



The youthCONNECT Integrated Student Supports Model Shows a Relationship Between Caring Adults and Students' Academic Outcomes

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Introduction

youthCONNECT is an integrated student supports' initiative developed by Venture Philanthropy Partners (VPP), a philanthropic organization in the greater Washington, DC region, to address barriers to academic success for adolescents. This brief is the third in a series describing findings from an evaluation of youthCONNECT at Suitland High School, where the initiative was implemented from 2015 to 2020. Broadly, we found that youthCONNECT's *theory of change*—or the framework underlying its efforts to enhance student outcomes—is valid. In other words, there is evidence supporting this theory of change—in particular, that the presence of a caring adult in a young person's life is strongly associated with their academic success.

In this brief, we first describe the youthCONNECT initiative and its theory of change for improving students' outcomes. To help policymakers and practitioners understand how we arrived at our findings, we briefly outline our analysis to test the

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 4).
- ▶ 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 PGCP's Career and Technical Education Department, and with local employers.



validity of youthCONNECT's theory of change. Next, we summarize the pathways by which the presence of a caring adult can improve student outcomes. Finally, for other researchers and practitioners interested in learning more about our work, the Detailed Findings and Methods section provides an in-depth description of our analysis of the youthCONNECT theory of change.

About youthCONNECT and Its Theory of Change

In 2010, VPP received a Social Innovation Fund (SIF) grant to convene a network of high-performing youth-serving nonprofit organizations in the greater Washington, DC region to develop and implement the youthCONNECT model. In 2013, the Prince George's County (MD) Executive invited VPP to replicate the model in the county, as one strategy of a larger initiative to strengthen youth college and career outcomes called Ready for Work. As part of Ready for Work, VPP began to implement youthCONNECT at Suitland High School in Fall 2015 (see the [first brief](#) in this series for more information on the history of youthCONNECT).



Each implementation of youthCONNECT is tailored to the needs of youth in a specific community, but is always based on a common, broader theory of change (i.e., the framework, or pathways, by which a set of activities or programs can be expected to enhance outcomes for youth who receive or participate in these services). According to the youthCONNECT theory of change, if students are provided with college and career preparation services, life skills training, and a connection to a caring adult, they are likely to experience improved healthy behaviors, engagement in school, and social and emotional skills; these improvements, in turn, will ultimately lead to better academic outcomes (for more detail, see the youthCONNECT logic model in Figure 4). A key component in the youthCONNECT model is the presence of caring adults: These relationship(s) are the foundation from which youth build engagement in school and confidence in their abilities.

At Suitland High School, youthCONNECT aimed to provide students with connections to caring adults, who were generally teachers or staff members from a coordinated network of five nonprofit organizations. These organizations collaborated with each other and with school staff to provide wraparound supports to students that ranged from afterschool tutoring to connections to services that help meet students' basic needs.



About This Analysis

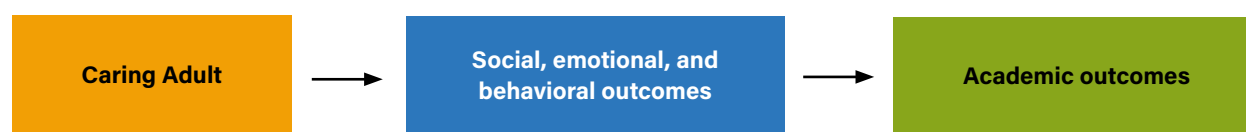
Our study team conducted a rigorous analysis to determine whether students at Suitland High School who had connections to caring adults had better social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes, and if so, whether those outcomes were related to better academic outcomes. This analysis extends and deepens our initial analyses—described in the [second brief](#) in this series—to assess the strength of youthCONNECT’s theory of change. In that analysis, we tested whether each component of youthCONNECT (connection with a caring adult; social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes; and academic outcomes) were each individually related to each other. We found that students with a connection to a caring adult had better social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes, and better academic outcomes. Additionally, we found that students with better social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes had better academic outcomes.

These initial findings were consistent with an evolving body of research that focuses primarily on how integrated student supports programs affect short-term improvements in social-emotional outcomes or longer-term improvements in academic outcomes. However, evaluations of integrated student supports programs have rarely explored the connections between short-term and long-term outcomes. In other words, while an increasing body of research has linked the presence of a caring adult in a young person’s life to their academic, social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes,ⁱⁱ little research has investigated the pathways through which these relationships operate in schools or in other programs.ⁱⁱⁱ

To fill this gap, we analyzed all components of the youthCONNECT theory of change (see Figure 1) together, to explore *how* caring adults are linked to academic outcomes, and how each of the youthCONNECT logic model components are interrelated. This analysis helps us better understand how having a caring adult might affect both short-term and longer-term outcomes at the same time.

Note that our analyses for this brief were not conducted to assess the effectiveness of youthCONNECT at Suitland High School. The point-in-time data for these theory of change analyses come from 1,062 students who responded to a survey between 2017 and 2020, and who may or may not have received youthCONNECT services. Rather, our goal was to operationalize the pathways (indicated by arrows) through which a connection to a caring adult may be associated with academic outcomes, in order to inform future programming.

Figure 1. Simplified Theory of Change



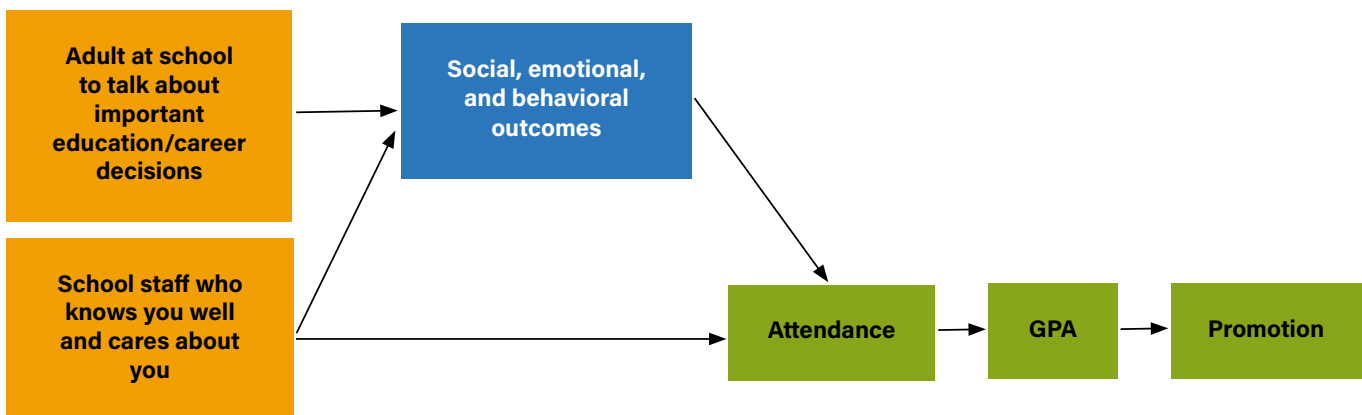


Key Findings

When testing components of youthCONNECT’s theory of change, we found that the theory of change is valid: Overall, the presence of a caring adult in a young person’s life is a strong indicator of their academic success. More specifically:

- **It’s important to provide students with a high-quality relationship with an adult whom the student feels cares about their well-being.** Our analysis finds that the presence of a caring adult has a positive relationship with a young person’s social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes *and also* their academic outcomes—the latter via the relationship between the caring adult and improved social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes. In other words, social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes are the pathway by which improved academic outcomes can be fostered.
- **Various types of caring adult roles matter to youth in different ways (Figure 2).** For example, both the presence of an adult with whom a young person can talk about important decisions, and one who cares about them, is related to that young person’s social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes, but in different ways. More specifically, we found:
 - For youth, having an adult at school who knows them well and cares about them is *directly* related to higher attendance, which is, in turn, related to higher GPAs and promotion to the next grade.
 - Alternately, having an adult at school with whom students can talk about education and career decisions is directly related to youth’s social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes. It is *through* this relationship with social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes that having an adult to talk to about education and career decisions is related to the youth’s higher attendance, higher GPA, and promotion to the next grade.

Figure 2. Different types of caring adult roles matter to youth in different ways





Conclusion

While the findings in this brief were developed using data collected just days before Suitland High School closed for the COVID-19 pandemic, they remain just as relevant—if not even more so—for school districts, youth-serving organizations, and individuals seeking to better understand how they can support students after COVID-19 interruptions to enhance learning environments and students' well-being. While some school systems are beginning to see declines in test scores, a focus on immediate short-term outcomes, such as socioemotional learning, can provide the additional supports that students need to improve their academic outcomes long-term.

For a more detailed description of our structural equation modelling and findings, please see the Detailed Findings and Methods that begins below. The technical report includes 1) a detailed description of our findings from structural equation modelling to assess the youthCONNECT theory of change, 2) a discussion section to provide additional context to our findings and provide information to inform how practitioners engage with youth, and 3) a detailed methods section outlining the methodology used in this brief.

Detailed Findings and Methods: youthCONNECT at Suitland High School's theory of change is valid.

In our analysis, we examine the relationship between the presence of a caring adult and students' academic outcomes (regardless of whether they received youthCONNECT services). We asked students two distinct questions about their relationships with caring adults at school: 1) "Thinking of your teachers or other staff at your school, how many know you well and care about you?" and 2) To what degree do [you] rate [your] agreement with the statement, "There is an adult at Suitland High School I can talk to about important educational or career decisions.?" Using structural equation modelling, we can identify the pathways through which 1) the presence of caring adults is *directly* associated with academic outcomes, and 2) the extent to which the presence of caring adults is *indirectly* associated with academic outcomes through social, emotional, or behavioral outcomes. This modeling helps us understand how observed patterns compare to the hypothesized youthCONNECT theory of change.

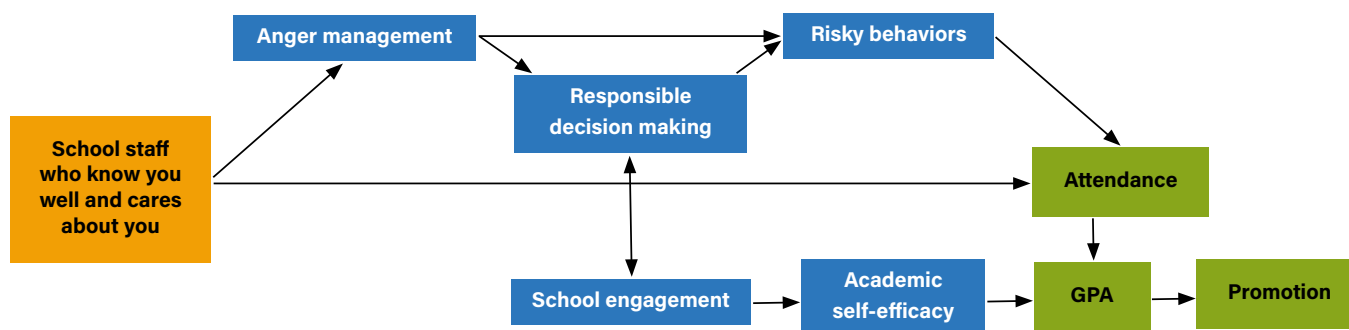




We found that a connection to a caring adult at school is related to academic outcomes, both directly and indirectly through social, emotional, and behavioral factors; however, the two types of caring adult relationships are related to academic outcomes through somewhat different pathways. We ran a single structural equation model that includes all hypothesized components of the youthCONNECT model. Below, we break down the full structural equation model into three visuals: a) structural paths associated with having a teacher or school staff member who knows a student well and cares about them; b) structural paths associated with having an adult to talk to about career or education decisions; and c) the full model.

Figure 3a shows that having a school staff member who knows and cares about a student is directly related to that student's higher attendance, which (subsequently) is related to their GPA and promotion to the next grade. Students who have this kind of caring adult at school also have better anger management skills. Stronger anger management skills are, in turn, related to attendance via their association with a more careful approach to decision making ("responsible decision making") and fewer risky behaviors. Anger management is also indirectly associated with GPA through more careful decision making, more school engagement, and greater academic self-efficacy.

Figure 3a. Pathways originating from having a school staff person who knows a student well and cares about them



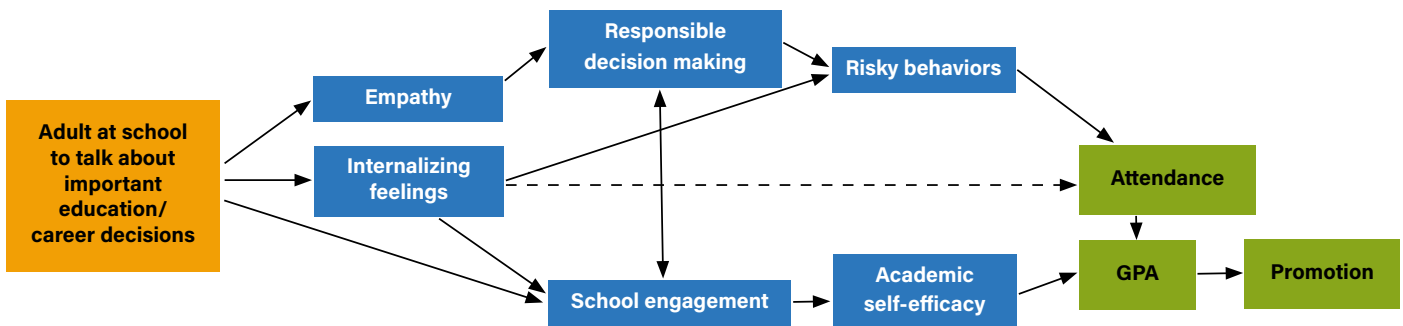
Note: The blue boxes are latent constructs, which are measured by at least three underlying survey questions in the analysis.

While having an adult to talk to about educational and career decisions is not related directly to academic outcomes, it is associated with attendance and GPA via several social, emotional, and behavioral factors, as shown in **Figure 3b**. In other words, we do not see evidence that having this kind of caring adult relationship is directly associated with students' decisions to come to school, nor with students obtaining higher GPAs. Instead, this kind of caring adult relationship is associated with greater empathy, fewer internalizing feelings (such as sadness, loneliness, or hopelessness), and better school engagement; there are a few pathways through which these factors are associated with better academic outcomes.



First, we found that students who have an adult to talk to about educational and career decisions have more empathy and approach decision making more responsibly. These social-emotional competencies, in turn, are related to fewer risky behaviors and then to better attendance. Second, students who have an adult to talk with about educational and career decisions are more engaged in school. Engagement is associated with higher academic self-efficacy, which is then associated with higher GPAs. These two pathways are further linked in the sense that approaching decisions responsibly is associated with higher school engagement. Third, in a distinctly different pathway, having an adult to talk to about education and career decisions is also related to having fewer internalizing feelings. However, students who express more internalizing feelings also had higher attendance.

Figure 3b. Pathways originating from having an adult at school to talk to about important career and educational decisions

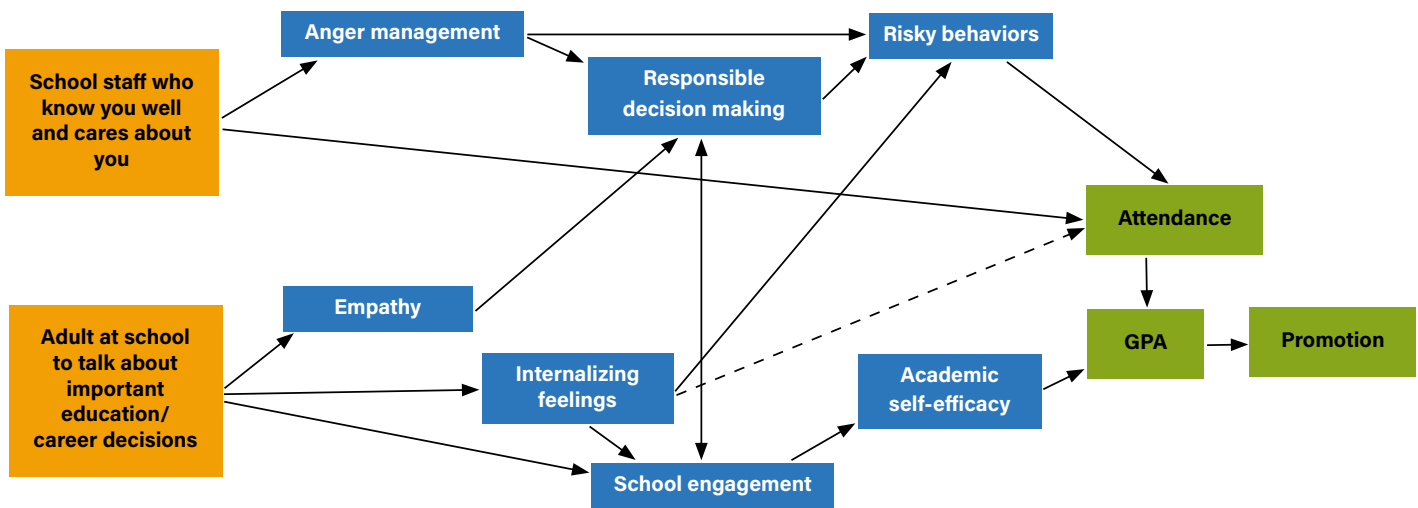


Note: The blue boxes are latent constructs, which are measured by at least three survey questions in the analysis. Associations in expected directions are indicated by solid arrows. Associations in unexpected directions are indicated by dashed arrows.

In summary, both caring adult roles and social, emotional, and behavioral factors predict variation in attendance and GPA, which are directly associated with promotion to the next grade level—as shown in Figure 3c.



Figure 3c. Final structural equation model path diagram



Note: The blue boxes are latent constructs, which are measured by at least three survey questions in the analysis. Associations in expected directions are indicated by solid arrows. Associations in unexpected directions are indicated by dashed arrows.

Discussion and implications

Our findings shared in this brief indicate that a strong theory of change underlies the youthCONNECT at Suitland High School initiative. While the data are cross-sectional, the analyses provide strong support for our hypothesis that a program that provides students with connections to caring adults can enhance their social, emotional, and behavioral well-being—important outcomes in their own right, but ones that also enable students to be more successful academically.

Three entities—Prince George’s County Public Schools, Suitland High School administrators, and VPP+RDC—committed to using data to inform and evaluate the youthCONNECT initiative. This allowed our team to create a unique data set that combines three types of data: administrative data, student self-reported survey data, and program data across multiple school years. Having data for more than 1,000 students on a multitude of variables across several domains of well-being and academic outcomes helped our analysis to better understand the interconnections among relationships with caring adults, well-being outcomes, and academic outcomes. This information can be used by schools, community organizations, funders, program developers,





and program staff in developing and implementing programs that strive to provide youth with structured adult relationships that support their whole selves. For example, our findings indicate that the presence of caring adults who play different roles for youth may affect different social and emotional outcomes. On one pathway, an adult with whom young people can discuss important decisions seems to be directly related their engagement in school, which in turn is related to attendance. On another pathway, a teacher who cares about young people is directly associated with their attendance. Both relationships are ultimately related to better academic outcomes, but schools, school districts, program professionals, and funders looking to provide a range of supports to students to meet their unique and varied needs (social, emotional, academic, and behavioral) should consider the various roles of caring adults in different capacities.

Of course, part of the theory of change for youthCONNECT is that students who receive services will be more likely to be connected to at least one caring adult, and will therefore experience stronger academic and nonacademic outcomes than their similar peers who did not receive services. In separate analyses, we found that students served by youthCONNECT were more likely to agree that they had someone to talk to about important educational or career decisions, relative to students who had not received youthCONNECT services. Given time, we would expect this kind of supportive relationship through a program to be associated with better outcomes. Furthermore, given the limitations of the data available for comparison analyses, we were not able to draw definitive conclusions about differences in academic, social, emotional, or behavioral outcomes between students served by youthCONNECT and their peers who were not. However, we did find that some students who experienced substantial declines in attendance, percentage of classes passed, GPA, and promotion rates—but who then received intensive supports from youthCONNECT—subsequently experienced improvements in these outcomes post-program enrollment. By two years after enrollment, these students are on a similar trajectory as their peers who did not receive any services. Although these findings are largely descriptive, they suggest that higher-intensity supports delivered through a caring adult can help set youth who are struggling back onto a positive path.

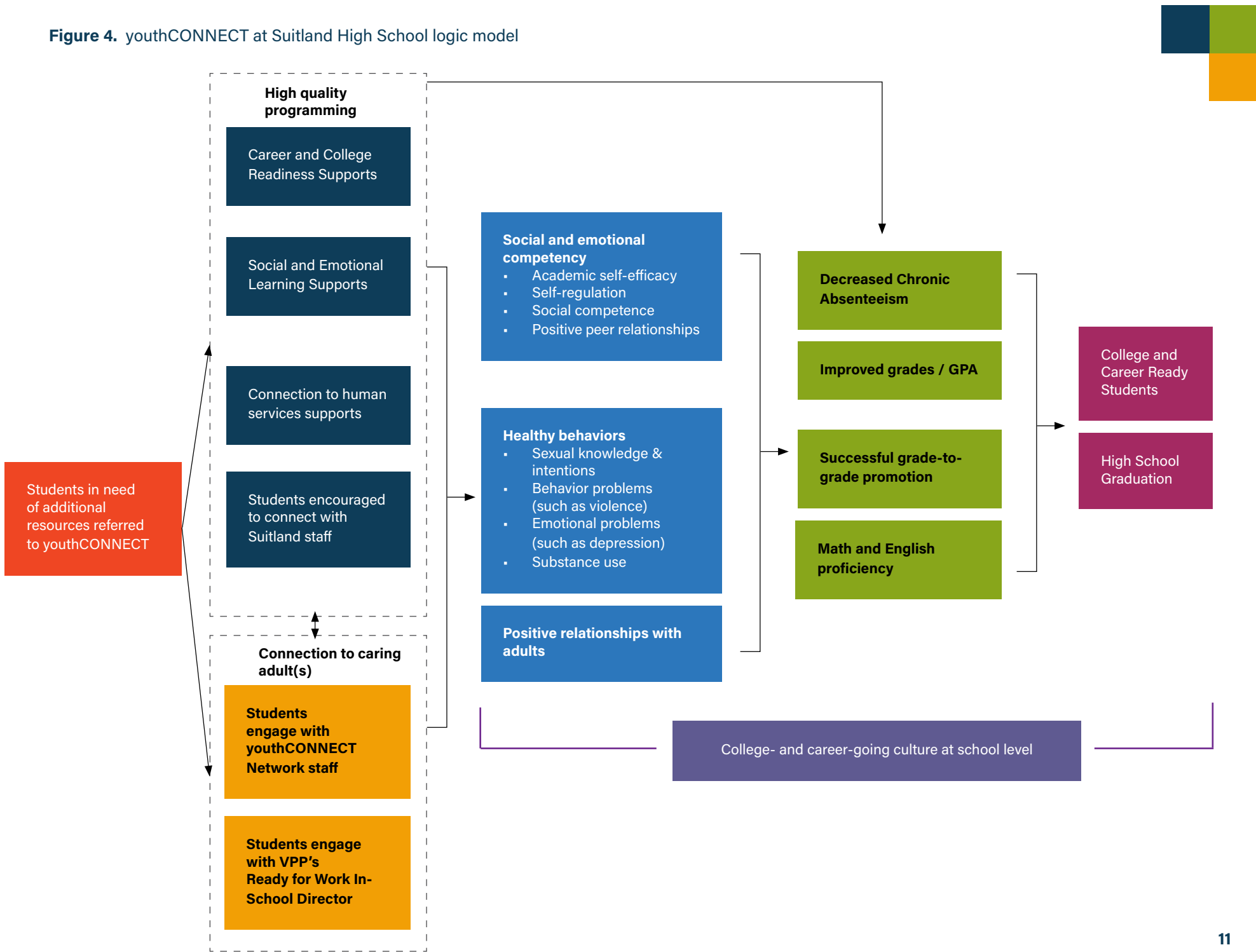
Methods

All findings in this brief are derived from structural equation modelling conducted with data from 1,062 students enrolled at Suitland High School for at least one school year from 2017 to 2020 and who took the student survey at least once. Students did not have to be youthCONNECT participants to take the survey or be included in these analyses. Responding students are likely not 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 and 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 academic outcomes and demographic information come from administrative records provided by Prince George's County Public Schools. Survey and administrative records were linked using district-assigned student identification numbers.



We used MPlus to conduct structural equation models. Social, emotional, and behavioral constructs were constructed as latent variables, after using confirmatory factor analyses to ensure that indicators held together and tapped into underlying constructs appropriately. Each latent variable is made up of at least three ordinal indicator variables. The structural model was initially tested with all paths hypothesized in the theory of change. We subsequently conducted iterative testing, adding and removing paths based on modification indices and the theoretical foundation, to achieve a parsimonious model that fit the data well. The final model presented here meets conventional criteria for good fit^{iv} based on the following fit statistics: root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.033 (90% CI: 0.030–0.036), comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.97, and Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) = 0.97. The figures above present only the associations that were significant in the final model, with one exception: Although not displayed in the figures, we also included demographic variables in the model that are known to be associated with social, emotional, behavioral, and academic factors. This was done to reduce omitted variable bias. Eligibility for free and reduced-price meals is associated with lower attendance in these models. Consistent with other literature, being in a higher grade level in school is related to more empathy^v and more risky behaviors.^{vi} Grade level was also positively associated with GPA. Finally, students who self-identified as girls were more likely to have a higher GPA as well as more internalizing feelings, worse anger management, and more empathy—also a finding echoed consistently in the literature.^{vii}

Figure 4. youthCONNECT at Suitland High School logic model





Suggested Citation

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Venture
Philanthropy
Partners

Venture Philanthropy Partners engaged Child Trends to evaluate its Ready for Work initiative from 2015 to 2020.



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