



Relationships with Caring Adults and Social and Emotional Strengths Are Related to High School Academic Achievement

Testing the youthCONNECT Theory of Change

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Introduction

youthCONNECT is an integrated student supports initiative, developed by Venture Philanthropy Partners (VPP), that is being implemented in Prince George's County, Maryland, in partnership with the Prince George's County government and Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS). At Suitland High School, the youthCONNECT theory of change posits that providing college and career preparation services, life skills training, and a connection to a caring adult—all via a coordinated network of five nonprofit organizations working in collaboration with each other and with school staff—will improve students' healthy behaviors, engagement in school, and social and emotional skills. Additionally, youthCONNECT aims to leverage these improvements into stronger academic outcomes, high school success, and to postsecondary engagement and employment.

Using data from a student survey, school administrative records, and youthCONNECT Network Partner program data, Child Trends found evidence in support of this theory of change. In particular:

- Students who have a relationship with a caring adult—as well as students who have an adult to talk to about educational and career decisions—are more likely to report strong social and emotional outcomes, avoid risky behaviors, and have better academic outcomes.
- Students who report engaging in fewer risky behaviors have better academic outcomes.

This brief is the second in a series of reports describing youthCONNECT at Suitland High School. The first report reviewed the history of youthCONNECT and identified several lessons learned for collecting and using student data.¹ Upcoming reports will describe findings from the youthCONNECT evaluation and compare the outcomes of students served by youthCONNECT to their peers.

What is youthCONNECT?

- ▶ youthCONNECT is part of the Ready for Work initiative, which aims to increase students' high school success and improve their readiness for post-secondary education and employment.
- ▶ youthCONNECT is a collaboration among several nonprofits and school leaders to offer wraparound services—such as tutoring, job readiness training, and case management—delivered by caring adult staff in the school building. The nonprofit Network Partners work toward a shared set of outcomes, outlined in the youthCONNECT logic model (Figure 1).
- ▶ youthCONNECT is implemented alongside the other two Ready for Work strategies:
 - Strengthen career and technical education (CTE). VPP works to enhance the Prince George's County school system's implementation of CTE programs at both the system and school levels.
 - Provide real work experiences. This strategy connects youth with meaningful work experiences before they graduate from high school and relies on partnerships that VPP established with Prince George's County's Summer Youth Enrichment Program, with PGCPS' Career and Technical Education Department, and with local employers.



About 1,900 students attend Suitland High School each year, and the findings in this report draw on data from 721 students—some of whom received youthCONNECT programming and some who did not—who completed a student survey that Child Trends and VPP developed to assess short- and mid-term outcomes from the youthCONNECT theory of change. These students and their parents or guardians also gave permission for Child Trends to access their academic records, including for grades, attendance, and suspensions. About 60 percent of the 721 students self-identified as female, and about 60 percent were in either 11th or 12th grade. Child Trends analyzed the data to predict various outcomes, controlling for several key demographic and economic characteristics: gender, race and ethnicity (although about 90% of students at Suitland High School, and in the data for this analysis, are Black and non-Hispanic), eligibility for Free and Reduced Price Meals (FARMS), age, and grade level. For more details on the methods used in this analysis, see the text box at the end of this report.

The importance of a caring adult

The youthCONNECT model makes a key assumption that a young person’s consistent, responsive, and caring relationship with at least one adult can help put them on a path to success. Building relationships between program staff and students is a core component of all programs that make up the youthCONNECT at Suitland High School Network. A wealth of research has identified the benefits, for youth, of relationships with a committed adult, including teachers, coaches, afterschool program staff, and informal and formal mentors. These adults may primarily provide emotional support or provide specific goal-oriented support, such as guiding youth in exploring careers or navigating the college application process. In previous research, youth who have a connection to a caring adult, or connections to adult mentors, have been found more likely to experience positive social, psychological, academic, and health outcomes.ⁱⁱ

As anticipated in the youthCONNECT theory of change, students who have a positive relationship with at least one adult:

- ▶ Have higher academic self-efficacy
- ▶ Are more engaged in school
- ▶ Have lower rates of substance use
- ▶ Have higher GPAs
- ▶ Are more likely to be promoted to the next grade

youthCONNECT partners are located in the Suitland High School building, in a dedicated program space that serves as a safe space for youth to meet with friends and program staff or embedded in classrooms. Students may not necessarily distinguish youthCONNECT staff from other caring and supportive school staff or adults in the building. Other students may associate youthCONNECT staff with their organization, rather than the school. For this reason, the survey asks three different questions about relationships with caring adults.

Among the Suitland students who took the student survey, those who reported having a supportive non-family member adult in their life were more likely to report several positive social, emotional, and academic strengths, and fewer risky behaviors (see Table 1). Youth who reported having an adult at school to talk to about important educational and career decisions also reported higher academic self-efficacy, school engagement, and social competence, while also reporting fewer risky behaviors such as stealing or fighting (negative outward behaviors often referred to as externalizing behaviors), using substances, or having sex—relative to their peers who “strongly disagreed” that they had an adult to talk to about important decisions. A positive relationship with an adult was not as strongly related to self-regulation, feelings of loneliness, depression, and sadness (generally referred to as internalizing symptoms), or with promotion to the next grade level. On average, students with a caring adult had higher attendance, were less likely to fail a class, and had higher GPAs.



Table 1. Relationships with caring adults are related to a number of positive student outcomes

	Social, emotional, and academic strengths							Avoiding risky behaviors			Academic outcomes				
	Academic self-efficacy	School engagement	Friends want student to do well in school	Friends want to go to college	Social competence	Anger management	Fewer internalizing symptoms	Fewer externalizing behaviors	Less substance	Has not had sex	Higher attendance	Not chronically absent	Passing all classes	Cumulative GPA	Promotion to the next grade
Youth has adult(s) at school to talk to about career and educational decisions.	✓	✓	✓	-	✓	-	-	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Youth has teacher/school staff who know them well and care about them.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	-	-	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	-	✓	✓
Youth has adult(s) in neighborhood, youth, or religious organization who know them well and care about them.	✓	✓	-	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	-	-	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: (✓) indicates that the variable was significantly related to the social, emotional, risky behavior, or academic outcome in regression analyses controlling for student gender, race/ethnicity, age, grade, and Free and Reduced Price Meals (FARMS) status. (-) indicates that the variable was not significantly related to the outcome. Significance was determined using a p-value of 0.05.



Nonacademic factors are associated with academic outcomes

The youthCONNECT model—along with integrated student supports approaches more broadly—is built on the understanding that social, emotional, and behavioral factors affect youth’s ability to learn and thrive in school. These factors can affect academic performance just as much as the quality of academic instruction.ⁱⁱⁱ The youthCONNECT partners focus on supporting the youth they serve with important academic and employment-readiness skills, but also teach critical life skills and support students’ social and emotional well-being.

We found that several social, emotional, and academic strengths were related to academic performance among the Suitland students. In particular, school engagement, having friends who want to go to college, and self-regulation skills were associated with higher attendance, higher GPAs, a lower likelihood of failing a class, and a higher likelihood of being promoted to the next grade. We also found that students who reported engaging in fewer risky behaviors had more positive academic outcomes. On the other hand, students who reported more frequent internalizing symptoms (such as feelings of depression) appeared more likely to fail a class, but otherwise performed about as well in school as their peers.

As anticipated in the youthCONNECT theory of change, students who:

- ▶ avoid risky behaviors
- ▶ have better anger management skills
- ▶ are more engaged in school
- ▶ have peers who want to go to college

have better attendance higher grades, and are more likely to be promoted to the next grade.

Table 2. Students with stronger social, emotional, and academic strengths and fewer risky behaviors have better academic outcomes

	Higher attendance	Not chronically absent	Passing all classes	Cumulative GPA	Promotion to the next grade
Social, emotional, and academic strengths					
Academic self-efficacy	-	-	✓	✓	✓
School engagement	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Having friends who want student to do well in school	-	-	-	-	-
Having friends who want to go to college	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Social competence	✓	-	✓	✓	✓
Anger management	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Less frequent internalizing symptoms	-	-	✓	-	-
Avoiding risky behaviors					
Fewer externalizing behaviors (e.g., stealing)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Less substance use	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Has not had sex	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: (✓) indicates that the variable was significantly related to the academic outcome in regression analyses controlling for student gender, race/ethnicity, age, grade, and Free and Reduced Price Meals (FARMs) status. (-) indicates that the variable was not significantly related to the outcome. Significance was determined using a p-value of 0.05.



Implications

Our findings indicate that the building blocks of the youthCONNECT model—development of relationships between students and a caring adult, the development of social and emotional competencies, and the reduction of risky behaviors—are interrelated in ways that the youthCONNECT theory of change would predict. Importantly, they are also associated with positive academic outcomes. This adds to a substantial body of prior research to suggest that a multi-year longitudinal evaluation may find that youthCONNECT services enhance the life prospects of students. Upcoming reports will explore the differences between youthCONNECT students and their peers.

Methods

All findings reported in this brief are from multivariate linear or logistic regressions run on data from 721 students (from among approximately 2,000 students enrolled at Suitland High School) who took the student survey in either Spring 2018 or Spring 2019. Students did not have to be youthCONNECT participants to take the survey. Responding students may not be fully representative of all students at Suitland High School in those years, particularly given that the students who took the survey had to return two correctly completed consent forms by a designated deadline, as well as show up to take the survey. The survey asked students to report on a range of topics, including risky and healthy behaviors, social and emotional skills, relationships with peers and adults, and educational aspirations. The caring adult questions asked students how many school staff and how many adults in their neighborhood, religious organization, or youth organization “know you well and care about you.” The survey also asked students whether they agreed with the statement that there was an adult they could talk to at school about important educational and career decisions. Academic outcomes come from administrative records provided by Prince George’s County Public Schools, and all other outcomes described in this report come from the student self-report survey. Because this report is primarily concerned with answering the question of whether individual components of the logic model are related to each other in the hypothesized ways, the regressions to test each component included only the given variable of interest (for example, academic self-efficacy) and key demographic and economic control variables.

ⁱ Sacks, V., Jones, R.M., Redd, Z., & Moore, K.A. (2020). *Data sharing, incentives, and relationship building are critical components of using data to support student success*. Bethesda, MD: Child Trends.

ⁱⁱ For example, see: Li, Junlei, & Julian, M.M. (2012). Developmental relationships as the active ingredient: A unifying working hypothesis of “what works” across intervention settings. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 82(2), 157-166; Murphey, D., Bandy, T., Schmitz, H., Moore, K.A. (2013). *Caring adults: Important for positive child well-being*. Bethesda, MD: Child Trends; Scales, P.C., Benson, P.L., Bartig, K., Streit, K., Moore, K.A., Lippman, L., ...Theokas, C. (2006). *Keeping America's promise to children and youth: A Search Institute-Child Trends report on the results of the America's Promise National Telephone Polls of Children, Teenagers, and Parents*. Retrieved from <https://www.search-institute.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/2006NationalPromisesStudy.pdf>; Scales, P.C., Boat, A., & Pekel, K. (2020). *Defining and measuring social capital for young people: A practical review of the literature on resource-full relationships*. Minneapolis: Search Institute. Report for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation; Theodos, B. (2016, April 20). *For at-risk teens, the benefits of a caring adult last beyond youth*. Urban Institute. <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/risk-teens-benefits-caring-adult-last-beyond-youth>.

ⁱⁱⁱ 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.



Figure 1. youthCONNECT at Suitland High School logic model

