



EVALUATION OF PEER GROUP CONNECTION - HIGH SCHOOL EDUCATION POLICY PROJECT SUMMARY

THE PROJECT

this project was funded through a *Department of Education*, Investing in Innovation (i3) Program development grant awarded to **The Center for Supportive Schools** (CSS) from 2016 to 2020.

PRG served as the external evaluator for the grant and designed an implementation and impact evaluation of CSS's high-school transition peer mentoring program, Peer Group Connection (PGC-HS).

THE INTERVENTION

PGC-HS is a school-based high school transition and cross-age peer mentoring program for ninth-grade students designed to improve their engagement in school and educational outcomes. The program leverages existing resources, such as school staff, parents, and student leaders, to create a supportive environment for transitioning high school students that encourages them to attend school, set personal goals, work hard, and make healthy decisions. By offering additional support to ninth-grade students, the program seeks to mitigate the problems associated with the transition to high school, such as disengagement from school, absenteeism, increases in disciplinary events, and declines in academic performance.

The program model includes a stakeholder team comprised of administrators, faculty, families, and students who support two faculty advisors who teach a leadership course to 11th and 12th grade peer leaders. CSS provides an 11-day training to prepare faculty advisors for teaching the leadership course, selecting peer leaders, and placing ninth graders into small peer groups.

During the school year, peer leaders facilitate a series of structured peer group sessions with ninth graders that emphasize relationship building and essential skill development. Peer leaders act as role models and mentors as ninth graders practice academic, social, and emotional skills, such as critical thinking, goalsetting, decision making, time management, teamwork, and communication.

THE STUDY

PRG conducted a rigorous impact and implementation evaluation of the PGC-HS program's effect on ninth-grade student outcomes. The impact study was an individual-level randomized controlled trial (RCT) where half of eligible ninth graders were randomly assigned to be offered the PGC-HS program (treatment) or a class-as-usual control condition. Program impact was measured on the following outcomes at the end of ninth grade: school attachment, suspensions and discipline referrals, GPA, social and emotional outcomes (e.g. decision-making skills), college expectations and aspirations.

SETTING

- Implemented in eight rural high schools across North Carolina

PARTICIPANTS

- A total of 1,351 ninth graders participated across three cohorts
- 36% of study participants identified as Black, 12% as Hispanic/Latino/a, 12% had an IEP

IMPLEMENTATION

- 6 of 8 study sites implemented the minimum recommended programming
- Of the 680 students assigned to PGC-HS, 61% (412) received the recommended minimum amount of programming

PGC-HS PROGRAM MODEL









OUTCOME MEASURES

- School attachment
- Suspensions & discipline referrals
- Attendance
- GPA
- Social and emotional outcomes
- College expectations and aspirations

STUDY FINDINGS

Implementation of PGC varied across the eight study sites with schools offering between 13 to 32 peer group sessions over the course of the school year. Two schools fell short of implementing the minimum recommended amount of programming for students, 18 sessions.

Given the varied programming implementation and dosage, PRG estimated program impact on the full sample of students, and conducted exploratory quasi-experimental analyses to estimate the impact of receiving the recommended dosage of sessions. Findings from both sets of estimates are noted below.

	Full Sample	High-Dosage	
	↑	↑	Both sets of findings indicate that students in the PGC condition report higher levels of attachment to their school at the end of ninth grade than students in the control condition.
	↓	↓	Both sets of findings indicate that students in the PGC condition were less likely to be suspended or receive a disciplinary referral in ninth grade than control students.
	—	↑	Overall findings indicate that PGC and control students attended the same number of days of school in ninth grade. Exploratory estimates, however, indicate that students who received the recommended amount of programming attended 1.5 more days of school than similar control students.
	—	↑	Overall findings show that PGC and control students earned similar GPAs at the end of 9th grade. Exploratory findings, however, indicate students who received the recommended amount of programming earned 0.15 grade points higher than similar students not offered the program.
	—	↑	Overall findings show that PGC and control students self-reported similar levels of decision-making skills and peer attitudes toward academic achievement at the end of ninth grade. Exploratory findings, however, suggest that students who got the recommended programming self-reported higher scores than similar control students.
	↑	—	Overall findings indicate that students assigned to PGC were more likely to say they expected to go to college than control students at the end of ninth grade. This trend was not observed among the subset of students who got the recommended programming and similar control counterparts.

CONCLUSIONS

- PGC-HS is a complex, multi-session intervention and implementation varied across study sites. Most, but not all, sites implemented the recommended minimum number of peer group sessions during the school year.
- Taken together, findings from our evaluation suggest that, when implemented well, offering PGC-HS could help improve outcomes for students making the transition from middle to high school.
- Main findings indicate that offering PGC, with variable degrees of fidelity, may have modest impact on a limited selection of outcomes (attachment, discipline, and expectations for attending college).
- Findings from the exploratory analyses indicate that students who received the recommended amount of programming also had higher attendance, GPA, and self-reported social emotional learning scores.
- PGC-HS would benefit from additional research that examines the program's impact through the later grades and graduation.

See PRG's full manuscript in JREE at [this link](#).

Questions? Contact education@policyandresearch.com

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