UNIVERSITY of HOUSTON
GRADUATE COLLEGE of SOCIAL WORK
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Promoting Academic Achievement Among Children in Poverty Using the City Connects Approach

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Introduction

Children living in poverty often experience:
- Poor attendance
- High mobility
- Social-emotional dysfunction
- Lack of readiness for school

All are stressors that can contribute to lower academic achievement. (O'Dwyer et al., 2015)

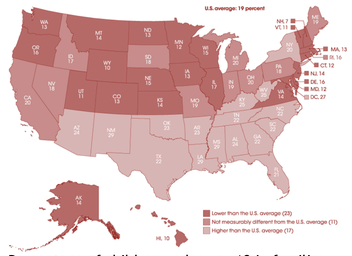
Academic Achievement can be measured by:
- Report Card Grades
- Standardized Test Scores
- High School Completion
- College Enrollment & Completion

(Reardon, 2013)

The Achievement Gap

- The gap in academic performance between high & low income students has grown nearly **40%** since 1970
- The income achievement gap is **two times larger** than the Black-White achievement gap
- The income achievement gap is large when children enter **Kindergarten**

(Reardon, 2011)



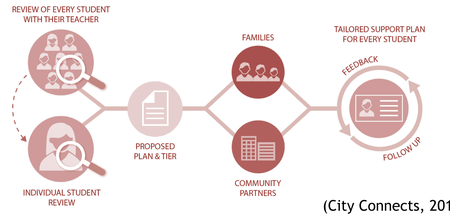
Percentage of children under age 18 in families living in poverty, by state: 2016 (NCES, 2018)

Research Question

What is the most effective program to promote academic achievement among children living in poverty?

City Connects

A licensed **school counselor** or **school social worker** is at the **core** of the intervention.



(City Connects, 2015)

City Connects Theory of Change

Because optimized student support…
- Collaborates with each teacher to develop a uniquely tailored student support plan for every child
- Leverages both school & community-based services and enrichment opportunities
- Partners with families to ensure service delivery
- Systematically uses data to improve practice & assess outcomes

An environment is created where…
- **Students'** strengths & needs are addressed
- **Teachers** shape instruction to meet student challenges
- **Principals** have more time to focus on instruction
- **Families** have a trusted person to facilitate access to supports
- **Community Providers** can better tailor & deliver services

Resulting in…
- Significant improvements in student achievement & ability to thrive
- Thriving: Behavior, Work Habits, & Effort
- Academic Performance: Elementary School Grades
- Lasting Positive Academic Effects
- Improved Life Chances

(Shields, Walsh, & Lee-St.John, 2016)

Other Programs Considered

	Head Start (WWC, 2015)	KIPP Knowledge is Power Program (WWC, 2018)
Program Description	A federal program that promotes school readiness for low-income children from birth to age 5 by providing services including education, health and nutrition, family engagement, and other social services.	A national network of charter schools serving Pre-K through high school students and has both an extended day and school year compared to other public schools. Students, parents, and teachers sign a pledge that describes the roles and expectations for attendance, homework, and behavior for students; assistance and support for parents; and preparation and availability for teachers.
Effectiveness	For 3-and 4-year old children: ➢ Potentially positive effects on general reading achievement ➢ No discernible effects on mathematics achievement and social-emotional development	For middle and high school students: ➢ Positive effects on Mathematics Achievement & English/Language Arts Achievement ➢ Potentially positive effects on Science Achievement & Social Studies Achievement ➢ No discernible effects on student progression for high school students
Rationale for Rejection	➢ Impacts are not enough to eliminate school readiness gaps between Head Start participants and their non-low-income counterparts ➢ Does not have the capacity to serve all eligible students due to funding (Joshi, Geronimo, & Acevedo-Garcia, 2016)	➢ High teacher attrition within the program poses a treat to validity ➢ Some studies do not account for prior achievement level of comparison groups ➢ Employs a lottery system when demand exceeds enrollment (Gleason, Tuttle, Gill, Nichols-Barrer, & Teh, 2014)

Methods

DATABASES
- Academic Search Complete
- ERIC
- PsycINFO
- SocINDEX
- Teacher Reference Center

Inclusion Criteria
- Scholarly (Peer Reviewed) Journals
- Publication Date: 2008-2018
- Language: English

SEARCH TERMS
"Academic Achievement" OR "Academic Performance" OR "Academic Success"

AND
Program OR Initiative OR Intervention

AND
"Children in Poverty" OR "Disadvantaged Students" OR "Low Income Students"

Initial Search Yielded **303 Results** → **36 Articles** Selected for Basic Research → **10 Articles** Reviewed & Analyzed

Rationale for Selection

Strengths:
- Customized support plans are systematically developed for each student creating less likelihood of a student being overlooked (Bowden et al., 2016)
- Successfully replicated in over 85 public, charter, and private schools in Massachusetts, Ohio, Minnesota, and Indiana (City Connects, 2015)
- Higher report card grades (Grades 3-5) (Walsh et al., 2014)
- Higher Standardized Test scores in Middle School, indicating lasting benefits beyond the intervention (Walsh et al., 2014)
- High school dropout rate for City Connects student is 8% compared to 15.2% of comparison group (Walsh, Lee-St. John, Raczek, & Foley, 2015)
- Cost per student = approximately $500 (Bowden et al., 2016)

Limitations:
- Cannot feasibly use randomized control design (Walsh et al., 2014)
- Internal validity: hidden bias from unobserved characteristics may exist (Walsh et al., 2014)

Conclusion

- City Connects focuses on assessing students, matching students to services, and managing student progress. (Bowden et al., 2016)
- Evidence supports higher academic achievement for City Connects students beginning in elementary school and lasting through middle school. (Walsh et al., 2014)

Recommendations

- Further investigation should employ a range of methods to determine whether a causal relationship exists between the intervention and it's outcomes. (Walsh et al., 2014)
- Program design is limited to urban school districts and/or cities with abundant resources. Research should be conducted on how to apply the City Connects model in rural or suburban settings with limited supports. (Walsh, Lee-St. John, Raczek, & Foley, 2015)
- Future research should examine special populations including, but not limited to, students with special needs and immigrant students.