Data sharing, incentives, and relationship building are critical components of using data to support student success

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Overview

Over the past decade, researchers, funders, and practitioners have come to an important common understanding: Good teaching is necessary for students' success in school and work, but students also need additional support to meet their academic and non-academic needs, including social-emotional development. This support can take the form of social, emotional, and health interventions and services, as well as college preparation and career development and training. When implemented in schools, this approach is referred to as an integrated student supports model.[1]

youthCONNECT is an integrated student supports model developed by Venture Philanthropy Partners (VPP) that is currently being implemented in Prince George's County, MD, in partnership with the Prince George's County government. VPP commissioned Child Trends to serve as the evaluation partner for youthCONNECT.

Across the first five years of the youthCONNECT initiative at Suitland High School, Child Trends and VPP have learned many lessons about collecting and using data, that can help inform the work of programs, practitioners, and evaluators conducting similar initiatives. This brief is the first in a series of reports and focuses on the critical—and often challenging—first step of collecting data in a school setting. We offer three lessons from our experience at Suitland High School that we hope will inform the efforts of similar collaboratives to collect—and use—data effectively.

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[1] Moore, K.A., Lantos, H., Jones, R., Schindler, A., Belford, J., Sacks, V., & Harper, K. (2017). *Making the grade: A progress report and next steps for integrated student supports*. Bethesda, MD: Child Trends.

The lessons, discussed in greater detail later in the brief, are as follows:

- Data sharing agreements are critical components of a data collection effort—but the process for developing and executing these agreements is difficult and time consuming.

- Incentives are key to collecting consent from a large number of students in a school setting.

- Relationships underpin successful data collection and reflection efforts.

Future reports in this series will focus on other aspects of youthCONNECT at Suitland High School, including testing the theory behind the youthCONNECT model and exploring student outcomes.

Background of Ready for Work

In 2014, VPP, in collaboration with Prince George's County, MD, launched Ready for Work, a multi-year initiative that aims to address the academic and employment needs of youth in the county to ensure that they are college- and career-ready upon high school graduation. youthCONNECT is one of three strategies that make up the Ready for Work initiative:

- **Strengthen career and technical education**. This strategy involves increasing student's technical and academic skills by enhancing the school system's implementation of Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs at both the system and school-levels.

- **Expand youthCONNECT model to Prince George's County.** This strategy focuses on equipping youth with foundational life skills that prepare them for adulthood. It fosters collaboration among several nonprofits and school leaders to offer wraparound services, such as tutoring, job readiness training, and case management, within high schools in Prince George's County to increase high school success and improve students' readiness for post-secondary education and employment.

- **Provide real work experiences.** This strategy connects youth with meaningful work experiences before they graduate from high school and relies on partnerships that VPP establishes with the County's Summer Youth Enrichment Program and with local employers.

Sharing findings with the school staff and administration, as well as with the nonprofit partner organizations, is one of the most important initial uses of the data.

Background of youthCONNECT at Suitland High School

Starting in 2010, VPP developed and tested youthCONNECT through a Social Innovation Fund (SIF) initiative. VPP launched youthCONNECT to improve economic opportunities and educational outcomes among low-income young people ages 14 to 24 in the Greater

Washington Region. Through the SIF-supported youthCONNECT initiative, VPP tested the value of bringing together high-performing youth-serving nonprofit organizations to operate as a network. The nonprofit organizations, called Network Partners, developed a shared set of outcomes focused on improving youth's post-secondary participation, employment, earnings, and healthy behaviors. The Network Partners also met regularly to connect as peers and share resources and best practices about program delivery and internal data management practices. As these nonprofits learned more about the services offered by their peer organizations, they began to provide student referrals and work together collaboratively to tackle shared challenges affecting young people in the region. The initial work for this initiative clarified the value of a place-based approach, where multiple supportive organizations work collaboratively in a school to meet student needs.

In 2013, the Prince George's County Executive invited VPP and the youthCONNECT Network Partners to replicate the model in the county to strengthen youth outcomes. VPP and Prince George's County leaders conducted an initial needs assessment that included using information at the student, school, and community levels to identify the communities where youthCONNECT could be implemented. Suitland High School is a large suburban public school where about 90 percent of enrolled students are African American, 7 percent are Hispanic, and more than half are low-income (with more than 55 percent eligible for free or reduced-price meals). The school has a strong visual and performing arts magnet program and is well known for its career and technical education programs, such as an NAF Academy of Finance. VPP and the Network Partners selected Suitland High School because its principal was interested in the supports these nonprofits could provide his students, and for the combination of capacity and ample student need across multiple dimensions. Five area nonprofit partners are working with VPP to implement the youthCONNECT model (see figure 1 for more information about the services that each Network Partner provides):

- Hillside Work-Scholarship Connection

- Maryland Multicultural Youth Center

- Peer Forward–National Capital Region (formerly known as College Summit)

- Urban Alliance

- Year Up-National Capital Region

Figure 1. youthCONNECT Partner Organizations at Suitland High School

Program	Description of services
Hillside Work-Scholarship Connection	- Caring adult provides mentoring and support at home, school, and work - Job readiness training and job placement - Tutoring and college preparation services - Academic enrichment - Life skills training
Maryland Multicultural Youth Centers	- Ongoing individualized case management and mentoring from a caring adult (mentor/advocate) - Individual needs assessment and development of youth-driven goals - Crisis support (social services, counseling, etc.)
Urban Alliance[2]	- Professional development training, including workshops on pre-employment, communication, and 21st century skills - Workshops are embedded in CTE classes and classroom teachers grade the assignments for course credit
Peer Forward[3]	- Training for peer leaders (11th and 12th grade students) - Peer leaders operate school-wide campaigns that promote applying for college, applying for financial aid, and connecting students with college and career information and supports
Year Up[4]	Post-graduation program that provides: - Job readiness skills, including hands-on technical skill development and professional skills - Courses eligible for college credits - Professional internships - Wraparound supports

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[2] An adapted version of the Urban Alliance model is implemented at Suitland High School. The traditional model is an intensive year-long training and internship experience for high school seniors as well as services for program alumni.
[3] Peer Forward is formerly known as College Summit
[4] A select number of program slots are reserved for Suitland High School graduates.

The youthCONNECT Network Partners began serving students in the 2015-2016 school year. The Network Partners worked together to develop a set of shared outcomes they would focus on, in partnership with school staff, which include improvements in attendance, grades, 9th grade promotion rates, and rates of completion of Free Applications for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Figure 3 presents the logic model for youthCONNECT at Suitland High School.

The Ready for Work in-school director, who manages youthCONNECT's day-to-day operations and oversees the collaboration between the five Network Partners and school staff, started in the 2016-2017 school year. Child Trends works collaboratively with VPP, the five nonprofit Network Partners, Suitland High School, and Prince George's County Public Schools to collect and analyze data for youthCONNECT at Suitland High School from students, program providers, and the school system.

How youthCONNECT Data are Collected and Used at Suitland High School

When an intervention is implemented to improve student outcomes, it can take several years to see evidence that it is working—particularly for outcomes such as academic achievement, educational attainment, and employment. However, data-driven organizations do not wait years to find out if their programs are making a difference. Instead, they map out a detailed theory of change and logic model, and then begin collecting and monitoring data on every component in the logic model chain.

The youthCONNECT theory of change is that providing college and career preparation services, life skills training, and a connection to a caring adult through a coordinated network of nonprofit organizations working in collaboration with school staff will improve students' healthy behaviors, their engagement in school, and their social and emotional skills; and that these improvements will lead to stronger academic outcomes, high school success, and ultimately to postsecondary engagement and employment. By tracking and regularly reviewing data on the short-term, non-academic outcomes, the Network Partners are able to observe intermediate outcomes almost in real time, and to use that information to adjust programming to better serve students. At Suitland High School, VPP also wanted to ensure that the entire school could learn from the powerful data being collected and made it a priority to share these data with school staff.

A theory of change is nothing more than a theory until data are collected and analyzed to test its assumptions.

Child Trends and VPP began collecting data from three sources in school year 2017-2018: administrative data from Prince George's County Schools, data from a survey administered to Suitland High School students, and data collected by the youthCONNECT partner organizations (see figure 2). Because we have data from all three sources at the individual student level, we

can link survey data provided by a student about their needs and outcomes to data on services that the student has received from the nonprofit partners, and then to data on the student's academic and behavioral outcomes from the school district. The result is a linked data file that gives the youthCONNECT Network and the school as a whole a unique, holistic, view of students. Some students represented in the data are receiving services from youthCONNECT Network Partners, and some are not, which allows us to compare the outcomes of students in youthCONNECT to those who are not participating. VPP and Child Trends have used this data for two primary purposes to date: to identify and monitor needs among students in the school and to validate the youthCONNECT theory of change.

Figure 2. youthCONNECT at Suitland High School study uses three data sources
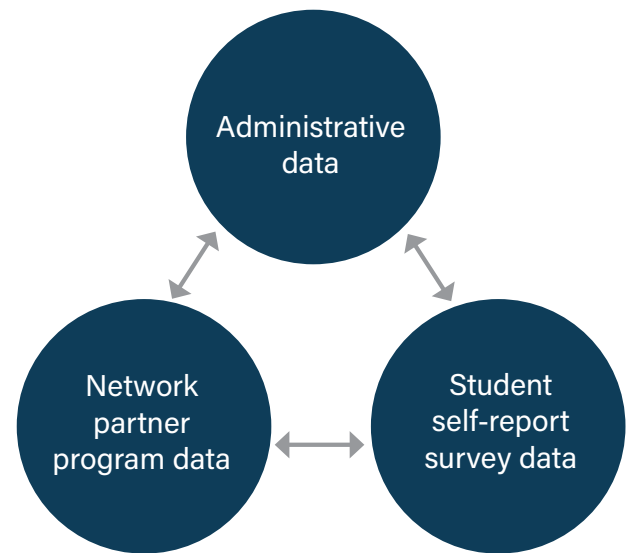
Using data to identify and monitor needs of Suitland High School students

Sharing findings with the school staff and administration, as well as with the nonprofit partner organizations, to inform their work with students is one of the most important initial uses of the data. Ultimately, the goal is not to simply collect data, but to use the data to help the school and the youthCONNECT Network Partners do their jobs better. Following each survey administration, Child Trends and VPP use data walks to share findings with teachers, administrators, guidance counselors, and staff from youthCONNECT Network Partner organizations. During the data walks, participants rotate in small groups through four to five stations, each of which focuses on one or two data points from the survey, to learn about, react to, and discuss the findings. Each station is facilitated by a member of the Child Trends research team and an evaluation staff member from a Network Partner, who provide a high-level overview of the data point(s) and identify potential take-away messages. A VPP staff member rotates with each group to encourage participants to think about and discuss the implications of the data for their work with students.

The data walks have two main purposes. First, the data walks serve as a feedback loop on student outcomes to the practitioners and educators who work most closely with students. The survey provides information about student attitudes and behaviors that the school would not otherwise have access to. Because data walks happen a few months after the data are collected, they provide close to real-time information—a pulse check on how students are feeling and behaving. The school leadership encourages all staff to attend the data walks and has invited administrators from feeder middle schools and other area high schools, as well as Prince George's County executives, to participate. In addition to holding data walks twice a year as new survey data are collected, Child Trends and VPP conducted a data walk during a 2018

summer retreat and planning meeting with school administrators. The format of the data walks encourages discussion and thoughtful reflection on the student outcomes, and the number of teachers and other staff who attend has increased each year.

A second purpose of the data walks is to provide the research team with important on-the-ground context that gives meaning to the data. For example, the survey data indicated that Suitland students have high educational expectations; in fact, over 90 percent said they were confident they would complete their high school degree and continue their education. However, a much lower percentage of students reported feeling confident that they could do the school work assigned to them. In exploring this gap between expectations and self-efficacy, school and nonprofit staff shared that while students have high expectations for themselves, they do not always have an understanding of what is required to achieve their goals, such as knowing what grade point average they must have to be accepted to a four-year college. As a result, there is sometimes a disconnect between a student's educational aspirations and their readiness for postsecondary education. Contextual information like this helps the research team draw more informed conclusions from the quantitative data to better support the work of the Network partners.

Using data to validate the youthCONNECT theory of change

A theory of change is nothing more than a theory until data are collected and analyzed to test its assumptions. Our analyses of the Suitland High School youthCONNECT data collected thus far have found consistent support for the model's expectations. For example, we have found significant associations between social-emotional outcomes and academic outcomes. Forthcoming briefs will take a deeper look at the relationship between the components of the youthCONNECT logic model, in particular the changes we would expect to see in students.

Lessons for the Field

Negotiating critical data sharing agreements is a lengthy and meticulous process, dominated by concerns about privacy and with no guarantee of success.

The first two years of establishing youthCONNECT at Suitland High School were focused on three things: (1) building the network of nonprofit partners, (2) implementing programming, and (3) developing a data sharing agreement between VPP and Prince George's County Public Schools. The resulting memorandum of understanding ensures that data sharing between VPP, Child Trends, and the school system is conducted in a way that ensures student confidentiality,

and lays out the responsibilities of each organization involved in the data collection process. Getting this data agreement in place required at least a dozen meetings and phone calls between VPP, Prince George's County Public Schools and Child Trends. Each organization had important privacy concerns, reflecting both statutory requirements and concern for students; data rights requirements that needed to be considered; and, their own internal review and approval process. Additionally, VPP and each youthCONNECT Network Partner negotiated agreements to ensure that the partner organizations—which all have their own privacy policies to ensure the confidentiality of their participants—can share their student rosters and data on services provided to students with Child Trends. Although it took many months of perseverance and negotiation, without these efforts and the resulting agreements, the research team would not have been able to combine data from the three sources—student surveys, administrative records, and nonprofit partner records—into the unique data set that drives the learning and evaluation for the youthCONNECT Network.

Getting annual consent from a large number of students is difficult, but incentives boost response rates.

There are nearly 2,000 students enrolled at Suitland High School each year, and we aim to have a representative sample of students to participate in data collection. Additionally, the Prince George's County School District requires that researchers obtain active consent for data collection from students and their parents and/or guardians annually. We tested and honed the approach to getting consent from a large number of students, in order to improve response rates each school year.

In the first two years of the study, we offered several opportunities for students to receive incentives for returning completed parent and student consent forms. Students who returned forms were entered into a drawing for a chance to receive $25 gift cards. Classrooms with a high number of forms returned got a small classroom party and the teachers in those classrooms received a $50 gift card; in addition, one student in each grade who took the survey was selected to receive an iPad. This strategy resulted in a modest response rate the first year—about 20 percent of the student body consented to be in the study.

By building relationships characterized by mutual trust and respect with key administrators and staff at Suitland High School, Child Trends and VPP have been able to implement and learn from each step of the data collection process, and to share the results with the school community.

Because we recognized that parents are harder to reach than students, and that the study team would have few opportunities to speak to parents about the study directly, in the second year, we introduced an additional incentive tied to Back to School Night at Suitland High School. We sent a team of researchers, dressed in brightly colored Ready for Work shirts, to Back to School Night to talk to families about the study. We offered entry into a drawing for $125 in gift cards for returning forms that night ($100 for the parent/guardian and $25 for the student). Although we got a particularly high response rate on Back to School Night, the initial classroom response declined in the second year, resulting in about a 20 percent total consent rate again that year.

In the third year of the study, we offered a $10 gift card to every student who returned completed forms by a deadline in early October, and every teacher who helped to distribute consent forms was given a $10 gift card; we also continued with offering classroom-level incentives and having a team from Child Trends attend Back to School Night. Child Trends and VPP staff visited every classroom prior to the incentive deadline to give out gift cards to students who had returned their forms, in order to reward them and to "advertise" the incentive to their classmates who had not yet returned the forms. By the October deadline, nearly one third of the student body were consented into the study—more than in the entire previous school year. Although tracking and distributing these individual incentives required significantly more staff time and financial resources to execute, the initial results indicate that these efforts were worth the investment.

Strong, trusting relationships are central to successful data collection and reflection in school settings.

A data collection effort of this scale would not be possible without the support of school leadership and staff. For data collection to succeed, school administrators must be comfortable with having a third party collect data from students; they also must be open to whatever the findings may say about the school and students. On a practical level, there are myriad details that must fall into place for data collection to be successful—from distributing and collecting paper consent forms, to coordinating schedules to find the optimal time for survey administration, to cleaning a large cafeteria in the 30 minutes between breakfast and survey administration. At the same time, school staff face multiple competing demands on their time, and often have to drop everything to deal with urgent student needs that arise throughout the school day, meaning that they have very little time to devote to the data collection process.

Additionally, at a large high school in which staff and students have likely seen many community initiatives come and go, some of these initiatives deliver on their promises, while others fall short. It is no surprise, then, that school staff might be wary of individuals coming into the school, asking staff to spend their limited (or perhaps even nonexistent) resources and time to help the organization not only implement programming, but collect data from students. This may be exacerbated in communities of color that have historically been disrespected or harmed by research studies.

By building relationships characterized by mutual trust and respect with key administrators and staff at Suitland High School, Child Trends and VPP have been able to implement and learn from each step of the data collection process, and to share the results with the school community. The research team and VPP have worked together with administrators to develop processes for data collection and reflection (such as the data walks) that reflect Child Trends' expertise on best practices, and the administrators' expertise on what works for their school. Additionally, because the research team is not in the school each day, they have to rely on school staff to observe and report back on why something did not work as intended, and to troubleshoot ways to improve for the next round. Having a Ready for Work in-school director in place at Suitland High School has been essential in this respect. Because the in-school director has relationships with teachers and administrators at the school, they often share feedback that he is able to pass on to the research team. He is also able to alert the research team when an issue arises at the school that requires the staff's immediate attention, so that the research team is better able to time their requests, or scale them back completely, to avoid overburdening staff.

What's Next?

While it is important to share information about the process of collecting and disseminating data, we also want to share findings arising from this collaborative work. In the coming months, we will release additional briefs that highlight lessons learned about youthCONNECT at Suitland High School from analyses of the survey, program, and administrative data.

We will be using these three data sources to explore questions such as:

- Are the outcomes in the youthCONNECT theory of change related to each other in the way that was expected when the model was developed? For example, are stronger social-emotional competencies associated with better academic outcomes or career and college readiness?

- What are the characteristics and experiences of Suitland High School students?

- How are youthCONNECT students' academic and non-academic outcomes improving over time?

- Is the change in youthCONNECT students' outcomes over time different from students who are not served by youthCONNECT?

Figure 3. youthCONNECT at Suitland High School logic model