



CommPACT COMMUNITY SCHOOLS COLLABORATIVE

249 Glenbrook Road, Unit 3224
Storrs, Connecticut 06269
Phone: (860) 486-4812
www.commpact.uconn.edu

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AUTHORS

Michele Fenc-Bagwell, Ph.D.
Danielle Annett, Ph.D.
Candidate

Improving Student Outcomes and Creating a Community School through Innovation, Social Advocacy Engagement, and Parent Engagement

In urban settings with high poverty rates, definitions of parent engagement tend to be deficit centered without emphasis on parent assets. Furthermore, parent involvement tends to center on teaching parents academic skills to bolster academic achievement for their children rather than providing parents with the personal/social and academic strategies in a responsive environment to holistically strengthen bonds with their children and with school. Survey data and school based student outcomes provided insight from which to build intervention through implementation of a collaborative school based model. After a tumultuous beginning, positive results were evidenced and directions for future work are outlined.

Background

CommPACT schools aim to collaborate with community schools in an effort to build parent/family or community engagement in meaningful ways toward school improvement as many of the tasks fall outside what is possible through traditional methods and resources (University of Connecticut, n.d). This year, CommPACT has focused energy on providing resources to inspire parent engagement through building an infrastructure with the provision of support through collaborative conceptualization of methods to encourage parent engagement in a setting where parent engagement is typically disciplinary or informational in nature.

The purpose of the current study was to compare parent attitudes in an urban setting as they relate to their child's school; the degree to which parents feel valued by their child's school staff; their relationships and connectedness to their child's school experience; and the relevance of noncognitive skills being taught to both students and parents before and after parent group participation in order to establish a method for parents to connect with school and their children in urban settings.

The goals were to gain insight related to the research questions in order to establish improved relationships and connectedness between urban high school staff and parents/families of students who attend the school. The long term goal of establishing a program to encourage improved relationships with the aim of improving critical student outcomes in an effort to close the achievement gap.

Setting the Stage

At the outset of the 2014-2015 academic year the students, faculty, and staff of Bassick high school faced numerous challenges. Specifically, in the ninth grade academy, students not only had no leader, but no consistent math or science teachers for several months.

Students transitioned into an environment fraught with upheaval and were in a position to navigate the nuances of shifts in leadership and subsequently leadership style. Despite our history with working with this school community since 2011, reintegrating into the community following leadership changes was even more challenging than the first year of implementation. Following the interim Principal's start of the 9th Grade Academy late in the Fall of 2014, our team worked diligently to build relationships and provide support in navigating the challenges of new leadership.

In order to accomplish the shifts desired in student outcomes, the team collaborated to launch the multi-tiered system of support developed in consultation with one of the researchers participating in the project (See Figure 1, Annett 2015a). The program, School Counseling Social Advocacy Framework; Engagement Model (SCSAF: EM) encourages of full scope of services for all students creating a supportive environment to facilitate transition from a higher level of support to a more autonomous environment modeled in upper grades and is driven by professional school counselors. The model includes collaborative, reflective and data analytic engagement supported through a critical social lens in order to be continuously mindful of the factors that establish and maintain inequity in schools (Annett, 2015a). The research and school based team collaborated to make the research based model fit the needs of the students and academic teams.

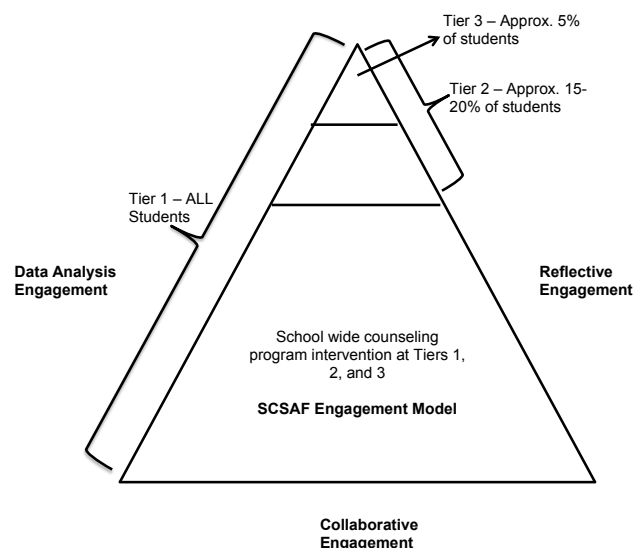
Ultimately, through collaboration with CommPACT and Balfour projects, the team has been able to create a model of practice that has been transformative in the lives of nearly 300 students, 10 teachers and countless family members

Students entering 9th grade need additional support with regard to transition to increased academic and behavioral autonomy. Specifically, all students benefit from support around achievement related outcomes (e.g. mindset, academic behaviors, emotional intelligence, attendance, and managing behaviors) leading to improved achievement outcomes (Chicago consortium of Schools, 2012).

Given this knowledge and the push toward preparing all students to be college and career ready, the team at the school in collaboration with CommPACT and Balfour projects developed a phasic goal for improving student outcomes with initial emphasis on student attitudes related to mindsets and behaviors with later focus on disruptive behaviors and attendance with the final goal toward impacting grades and Aimsweb scores. Specifically, the SMART goal actions were to increase the following: Student positive attitudes related to ASCA mindsets and behaviors (2014); attendance; achievement reflected by Aimsweb scores and promotion rates. Additionally, a decrease in disruptive behaviors would naturally occur as a consequence of improving the previously mentioned outcomes.

Extending the work beyond the scope of the ninth grade academy included reaching out to parents to engage in the parent component of this study.

Figure 1: SCSAF: Engagement Model



Mindsets and Behaviors

In order to measure the success of the programming put in place by the UCONN research coordinator and master's level counseling students, the research coordinator created an online survey to align with the 2014 ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors. The mindsets and behaviors focused on include learning strategies, self-management and social skills as supported through ASCA (2014). Furthermore, current research supports development of growth mindsets, executive skills, and noncognitive skills as foundational components of learning (Dweck, 2008; Chicago Consortium of Schools, 2014; Tough, 2012)

The survey is a 45-question instrument with 43 likert items and 2 write in items. The Likert scale is an agreement scale between 1-5 with scores of 1 representing strong disagreement and scores of 5 representing strong agreement. At present, the instrument is being assessed through factor analysis to develop subscales, subscale means and reliability coefficients.

Of the students who participated in the survey, most reported responses related to mindsets and behaviors that reflect opinions of "neither agree nor disagree" to "strongly agree" as reflected by the mean scores for each item.

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
I show my teachers that I am creative	102	3.725	.9663
I manage my time very well.	102	3.441	.9706
I am very organized	102	3.441	1.1653
I have very strong study skills	102	3.088	1.1267
I take classes that are a challenge for me.	102	3.500	1.0877
When making a decision, I think about other perspectives.	102	3.588	1.1376
I do other things after school to make my grades or other talents even better.	102	3.108	1.4065
I believe I am a balanced person	102	3.647	.9507
I know how to control my reactions to different things that upset me	102	3.676	1.1532
When school work is hard in one of my classes, I find ways to work it out	102	3.775	1.0040
When I have a challenge to overcome, I know how to get myself through it	102	3.745	1.0117
I stay cool when things keep changing in my life.	102	3.706	1.0492
I feel like I belong here at school.	102	3.392	1.2361
I communicate so that I am easily understood	102	3.686	1.0243
I know how to make good relationships with other people	102	3.784	1.0775
I think about the impact of my choices before I do anything	102	3.863	.9854
Learning and work make me feel really good.	102	3.745	1.0018
I am proud of my school	102	2.784	1.2156
My teachers care about me	102	3.931	1.0075
Other teachers or adults, not on my team, support me	102	3.500	1.1497
My teachers try to make learning fun for me	102	3.745	1.0962
I feel connected to people at school	102	3.206	1.0748
My hallway feels safe	102	2.980	1.1856
My school feels safe	102	2.775	1.2015

Students' responses were used to guide programming for the Spring of 2015 and students will be surveyed again at the outset of the 2015-2016 school year to assess changes in students mindsets and behaviors following participation in the comprehensive model implemented by the 9th grade academy teams.

Though all areas have been a focus for the planning of the consultation, classroom lessons, counseling groups and individual one to one counseling items with a mean score of 3 or lower were focused on as areas in need of development. These mostly include items related to safety ($x=2.78$); connectedness to people at school ($x=3.21$); feelings of belongingness at school ($x=3.39$); knowing what to do in addition to school work in school to improve grades ($x=3.11$); and study skills ($x=3.01$). However, there are other areas of concern related to learning strategies, self-management skills and social skills listed in bold in Table 1.

Mindsets and Behaviors Continued

When analyzing significant correlations across the items, numerous correlations are significant and moderate to large and are summarized in Table 2 below:

Table 2. Significant Correlations – Mindsets and Behaviors

Statement		Correlation	Significance Value
I have high standards for my work	I am confident in my ability to succeed	.498	.000
Learning and work make me feel really good	I have strong study skills	.450	.000
I know my goals	I am able to think carefully about options to make good choices	.408	.000
I manage my time well	I am very organized	.509	.000
My hallway feels safe	I know how to keep myself safe	.427	.000
I feel connected to people at school	My teachers care about me	.534	.000
I feel connected to people at school	I am proud of my school	.451	.000
I feel connected to people at school	My hallway feels safe	.493	.000
I am organized	I have strong study skills	.483	.000

Achievement

In terms of performance on standardized benchmark assessments, the majority of our students were performing in the below average to well below average ranges for all areas assessed through AimsWeb probes in the Fall of 2014. In terms of Oral Reading Fluency performance, 42% of students were performing below average or well below average; 74% of students performed well below average to below average on cloze tasks; 76% of students performed well below average to below average on math concepts and applications; and 69% of students were performing well below average or below average on math computation.

During participation in the model implemented by the 9th grade team exemplified in Figure 1, student performance improved in oral reading fluency as evidenced by a 16% drop in students functioning in the below average range between testing in the Fall of 2014 and testing in the Spring of 2015. Additionally, there was a 17% increase in students performing average or above from Fall 2014 to Spring 2015. Additionally, the rate of students promoted to 10th grade was 77% of first year ninth grade students. This supports that the model implemented late in the year was beginning to make changes with regard to student academic performance. It is important to note that change in student academic performance is secondary to improved support in psychological/physical health and safety and improvement in noncognitive skills in order to access cognitive skills needed to foster academic self-actualization (Annett, 2015b).

Attendance

As of May, 2015 there was no statistically significant improvement in attendance rates for the 9th grade academy; however, the attendance rates were holding steady with no drop in attendance at the Tier 1 level of analysis. Students identified for intervention with the Climate Specialist and intervention with the Counseling students from UCONN showed significant improvement in attendance rates on an individual basis as expected with Tier 3 (non special education) support. On average, student absences went from 19 absences in the first quarter to 9 in the second quarter (n=34) evidencing significant improvement.

Parent Attitudes

In general, parents feel the school is not a welcoming place where they are valued feel safe expressing needs. Many attempts made to engage parents gaining their opinions inviting them to engage process of learning what their children are learning. However, despite the numerous attempts, only 19 parents participated in filling out a survey only 13 completing the survey.

Table 3. Parent Survey Descriptive Statistics BASELINE DATA

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
WELCOMING	19	1	5	2.42	1.539
HELPSUCCEED	19	1	5	2.53	1.541
PROUD	19	1	5	2.42	1.305
SCHOOLVALUES	19	1	5	2.58	1.575
LISTEN	19	1	5	2.79	1.475
SHAREIDEA	19	1	5	2.47	1.389
IMPORTANT	19	1	5	2.37	1.461
CONNECTED	19	1	5	2.84	1.302
AWARENESS	19	1	5	2.95	1.311
LEARNING	19	1	5	2.95	1.433
KNOWINGSELF	19	1	5	2.53	1.679
GOODSTUDENT	19	1	5	2.42	1.677
MYINTERESTS	13	1	5	2.85	1.345
INVOLVED	13	1	5	3.31	1.548
GETINVOLV	13	1	5	2.85	1.676
Valid N (listwise)	13				

Parent feedback in phone conversations and survey data reflect a climate that is not welcoming or engaging for parents. The research coordinator started phoning parents one by one and gained valuable feedback and information about parent attitudes toward the school and the hope they hold for the child's future given their school and neighborhood environment.

The research coordinator attempted phoning students' families identified for additional support; however most parents did not answer the phone and did not return phone calls when a message was left requesting a call. Students were asked to participate in the phone call process to initiate positive contact with the parents. Following this process, parents began to feel safe about communicating with staff via phone to engage in conversations about planning for their child's success and improvement of the school and programming.

Please see Table 3 for parent data.

Parent feedback shows disagreement with statements related to climate and parent engagement with large standard deviations indicate discrepant opinions or lack of unity.

In terms of the parent education and feedback group, only when the coordinator of the research project started reaching out to parents one by one did a parent group finally form and begin to meet. However, the group disbanded as quickly as it began as tensions between the school and community continued to run high. Furthermore, most of the parents of students at the urban high school tend to work numerous jobs in an effort to maintain stability and consistency for their families in a difficult economic climate. Parents who were reached for comment and discussion expressed disbelief and suspicion when the researchers attempted to connect and engage on a level that was not representative of discipline or other administrative concerns.

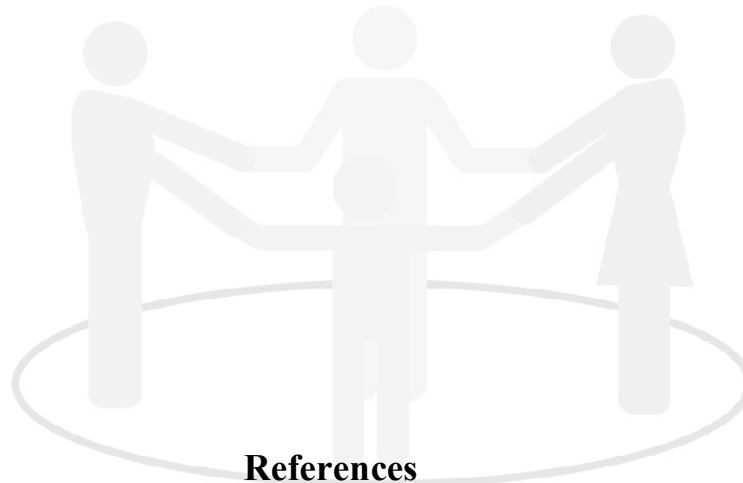
Typical communication from school to the community is disciplinary so parents were somewhat reluctant and guarded in communication

Future Directions

Where do we go from here?

The goals of this initial research project focusing on parent engagement were to gain valuable insight related to the research questions in order to establish improved relationships. The team also sought to establish much needed connectedness between the urban high school staff and parents/families of students who attend the school in an effort to strengthen the community while simultaneously improving achievement.

Due to the high level of guardedness and previous deficit centered parent engagement, much more foundational work is required to engage parents and families in the educational process of the community. Current plans include reaching back to feeder schools and inviting parents for information sessions prior to the start of the 2015-2016 school year; the start of a CommPACT led parent engagement qualitative study related to what engagement looks like for different families; construction of a parent room complete with technology and other comforts to encourage parent engagement with the 9th grade academy; and continued attempts for parent seminars and collaborative opportunities around academic, personal/social and career development of students.



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