

City Connects is an evidence-based intervention delivered in partnership with schools and services seeking to meet the needs of children living with high levels of poverty and marginalisation. It is currently being piloted in ten DEIS band 1 primary schools in the North East Inner City in Dublin. This article introduces the system and describes its implementation in Ireland.

Background to City Connects

City Connects, developed by Boston College, is a 20-year old evidence-based intervention designed, developed, and delivered in partnership with schools and services seeking to meet the needs of children living with high levels of poverty and marginalisation. It offers a strategic, systemic, and systematic mechanism to enable children to meet their potential by having their strengths and needs recognised and addressed.

City Connects is built on the belief that every student deserves the opportunity to learn and thrive. Children can face significant out-of-school challenges that directly impact on their capacity in the educational system. City Connects' mission is to 'help students academically, socially, emotionally, and physically by connecting each and every child to a tailored set of prevention, intervention, and enrichment services in the school and community'.

City Connects, implemented in 90 schools across six States in the US, has been rigorously evaluated and has evolved to become an example of how the leadership of a higher education institution, working in partnership with schools, families, and services, can maximise outcomes for students and promote equity of outcome. Its strong evidence base shows significant outcomes in student achievement and thriving:

- better performance on standardised tests in elementary and middle school
- higher scores on report cards in elementary and middle school
- less likely to be held back a grade
- lower rates of absenteeism
- far less likely to drop out of school
- significant positive outcomes for English language learners.

For more details, see: www.bc.edu/bc-web/schools/lynch-school/sites/cityconnects.html.

City Connects Pilot Project

An evidence-based system being piloted in 10 DEIS primary schools in Dublin



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With the right supports, every student can thrive.



Figure 1: City Connects core beliefs

City Connects, guided by developmental psychology, recognises that if schools are to make significant inroads into equity of educational outcomes, they need a systematic approach to identify and meet the strengths and needs of every student across four domains: academic, social and emotional, family, and health. City Connects' core practice culminates in a tailored support plan for every student. It seeks to ensure that the right supports are offered to the right student at the right time.

Core practices of City Connects

Coordinators' core practice: building and implementing a tailored **student profile and plan** for every student, every year

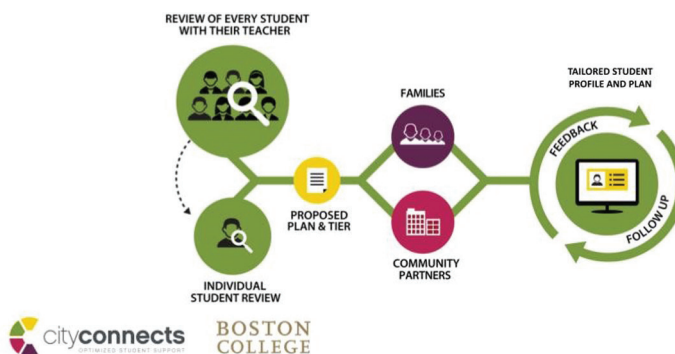


Figure 2: City Connects core practices

The core practices of City Connects are carried out by a City Connects coordinator (CCC), who is trained in the model and supported by a supervising programme manager. At the start of each school year, CCCs make a presentation to school staff and, in consultation with the principals and other key stakeholders, plan the schedule for the core work:

1. Whole Class Reviews (WCRs)

- I. Annually, CCCs meet with the teacher and at least one other member of school staff as appropriate (e.g., home school community liaison coordinator, learning support teacher).
- II. With parent's permission, each child's strengths and needs are reviewed at the start and end of the school year under the four domains – academic, social and emotional, family, and health.
- III. A tailored Student Profile and Plan is devised for each child. Children are linked to appropriate services, in consultation with key personnel and parents. CCCs continuously implement and follow up on plans, maintaining records in MyConnects, a secure system for capturing review and referral information and tracking progress. CCCs collaborate with school staff and community partners to provide feedback.

2. Individual Student Reviews (ISRs)

- IV. ISRs are conducted by the CCC in consultation with key personnel for approximately 10% of children each year.
- V. An ISR is implemented when requested by the principal, or when the need for a deeper review and conversation emerges through the WCR.
- VI. A tailored Student Profile and Plan is devised or revised for each student. Children are linked to appropriate services in consultation with key personnel and parents. CCCs continuously implement and follow up on plans, maintaining records of their work in the MyConnects system. CCCs collaborate with school staff and community partners to provide feedback.

Information about each community partner is captured in MyConnects to facilitate the right fit for each student's interests, strengths, and needs.

3. Working with Community Partners

Partnership is core to the successful development and implementation of City Connects. CCCs understand, identify, and develop effective school and community partnerships to ensure appropriate referrals, follow-up, and collaboration. Information about each community partner, including the type of service offered and its tier of intensity, is captured in MyConnects to facilitate the right fit for each student's interests, strengths, and needs.

4. Family Partnerships

CCCs, in collaboration with school personnel and others, communicate and collaborate with families or caregivers about student support throughout the year.

Throughout the school year, CCCs follow up on each student's plan, making changes as needed. At the end of the year, they use the MyConnects system to flag students who would benefit from an early check-in at the start of the new school year.

MyConnects allows CCCs to report on progress in the aggregate to the principal and school staff. Information from the system also enables monitoring of practice, evaluation, and research. During the 2020–21 school year, an interim IT solution was developed while work was being undertaken to bring MyConnects into the Irish context.

City Connects in Ireland

Mary Immaculate College (MIC), in consultation with Boston College (BC), initiated discussions with the Department of Education (DE) on piloting City Connects in Ireland. Representatives of DE, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (now the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, DCEDIY), Tusla, and MIC participated in a study visit to BC. Representatives from BC then visited Dublin, made presentations on City Connects, and met with government officials, school personnel, community representatives, and funders working in and with the North East Inner City (NEIC) Programme Implementation Board (PIB).

The NEIC PIB was established on foot of the Mulvey report (2017) ‘Creating a Brighter Future’, in recognition of the need to provide long-term social and economic regeneration for the NEIC area. Because the aims of City Connects align with recommendations in the Mulvey report, the NEIC PIB has supported the initiative from the outset and is a key source of funding for the pilot.

Mary Immaculate College, in consultation with Boston College, initiated discussions with the Department of Education on piloting City Connects in Ireland.

City Connects is being piloted in the academic years 2020–22 in ten DEIS band 1 primary schools in the NEIC in Dublin. The schools range in size from 60 to 405 pupils, and all include students from a local Irish background and students from a migrant background. Principals in the NEIC have consistently raised the need for wraparound services for children in the NEIC and using the school setting as the focus for supporting a child’s strengths and needs while accessing external services.

It is the first time that City Connects is being piloted outside the US. The pilot is led by the DE, DCEDIY, and Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) and is funded by the Irish government via the DE, DCEDIY, and the NEIC Initiative. In collaboration with Boston College, Mary Immaculate College in Limerick is the lead implementation partner in Ireland. Representatives from all the organisations above form the steering committee.

Staffing of the NEIC City Connects pilot project includes one programme manager and five City Connects coordinators.¹ All staff are highly experienced teachers.

The DE has appointed an NEIC education initiatives manager, who supports this pilot as part of his remit. A project management team comprising DE, TESS, DCEDIY, and BC supports and helps coordinate the subgroups. The implementation practice and training team, consisting of the

1. There were three City Connects coordinators during the 2020–21 school year; this has been increased to five for 2021–22

programme manager and implementation leads from MIC and BC support the implementation in schools, including weekly coaching calls with the programme manager.

Additionally, the Integrated Model of School Services working group, with representation across stakeholders, including the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) and Health Service Executive (HSE) clinicians, guides and supports the pilot project.

The review and feedback evaluation carried out for the 2020–21 school year revealed that despite significant challenges, including the Covid-19 pandemic and the ransomware attack on the HSE, significant progress was made in faithfully implementing the core components of City Connects.

We believe that City Connects has the potential to enhance the DEIS scheme through building on existing supports and increasing their effectiveness. From the beginning of the collaboration, Boston College noted strong alignment of vision, among all the partners, on core beliefs about what is possible for children and families. Fundamentally, City Connects offers a structured way to support an integrated services model, enabling services to respond appropriately, efficiently, and cost-effectively and enabling every child to reach their potential.



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