



Exemplary Public-Private Community Preschool Partnership Case Study #1

June, 2015



*This case study was developed by the **Early Care and Education Consortium (ECEC)** and is based on discussions with the **U.S. Department of Education Office of Early Learning**. It is part of a series of case studies designed to highlight 10 exemplary public-private community preschool partnerships in states and communities around the country. Each case study will be available on ECEC's website at www.ececonsortium.org.*

Executive Summary

Data on the Brownsville community of Brooklyn, New York tell a troubling story. In addition to having the highest concentration of public housing in the country, 52% of children in this community live in poverty, and only 37% of residents over the age of 25 are high school graduates. However, these statistics seem far from the energy and enthusiasm shown by a grouping of four-year-olds and eighth-graders tending a communal garden plot shared by **PS/IS 41**, a K-8 public school and **FirstStepNYC**, an early childhood education center serving children and their families from birth through age five. Together, the children ensure that their shared garden is healthy—and provide a powerful metaphor for the cooperation and coordination that has gone into growing *FirstStepNYC* as an exemplary public-private community preschool partnership. This one-of-a-kind early education program of SCO Family of Services is co-located with a K-8 public school and is part of New York City's dramatically-expanded Universal Prekindergarten Program (UPK) initiative, ***Pre-K For All***. *FirstStepNYC*, also incorporates the *FirstStepNYC* Early Education Leadership Institute operated in partnership with [the City University of New York's Early Childhood Professional Development Institute](#), [Bank Street College of Education](#) and [SCO Family of Services](#).



FirstStepNYC's Pre-K For All program is exemplary in its design and implementation because it is:

- The first community center-based prekindergarten program that is co-located with its neighborhood school to promote a strong transition into kindergarten for children, as well as collaboration between early childhood program and school leaders.
- A public-private preschool partnership involving SCO Family of Services, and New York City's Administration for Children's Services (NYC ACS) and the Department of Education (NYC DOE). The program also relies on substantial private philanthropy raised by SCO Family of Services and the *FirstStepNYC* Advisory Council.
- Based on an emergent curriculum aligned with New York State's early learning framework designed to support a whole-child, play-based approach to developmental readiness.
- Supportive to families as the first teachers and number one advocates for their children. Each *FirstStepNYC* family is assigned a Family Support Specialist, who provides home visits and facilitates support needed in and outside of the program, including kindergarten transition, as well as connections to other community services.
- Committed to relying on [Teaching Strategies GOLD](#) to guide instruction and measure student growth in developmental domains throughout the year and [Teachstone's CLASS](#) to measure the quality of interactions and provide the program with feedback about the effectiveness of its teachers. The [Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale \(ECERS\)](#) is used to measure the quality of the prekindergarten learning environment.
- The home of The Early Education Leadership Institute, which is operated in partnership with [the City University of New York's Early Childhood Professional Development Institute](#) and [Bank Street College of Education](#). As part of a comprehensive, five-year, citywide plan, the Early Education Leadership Institute promises to create a robust pipeline of future NYC early childhood leaders, while also supporting the professional growth of current teachers and directors.
- Participating in a rigorous evaluation conducted by an external research partner.

State and Local Early Childhood System Landscape

The state of New York began funding Universal Pre-K (UPK) for four-year-olds in 1998; however, the program targeted low-income communities and included only a half-day of programming. In 2014, New York City (NYC) Mayor Bill de Blasio championed true universality and a full-day of programming for all four-year-olds. Governor Andrew Cuomo's FY2014-15 budget included \$300 million as a down-payment on the expansion of New York City's UPK program, with a target of serving more than 70,000 children in full-day programs by fall 2015, and a commitment for level funding over the next five years. In school year 2014-15, New York City enrolled over 50,000 four-year olds in full-day prekindergarten and is on target to serve 70,000 children in the 2015-16 school year. To do this, the city is relying heavily on community, high-quality providers to incorporate UPK in their early childhood centers to augment the capacity of neighborhood public schools. New York City's *Pre-K For All* program began with tremendous parent outreach to increase enrollment, as well as significant investment in teacher recruitment, certification, and



professional development.

EARLY CARE
AND EDUCATION
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Program Background

FirstStepNYC opened in September 2013 in a newly renovated space in *PS/IS 41* designed specifically to serve young children from 6-weeks through five-years-old, and their families. **Annually, the program's Pre-K for All component has an operating capacity of 38 slots.** Currently, *FirstStepNYC* serves 120 children from infancy through five-years-old, 100 of them on-site in 9 classrooms and 48 off-site in home-based Early Head Start programs. The program serves a variety of parental needs in terms of hours of service and the overall program's daily, year-round operational time is 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.

SCO Family of Services – the community-based organization that runs *FirstStepNYC*, has served vulnerable children and families in the Brownsville community for over 30 years and offers a range of other programs, including family counseling and support; foster care; a high school for over-age and under-credited youth; Nurse-Family Partnership; Parent-Child Home; a network of family home child care providers; shelter for homeless families, and two additional early childhood education centers that also participate in the city's *Pre-K For All* program.

The development of *FirstStepNYC's Pre-K for All* program was driven by a synergy of policy and resources: Private sector stakeholders wanted to develop an exemplary early childhood program offering comprehensive services within a high-need community while city agencies were considering expansion of their service infrastructure. At the core of the program's genesis were strong relationships that allowed investors and agencies to trust each other and envision the promise of this collaboration.





Program Integration and Coordination

FirstStepNYC is a public-private preschool partnership involving SCO Family of Services, NYC Administration for Children's Services (NYC ACS) and the NYC Department of Education (NYC DOE). The program also relies on substantial private philanthropy raised by SCO Family of Services and the *FirstStepNYC* Advisory Council. NYC DOE provided the program's initial \$10 million in start-up capital to support site renovation. Program dollars emanate from: the NYC ACS EarlyLearn program; the NYC DOE *Pre-K For All*; and directly from two programs of the federal Department of Health and Human Services—Early Head Start and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). Despite the complexity of integrating multiple funding streams, the goal when parents and students walk into *FirstStepNYC's Pre-K For All* program is to provide consistent quality across age-groupings and classrooms. ***As Laura Ensler, FirstStepNYC Founder, says, "When people walk through the door, we don't want them to see funding streams."***

Beyond integrating public and private funding sources, a great deal of program and agency coordination is also necessary. Operationally, *FirstStepNYC* also coordinates with the NYC Department of Mental Health and Hygiene that is responsible for child care licensing, as well as other city agencies that take part in building inspections.

There are both challenges and opportunities posed by the range of program coordination involved in administering *FirstStepNYC*. In addition to the financial management required to operate such an integrated funding model, creating a program-wide sense of coherence across multiple individual program requirements can be challenging in other ways. For example, the continuous child assessment being conducted via at least three different assessment platforms to meet different individual program requirements can prove stressful to program staff. Yet, the extent of program coordination supporting *FirstStepNYC's Pre-K For All* program also suggests opportunities for increased collaboration and articulation with public schools. The opportunities to collaborate are boundless. ***Co-location between a community center-based prekindergarten program and a neighborhood school can ensure a child's smooth transition to kindergarten; encourage shared space and services and upkeep of facilities; and bring together the school community in ways that connect staff where they never would have been connected before.*** At *FirstStepNYC*, data management and coordination assigns each child a unique DOE identification number that follows the child as s/he enters kindergarten and allows for longitudinal data tracking by the public higher education system in New York City.

PRE-K
FOR ALL



Instructional, Professional Development, and Leadership Models

FirstStepNYC embraces a holistic developmental approach in serving children and families, with an emphasis on language and literacy, and supporting parents as their child's first teachers. The foundation of New York State's early learning standards are captured in a framework that includes the New York State's Core Body of Knowledge, the Early Learning Guidelines, and the Pre-K Foundation for the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). In 2010 New York became the second state in the country to adopt the CCSS for its prekindergarten programs, and worked quickly to align the state's early learning standards with the CCSS through a comprehensive framework that includes all developmental domains. To support their implementation of the state's aligned early learning standards, *FirstStepNYC* educators designed an emergent curriculum to support a whole-child, play-based approach to developmental readiness.

To guide instruction, *FirstStepNYC* relies on the [Ounce Scale](#) for infants and toddlers, and [Teaching Strategies GOLD](#) for the three- and four-year olds to measure student growth in developmental domains throughout the year. [Teachstone's CLASS](#) is used to measure the quality of interactions and provides the program with feedback about the effectiveness of its teachers. [The Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale \(ECERS\)](#) is used to measure the quality of the prekindergarten learning environment. The [Infant and Toddler Environmental Rating Scale \(ITERS\)](#) is also used among those classroom age groupings. In addition, the program completes annual self-assessments and revisits its community assessment yearly to ensure programming is meeting community needs.

The program's teaching model promotes consistent relationships and ease of transitions among teachers, and the children and families participating in the program. Classrooms are arranged in *neighborhood clusters*, so children remain with the same teacher as infants and toddlers, and then may move to a room just next door, where they can stay for their full preschool experience as three- and four-year-olds. The *Pre-K For All* classrooms also offer full-time options to meet parents' employment or school schedules. Both *Pre-K For All* classrooms are a highlight of the program for this and many other reasons.

Each *FirstStepNYC* classroom consists of a teacher and two assistant teachers. *FirstStepNYC* embodies embedded professional development through coaching and strengths-based peer learning while implementing the work of the *FirstStepNYC* Early Education Leadership Institute which is located on site. Master teachers provide intensive, ongoing support to classroom teaching teams based on [The Powerful Interactions](#) reflective practice and coaching model. Observation rooms between classrooms serve as offices, observation rooms and coaching hubs for Master Teachers.

Beyond benefiting *FirstStepNYC* directly, Master Teachers serve as leaders for the field. Based on their experience and qualifications, which include Master's degree in Early Childhood and Teacher Certification, these leaders support the development of approximately 40 educators across SCO's early childhood programs and others in the early childhood field in NYC.



Leadership is a core focus at the program based on the *FirstStepNYC* Early Education Leadership Institute, which is designed to meet the city's short and long term needs for high-quality Directors of early childhood programs. ***The Early Education Leadership Institute is operated in partnership with [the City University of New York's Early Childhood Professional Development Institute](#) and [Bank Street College of Education](#). As part of a comprehensive, five-year, citywide plan, the Early Education Leadership Institute promises to create a robust pipeline of future NYC early childhood leaders, while also supporting the professional growth of current teachers and directors.***

Through the Early Education Leadership Institute, early education professionals have access to:

- Financial support for an MS_{Ed} in leadership through Bank Street College of Education
- Scholarships for the Children's Program Administrator (CPAC) credential through the City University of New York Early Childhood Professional Development Institute
- Professional coaching sessions
- Customized leadership professional development
- Scholarships for conferences and professional events
- Facilitation of Teach for America summer early childhood institute
- Participation in panels, workshops and affinity groups

IN THE DIRECTOR'S OWN WORDS:

"The Pre-K For All classrooms at FirstStepNYC are a prime example of the collaborative work between a community-based early childhood setting and school.

FirstStepNYC School Readiness Meetings occur quarterly, bringing together families and educators from both the center and the school in order to discuss learning goals and curriculum. At the end of the year, transition meetings are planned in order to identify steps families and educators can take to help pre-k children prepare for kindergarten. This year as part of the transition process FirstStepNYC will hold a kindergarten readiness panel that will include pre-k teachers as well as kindergarten teachers from the school and from the community so that parents can hear important information, and ask questions that they may have about the important transition.

Proximity and shared professional development between NYC DOE educators and FirstStepNYC educators also play an important role in bringing up relevant conversations about how a play based, emergent curriculum with a social and emotional focus at the center can provide a solid foundation for students as they enter kindergarten and begin their journey with the Common Core Curriculum."

~ Joan Kuo, Center Director



Like any school readiness program, *FirstStepNYC* has had to face challenges of staff attrition and turnover. However, the program has benefited from consistent leadership since it opened its doors in 2013, as well as the city's efforts to level compensation parity across school- and community-based programs. In fact, *FirstStepNYC*'s Founder can reflect on the irony of the program's success in developing early childhood leaders by considering its impact on teacher retention: the last Master Teacher who left the program went on to a leadership position with the larger organization, SCO Family of Services.

Community and School Collaboration

FirstStepNYC is the first co-located program of its kind in NYC. A compelling asset of the program's service structure is that it promotes a strong transition into kindergarten for children, as well as collaboration between a school readiness program and its school counterpart. ***Co-location contributes to increased cooperation between the early childhood program director and the K-8 school principal. Together, these program leaders have worked together on providing shared professional development for early childhood and K-3rd grade teaching staff, continuity of family support services, shared use of common space, and shared community service activities.*** The co-tending of the shared school garden is being done within framework of the science curriculum, which is shaped by the continuous alignment with the CCSS for the prekindergarten and 8th grade participants. Collaboration around summer and after-school programming is also scheduled to begin.

Parent Engagement and Community Outreach

FirstStepNYC's mission is to "empower the children of Brownsville, one family at a time." The program believes the family is the child's first teacher and number one advocate. In order to prepare students of *FirstStepNYC* for academic and life-long success, the family unit is the emphasis. The program uses [Solution-Based Casework](#), an evidence-based family support program, to develop strong partnerships with family and promote child safety and well-being. In addition, the program supports a team of Family Support Specialists. ***Each FirstStepNYC family is assigned a Family Support Specialist, who provides home visits and facilitates support needed in and outside of the program, including kindergarten transition, as well as connections to other community services.*** The program also offers workshops to families and activities focused on topics such as health and nutrition, the importance of play, and financial literacy.

Program Evaluation and Scalability

Both *FirstStepNYC* and the Early Education Leadership Institute are committed to a rigorous evaluation conducted by an external research partner. The findings of this evaluation will help inform the city's efforts to increase *Pre-K For All* program quality overall.

FirstStepNYC represents a replicable community-based model within NYC's *Pre-K For All* program that benefits children and families, supports early childhood leadership development, and leverages resources within this expanding local system. This co-located program model also promotes collaboration between schools and high-quality community partners. *FirstStepNYC* is actively exploring opportunities for further scaling this approach within NYC's *Pre-K For All* program.