

Family Connect Program

Denver Public Schools

Denver, CO



The mission of Denver Public Schools (DPS) is to provide all students with the opportunity to achieve the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed. DPS is committed to meeting the educational needs of every student and their family through impactful and innovative partnerships that address the needs of the whole family. There are many indicators that illustrate the need for increased family and community support. More than a quarter of DPS students do not graduate on time and more than 2,000 students drop-out before finishing high school. Thirteen percent of students in DPS are identified to have a disability posing significant challenges for families. And nearly 60% of students eligible for free and reduced lunch are significantly impacted by Denver's rising home costs with the median escalating well above the average DPS family income creating instability in living situations.



The FACE Family Connect (FFC) Program was developed by two school social workers in 2019 in response to an identified service gap that recognized that families do not always have adequate support in navigating and connecting with resources. When connections to viable resources are not made available, instability continues to impact the school experience. Multi-generational strategies remove barriers for families, allowing them to engage more deeply with their children. Through this inclusive approach, DPS can increase support for the whole child resulting in families that have stronger trust with the school and are better equipped to support student achievement and school readiness.

Families are referred to the program by specialized service providers in the school such as the school social worker or psychologist as they are most typically engaged with families who have been identified as having more intensive needs and can accurately assess what supports are needed. The program is a home-based model in its ideal form as it allows for full engagement with the parents or guardians who have been referred, resulting in a deeper understanding of family dynamics, their strengths, current supports, and needs. The program is strengths-based and works with families on identifying and developing their own client-centered support goals. An important component of the program is the intention to help families achieve self-sufficiency, which cannot be effectively achieved through a rescue mentality or a quick fix approach. Social workers focus on capacity building with the goal to help families build skills to prevent further crises and the tools for self-support if future crises should occur. Throughout the relationship with the family, which is not time-limited, the program social workers demonstrate a team approach by working closely with school-based support. Above all, the program aims to build positive relationships with families, build bridges between the family and the school, and provide the highest level of customer service to both the clients and the schools they serve.

The primary tool used to evaluate success is a fourteen-category itemized matrix based on the Arizona Model but adapted to fit the needs of DPS families. The tool measures family functioning using a 1-5 scale from crisis to thriving that cover fourteen areas including food, housing, clothing, employment, transportation, utilities, student attendance, student transportation, health care coverage, parent-school involvement, mental health, and access to services and resources with two additional optional categories to assess childcare and student disability. Whether a client completes their goals is another metric used to evaluate program efficacy. All clients have primary goals which are typically the identified reason the family was referred to the program. Finally, the program uses a satisfaction survey to assess whether schools feel that the program is adequately

supporting them and their families. The survey focuses on questions around customer service, how well the program engages families, whether they are satisfied with services, and plans to continue referring to the program. It also elicits qualitative data through open-ended questions which supports future planning.

As with any program there are challenges. One challenge is the lack of resources available to expand programming to appropriately support the needs of the racially and ethnically diverse community that the program serves. Another continuous challenge is keeping school-based professionals trained so that their expectations are aligned with the scope of the program. A social worker in DPS that refers families to the program commented, “The FACE family connect team is the most effective team I have worked with in DPS. The referral process is simple, they are timely, and extremely competent. As a school social worker, I desperately need the FACE family connect team to do the work they do in support of our students and families. My role is so SPED heavy that without the FACE family connect team I worry about how many families could fall through the cracks.”

The following advice is offered to districts who wish to replicate the program:

1. Licensed social workers in case management roles are logically the best fit for the program based on their training and expertise in family systems and community work as well as preparation to respect cultural differences and embrace self-determination. Additionally, case managers who are familiar with school protocols, systems, and roles are essential in understanding how to best assist families within the defined program scope and can help families more fluently navigate some of the more complex internal systems.
2. Having and communicating a well-defined scope including service exclusions is an important part of maintaining appropriate program boundaries. For example, although many of the referrals are attached to truancy the program does not take referrals for truancy that do not connect to a specific need. The program asks that schools do assessments to determine root cause and make a referral that aligns with a specific need if the parent consents to program support.
3. Collaboration is key, therefore identifying point people at each school is important as well as an emphasis on building trust and strong relationships within the schools. Thinking of the program as an extension of the school team allows for optimal collaboration, aligns conversations with families, and ensures the family will continue receiving support once the services are closed. Providing orientation to those who refer greatly improves the quality of referrals and increases the number of referrals that fall within the scope of the program. The program gives regular updates to those who refer to let them know when services are being closed and where the family may still need support. This not only allows for a stronger continuum of services for the family but demonstrates a level of customer service that promotes a strong collaborative partnership.
4. The ability to meet the client where they are during the case management relationship is critical in helping them to meet successful outcomes. Tenacity in relationship building and using a variety of engagement strategies to meet the individual needs of the client as well as allowing the client to stay in the driver’s seat and self-determine their own course are keys to building trust. Executing a non-judgmental approach and allowing families to determine the pace are just as important as the case manager’s ability to dig deep for resources and maintain commitment to doing whatever is needed to help a client reach their goals.