs when planning instruction*



Source: Post-program educator survey (N=19). Responses: A great extent, A large extent, A moderate extent, A slight extent, Not at all.

*"I think I'm more patient. So instead of just being like 'stop, stop, stop' it's more like 'do you need something?' You have to need something to consistently interrupt."*

- Educator

## Consideration Corner

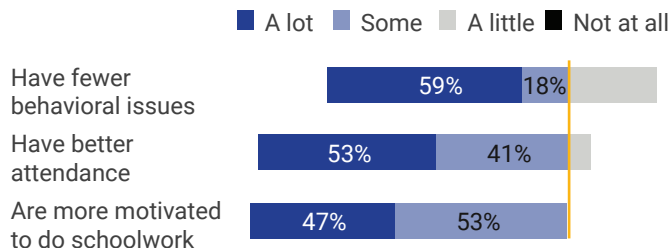
Educators believed the information they gained during Connection Conversations would be extremely useful for colleagues that teach the same students. How can program educators share new insights with other colleagues while respecting families' trust and confidentiality? Are there opportunities to recruit teams of educators who share the same students to participate in the program?

# Educators reported improvements in student behavior, but caregivers were not certain that single visits led to change.

Several educators believed that students' classroom behavior and engagement improved after their conversation with families. One educator noted that students are more likely to "meet expectations and behavior will not escalate" when a simple redirect is used. On the survey, educators noted improvements in behavior, attendance, and motivation.

## Educators believed that Connection Conversations had a positive influence on student behavior.

*The extent to which educators reported students...*



Source: Post-program educator survey. N=17

Caregivers, however, were less confident. While all caregiver survey respondents agreed that their child was more motivated to do schoolwork, several caregivers in focus groups said that they had not noticed any changes. "How do you notice a change in your child's behavior if this is something that only happens one time?" one caregiver asked. Another agreed, saying, "I don't know how much of a change that [one conversation] can create." Both caregivers suggested changes in their students' behavior would be more likely if multiple conversations happened over time.

### Consideration Corner

Both educators and caregivers discussed the limitations of one-time family visits and brainstormed possibilities for meeting more often. What opportunities exist for supporting a multiple-visit approach? What are the specific trade-offs program leaders must consider when choosing between the single-visit and multi-visit approaches?

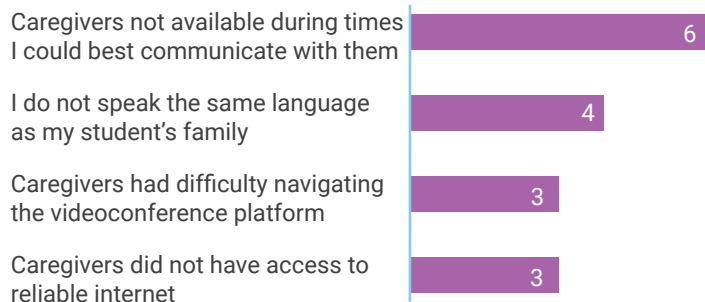
# Educators suggested it would be useful to meet with other educators during the program to share experiences and tips.

In addition to the challenges related to facilitating conversations, educators reported experiencing some logistical complications such as conflicting schedules with families, language barriers, and technology-related problems. Some also described feeling as if they were on their own when figuring out how to navigate emerging challenges, especially if they were the only member

of their school or department participating in the program. To reduce isolation, educators suggested meeting regularly with other program educator participants. They believed it would be useful to hear about others' experiences and exchange effective practices with colleagues.

## Educators experienced some logistical challenges in conducting virtual visits.

*Number of educators experiencing challenges*



Source: Post-program educator survey. N=19

*"I think it would be nice to possibly offer participants a way to chat with others in the program, especially if they are the only one at their school, to get ideas and feedback on visits and struggles."*

*- Post program educator survey*

*"I would have loved more opportunities to connect with other teachers in the program."*

*- Post program educator survey*

*"Maybe have a little group meeting? Everybody should have at least one [visit] under their belt. And people share out how they did, and what worked and what didn't work and tips."*

*- Educator focus group*



# Moving Forward

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The evidence collected during the inaugural implementation of Connection Conversations provides valuable insight into the program's potential to support educator-family partnerships and ultimately student success. Below are a few considerations for program leaders as they prepare for future rounds of implementation.

## **Intentionally facilitate connections.**

The personal interactions that occur during Connection Conversations help families experience educators as caring individuals and allow educators and caregivers to expand their understanding of each other as people. Program leaders can intentionally encourage and facilitate these specific benefits during educator trainings and in communications with families and educators.

**Create community.** Over the course of a program session, educators have varied experiences interacting with students' families and hear multiple stories about their lives. They continually need to develop their understanding of how to best connect with families over time. Program leaders can create space for educators to share useful lessons with each other to deepen their collective practice of family engagement. The community can also be used to explore how educators may share emerging lessons with colleagues not in the program to improve engagement work across their individual schools.

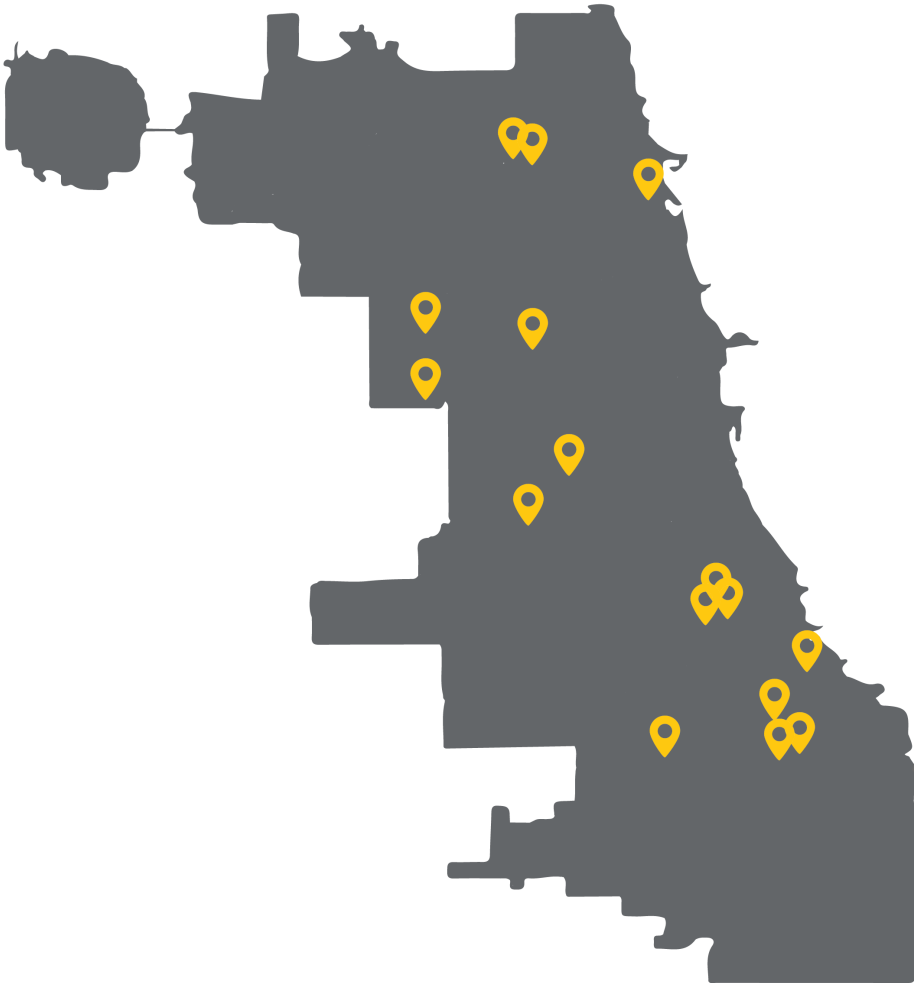
**Document student changes.** Educators and caregivers shared encouraging observations of positive student engagement following Connection Conversations. Yet, they also raised important questions about the extent to which visits may lead to positive changes.

Program leaders should explore if there are practical and meaningful opportunities to document changes in key student academic behaviors during the program.

**Prepare for a new context.** The inaugural implementation of the Connection Conversations program took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, with families experiencing unprecedented levels of stress while sheltering at home. Simultaneously, educators were tasked with managing enormous new demands brought about by remote learning. Program leaders should consider how needs may change and what new opportunities may emerge, as we hopefully transition back to in-person schooling in a post-pandemic world.

May 2021

# Appendix



Grade Band	Total Number of Visits
Pre-K through 3 <sup>rd</sup>	42
4 <sup>th</sup> through 8 <sup>th</sup>	28
High School	22

- Sixteen Chicago public schools (15 pre-K through 8th and one high school) were represented.
- Nearly 10,000 students attend the 16 participating schools.
- Over half of participating schools serve Black student populations of 90% or more.
- A quarter of participating schools serve Latino student populations of 50% or more.
- 75% of participating schools serve English language learners.

## Acknowledgments

The University of Chicago Consortium on School Research (UChicago Consortium) and Stand for Children Illinois partnered to conduct a strategic data analysis project to provide support for the development of the Connection Conversations program. We would like to thank the many educators and caregivers who participated in focus groups with the project team. Stand would like to give a special thanks to W. David Stevens and Vanessa Gutierrez for their deep commitment to equity and their unwavering attention to detail and data integrity. Finally, UChicago Consortium would like to thank the Stand staff who helped collect program documentation, administer surveys, and recruit participants for the project.

**Authors W. David Stevens and Vanessa Gutierrez**

## About Stand for Children

Stand for Children is a non-profit education advocacy organization focused on ensuring all students receive a high-quality, relevant education, especially those whose boundless potential is overlooked and under-tapped because of their skin color, zip code, first language, or disability. Stand makes an impact by:

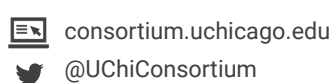
- Partnering with parents to support their children's education journey and become strong advocates.
- Advocating for proven policies and funding primarily focused on helping students reach the make-or-break milestones of: (i) reading well by the end of third grade, and (ii) graduating from high school ready for college, career training, or a career.
- Ensuring the changes we fight for reach classrooms and directly support students.



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## About UChicago Consortium

The University of Chicago Consortium on School Research (UChicago Consortium) conducts research of high technical quality that informs and assesses policy and practice in Chicago Public Schools. We seek to expand communication among researchers, policymakers, and practitioners as we support the search for solutions to the challenge of transforming schools. The UChicago Consortium encourages the use of research in policy action and improvement of practice but does not advocate for particular policies or programs. Rather, we help to build capacity for school improvement by identifying what matters most for student success, creating critical indicators to chart progress, and conducting theory-driven evaluation to identify how programs and policies are working. The UChicago Consortium is a unit of the Urban Education Institute at the Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice.



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