

Dekalb County Public Schools  
Counseling Demonstration Program

*A Project funded by the U.S. Department of Education,  
Safe and Drug Free Schools*

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Final External Evaluation Report

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Submitted to the Social Work Department

Dekalb County School System

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# Background

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DEKALB COUNTY, A METROPOLITAN SUBURB OF ATLANTA, claims the second largest school district in the South. During the 1990's, the Dekalb County Public School system became the most diverse in the region with a student population that was about 76% Black, 12% White, 5% Latino, 4% Asian, and 2% multi-racial. When the Dekalb County Social Work Department was awarded the Counseling Demonstration Program Grant in August 2000, there were only 26 school social workers serving 95,223 students – or one social worker for every 3,662 students. On average, each social worker divided his or her time among five different schools. On the elementary level, 104 school counselors were serving 82 schools.

## **The Need to be Addressed**

Elementary schools with high numbers of international students were facing numerous challenges in the late 1990's yet they had the same support services as other schools. As described in the original grant proposal, immigrant and refugee children in these schools were struggling with a host of personal, social, and educational problems:

- \* Many children from other countries were adjusting to being in a school environment for the first time.
- \* Some children from warring countries that relocated to the same community were attending the same school together.
- \* Children were grieving the loss of friends, extended family, and their homeland.
- \* Many children who experienced loss and trauma were at the same time adjusting to life in the United States.
- \* Children who never learned to read in their native language were making slow academic progress in the U.S.
- \* All children – American and international children alike -- needed to learn about the cultural backgrounds of fellow students.

International parents were also facing difficulties:

- \* Many did not speak English and were therefore reluctant to involve themselves in school activities.
- \* Many worked long hours to support their families and meet self-sufficiency requirements and so their ability to participate in school activities was hampered.

Teachers, administrators, and staff members were challenged by the influx of international students:

- \* Communicating with parents who spoke little or no English was not possible without the use of translators who were often difficult to find.
- \* Training was needed on cultural diversity and sensitivity in order to work effectively with children and their families.
- \* Absentee rates for the schools were higher, on average, than for other Georgia schools.
- \* The number of ESOL students at many county elementary schools was much higher than at other schools in the county, yet resources to serve them were the same.
- \* Academic achievement at several schools, as measured by the ITBS scores in Reading Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension, was much lower than other schools in the county, the state, and the nation.

## **Program Goals and Objectives**

The Counseling Demonstration Program provided an opportunity for the Dekalb County Social Work Department to effectively meet the needs of immigrant and refugee children and their families. The overall goal was to address the personal, social, emotional, and educational needs of students by expanding counseling services and involving parents and community members in the schools. The original objectives were to:

1. Decrease student discipline referrals.
2. Increase student attendance.
3. Improve parental participation in school-related activities.
4. Expand meaningful collaboration between the school and the community.
5. Improve home-school connections.

Objective #1 was modified at the outset of the program when four of the five social workers reported that there was not an actual discipline problem among the international students in their schools. As one principal explained to evaluators, “Ninety-percent of the discipline problems come from the 10% of American kids in the school.” None of the five grant social workers or their principals identified discipline as a chief concern. However, all agreed that children go through a period of adjustment when they enter the new culture. One social worker explained that she got called on to address behavior problems

but these were not discipline problems in the traditional sense. These were outbursts of anger, sadness, or frustration. Another social worker explained that many of the international children are very quiet, tearful, and withdrawn for the first 5-6 weeks after they arrive at a new school. Again, this behavior was not considered to represent a discipline problem, but rather a problem of cultural adjustment to which the grant social workers were uniquely positioned to respond. From the outset of the program, it was more meaningful for grant social workers to focus on the cultural adjustment of international students rather than on discipline problems. Objective #1 was therefore changed to **"Ease the trauma of cultural adjustment among international students."**

# Program Design

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THE SOCIAL WORK DEPARTMENT CONCEIVED THE Counseling Demonstration Program as an opportunity to more effectively address the unique needs of the immigrant and refugee student population in a manner virtually unprecedented -- by placing a dedicated social worker in selected schools. The program was designed to also address needs of international parents and the school staff.

## Identifying Sites

To determine in which elementary schools to place full-time social workers, an informal assessment was conducted to identify schools in which the refugee and immigrant populations were increasing most rapidly. Among the schools identified, five were selected based on both the percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunches and the principal's desire to support achievement of the program objectives. The selected elementary schools were Cary Reynolds, Indian Creek, McLendon, Montclair, and Woodward. The diversity of these schools is depicted in Table 1. In the third year of the program, Woodward Elementary was replaced as a demonstration site by Oakcliff Elementary because the assigned social worker and her school principal had been experiencing significant conflict that could not be resolved.

### Cultural Diversity of the Participating Schools

School	# Language Groups Spoken by Students/Parents	% Students Whose Primary Language Was not English
Cary Reynolds Elementary	30	81%
Indian Creek Elementary	27	57%
McLendon Elementary	32	22%
Montclair Elementary	26	53%
Woodward Elementary	22	70%

Table 1.

## Recruiting Program Staff

Five social workers were initially recruited to work in the schools based on several criteria. First, as stipulated by the grant funding, individuals needed to be qualified through achievement of a Masters degree in social work, and certified by the Georgia Professional Standards Commission as a school social worker, school counselor, or school psychologist. A second criterion for hiring the social workers was diversity. The preference was to hire social workers that were fluent in other languages, specifically Spanish and Vietnamese. Social Work Department staff contacted the schools of social work within the University of Georgia system to find out if they had recent graduates meeting this criterion. No school had recent graduates who spoke Vietnamese but most had a few who spoke Spanish. The Social Work Department also contacted all of the agencies that had written letters of support for the grant application and asked them to refer qualified social workers. A third criterion for hiring social workers was that they had experience with individual, group, and family counseling. Creative social workers that had an ability to work independently to plan projects and who would be a good fit with the department were sought.

A social worker who had worked within the department for four years and who had co-written the grant proposal assumed the role of lead social worker. The Coordinator of the Social Work Department and the lead social worker interviewed several applicants and selected four who possessed a range of experience. The resulting grant team was diverse with two African-American females, two Caucasian females, and one Latino male. Much of the grant success is due to the high quality of the social workers hired. All social workers had Master's degrees in social work. Their work experience ranged from one to 15 years. Three had completed internships in schools; two had worked for the Department of Family and Children Services; and two had worked with a mental health project in schools. All social workers had experience with individual and group counseling. All social workers were passionate about the program and interested in working with families of diverse backgrounds. They all were creative as is evidenced by the different programs they developed and implemented. Also, they were good team members who worked well together. One of the social workers spoke Spanish and this proved to be a tremendous benefit to the program.



*Leslie Jo Tottenham, Lead Social Worker.*

In Year 3 of the program, the social worker assigned first to Woodward Elementary and then to Oakcliff resigned her position. The social worker hired to replace her was fluent in Spanish, and again, this language ability was extremely valuable. A no-cost extension was granted in to continue the program at Oakcliff Elementary for another year. A seventh qualified social worker was hired for the grant-funded position at that school.

## Putting the Program in Place

The Coordinator of the Social Work Department of the Dekalb County School System, Mr. Apolinar Lorenzo Alzaga, served as the Project Director. In this capacity he was responsible for hiring program staff, ensuring that social workers were supported and fully integrated into their assigned schools, monitoring the expenditure of funds, consulting with the social workers as needed, and reviewing guidance plans for timeliness and appropriateness. Mr. Alzaga also assisted the lead social worker in administering the program.



*Grant social workers Kristin Lee, Kathy Swilley, Guillermo Rives, Bridget Isaacs, and Leslie Jo Tottenham, with evaluator Margaret Holt, during a monthly team meeting.*

The lead social worker, Ms. Leslie Jo Tottenham, served as the grant-funded social worker for McLendon Elementary and as supervisor of the other four team members. In the latter role, she led and participated in monthly team meetings and offered support to the other social workers as needed. She was also responsible for assuring that social workers completed all required documentation.

All five grant-funded social workers developed a Guidance Plan each year which outlined the strategies they would use at their respective schools. A hallmark of the demonstration program was that each social worker could develop a unique plan appropriate to the needs at his or her school. This plan was developed with input from an advisory board that met at least once each program year.

## Advisory Boards

As specified in the original proposal, advisory boards helped determine the specific interventions that grant-funded social workers would undertake. The actual role played by the advisory boards evolved over the life of the program, however. Initially, they provided needs assessment data as well as information on existing programs and services both in the school and in the community at-large. Later, they offered feedback on the effectiveness of grant-funded initiatives, and suggested ideas for new projects. At the outset of the program, the advisory boards were selected by the social workers and were comprised of direct stakeholders in the program. In Year 2, Georgia Governor Roy Barnes mandated that each school have a school council comprised of the principal, two certified teachers, two parents, and two business people. Social workers then opted to use the new school councils as their advisory boards. The social workers all agree that the advisory boards were helpful, particularly in the beginning of the program. Most of the social workers,

however, found that it was challenging to get advisory board members together for meetings. One said that her board sometimes resorted to “rubber stamping” grant-funded activities rather than offering substantive input. The social workers recommended that a board, therefore, might be best utilized early in the program rather than later.

# The Settings

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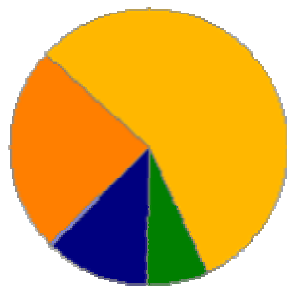
FIVE DEKALB COUNTY ELEMENTARY schools served as demonstration sites for the program. The schools were similar in that, relative to other schools in the county, they each served a high percentage of immigrant and refugee students. Also, each served a great number of low-income children as evidenced by the percentage of students receiving free or reduced price lunches. Basic data presented about the schools in Figure 1 comes from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) from the 2001-2002 school year. These data provide a snapshot of the diverse school settings in which social workers pursued the grant objectives.

## School Settings - Ethnicity

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### Cary Reynolds Elementary

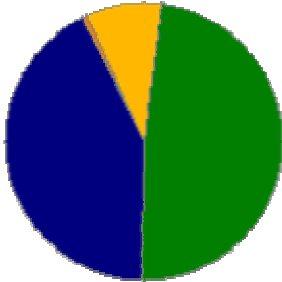
#### Student Ethnicity



Ethnicity	This School	State Avg. (grades K-5)
African American	12%	41%
American Indian	<1%	<1%
Asian	24%	2%
Hispanic	56%	6%
White	7%	51%

## Indian Creek Elementary

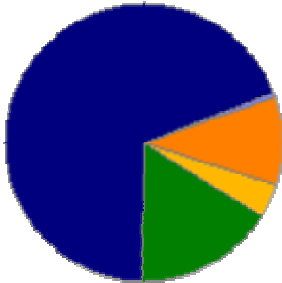
### Student Ethnicity



Ethnicity	This School	State Avg. (grades K-5)
African American	43%	41%
American Indian	0%	<1%
Asian	<1%	2%
Hispanic	9%	6%
White	48%	51%

## McLendon Elementary

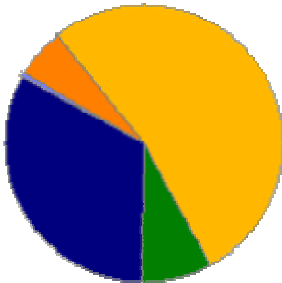
### Student Ethnicity



Ethnicity	This School	State Avg. (grades K-5)
African American	69%	41%
American Indian	<1%	<1%
Asian	10%	2%
Hispanic	4%	6%
White	16%	51%

## Montclair Elementary

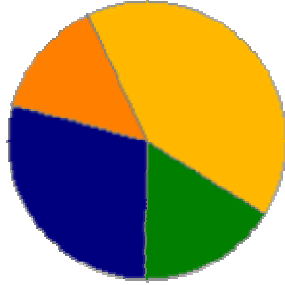
### Student Ethnicity



Ethnicity	This School	State Avg. (grades K-5)
African American	33%	41%
American Indian	<1%	<1%
Asian	6%	2%
Hispanic	53%	6%
White	8%	51%

## Oakcliff Elementary

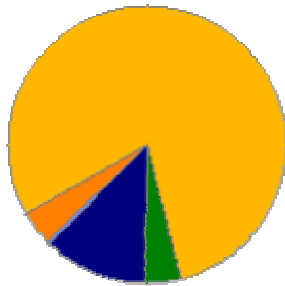
### Student Ethnicity



Ethnicity	This School	State Avg. (grades K-5)
African American	29%	41%
American Indian	0%	<1%
Asian	14%	2%
Hispanic	41%	6%
White	16%	51%

## Woodward Elementary

### Student Ethnicity



Ethnicity	This School	State Avg. (grades K-5)
African American	12%	41%
American Indian	<1%	<1%
Asian	4%	2%
Hispanic	79%	6%
White	4%	51%

Figure 1.

Approximately 750 students attended Cary Reynolds Elementary during the time the demonstration project was underway supported by 60 faculty and staff. Eighty-percent of the student population in 2002-03 was classified Asian or Hispanic, making it the most international school among all demonstration sites. Almost the entire student body (96%) received free or reduced-price lunches indicating that Cary Reynolds' families were also among the poorest. The principal was replaced between the second and third years of the demonstration program. In Year 2, Cary Reynolds became an America's Choice school. America's Choice is a major school reform program targeted to schools that are most challenged when it comes to achieving the state performance standards. Cary Reynolds had, according to the No Child Left Behind Act, been designated "in need of improvement" because goals for adequate yearly progress had not been met.

Indian Creek Elementary served approximately 775 students each year of the demonstration project with support from 73 faculty and staff. Nearly a quarter of the

student body (23%) was classified Asian or Hispanic with 82% of the student body overall receiving free or reduced-price lunches. A principal was replaced at Indian Creek during the period the program was in place.

McLendon Elementary School served approximately 525 students each year that the demonstration program was in place, with support from 40 faculty and staff. Fourteen percent of the study body was classified Asian or Hispanic and 92% of the student body overall received free or reduced price lunches.

At Montclair Elementary, the student body of approximately 582 students was served by 38 faculty and staff. Fifty-nine percent of the study body was reported to be Hispanic or Asian. Overall, 90% of the students at Montclair receive free or reduced-price lunches. The federal government had identified Montclair Elementary “in need of improvement” according to the No Child Left Behind Act because goals for adequate yearly progress were not being met.

Oakcliff Elementary is a traditional theme school focusing on parent involvement. In fact, all parents at Oakcliff are required to contribute a specified number of volunteer hours to the school each year. Oakcliff served approximately 700 students each year that the demonstration project was in place. More than half (55%) of the study body was classified Asian or Hispanic. Students were supported by 47 faculty and staff. Sixty-seven percent of the student body received free or reduced price lunches. Oakcliff became a site for the demonstration program during the third year of grant funding. A no-cost extension allowed the program to continue there for a fourth year.

Woodward Elementary, with 675 students, was a demonstration site for the first two years of grant funding. Eighty-three percent of the student body at Woodward was classified Hispanic or Asian when the demonstration project was underway and, overall, 93% of the study body received free or reduced-price lunches. The school was supported by approximately 57 faculty and staff. According to the No Child Left Behind Act, Woodward was identified as “in need of improvement” because goals for adequate yearly progress were not being met.

The counseling demonstration program was carried out in these schools from fall 2000 through spring 2003. (The program continued at Oakcliff through spring 2004). The events of September 11 occurred within the first few weeks that the program was up and running. With attention to homeland security magnified, many international families experienced substantial additional stress. After September 11 for example, immigration laws tightened severely, the economy suffered, unemployment rates rose, and tension and mistrust among members of certain ethnic and cultural groups intensified. These events, all headline stories during the grant period, figured into the perspectives and experiences of many students, parents, teachers, administrators, and community members associated with the Counseling Demonstration Program.

# Evaluation Methods

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AN EXTERNAL EVALUATION BY EDUCATIONAL CONSULTANTS Margaret E. Holt, EdD and Cassandra E. Drennon, PhD has been underway since the inception of the grant. The evaluation, which was both formative and summative in nature, was designed to determine the extent to which program goals and objectives were achieved, to assess the overall strengths and weaknesses of the program design, and to identify lessons learned that could be applied to similar efforts.

Key evaluation activities, by year, leading to the preparation of this report are displayed in Table 2.

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## Evaluation Activities by Year

### Year 1 2000-2001

- One hour interviews with each grant social worker in his or her school setting.
- One hour interviews with each school principal at his or her school site.
- One hour interview with the grant project director.
- Attendance and participation in monthly grant team meetings.
- An observation of one school's advisory committee meeting.
- Attendance at a presentation about the project given by grant social workers to county social workers.
- A mixed design anonymous survey of school personnel at each of the five schools.
- Collection and review of 53 project documents.
- Collection and review of 15 periodic progress reports from grant social workers.

### Year 2 2001-2002

- A one-hour critical incident interview with each grant social worker in his or her school setting.
- A telephone interview with each school principal.
- Attendance and participation in monthly grant team meetings.
- A day-long retreat with the social work team.
- A mixed design anonymous survey of school personnel at each of the five schools.
- Collection and review of 129 project documents.
- Collection and review of quarterly reports from each social worker.

Observation of 4 parent meetings planned by the social workers.  
Electronic collection from grant social workers of more than 40 narrative accounts of project activities and their perceived impact on students and their parents.

**Year 3 2002-2003**

Telephone interviews with 2 of the 5 school principals.  
Attendance and participation in monthly meetings with grant-funded social work team.  
A mixed design anonymous survey of school personnel at each of the five schools.  
Collection and review of 152 project documents.  
Collection and review of quarterly reports from each social worker.  
Observation of four (4) parent meetings planned by the social workers.  
Electronic collection from social workers of more than 49 narrative accounts of project activities and their perceived impact on students and parents.  
A questionnaire sent to 16 community agencies (8 returned).  
A 4-question survey translated into multiple languages and administered to varying numbers of parents at each school (519 total responses).  
One-hour focus groups at each of the five elementary schools with a total of 31 teachers who had been in the school at least five years.

**Year 4 2003-2004**

Interview with the school principal.  
Interview with the school social worker.  
Collection and review of 33 project documents.  
Collection and review of quarterly activity reports.  
A mixed design anonymous survey of school personnel.  
Observation of after-school program.  
Observation of parent meeting focusing on gang violence.

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Table 2.

All qualitative data from interviews, observations, electronic narratives, and surveys were entered into the data analysis software program, Atlas.ti for thematic coding and analysis. School administrators administered the School Personnel Surveys during routine staff meetings held each year in April and then mailed them directly to evaluators for analysis. Quantitative data from the School Personnel Survey were entered into Microsoft Excel. Quarterly report data were tabulated manually. All documents were individually reviewed and systematically catalogued for reference.

Attached to this report as an appendix are the following supporting documents: Teacher focus group interview guide; School Personnel Survey instrument; Parent survey questions and procedures; Agency survey cover letter and instrument; Quarterly reporting form for social workers; and Document inventories.

# Strategies and Outcomes

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THE DAILY DEMANDS at each of the five demonstration sites varied considerably, and consequently, strategies employed by the social workers varied at each site also. The social, emotional and academic needs of international children and their families were never to be effectively met with a “canned program” or through strictly defined and regulated interventions. Each social worker devised a repertoire of creative strategies and then drew from those to meet needs that emerged for the international population at his or her school. The social workers identified 130 different strategies that they utilized in Year 2 of the project. By Year 3, they had narrowed their repertoire to 89 distinctive strategies that they used across the five schools to achieve the project’s objectives. At no school did we find exactly the same set of approaches implemented in the same way. Table 3 depicts the strategies that were being used in Year 3 by the social workers.

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## **Profile of Strategies Used in 2002-2003 for Achieving Objectives Across All Five Schools**

### **STRATEGIES FOR EASING TRAUMA OF CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT (16)**

#### **Advise and educate staff**

- Provide cultural diversity training for staff
- Consult individually with teachers
- Offer staff development on “Building Understanding and Empathy”

#### **Advise and educate students and families**

- Provide students with individual counseling
- Call students at home
- Participate in SST meetings
- Offer classroom guidance (speakers etc)
- Conduct special small topics groups
- Arrange parent Conferences
- Educate parents on rights and responsibilities
- Arrange for individual counseling of students by therapist/mental health center
- Register students for Pan Asian Center after-school program
- Offer a newcomer adjustment group

#### **Celebrate cultures**

- Organize cultural celebrations

**Model good relationships**

Mentor students

**Advocate for cultural needs and concerns within the schools**

Advocate for children

**STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING ATTENDANCE (14)**

**Increase understanding among students and families of the attendance requirements**

Provide “absent” notices to parents

Conduct home visits to discuss absences and explain the law

Call students and families

Call parents in to discuss policy

**Provide incentives to attend school regularly and achieve perfect attendance**

Provide door hangers as awards

Announce attendance accomplishments

Offer reward luncheon

Maintain an attendance chart with stickers awarded for full week

Provide parent incentive – Breakfast

Throw a popcorn party

**Offer individualized and group support to children with attendance problems**

Individually counsel children with poor attendance

Assess why student is not attending

Mentor students; encourage them to attend regularly

Hold a monthly attendance group

**STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT (17)**

**Offer relevant parent activities**

Coordinate and develop Spanish literacy class with Emory

Offer Latino Parent meetings

Sponsor “Take Your Parent to School Day”

Offer Parenting Classes

Offer Project REAP

Offer Parent Orientation

Offer computer class for parents

Offer sewing class and refugee women’s support

Sponsor “Walk Your Child to School” Day

Offer “Make It, Take It” workshops

**Support parents’ efforts to participate in parent teacher conferences and any other meetings concerning them**

Hold parent meetings in the community

Provide transportation for Parent-Teacher Conference nights

Provide interpreters for Parent-Teacher Conference nights

**Encourage volunteerism in the school**

Encourage garden volunteers

Encourage cafeteria volunteers

**Offer opportunities for parents to voice their opinions on school matters**

\*No strategies noted in this category in 2002-3003

**Build relationships with parents**

Conduct home visits

Meet parents at Refugee Family Services

**STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE HOME-SCHOOL CONNECTIONS (10)**

**Visit the homes**

Conduct home visits

**Make information from the home understandable to the school**

\*No strategies noted in this category in 2002-2003

**Make information from the school understandable at home**

Assist parents in filling out forms

Assist parents in understanding and complying with America's Choice

Create and maintain a translation notebook

Assist parents getting forms signed (permission for field trips, reading programs, reduced or free lunches)

Contact parents about health concerns

Contact parents about needs and concerns of children

Having forms translated into different languages for distribution

Offer school orientation for parents at Refugee Family Services

Help parents in registration process

**STRATEGIES TO EXPAND MEANINGFUL COLLABORATION  
BETWEEN SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY (32)**

**Cultivate community relations**

Attend community meetings

Develop partnerships

Maintain partnerships

Engage in public relations activities

Network at Community Hispanic Health Coalition

Serve as a board member on Georgia Advisory Council on Refugee Resettlement

Organize an advisory board

Recruit members for advisory board

Solicit bilingual professionals to facilitate groups

Invite community members to PTA night

**Refer families directly to community services**

Refer children to agencies for health assistance

Locate economic resources to help families

Get food and clothing from local churches for families

Offer Pan Asian after-school tutoring program

Utilize IRC services

Utilize Newcomers network (later "Refugee Family Services")

**Coordinate services directed toward the school**

Bring in speakers for parents

Coordinate Toys for Tots

Bring in partners to volunteer with kids

- Coordinate and develop Spanish literacy class with Emory
- Offer monthly attendance luncheon
- Offer international celebrations with Emory
- Offer Chick-fil-A night
- Offer Cool Girls organization
- Interact with Neighborhood Association
- Hold “Vote and Visit”
- Expand partnerships
- Offer Project REAP – family literacy
- Offer DCSB – Mental health counseling at school
- Invite Emory students to speak in classrooms about different countries
- Offer Parent Training (e.g. legal services, immigration, and domestic violence)
- Offer Red Cross Blood Drive
- Provide Flu Shots

Table 3.

Each year, results of the annual School Personnel Survey strongly indicated that the demonstration program produced school improvements in every intended area. This finding is supported by the teacher focus groups, on site observation, agency survey responses, and parent survey responses. In the final year of the project, the percent of school personnel reporting positive changes, as a result of the counseling demonstration program, are indicated in Figure 2. Across all five schools, no less than 87% of personnel reported anywhere from “A Little” to “Very Much” improvement in each area.

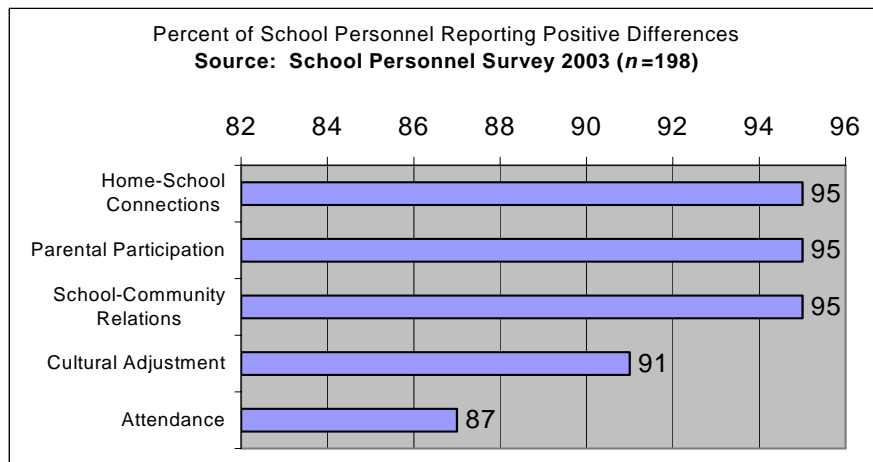


Figure 2.

A discussion of each intended outcome and specific achievements follows.

## Objective 1: Ease the Trauma of Cultural Adjustment

Social workers employed strategies for easing the trauma of cultural adjustment for children that could be categorized into 5 primary approaches: 1) Advise and educate staff about cultural issues; 2) Counsel and educate students and families about cultural issues; 3) Celebrate different cultures; 4) Model good relationships; and 5) Advocate for culturally-based needs and concerns within the school. A powerful example of a cultural adjustment challenge came from a teacher interviewed in one of the focus groups. The challenge she described was like countless others that grant social workers were instrumental in overcoming:

*[The children] come with culture shock. I can remember two that I had last year and the year before that I had to literally pull out of the bathroom because they hadn't seen running water before. One would drag her feet because she hadn't really worn shoes before and she thought they were going to come off.*

[Interview P35 69:80]

The parents are going through a period of cultural adjustment at the same time as their children. Conforming to school norms and expectations is a particularly big adjustment for them. One teacher, for example, recalled that she had had a tremendous tardy problem. “[The children] would just saunter in here 45 minutes [late] or 30 minutes. They didn’t care.” [Interview P34 381:386] According to another teacher there had been a problem with girls coming to PE class in full dresses and sandals because the parents did not understand that on PE days other attire was more appropriate. In cases like these, the social workers proved themselves invaluable by doing what regular classroom teachers simply did not have time to do. Across all five schools the social workers, for instance, saw to it that families were fed and clothed by linking the most needy families with community resources; they called and visited families at home to explain school “rules” and expectations; they provided children much needed one-on-one time and attention; and they helped individual children solve interpersonal problems they experienced because of language and cultural differences. One social worker devoted considerable time to helping two fifth grade girls who had trouble getting along because they couldn’t communicate. Specifically, she helped them find ways to do “nice things” for each other over a period of time. By the time the girls had completed their task they had overcome the language barrier and, they wrote in a story, “Well, our story is that we didn’t get along with each other. So we talked to [the social worker] and she helped us be friends. We are friends now, best friends!” [Weekly Narrative P5 24:39]

When children begin to successfully adjust to the new culture, discipline and interpersonal problems noticeably diminish, according to many teachers and staff members with whom we spoke at the various schools. “I’d say respect or self-esteem has really, in the children, has really gone up,” said one teacher. [Interview P34 317:317] However at one school, at least two teachers in the focus group actually perceived more discipline problems among the international students now than several years ago. They attributed this to the fact that

the testing programs to which children are subjected creates a level of stress that, in turn, plays out in classroom behavior and interpersonal relationships.

Ninety-one percent of international parents (N=138) surveyed about their child’s happiness perceived that their child was happy in his or her school. This could be further indication of the fact that children are, indeed, adjusting to their new culture. (Less than 1% of the parents surveyed about this question perceived that their child was *not* happy in their school, and 9% either *did not know* or had *no opinion*.) Table 4 shows the breakdown of parent responses by school.

### Percent of Parents Responding

#### “My child is happy in this school.”

<i>School</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Not Sure/No Opinion</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
Cary Reynolds	73	96%(70)	4%(3)	
Indian Creek	30	67% (20)	30% (9)	3% (1)
McLendon	13	100% (13)		
Montclair*				
Oakcliff	22	100% (22)		
<b>Totals</b>	<b>138</b>	<b>91% (126)</b>	<b>9% (12)</b>	<b>&lt;1% (1)</b>

Table 4. \*Did not administer.

Across all five schools, 91% (n=198) of personnel who responded to the School Personnel Survey in Year 3 indicated that the project was making a positive difference in cultural adjustment among international students in their respective schools (64% percent checked “very much,” 22% checked “fairly well.” Another 5% checked “a little.”) At 3 of the 5 schools perceptions in this category remained relatively stable over the life of the demonstration program. Each year at Indian Creek, however, personnel increasingly noticed positive changes in this area. By individual schools, the percent responding in the two highest response categories each year are displayed in Figure 3:

**Percent of Teachers Reporting a Positive Difference  
in Students' Cultural Adjustment**

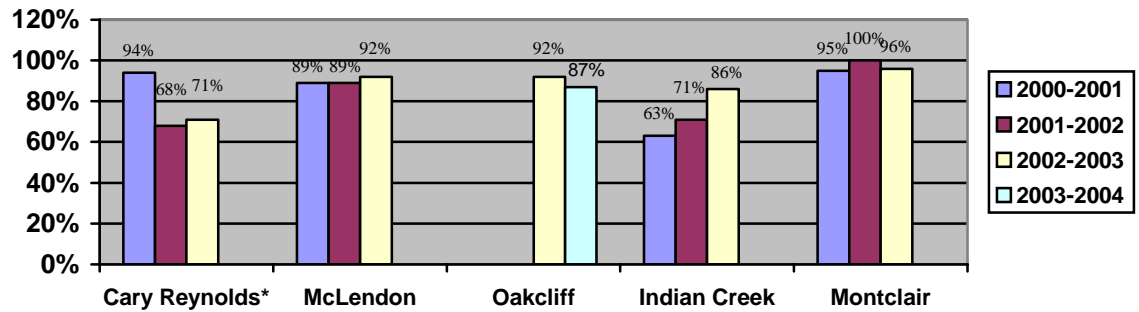


Figure 3.

### Objective 2: Increase Student Attendance

By Year 3, social workers were using at least 14 different strategies across the five schools to increase student attendance. The strategies could be categorized into 3 primary approaches: 1) increase understanding among students and families of the attendance requirements; 2) add incentives to attend school regularly; and 3) offer individualized support to children with attendance problems. Social workers, teachers, and staff specifically identified direct family contact as the most effective approach to solving attendance problems. The following testimonials illustrate this finding:

*I had [the social worker] call a child that was missing a day a week. The mom said he was sick and she didn't want to send him to school if he was sick and she didn't have health insurance. [The social worker] told her there is a law. If he's sick he needs to go to the doctor. The child has been here everyday since [the social worker] called.*  
[Interview P34: 34:46]

*In kindergarten, a lot of parents didn't seem to understand that school is a five-day process, and you're supposed to go to school on a regular basis. It has helped a whole lot to have this communicated – to have [the social worker] get in touch with parents. It's meant a lot to have that extra person communicate and help them understand how important it is to send their kids to school on a regular basis.* [Interview P35 135:142]

*When you turn in a referral [the social worker] is on it right away. She calls immediately – the parent. Everything gets settled so fast. When a child was late, she kept calling until this was settled. She makes me feel that I know what I'm talking about. She doesn't question me. She makes me feel very professional.* [Interview P38 57:60]

An impressive 87% (n=198) of school personnel that responded to the survey in Year 3 indicated the demonstration program was “making a positive difference in attendance

among international students” in their respective schools. Perceptions in this category, overall, remained relatively stable each year of the program in four out of five of the schools as depicted in Figure 4. Personnel across the five schools perceived less improvement in attendance as a result of the demonstration program than they perceived in any of the other four areas of focus. In focus group interviews, several personnel at the schools expressed a vague sense that attendance had improved and there was a high level of satisfaction at every school with the strategies that social workers implemented to address the attendance problem.

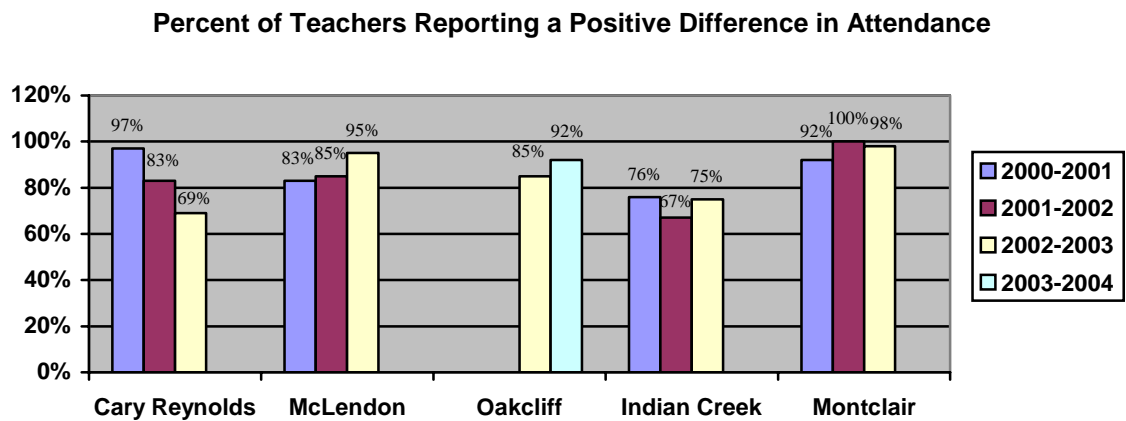


Figure 4.

The Annual Report Card on K-12 Public Schools published by the Office of Student Achievement may be the best indicator of general attendance trends at each of the five schools, although such data is only available for two of the most recent three project years. Unfortunately, currently published attendance data are not directly comparable with the baseline attendance data collected for each school at the proposal preparation stage. (The Annual Report card reports the percent of students absent 5 or fewer days; 6 to 15 days absent; and more than 15 days absent. Baseline attendance data for the demonstration program was presented as the percentage of students absent 10 or more days in the school year.)

The 2002-2003 Annual Report Card indicates improvement in attendance at Cary Reynolds Elementary School despite the fact that the Student Personnel Survey depicts a steady decline over the life of the demonstration program in teachers’ perception that the program was making a positive difference in attendance among international students. Between 2001-02 and 2002-03, the percentage of Hispanic



*Door hanger used at Cary Reynolds Elementary to celebrate perfect attendance.*

students absent 5 or fewer days increased from 45% to 50%. The percentage of Hispanic students absent 6-15 days decreased from 40% to 34% during this same time period. Among the Asian student population, a similar trend is exhibited. The percent of students absent 5 or fewer days increased from 57% to 69%. The percentage of Asian students absent 6-15 days decreased from 33% to 24%.

The social worker assigned to Cary Reynolds distinguished herself on the project team for her innovative attendance incentive program which was duplicated by social workers at other demonstration sites. She awarded classes a festive door hanger each day they achieved perfect attendance, recognized these classes over the school intercom, and then periodically awarded the single class with the best attendance record a lunch with faculty sponsored by Chick-fil-A.

At McLendon Elementary, we observe another disjuncture between teachers' perceptions of improved attendance and the attendance data as reported on the Annual Report Card on K-12 Public Schools. Each year of the counseling demonstration program, the percentage of McLendon teachers reporting highly favorable impressions of attendance improvement remained steady or increased further. According to Report Card data, however, the percentage of limited English proficient students who missed 5 or fewer days decreased between 2001-02 and 2002-03 from 48.2% to 43.1%. The percentage of these students absent 6 to 15 days increased in the same time period from 38% to 44%.

While teachers' perceptions of attendance improvement at Oakcliff and Indian Creek are reasonably consistent with Report Card data, improvement in attendance among the international students at Montclair Elementary may be even more outstanding than our School Personnel Survey was able to detect. For example, the percentage of Hispanic students who were absent 5 or fewer days increased between 2001-02 and 2002-03 from 48% to 57%. The percentage of Hispanic students absent 6 to 15 days decreased in the same time period from 41% to 36%. The percentage of Hispanic students absent more than 15 days was more than cut in half – from 13% to 6%.

### **Objective 3: Improve Parental Participation**

With respect to this objective, the conundrum for evaluators initially was twofold: 1) Parental participation had not been operationalized, and 2) Baseline data for parental participation did not exist. Of course schools had policies for visitors to sign in and out of the building, and social workers, counselors and principals kept listings of parental conferences and visitations, but these data were not readily available, nor did they seem meaningful. For example, a parent or other visitor may “sign in” to have an individual conference or to leave a forgotten lunch but the sign-in sheets do not indicate the nature or quality of parental visits to the school.

Early on, evaluators sought the team's guidance in distinguishing between “parental participation” from “home-school connections.” It was decided that “parental participation”

would mean parents' engagement in school events while "home-school connections" would refer to the flow of information between the two environments.

Parental participation in the first year, by and large, took the form of parent outreach. In other words, social workers understand that reaching out to parents by providing counseling, information, and referral to other services, is the first crucial step toward increasing their participation in the schools. In most cases there are problems to be overcome at home before parents are able to fully participate in their child's education. As one social worker explained, "You have to offer the parents something to open up the relationship." He referred parents to domestic violence counselors, Alcoholics Anonymous, and employment agencies, for example. "This is the kind of thing parents remember," explained this social worker. "It keeps them coming back."

Illustrative stories of accomplishment date back to the program's first year:

- \* From **Montclair** -- Only three people attended this social worker's first parent meeting. By the end of Year 1, as many as 75 parents were attending the meetings, thus making it necessary to move them from the school library to cafeteria.
- \* From **Indian Creek** -- One of this social worker's many activities has been developing a parent resource center. The Center includes books and tapes that parents may check out to help their children. Computer lessons are planned for the future. The social worker also established English classes for parents. Participation in the English classes increased with every session. An assistant principal in this school told an evaluator that parents "light up" when they come into the building and see the grant social worker. She was described as an advocate for the international parents. It is common for her to be called to the office when parents come seeking assistance because they find relating to her easy and comfortable.
- \* From **McLendon** -- The social worker presented sessions at parent meetings on attendance, discipline, homework, and testing topics. Such sessions had not previously been held for parents at this school. Three translators assisted the social worker with the sessions and all documents that were handed out were likewise translated.
- \* From **Woodward** -- The social worker reported, "I have developed a parent workshop series entitled, "Parents Building Brighter Futures." Each month parent workshops and seminars have focused on such topics as homework strategies for parents and effective parenting skills."

At the end of Year 1, the project team anticipated that actual parental participation would increase even more significantly as the project progressed because parents would gradually receive the services they needed to manage home and family life more effectively. This

prediction turned out to be accurate. For example, by the end of Year 3 the social worker at Montclair was hosting on average 250-300 parents at parent meetings.

By Year 3, social workers across all five schools had moved beyond mere “outreach” to parents and were using 17 different strategies to improve parental participation. An analysis of the strategies revealed 4 primary approaches that social workers took to achieve the objective: 1) offer relevant parent education activities; 2) support parents’ participation in parent teacher conferences and other meetings by providing translators; 3) encourage volunteerism in the school; and more generally 4) build relationships with parents.

Although objective baseline data about parental participation were not available at the five schools, observed improvements over the life of the demonstration program were dramatic. Data collected from all sources consistently indicated that more international parents began coming into the schools than ever before and that relationships between parents and school staff improved. On quarterly reports, each social worker reported high attendance figures for parent meetings, parent teacher conferences, and parent education opportunities they provided. On the school personnel survey, one teacher wrote, “The climate at school was good already. Now parents are smiling more, they are chaperoning trips, and volunteering to do basic things.” At another school, one teacher shared her observation that parents are now willing to talk through an interpreter and likewise willing to communicate with school personnel instead of simply saying that they can’t speak English. The social worker assigned to this school conducted home visits with the interpreters, which is attributed to parent’s increased comfort in the school. At all schools a welcoming school environment, accessibility to translators, and personalized attention provided to parents by the school social worker resulted in parents feeling welcome in the school environment (Table 5).

### Percent of Parents Responding

**“I always feel welcome at this school.”**

<i>School</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Not Sure / No Opinion</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
Cary Reynolds	38	89% (34)	11% (4)	
Indian Creek	73	88% (64)	9% (7)	3% (2)
McLendon	13	100% (13)		
Montclair	90	100% (90)		
Oakcliff	38	89% (34)	3% (1)	8% (3)
<b>Totals</b>	<b>252</b>	<b>93% (235)</b>	<b>5%(12)</b>	<b>2% (5)</b>

Table 5.

Teachers were also impacted directly by the demonstration program because they were able to communicate with far more international parents than ever before. Previously they simply did not have the time to track down translators, visit parents at home, or provide for parent’s intellectual and emotional needs in ways social workers could that directly led to their increased involvement in the school. “That’s a full time job,” one teacher told us. Another teacher remarked, “It’s just amazing what [the grant social worker] has done. . . . It’s been phenomenal. I’ve never had that kind of back up in my years of teaching.”

On the School Personnel survey, slightly more than 90% of teachers reported that the counseling demonstration project had positively influenced the frequency and quality of their contact with international parents. Teachers and other school personnel noticed overall improvement in parental participation. Ninety-five percent ( $n=198$ ) of the school personnel who responded to the survey in Year 3 indicated that the project was “making a positive difference on parental participation within their schools international community.” Seventy-three percent checked “very much” and 18% checked “fairly well.” Another 4% checked “a little.” By individual schools the percent responding in the two highest categories for each project year are depicted in Figure 5.

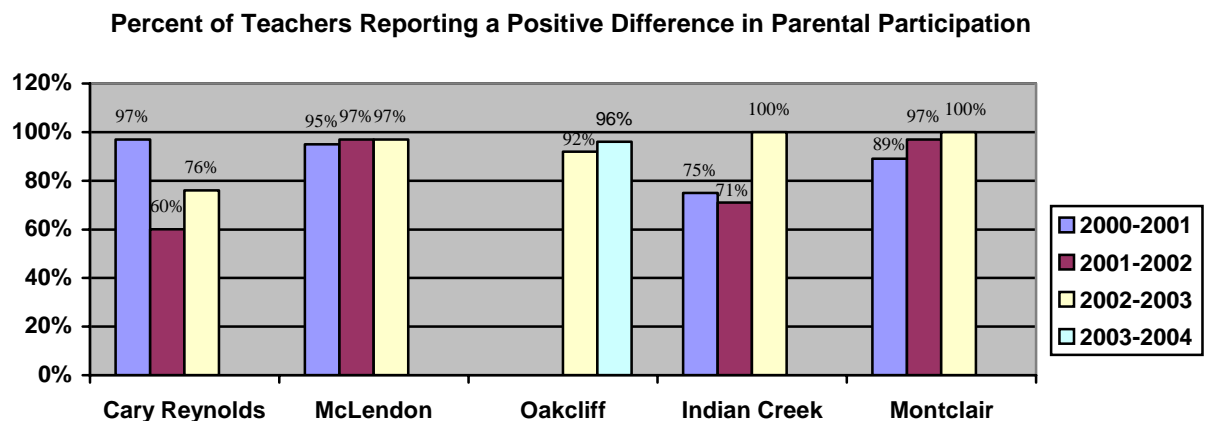


Figure 5.

The social workers went to great lengths to see that international parents could participate fully in parent teacher conference nights and PTA meetings. At least two schools used schools buses to transport parents to meetings. Social workers arranged for interpreters to attend the meetings, and in some cases the school-sponsored meetings were held at sites close to where the families actually live so that transportation was less of a problem. When asked about changes he has noticed at his school with respect to parent participation, the principal at Cary Reynolds Elementary exclaimed, "Oh my God, it's unbelievable! The comfort level [among international parents] has increased so much that the parents come into the building now which is what we want . . . . We have doubled our parental participation in the building. Unsolicited input from parents has probably doubled since last

year, too. This is because the grant social worker has been so visible.” The principal at McLendon described a fundamental change she observed this year among international parents which speaks directly to the value of the counseling demonstration project in her school:

*The parents are getting more and more involved. Last year they were a little reluctant to be involved in the school. Now they're calling us, "When is this program?" "When is that going to happen?" This is very different for the international parents. Last year we sent buses out to get them for meetings. This year we didn't do that and the parents car-pooled with each other or found their own transportation and even MORE showed up! This indicates that they are even more committed than ever to being involved in their kid's education. It may also indicate that they are becoming more self-sufficient the longer they are in the U.S. It's hard to know exactly the reasons.*

#### **Objective 4: Expand Meaningful Collaboration Between the School and the Community.**

At the outset of the program, grant social workers defined “meaningful collaboration” as that which brings the community and school together in providing education for children. By Year 3, across the five schools, social workers were using 32 different strategies to expand meaningful collaboration between the school and the community. An analysis of the strategies revealed 3 broad approaches that social workers took to achieve the objective: 1) cultivate community relations; 2) refer families directly to community services; and 3) coordinate services directed toward the school. In Year 2, the social workers collaborated with more than 40 different community agencies to provide services to international children and families. By Year 3, the number had grown to 89 different community agencies -- an increase over the prior year of 122%.

A survey mailed to community agencies in Year 3 provided insight into the valuable collaboration between them and demonstration sites. One community representative who responded to our agency survey described the social worker as her main school contact who helped "iron out" details to make it work - everything from recruiting the students to bus transportation. She indicated that without the social worker collaboration would be very difficult to manage. Community agency representatives praised social workers for their work on attendance, home visits, and follow-up with parents. One said that if the social worker had not solved a transportation problem, the program would not have succeeded. We asked agency representatives, “Whether or not you were to remain in your current position, how optimistic are you that a relationship will be sustained in the years ahead between your agency/organization/business/institution and this school?” Seven of the eight respondents checked "4" or "5" at the extremely optimistic end of the scale. One was not optimistic, and explained on the survey that the school administration had not been welcoming of the agency. However, the social worker had been encouraging and as helpful as possible under the circumstances. The responses from community agencies illustrated

creative projects, programs, events, and activities that served students, teachers, and parents.

As depicted in Figure 6, 95% (n=198) of the school personnel who responded to the personnel survey in Year 3 indicated that they noticed the project was “stimulating collaboration between the school and the wider community.” Sixty-two percent checked “very much” and 24% checked “fairly well.” Another 9% checked “a little.” By individual schools the percent responding in the same categories in 2001, 2002, and 2003 are depicted in Figure 6:

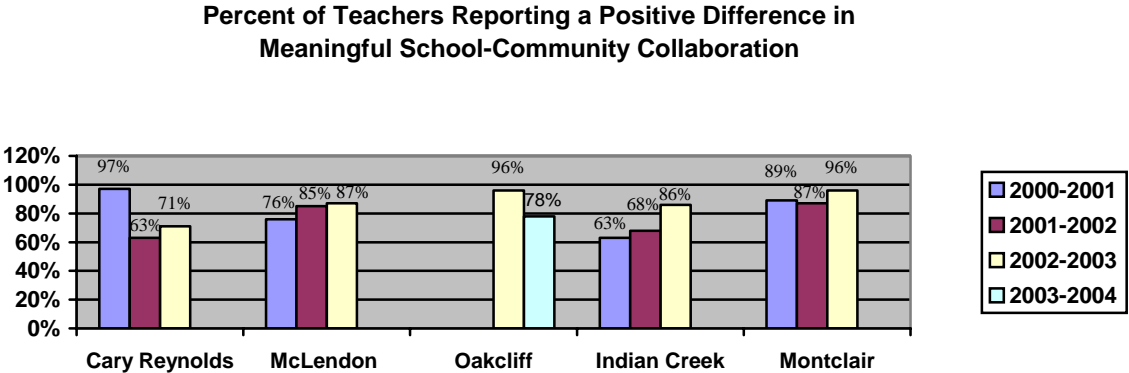


Figure 6.

A few examples of meaningful collaboration between the schools and community agencies follow:

From **Woodward** – A Hispanic clinical therapist from Catholic Social Services hosted a stress management workshop for parents. In the same month The Atlanta Police Gang Task Force volunteered to come in and talk with 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade students. [The social worker observed that there is heavy gang activity in her school area.]

From **Cary Reynolds** – This school became involved in partnerships with the Institute for Comparative and International Studies at Emory University. Because of this collaboration, a faculty member and an Emory student were both honored for “outstanding achievement in Community Connections.”

From **McLendon** – The social worker in this school, like the other grant social workers, worked consistently with the community organization known as Newcomers Network. This organization contributed to a very successful conference night with international parents by calling the parents in advance to inform them of the event, and providing translation services throughout the evening.

## Objective 5: Improve Home-School Connections.

At the outset of the project, evaluators asked the team to think carefully about operationalizing this objective so it would be distinct from improving parental participation. They decided the term “home-school connections” would be used to refer to the two-way flow of information between families and schools. An analysis of strategies used in this category by the social workers revealed two broad approaches to achieving the objective: 1) visit the homes; and 2) make information from the school understandable at home. In Year 3, the social workers took responsibility over a six month period for having approximately 311 different school documents translated (almost twice the number as were translated in Year 2). They visited 131 homes, up from 117 in Year 2, and they initiated literally thousands of phone calls to parents. These efforts were both noticed and appreciated by the faculties. Figure 7 depicts a great majority of school personnel indicating each year that the project was “making a positive difference on home-school connections.”

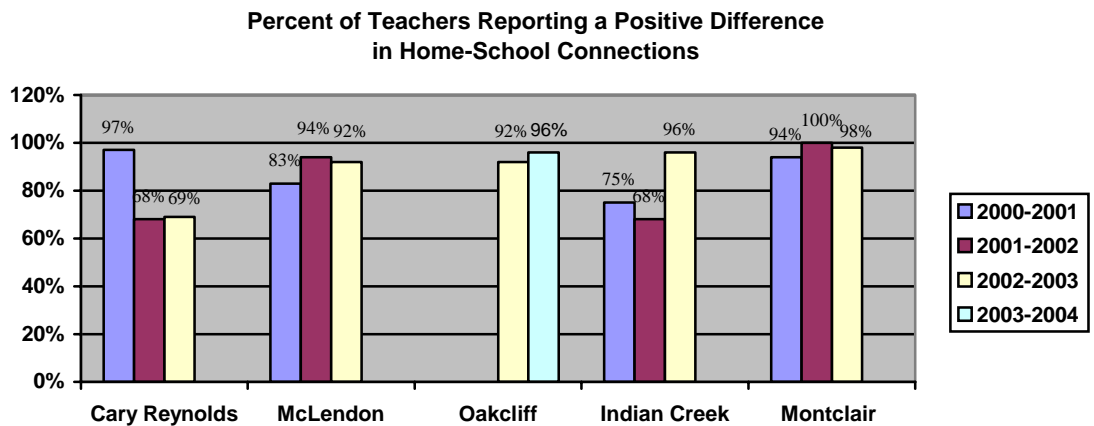


Figure 7.

In focus groups, teachers recounted numerous examples of how home-schools connections had been strengthened during the life of the demonstration project. A teacher at McLendon explained that helping parents “understand some of the simple things” was one of the most important tasks the social worker had undertaken:

*I mean every time a child takes a piece of paper home, and I mean we send home notices constantly and parents don't know what is important what is not. I've had parents who are afraid to sign things and they aren't sure what happens when they sign a piece of paper and send it back so that's helped a lot.*

According to parents who responded to our survey at three of the schools, the social workers' efforts to keep them informed were paying off. Table 6 reveals that the great majority of parents surveyed thought the school was doing "a good job" in this regard.

### Percent of Parents Responding

#### "This school is doing a good job telling me about my child."

<i>School</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Not Sure/No Opinion</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
Cary Reynolds Indian Creek* McLendon* Montclair**	33	94% (31)	6% (2)	
Oakcliff	27	85% (23)	15% (4)	
<b>Totals</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>90% (54)</b>	<b>10% (6)</b>	

Table 6. \*Not enough data. \*\*Did not administer the question.

# Lessons Learned

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THE PRIMARY PURPOSE OF A DEMONSTRATION PROJECT is to find out “what works.” Over the course of four years, a number of lessons were learned about how schools can effectively support the personal, emotional, social, and cultural adjustment of international children and their families:

1. Dedicating one social worker to one school returns tremendous benefits to children, families, and schools. Personnel across all schools describe the impact of having a single social worker dedicated to serving the needs of immigrant and refugee children as “phenomenal,” “amazing,” “unbelievable.” The one school/one social worker design of the counseling demonstration program is, in the opinion of external evaluators, the single most significant factor in determining the magnitude of outcomes achieved.
2. As with any school change effort, existing staff need to “buy into” the proposed change. The greatest success was achieved by social workers who were effectively introduced into the schools by principals and leaders in the social work department. When social workers were not effectively introduced into the schools, and when their roles were not made clear to personnel, they had more difficulty getting their grant-supported initiatives underway.
3. Effectively supporting the social, emotional, personal, and educational needs of immigrant and refugee children and their families necessitates a “holistic” approach to problem-solving – approaches that sometimes appear to cross the line between school counseling and family counseling, for instance. Grant funded social workers had the unusual opportunity to devote substantial hours to counseling parents and children, calling and visiting the homes, and ushering families through the maze of services available in the wider community. International families are usually coping with a confluence of challenging situations – cultural, psychological, economic, familial, and health-related.
4. Direct intensive communication with children and their families served to expedite the adjustment process. Because the social workers were dedicated to one school, they could spend a great deal of time with individual children when necessary and

they could communicate far more frequently with the families than could typical school social workers who serve several schools.

5. Relatively small changes in the schools resulted in big payoffs to international children and their families. Creating a welcoming environment by having schools signs posted in various languages, and having individuals stationed in the main office that speak several languages are two such approaches that resulted in more parents coming more frequently into the schools.
6. Regular meetings among members of the grant-funded social work team were invaluable for sharing strategies and trouble shooting situations faced at the various schools.
7. When social workers are given the latitude that they were given in the counseling demonstration project to initiate “whatever it takes” to effectively serve children and their families, the result is a plethora of creative strategies that could be replicated elsewhere. The fact that these strategies were not systematically documented and archived through a public website, as planned in the original grant proposal, represents to some degree a missed opportunity for sharing the wealth of knowledge that was created.
8. At the outset of a project such as this, it is important for all staff involved to develop a shared understanding of the goals and objectives. Everyone should understand how terms will be used (e.g. parental participation; home-school connections). In the absence of this shared understanding, it is difficult to recognize accomplishments or shortcomings.
9. Although all the social workers were highly effective in working with international children and their families, bi-lingual social workers were able to provide a level of support to families that other social workers simply could not approach. Having bi-lingual social workers dedicated to schools with high numbers of international students is key.
10. All of us in highly international school communities – parents, students, school personnel, and community members alike – need to develop our intercultural competence in order to live and learn together effectively. Intercultural competence refers to the ability to recognize, accept, and adjust to cultural differences. School communities should devise ways to pursue this development with or without dedicated social workers, in an effort to sustain the goals and objectives of the counseling demonstration program in the coming years.

## Sustaining the Program

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TYPICALLY, CONVERSATIONS ABOUT SUSTAINABILITY start happening near the end of a program when discontinuation of funding looms on the horizon. In fact, continued funding is just one factor that determines a program's future. The Harvard Family Research Project suggests considering four additional indicators of sustainability: 1) the ideas, principles, beliefs, and values that underlie the initiative; 2) the relationships supported and encouraged by it; 3) the initiative's outcomes; and 4) funding for smaller projects or aspects of the original program.

Since the counseling demonstration program concluded in May 2003 at four of the five schools, and in May 2004 at the fifth elementary school which had benefited from a no-cost extension, social workers have been assigned to additional schools as they had been prior to the program. In a traditional sense, one would conclude, therefore, that the program has not successfully been sustained beyond its federal funding. However, based on the framework offered by the Harvard Family Research Project, it is likely that children and their families can continue to benefit into the future. We conclude by offering recommendations (Table 7) for assuring that international families and children in Dekalb County may continue to benefit from the efforts initiated through the Counseling Demonstration Program.

### Strategies for Sustaining the Program

To maintain the program's core principles, values, beliefs, and commitment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Infuse core ideas of the demonstration program into school policies and structures.</li><li>■ Apply the principles of the demonstration program to future projects.</li><li>■ Gain commitment from school personnel to continue the efforts supported by the demonstration program.</li></ul>
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<p>To maintain key relationships among people and organizations.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Seek out joint projects with community agencies that were involved in the counseling demonstration program.</li> <li>■ Go beyond one shot collaborations. Strive for continuous involvement with these agencies.</li> <li>■ Gain commitment from community organizations to continue the work initiated under the counseling demonstration program.</li> <li>■ Meet with teachers at each school to share the strategies dedicated social workers considered to be most effective in serving international kids and their families. Make sure personnel left behind know how to utilize those same strategies.</li> </ul>
<p>To maintain the outcomes achieved to date.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Make the expectation part of school policy that certain outcomes will be achieved for international children and their families.</li> <li>■ Share the outcomes achieved through the demonstration program with school personnel so that enthusiasm for maintaining the outcomes will remain high.</li> </ul>
<p>To secure additional funding for sub-projects or aspects of the counseling demonstration program.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Use outcome data from this project to persuade new funding sources that the program has merit.</li> <li>■ Pursue revenue-generating strategies to support related efforts.</li> <li>■ Seek funding from multiple sources to support initiatives once funded entirely through the federal government.</li> </ul>

Table 7.

# Appendices

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