

Opportunity Knocks

A Connecticut School-Community Partnership Closes the Door on Preschool Expulsion

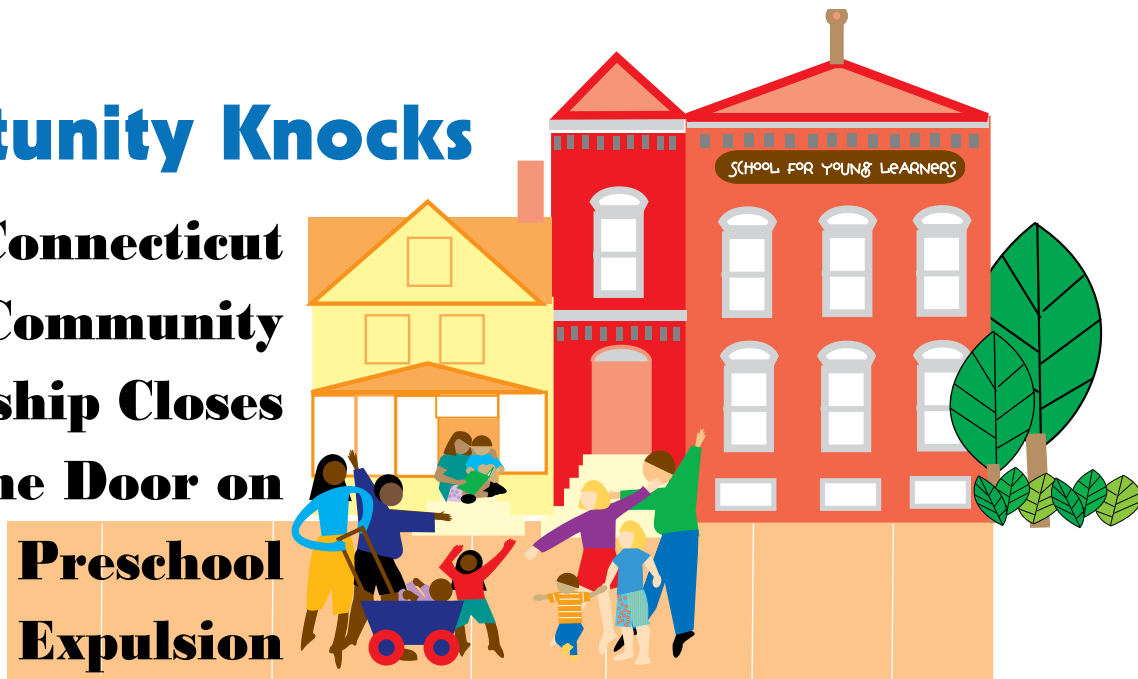


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Christine Fahey, Pat Ihle, Susan Macary, and Cliff O'Callahan

MIDDLETOWN, CONNECTICUT, mirrors many American communities. Its population is racially diverse; there is a strong local economy, but many families still struggle financially. Like families everywhere, they want the best for their children.

Several years ago, the people of Middletown made young children a priority by forming a coalition called Opportunity Knocks. A school-community partnership, Opportunity Knocks includes representatives from local health and social service agencies, early childhood educators, and families, all committed to improving the health and well-being of young children. The partnership's long-term goals include avoiding in their local schools what is a disturbing national trend: preschool expulsions.

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Susan Macary, MPH, is the project planner for Opportunity Knocks, and a member of its steering committee. Susan has worked in the field of maternal and child health, on children's mental health initiatives, and with preschools in community-based research settings.

Cliff O'Callahan, MD, PhD, is on the pediatric faculty for the Middlesex Hospital Family Practice residency program and is the physician advisor for Opportunity Knocks. He has worked on community- and provider-centered quality improvement interventions in the United States and developing countries.

Middletown was concerned even before a national study by the Yale University Child Study Center showed that pre-kindergarten programs expel children three times more often than public schools serving the K-12 population (Gilliam 2005). The members of the Opportunity Knocks team envisioned every Middletown child entering kindergarten physically and emotionally healthy and ready to succeed in school. As a result of community-based research (Middlesex Coalition for Children 2003), the coalition addresses Middletown children's nutritional, dental, and social and emotional health needs, particularly behaviors that could lead to preschool expulsion or impact a child's future school performance. The primary funders of Opportunity Knocks, the Funders' Collaborative, are four Connecticut philanthropic foundations that share a common interest in health care and early education.

Efforts over the last two years to prevent preschool expulsion—screenings, parent education programs, case consultation meetings, and more—are working. The number of preschool suspensions and expulsions in Middletown dropped from 26 during the first year of the program (2004-2005) to just one in the second (2005-2006).

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Administrator Strategies for Successful School-Community Partnerships on Early Intervention

- Get the support of the superintendent and school board
- Gather data on high-quality early interventions
- Be open to change and new ideas and approaches
- Select a point person or a group to facilitate change
- Create a committee that involves active members of the community
- Hold structured, ongoing meetings
- Evaluate and adjust the program as necessary; be flexible to meet the needs of the community

The pediatrician's role

Opportunity Knocks emphasizes the importance of treating the whole child. Writing for *Pediatrics*, Walter Gilliam of the Yale Child Study Center suggests that children expelled from preschool should receive comprehensive mental health evaluations to identify underlying health issues (American Academy of Pediatrics 2003). A Middletown pediatrician and member of the Opportunity Knocks team, Dr. Cliff O'Callahan works with other local pediatricians and family doctors to ensure that all children are screened for developmental issues at well-child visits and that families receive screenings for maternal depression and domestic violence as warranted.

Through puppets, posters, and child-friendly tools, the program teaches children self-control and how to interact appropriately with peers and adults.

Screening tools such as the Parents' Evaluation for Developmental Status (PEDS) and the Modified Checklist for Autism in Toddlers (M-CHAT) help identify early developmental issues, often leading to earlier treatment. Children whose needs are identified through the screening are referred to community support programs.

Steps to help educators

The Yale study (Gilliam 2005) found that preschool expulsions were lower in schools or centers in which teachers had continuing classroom support from behavioral or mental health consultants. When access to mental health professionals was in place, the likelihood of expulsion was cut nearly in half (National School Boards Association 2006). A social-emotional skills curriculum, *Second Step* (Committee for Children 1986), has been successfully implemented in all of Middletown's 12 center-based School Readiness and Head Start sites. Through puppets, posters, and child-friendly tools, the program teaches children self-control and how to interact appropriately with peers and adults.

In addition to Opportunity Knocks, Middletown's early childhood educators give high marks to the Early Childhood Consultation Partnership (ECCP) funded by Connecticut's Department of Children and Families—the state's



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child protection agency. That organization assigns one early childhood mental health consultant to each defined region of the state. The ECCP consultant provides in-depth advice to teachers and families to support children with challenging behaviors. Through direct observation and using various screening tools, the consultant observes children and the classroom, advises teachers, offers staff development, and refers families to community agencies when necessary. Parent educators are available through the community's Middlesex Hospital's Family Advocacy Program (FAP) to provide strategies to parents in the home setting.

Most important, the ECCP consultant facilitates monthly case consultation meetings. At these meetings, representatives from Middletown's School Readiness Program, the Department of Children and Families (DCF), Area Cooperative Education Services (ACES), and early childhood educators brainstorm solutions to address children's challenging behaviors in the classroom. These consultations are an opportunity for training, networking, and support. The meetings also enable DCF, an agency that typically intervenes on behalf of children only after abuse has been reported, to step in and provide assistance. The DCF representative may identify a family that needs additional support for managing a child's behavior at home and refer them to a pro-

Helpful Online Resources on Challenging Behaviors

There are many resources available to help families and educators find strategies for helping children with challenging behaviors. Here is a short list:

The Center for Evidence-Based Practice: Young Children with Challenging Behavior—A U.S. Department of Education-funded program to raise awareness and build a database of evidence-based practices. www.challengingbehavior.org

Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning—A national center focused on strengthening the capacity of child care and Head Start programs to improve the social and emotional outcomes of young children. Offers evidence-based, user-friendly information to help early childhood educators meet the needs of children with challenging behaviors and mental health challenges in child care and Head Start programs. Includes training modules. <http://csefel.uiuc.edu>

National Network for Child Care—Shares academic knowledge about children and child care with parents, professionals, practitioners, and the general public. Offers practical information and resources for working with children. <http://www.nncc.org>



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For information about Opportunity Knocks

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gram that helps family members develop skills and strategies. One long-time preschool teacher calls these meetings "a lifesaver."

Conclusion

Opportunity Knocks succeeds because of community support, perseverance, and hard work. It's a constant balancing act to meet the needs of preschool children with challenging behavior, the needs of other children in the classroom, and educators. Despite the struggle, the community is proud to shut the door on preschool expulsions.

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