



EVALUATION OF PEER GROUP CONNECTION MIDDLE SCHOOL EDUCATION POLICY PROJECT SUMMARY

THE PROJECT

This project was funded through a *Department of Education*, Education Innovation and Research (EIR) Program early-phase grant awarded to **The Center for Supportive Schools (CSS)** from 2017 to 2022.

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

THE INTERVENTION

PGC-MS is a school-based middle school transition and cross-age peer mentoring program for sixth-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 sixth-grade students, the program seeks to mitigate the problems associated with the transition to middle 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 eighth grade peer leaders. CSS provides an 10-day training to prepare faculty advisors for teaching the leadership course, selecting peer leaders, and placing sixth graders into small peer groups.

During the school year, peer leaders facilitate a series of structured peer group sessions with sixth graders that emphasize relationship building and essential skill development. Peer leaders act as role models and mentors as sixth 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-MS program's effect on sixth-grade student outcomes. The implementation study was a mixed-methods evaluation that assessed the degree to which the PGC-MS program was implemented as intended each year. The impact study was an individual-level randomized controlled trial (RCT) where half of eligible sixth graders were randomly assigned to be offered the PGC-MS program (treatment) or a class-as-usual control condition. Program impact was measured on attendance and courses passed at the end of sixth grade.

SETTING

- Implemented in nine middle schools across North Carolina, Maryland, and New Jersey

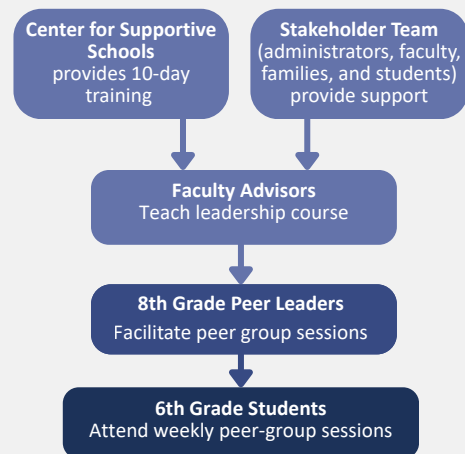
PARTICIPANTS

- A total of 1,902 sixth graders participated across three cohorts
- 34% of study participants identified as Hispanic/Latino/a, 29% as White, and 27% as Black
- 10% of students were English language learners, 8% had an IEP

IMPLEMENTATION

- The COVID-19 pandemic abruptly ended implementation during the second cohort (2019-20 SY)

PGC-MS PROGRAM MODEL



OUTCOME MEASURES



School attendance



Courses passed

STUDY FINDINGS

Implementation Evaluation

There was considerable variation in the implementation of PGC-MS across schools and cohorts. Key deviations from the planned implementation of PGC-MS included schools not meeting the minimum recommended threshold of sessions (18) held during the school year and not implementing all the core sessions recommended by the program developers.

- This five-year study was halted by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March of 2020. At that time, program implementation for Cohort 2 (2019–20) was discontinued after all study sites either shut down or transitioned to remote learning for the remainder of the school year.
- Only 3 of the 16 implementation sections, all from the school year preceding the pandemic, implemented the program to fidelity in terms of the number and type of sessions held. All three offered more than 18 outreach sessions and students at these schools attended an average of 16–17 outreach sessions.
- In the years during and after the pandemic (2019-20 and 2021-22), schools held an average of just nine outreach sessions; none held the minimum target of 18.
- Schools that participated in the final cohort (2021-22) continued to feel the reverberations of the COVID-19 pandemic. Stakeholder team leaders described challenges surrounding a chaotic readjustment to in-person learning at the start of the school year, as well as prolonged and frequent staff and student absences due to mandatory quarantines. Schools also faced challenges related to staffing shortages, which negatively affected their ability to identify staff for the faculty advisor roles.
- Overall, schools that saw the most success implementing the program had strong buy in and support from the school's leadership and were able to identify two faculty advisors who were not overburdened with competing priorities such that they were able to teach the daily leadership class and oversee weekly outreach sessions.

Impact Evaluation



Impact estimates did not support the hypotheses that offering PGC-MS would improve students' attendance during their sixth grade year. Students randomly assigned to the PGC-MS condition attended the same number of days of school as students assigned to the class-as-usual control condition.



Impact estimates did not support the hypotheses that offering PGC-MS would improve students' course performance during their sixth grade year. Students randomly assigned to the PGC-MS condition passed the same number of classes as students assigned to the class-as-usual control condition.

CONCLUSIONS

- Impact findings indicate that offering the PGC-MS program to sixth-grade students did not comparatively improve their school attendance or course performance.
- Null findings are not surprising at the end of this study given the COVID-19 pandemic's severe disruption to program implementation and outcome data quality. For these reasons, findings do not represent a reasonable test of the program's effect under more routine circumstances.
- Future work should continue to examine how PGC-MS can positively impact students during the transition from elementary to middle school.