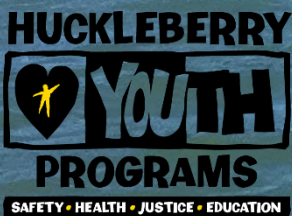# Evaluation of Project READY

(Reconnecting, Educating, and Achieving Dreams for Youth)

A Summary of Evaluation Findings

August 2020

Prepared For

HUCKLEBERRY YOUTH PROGRAMS
SAFETY • HEALTH • JUSTICE • EDUCATION

Prepared By

LfA LEARNING for ACTION

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Executive Summary

I.   Introduction

Huckleberry Youth Programs (HYP) delivers **Project READY (Reconnecting, Educating, & Achieving Dreams for Youth) – a violence/juvenile justice prevention and educational support/intervention program.** The program supports youth with significant behavior and/or attendance challenges from both Martin Luther King (MLK) and Willie Brown middle schools from the end of 7th grade through their transition to high school. Project READY provides a series of support services designed to ensure that participating young people can successfully matriculate to the 9th and 10th grades and avoid contact with the juvenile justice system.

Project READY's program model is designed according to the belief that academic support and social emotional learning/development (SEL/D) delivered through intensive one-on-one case management and groups, combined with parental support and education delivered in a school setting, can reduce rates of school failure and arrest among youth with multiple risk factors. Project READY is made up of four core program components: 1) case management, 2) academic support, 3) social and emotional learning/development and mental health support, and 4) parent education and support.

> Program staff consists of the Program Director, Program Manager, two Case Managers, and a Therapist who work collaboratively together as a multidisciplinary team.]

Project READY participants are primarily black and brown youth growing up in a context where youth of color are impacted by institutional racism and are disproportionately targeted by the criminal justice system. Over half (52%) of program participants are African American / Black and over one-third (39%) of youth are Hispanic / Latinx. Nearly half of participating youth identify as a cis woman / girl (53%) or cis man / boy (45%) respectively, and two percent of youth identify as transgender. Nearly all (90%) participating youth receive public assistance (e.g. EBT, free or reduced lunch, housing assistance, or other).

The Project READY evaluation is a formative process evaluation and outcomes study to inform ongoing learning, reflection, and improvement. Data collected as part of this evaluation includes participant data (e.g. referral and intake information, program participation data, school attendance, grades, etc.) and stakeholder interviews with Project READY staff and parents/caregivers.

II. Findings: How Project READY Makes a Difference

Program Implementation

Project READY staff serve as a bridge between young people, their families, and school staff to support youth with staying engaged in school and on track. This section describes implementation of the program in relation to how Project READY operates within schools, and how it engages young people and their families.

Operating as a School-Based Program

As a school-based program, Project READY is able to make services accessible for young people, and better coordinate with teachers/school support staff than if the program operated off campus. However, there are also challenges to operating as a school-based program despite having supportive school partners. Many of these challenges are issues that many school systems struggle with including: insufficient time and resources, operating in a context of constant pressure and reaction-mode, as well as ways in which school systems are poorly equipped to counter the negative impacts of racism, poverty, and community trauma. These challenges are part of why it is so valuable to have Project READY embedded within schools so that the program and its school partners can work together to navigate these challenges. Other key insights about operating in schools are below:

Project READY has cultivated good relationships with school staff by investing time to develop relationships with schools' wellness coordinators and student support staff.

Buy-in from school partners has increased as the program has demonstrated its impact. Schools value the program as a resource to support young people who exhibit challenging behaviors.

School staff operate in a context of very limited time.

The program aims to be a resource and a partner to schools, though staff fear that the program is viewed as another thing on school staff's already full plate. Obtaining student data and receiving timely referrals from schools have been challenging. Project READY aims to be collaborative and mindful of school staff's time, while also maintaining the partnership needed for the program's success.

Project READY is challenged to engage young people when they are not in school, especially over the summer break.

Staff address challenges of connecting with habitually truant youth by being creative, flexible, and adaptive, including picking youth up at their homes to bring them to school, checking in via text message, making home visits, and partnering with parents/caregivers. A strategy Project READY staff hopes may help with the decline in engagement during the summer is extending the program through the full 9th grade year to make up for some of the connection and engagement that may be lost over the summer.

Providing Responsive Youth Services

The success of Project READY is rooted in its commitment to provide intensive, comprehensive, and youth-focused services. Project READY balances consistency and structure with being flexible, adaptive, and attentive to young people's needs. **Three core aspects of responsive, youth-centered services are:**

1. **Meeting youth where they are at**

2. **Establishing authentic relationships**

3. **Connecting young people to additional supports as needed**

Engaging Families

Project READY staff consider effective partnership with families to be key to young people's success in the program. Program staff typically see deeper engagement and greater program impact among students whose families are also more actively engaged. Family participation includes frequent communication with case managers, monthly family meetings led by the program therapist, as well as optional family counseling. One

> The more I have **connection with parents,** the more **improvement I see with the kids.**
>
> *Project READY staff member*

staff member commented, "Everything we deal with starts at home first. If we're not building relationships with families, it's difficult to start with the kids." Project READY has a strong history of connecting with parents, and staff look to the successes, challenges, and opportunities for parent engagement to continue strengthening this component of the program. A few lessons program staff have learned about parent engagement are:
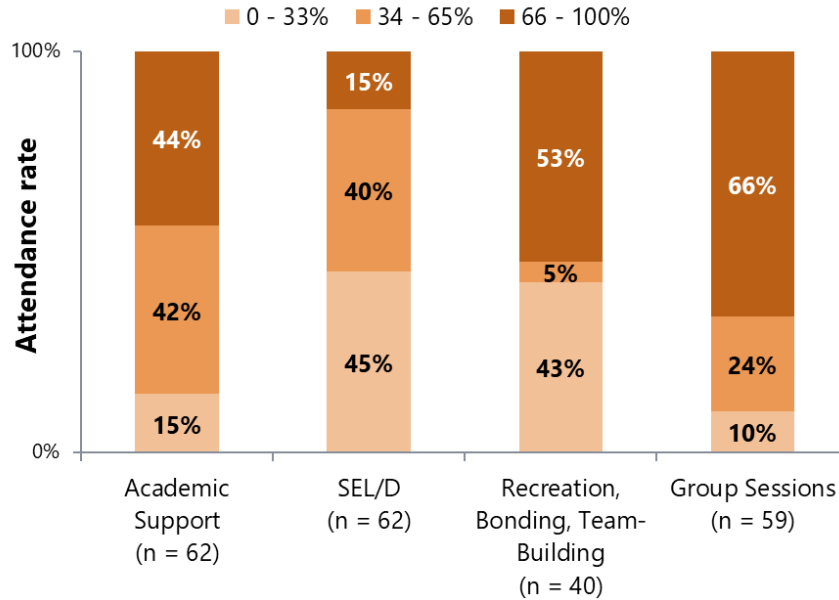
- Project READY **understands that some parents have initial hesitation** to engage with the program, which may be rooted in an underlying distrust of the school system, or a sense that the program is a punitive or disciplinary measure.

- Project READY staff **build trust with parents** by being consistent, celebrating positive news, and demonstrating concern and empathy for parents.

- Project READY **functions as a bridge** between parents and schools by helping families navigate the school experience.

Youth Engagement and Program Participation

Project READY has a prescribed frequency and number of sessions, but not all students participate at the intended level. Youth were expected to meet the target threshold of participating in two-thirds of the total academic support activities, individual social emotional learning and development (SEL/D) activities, SEL group sessions, and recreation and group bonding activities. The percentage of youth who met the two-thirds threshold ranged from 15% to 66%. Over half of the youth met the threshold for academic support activities, recreation and bonding time, and group sessions.

Exhibit A. Participation in Case Management Sessions

Legend: ■ 0 - 33% ■ 34 - 65% ■ 66 - 100%

Y-axis: Attendance rate (0% to 100%)

| Category	0 - 33%	34 - 65%	66 - 100%
Academic Support (n = 62)	15%	42%	44%
SEL/D (n = 62)	45%	40%	15%
Recreation, Bonding, Team-Building (n = 40)	43%	5%	53%
Group Sessions (n = 59)	10%	24%	66%

Project READY staff identified challenges to consistent participation. For example, Project READY has been operating without in-class support of academic support specialists, so case managers have been referring youth to outside tutoring supporting (which is limited) as needed. Another challenge is that students sometimes are reluctant to be pulled out of class because their SEL sessions occurred during their favorite (elective) class. Additionally, Project READY staff also attribute the low participation rates for some of these activities (as in the case with SEL/D sessions) to data entry practices. For instance, as noted above, case managers often use flexible approaches to connect with youth and meet them where they are. Staff may lack a uniform practice for how to code and capture these non-traditional sessions as SEL/D-focused sessions. Project READY plans to use these data to reinforce their team's commitment to strong data entry and tracking, as well as to continue strategizing about how to ensure more youth achieve the target level of participation.

Outcomes

To understand Project Ready's impact, the evaluation team assessed the extent to which youth made progress in the following outcome areas: Goal Planning and Achievement, Academic Performance, School Attendance, Behavior, and Social Emotional Development.

Goal Planning and Achievement

Project READY supports students to set and achieve goals for how they want to develop and grow. Goals are typically academic or behavioral in nature (e.g. arriving to school on time) and are tailored to each youth's self-identified vision for themselves. 97% of students made improvements on or met at least one case plan goal. 81% of participants made progress on at least half of their goals, with 48% of participants making progress on all their goals.
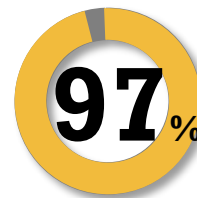
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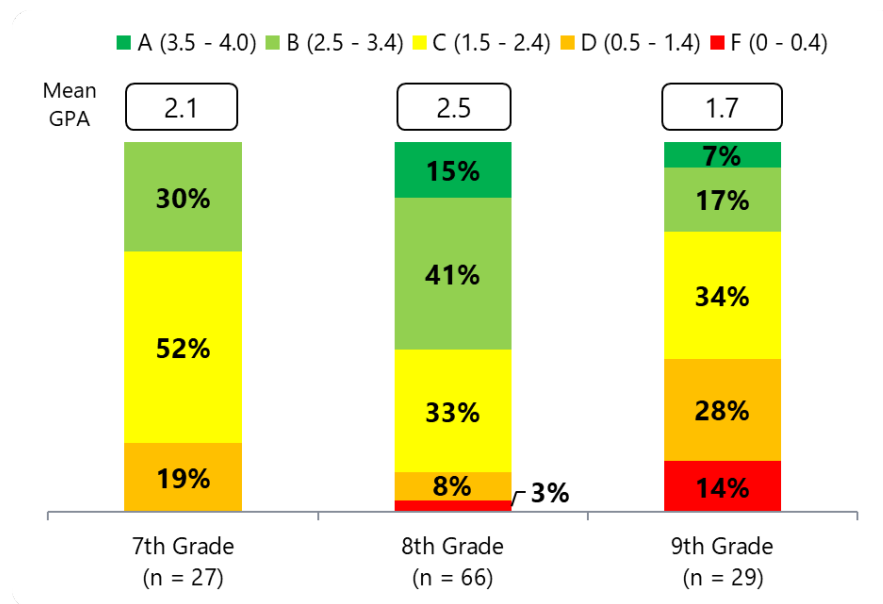
Academic Performance

Project READY students make a lot of academic gains in the 8ᵗʰ grade. 80% of participants increased their GPA from 7ᵗʰ to 8ᵗʰ grade, with the average GPA increasing from 2.1 to 2.5 on a 4-point scale.

After Project READY, [my son] **brought his grades up.** He got a 3.13 GPA, which is a huge improvement from 1.17. **He took studying more seriously.** He's on track with wanting to go to 4-year college.

Parent/Caregiver Interviewee

Exhibit B. GPA by Grade Level

■ A (3.5 - 4.0) ■ B (2.5 - 3.4) ■ C (1.5 - 2.4) ■ D (0.5 - 1.4) ■ F (0 - 0.4)

Mean GPA	2.1	2.5	1.7
A		15%	7%
B	30%	41%	17%
C	52%	33%	34%
D	19%	8%	28%
F		3%	14%
	7th Grade (n = 27)	8th Grade (n = 66)	9th Grade (n = 29)

While some students sustain academic gains into 9ᵗʰ grade others appear to regress academically. The GPA of a large proportion (86%) of participants dropped in 9ᵗʰ grade, with the average GPA dropping from 2.5 to 1.7. The program aims to address this academic slide in two ways: 1) reinstating an academic support specialist position to provide intensive academic supports; and 2) extending the program duration through the full 9ᵗʰ grade year.

Though some students appear to struggle academically in the 9ᵗʰ grade, the majority are sufficiently on-track to matriculate into the 10ᵗʰ grade. The average percentage of academic credits completed was 85%, and 81% of participants completed a target threshold of at least 75% of the school credits that they attempted.

School Attendance

Project READY students improve their attendance in 8ᵗʰ grade and maintain a stable attendance into 9ᵗʰ grade. 63% of participants improved their attendance from 7ᵗʰ to 8ᵗʰ grade, with the average number of absences decreasing from 20 to 18 days. Between 8ᵗʰ and 9ᵗʰ grade, 62% of participants improved their attendance though the average number of absences remains at 18 days. In other words, while a large proportion of students show attendance improvement, absences remain a concern for students as a whole. Exploring the data another way, between 7ᵗʰ and 8ᵗʰ grade the proportion of students with excellent or satisfactory attendance increased from 24% to 30%, and then increased to 38% in 9ᵗʰ grade.

Behavior

Project READY students reduce the number of behavioral incidents they have at school during their time in the program. 36% of students decreased their number of behavioral incidents from 7th to 8th grade, and 83% of students decreased their number of behavioral incidents from 8th to 9th grade.
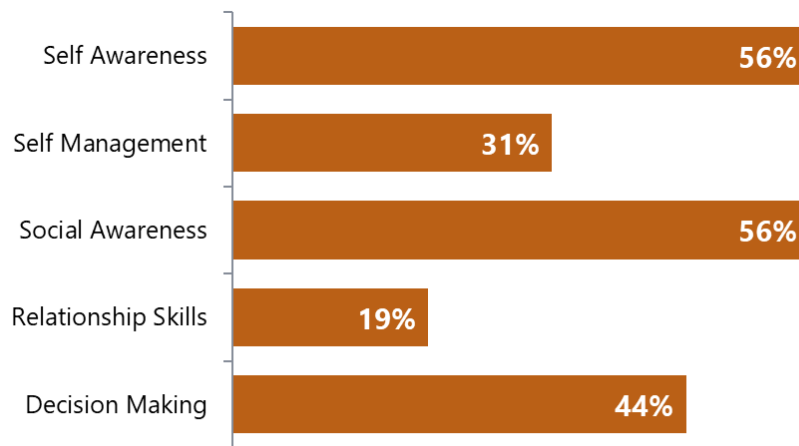
Social Emotional Learning and Development

Critical to the improvements in academics, attendance, and behavior is the progress that Project READY students make in social emotional learning and development (SEL/D). Project READY staff assess students' strength in five SEL/D components along a six-point scale, using a rubric developed collaboratively by Project READY staff and Learning for Action (Project READY's evaluation partner). [1] The scale ranged from 1 to 6: 1 = In Crisis; 2 = Distressed; 3 = Vulnerable; 4 = Stable; 5 = Building Capacity; 6 = Thriving. In the aggregate, participants' average scores improved in three out of the five SEL/D competencies: self-awareness (3.3 to 3.9); social awareness (3.3 to 3.8); and responsible decision-making (3.1 to 3.4). These are also the areas where individual youth made progress between the summer and fall as depicted in Exhibit C below.

Exhibit C. Percentage of SEL Scores that Increased Over Time

Competency	Percentage
Self Awareness	56%
Self Management	31%
Social Awareness	56%
Relationship Skills	19%
Decision Making	44%

n = 16

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[1] The five core competencies used in the Project READY SEL rubric are based on the CASEL framework; https://casel.org/core-competencies/.

Juvenile Justice Involvement

The majority of Project READY participants complete the program without involvement with the juvenile justice system. At the time of this report, 89% of participating youth had no arrests. Among the seven participants who have been arrested, three were arrested prior to Project READY, and four were arrested since joining the program. While in the absence of a comparison group it is difficult to know the extent to which this can be attributed to the program itself, research demonstrates that having at least one positive relationship with an adult supports youth to thrive.

For the most part, our youth don't get arrested. I think helping them with goals and **figuring out the path they want to choose for themselves** helps deter things like this. We try to stop things earlier on. **There is definitely a correlation between doing well in school and staying out of system involvement.**

Project READY staff member

Additionally, in a context in which many Project READY participants are living in poverty, and dealing with stressors and challenges that disproportionately impact youth of color, helping young people develop strengths that help them to avoid contact with a racially unjust criminal justice system. Project READY staff attribute the program's success in helping youth avoid justice system involvement to its strength in supporting young people's development of social emotional skills, providing them with options for positive and engaging activities, and empowering youth to develop a positive self-image where they can see a future for themselves that holds positive opportunities, and helps them stay motivated to achieve their goals for success.

III. Conclusions and Recommendations

This evaluation provides affirming evidence of Project READY's success in delivering high-quality, youth-centered programming in schools. The evaluation lends insights into the program's core strengths, as well as lessons and opportunities for further program refinements. The conclusions and recommendations below were co-developed in conversation with Project READY staff and are organized in four categories: student support, family engagement, evaluation and learning, and program refinements.

Student Support

Project READY's flexible and responsive approach of engaging youth is critical.

Case managers, therapists, and program staff use a youth-centered approach to build trusting relationships that become the foundation of the program's success. Project READY strives to balance structure and flexibility, so that they can maintain the connection with harder to reach youth. Project READY should maintain its commitment to meeting youth where they are at to hold young people's needs at the center of its work.

Project READY works to achieve the right balance between being school and community based.

As a school-based program, Project READY is challenged to serve students who are habitually truant. This presents a range of opportunities including modifying their program model to include more community-based, or home-based supports, or potentially identifying a threshold of absences as a criterion for eligibility. However, Project READY currently fills an important niche supporting youth with low school attendance. Absent other trusted, full-service providers who can meet the needs of chronically absent students, there is a greater chance of

these young people falling through the cracks. Project READY will need to continue to consider if this is a niche it is best positioned to fill, and if so how best to meet the needs of those students who are frequently missing school.

Staff diversity is an asset for the program.

Parents expressed that representation of people of color on the team is valuable for connecting with and supporting young people, many of whom are black and brown youth. Additionally, one parent expressed that it would be valuable to have more gender diversity on the team. Project READY embraces how diversity and representation among the case managers and therapists strengthens staff's ability to connect with and engage young people and will explore opportunities to expand the gender diversity on their team.

Parent Engagement

Parent engagement is key to youth engagement.

Young people whose families are more engaged show greater improvement through the program. Project READY connects with parents in non-judgmental ways, encourages and supports families as a whole, addresses issues at home that impact young people's success at school, and helps to serve as a bridge between families and schools. Despite having established some successful practices for engaging families, some parents remain harder to reach. Project READY has identified a couple potential strategies for strengthening parent engagement: 1) setting clear expectations about what program participation entails 2) enhancing and codifying the program's family engagement component.

Evaluation and Learning

Project READY is in the process of developing and strengthening data collection and reflection practices.

The program has robust data collection practices in place to gather program participation data, and assessments to inform case management, as well as school and arrest data. Project READY also has the infrastructure to support its data culture - a Salesforce database and a dedicated staff person responsible for internal learning and data use. The program has a strong commitment to data-driven programming, and there are areas for improvement that can further strengthen the program's ability to gather and use data for program evaluation and improvement.

- **Improving processes to obtain school data will support Project READY's ability to track key indicators.** The current process for obtaining school data is labor intensive for both school and Project READY staff, often resulting in delayed or incomplete data. Project READY identified two ways to strengthen the process of accessing school data: 1) streamline requests for school data through a single Project READY staff person, 2) establish an MOU with the school district to allow direct access to electronic student records. While this will not obviate the need to obtain some information from schools directly, it will ensure more seamless access to data that are captured in the district level electronic database.

- **Strengthening Project READY's internal data entry and reflection practices will strengthen the program's ability**

to demonstrate program impact. Challenges in keeping up with data entry result in backlogs, incomplete, or missing data. These data limitations make it difficult to interpret the data and draw meaningful conclusions. Project READY has expressed commitment to maintaining complete and up to date program records and aspires to engage more frequently in data reflection. Doing so will remind program staff of the importance of maintaining accurate participant records, provide real-time information to inform program delivery, and strengthen the culture of ongoing learning.

- **Bolstering data practices will enhance the program's ability to speak to the value of the program.** While the current evaluation presents findings on participant outcomes, there are some limitations in terms of the conclusions we can draw from these data due to the small numbers of participants with data across all of the indicators. Increasing the sample size and completeness of the data will enhance the ability to make statistical inferences about the impact of the program on participants.

> **The program may consider various ways to define and measure success.**

Achievement of core program objectives (matriculation to 10th grade, and avoiding arrests) is high, however, participants vary in their achievement of additional program targets, such as program participation rates and improvements in school attendance and behavior. While these targets provide useful guideposts for goal setting, the failure to meet these targets may underrepresent "success" for many participants who seem (anecdotally) to benefit tremendously from the program. Project READY may want to explore options for tracking other meaningful measures of progress for students on varying trajectories. For instance, Project READY may consider ways to define success that are more deeply rooted in achievement of SEL goals, such as development of key life skills that may help prepare young people for GED achievement, self-sufficiency, and/or careers that may be less dependent on traditional academic measures of performance and success.

Program Refinements

> **The social emotional learning and development component is one of Project READY's core strengths, and the program wishes to further develop its SEL/D supports.**

Its intensive, hands-on SEL/D support is one thing that sets Project READY apart from other youth serving programs. This evaluation highlights the program's effectiveness in supporting young people's SEL development, and program staff believe that the SEL/D supports can be further strengthened. Project READY may formalize and enhance the SEL/D component by developing a resource library consisting of a pool of resources to pull from, specific activities, and adopting a more structured curriculum for the SEL/D work with youth.

> **Project READY seeks to reintegrate an academic support position as part of the program's offerings.**

Program staff recognize the value of having the AmeriCorps Academic Support Specialists sit in on students' classes, provide tutoring support, and be an academic resource to participating youth. Absent this role, the program supports students to stay on track academically through promoting accountability and addressing social-emotional, behavioral, or logistical challenges that interfere with their school performance, however the program seeks to reinstitute a dedicated academic support role in upcoming program years.

> **Continuing Project READY supports through the full ninth grade year may help students achieve and sustain greater gains through participation.**

Currently the program provides case management through the first semester of the 9th grade year. With young people getting adjusted to high school, and some students spending some of the fall semester regaining momentum lost over the summer, case managers have limited time to engage and support ninth graders before the program concludes. Additionally, the data show that many students backslide academically between 8th and 9th grade, suggesting this is a particularly important time for sustained intervention and support. Project READY aims to secure additional grant funding that will allow it to extend the program duration through the full ninth grade year and to explore how best to support students over the course of a longer engagement.

Introduction

This report shares findings from a formative process evaluation and outcomes study conducted of the **Huckleberry's Project READY (Reconnecting, Educating, & Achieving Dreams for Youth) program**, currently in its fourth year of implementation. **Huckleberry Youth Programs** – whose mission is to educate, inspire, and support underserved youth in San Francisco and Marin to develop healthy life choices, to maximize their potential, and to realize their dreams – engaged **Learning for Action**, a San Francisco-based third-party evaluator, to implement the evaluation.

About the Program

Program Overview

Project READY (Reconnecting, Educating, & Achieving Dreams for Youth), provided through Huckleberry Youth Programs (HYP), is a violence prevention and educational support program that serves rising 8th grade youth (starting at the end of 7th grade) during the transition from middle school to high school. Project READY provides a series of support services designed to ensure that 8th grade students with significant behavior and/or attendance challenges are able to successfully matriculate to the 9th and 10th grades, and avoid contact with the juvenile justice system. Specifically, Project READY provides school-based case management, individual and family therapy, and scheduled home visits to bridge the connection between parents/guardians and San Francisco's Unified School District (SFUSD). The Project READY program was piloted from academic years 2016-17 through 2017-18. During these first two years, the focus was on refining and learning about the program model. Project READY is now in its fourth year of implementation.

Need for the Program

School failure is a major risk factor for violence and criminal activity.[2] The risk of school failure is higher in the transition from middle school to high school, and more students fail 9th grade than any other grade of school, with poor and minority students twice as likely as others to fail.[3] In addition to school failure, other major demographic and risk factors associated with delinquency include trauma exposure, abuse and family dysfunction, mental and behavioral health issues, community violence, low socio-economic status, race, and gender.

The overarching hypothesis behind Huckleberry's Project READY is that academic support and social emotional learning/development (SEL/D) delivered through intensive one-on-one case management and groups, individual therapy, combined with parental support and education delivered in a school setting, can reduce rates of school failure and arrest amongst youth with multiple risk factors.

The development of the Project READY pilot program surfaced in response to requests for Huckleberry to expand its diversion services into school settings. Huckleberry first began providing diversion services in 1998 in response to the San Francisco Mayor's Local Action Plan for Juvenile Justice Reform. The Huckleberry Community Assessment and Resource Center (CARC) was created to help youth arrested for

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[2] U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics (2004). *Survey of inmates in state and federal correctional facilities*. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research.

[3] Bottoms, C. (2002). Improving schools are trying new approaches to raise achievement of struggling students. In *Opening doors to the future: Preparing low-achieving middle grades students to succeed in high school (*41-56). Atlanta, GA: Southern Regional Education Board.

non-violent crimes stay out of detention and avoid further involvement in the juvenile justice system. CARC is one of the agencies credited with reducing juvenile detention bookings in San Francisco by 63% over the last 15 years.[4] The improved outcomes observed by SFUSD school staff for their arrested students (low recidivism and 63% of CARC youth identified as struggling in school improve their school behavior/performance), prompted school staff to request the same interventions for their non-arrested, but difficult to manage, youth. Furthermore, since 2011, SFUSD has been under enormous pressure to reduce suspension and expulsion rates. Pursuant to the Safe and Supportive Schools Board Resolution of 2014, emphasis is placed on improving school climate and addressing disproportionate disciplinary practices. Schools have been encouraged to use alternatives to suspension activities to improve behavior, academics, and attendance. In response to requests from SFUSD, Huckleberry piloted Project READY in 2016-17.

Target Population

Project READY serves middle school youth confronting multiple challenges associated with higher likelihood for juvenile justice involvement in San Francisco. The program is currently offered at Martin Luther King (MLK) and Willie Brown middle schools. MLK is located in the Portola neighborhood of San Francisco, bordering many of San Francisco's hot-zone neighborhoods and serving a significant number of students from these communities. Willie Brown is located in Bayview Hunter's Point, San Francisco's hot-zone neighborhood with the highest concentration of crime and poverty. There is a significant low-income population at each school, with 81% of MLK students and 77% of Willie Brown students qualifying for free/reduced price lunch.

Project READY supports rising 8th grade students with significant behavior problems, who in 7th grade had more than a minimum of 10 unexcused absences and/or three behavioral interventions (referrals, suspensions, expulsions, or "push-ins").

Program Description

Project READY provides youth with academic support and social emotional learning/development delivered through intensive one-on-one case management and groups, combined with parental support and education. The program works with youth from the summer before 8th grade through the first semester of 9th grade, with the most intensive services offered during 8th grade. Project READY is made up of four core program components: 1) case management, 2) academic support, 3) social and emotional learning development and mental health support, and 4) parent education and support. These four components are described below.

- **Case Management:** Project READY case management addresses targeted needs through activities such as needs assessment, planning, service delivery and coordination; regularly monitoring and adjusting plans; and ongoing monitoring of progress towards goals and recalibration of goals. To better support systems navigation and to advocate for students, the Huckleberry Project READY case manager meets regularly with teachers and parents and attends counseling conferences and school Student Success Team meetings. To successfully connect youth and their families to available community services, the case manager provides warm handoffs by accompanying youth to service locations and appointments, and by making introductions to new providers.

- **Academic Support:** Case managers consult teachers to assess student academic remediation and support needs in core subjects and identify behaviors impacting classroom success. With input from parents as well, and by using school data, case managers develop an individualized academic

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[4] District Attorney's Office: RFQ for Restorative Community Conferencing Released April 2013; Updated statistics from the Juvenile Probation Department.

success plan. Tutoring is available in math, science, and literacy. There also is a summer intensive offering that provides academic enrichment and engages youth in activities that teach study, test-taking, and note-taking skills.

- **Social Emotional Learning/Development (SEL/D) & Mental Health Support:** Case managers develop stabilization plans (which are based on the youth's Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS) pre-assessment results) as part of their case plans, and work individually with youth to address attendance, behavior, and barriers to school engagement. Referrals to Project READY therapists are made when appropriate. Case managers use an evidence based SEL/D curriculum to guide one-on-one meetings with youth. In addition, and with the support of Huckleberry therapists, case managers provide an SEL/D group workshop series for one-hour/week for 16 weeks focused on social and emotional skill development and leadership skills (e.g. community building, relationship building, assertiveness, self-awareness, restorative justice practices, etc.)

- **Parent Education & Support:** Huckleberry Project READY engages parents in multiple ways throughout the program implementation. Parents are engaged from the time the referral is made, then have multiple meetings with a case manager to recruit and onboard the youth and family into the program. Parents complete an SEL assessment and a parent agreement that outlines participation expectations (i.e. what is needed/requested from parents/families to have their child enrolled in the program). The case manager provides an orientation to each family prior to the start of the program. To develop the unique skills related to parenting an adolescent, parents receive monthly family meetings at their home, school or other community location, led by the Project READY therapist to create a family goal plan, empower the parents, discuss progress and address challenges. In addition, parents participate in individualized sessions/coaching and complete parenting workshops. Developing parenting skills and receiving new parenting tools helps parents deal with the challenges of adolescence, and heal family relationships. Parents are also in contact with the case manager to discuss academic and social-emotional progress. If requested, parents are referred to Huckleberry's family therapy services.

About this Evaluation

Research Design

The Project READY evaluation is a formative process evaluation and outcomes study using a non-experimental design (i.e., outcomes measurement will occur only among Project READY participants and not with a group of non-participants). LFA selected this design because it is most appropriate for the primary purposes of the evaluation: to assess implementation of this early stage program and explore the outcomes and progress of student participants. The evaluation includes the tracking of process measures to assess the extent to which the program is being delivered as described in the program model. It also collects outcome measures to examine changes among participants and assess youths' experiences in the program, including over-time assessment based on case manager progress tracking.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding the Project READY evaluation included:

Process Evaluation:

1. To what extent are Project READY program components and activities being delivered as intended? Are youth served receiving and participating in the program activities at the prescribed dosage and duration?

2. Is Project READY reaching youth who fit within the defined target population?

3. Are youth regularly attending the program and being retained in the program? If not, at what point do they drop out, and why?

Outcomes Evaluation:

1. What percentage of youth achieve the indicators of progress towards school outcomes?
   - To what extent do Project READY participants improve their academic performance?
   - To what extent do participants improve their school attendance?
   - To what extent do participants avoid school disciplinary actions?

2. To what extent do participants avoid involvement with the juvenile justice system?

3. To what extent do participants improve their social emotional skills?

Data Sources

The data sources listed below informed the Project READY process and outcomes evaluation.

Process Evaluation Data Sources

- Participant demographic data
- Program attendance records
- Case plan
- Intake forms (Referral form, Intake Screener, TESI, SSIS)
- Case management records
- Program attendance records

Outcomes Evaluation Data Sources

- School data
  - Academic records (GPA and units completed)
  - School attendance records
  - Weekly school progress reports
  - Disciplinary actions (suspensions, expulsions, and behavioral actions)
  - Matriculation records to next grade level
- Arrest data
- Social emotional assessment tool
- Parent interviews
- Staff Interviews

Methods

Data Collection

Participant data: Project READY enters all program data into their Salesforce database. This includes program referral and intake information, program participation data, and case plan information. Project READY obtains school information such as school attendance, grades, and behavioral incidents from the schools directly. These data are entered by Project READY staff into the Salesforce database. The program also obtains and enters arrest data into the program database. Project READY shared a de-identified data export with LFA for analysis.

Stakeholder Interviews: LFA conducted telephone interviews with Project READY staff and with parents/caregivers to gather their insights about the program.

Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis: LFA conducted analysis of all participant-level program, school, and arrest data using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Analysis consisted primarily of descriptive statistics along with some sub-group analyses.

Qualitative analysis: LFA reviewed transcripts from all staff and parent/caregiver interviews. The LFA team performed content analysis to identify key themes, lessons, and insights about program successes and opportunities.

Evaluation Findings: How Project READY Makes a Difference

Who is being served?

Since 2016 Project READY has served **62 students** from Martin Luther King (58% of participants) and Willie Brown (42% of participants) middle schools. Project READY is generally serving its intended target population. Over half (60%) of the participants (for whom data is available (n=15) meet the eligibility criteria of having three or more behavioral interventions, or 10 or more unexcused absences in 7th grade. Project READY works in close partnership with schools to identify students who could benefit from the program and are therefore flexible in accepting students based on other need factors. The charts below provide more information about the demographic profile of the students served by Project READY.

Project READY participants are primarily black and brown youth growing up in a context where youth of color are impacted by institutional racism and are disproportionately targeted by the criminal justice system. Over half (52%) of program participants are African American / Black and over one-third (39%) of youth are Hispanic / Latinx. Nearly half of participating youth identify as a cis woman / girl (53%) or cis man / boy (45%) respectively, and two percent of youth identify as transgender. Nearly all (90%) participating youth receive public assistance (e.g. EBT, free or reduced lunch, housing assistance, or other). The charts below provide more information about the demographic profile of the students served by Project READY.

Exhibit 1.Race and Ethnicity*

Asian, 3%
Other, 2%
Pacific Islander, 2%
Multiracial, 3%
Hispanic/Latinx, 39%
African American/Black, 52%

n = 62

Exhibit 2.Gender Identity

Transgender, 2%
Cis Man/Boy, 45%
Cis Woman/Girl, 53%

n = 62
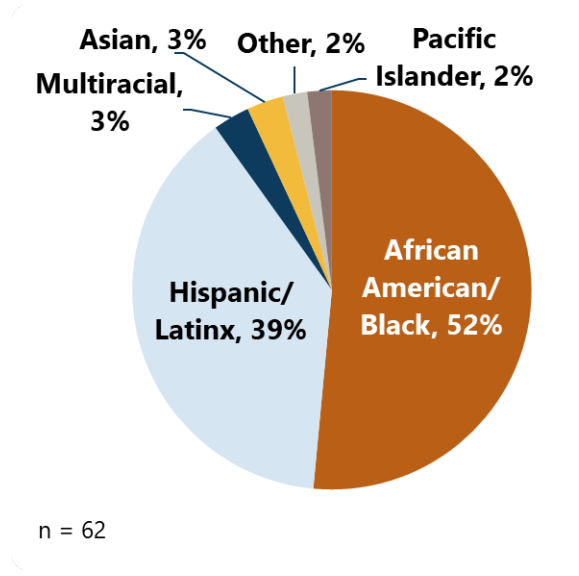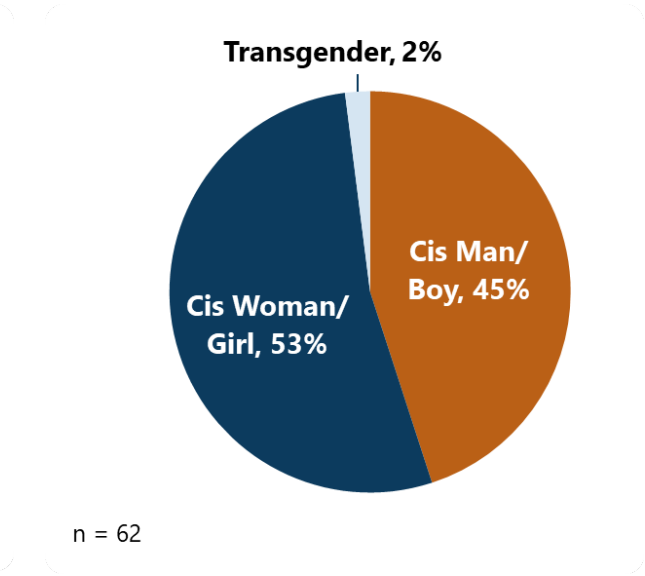
*The sum of the percentages is more than 100% due to rounding.

Exhibit 3.Preferred Language   **Exhibit 4.Receive Public Assistance*, ***
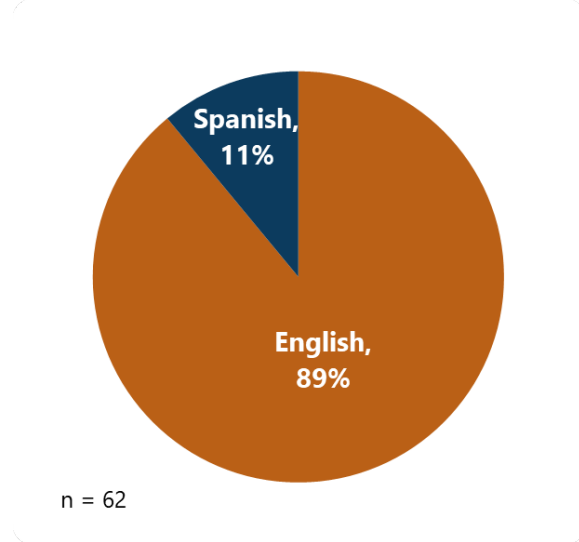
Spanish, 11%

English, 89%

n = 62

No, 11%

Yes, 90%

n = 38
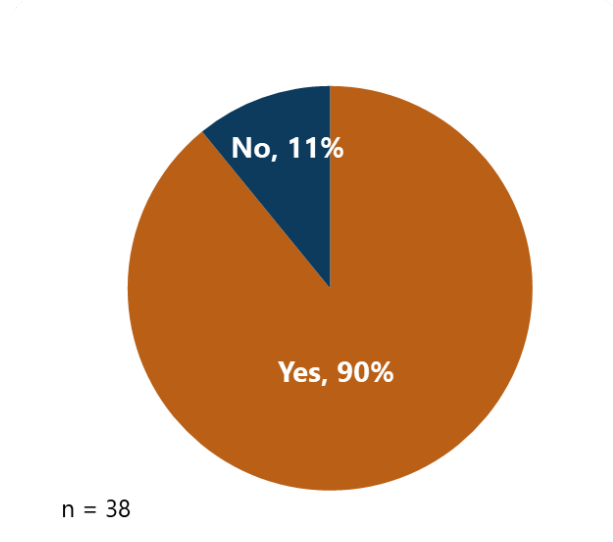
*The sum of the percentages is more than 100% due to rounding.
** Public assistance includes aid such as free and reduced lunch, EBT, or housing assistance.

Program Implementation

This section focuses on program staff activities in the following areas: attracting and retaining participants in the program; engaging with schools; providing direct services to youth; and family engagement. Within each of these areas, we share findings about how implementation unfolded and what Project Ready is learning with regards to implementation (such as best practices and opportunities for program refinement). While this section addresses program implementation itself (e.g. what staff is doing), the next section dives into the student experience of the program, including student participation and outcomes.

Attracting and Retaining Participants in the Program

The program aims to enroll young people in the fall, though referrals to the Project READY program are often delayed. Ideally, referrals come in during the first (fall) semester of the school year, allowing program staff to complete recruitment and enrollment in the spring, and begin relationship building with young people over the summer. Project READY notes that it has been a challenge getting referrals from the schools in the first semester. Across all cohorts, only 8% of referrals have come during the first semester, meaning that most referrals are not made until the second school semester. This is something Project READY is committed to continuing to navigate with schools to establish a more seamless referral process.

[When referrals are delayed] The case managers are starting that relationship building process when they should really be doing some of that intervention they should be doing. **Everything is getting pushed back** and the intervention is happening in the second semester not first. **That has an impact on retention and success.**

Project READY staff member

Project READY has had to be flexible in their recruitment practices to reach the target number served. Project READY often received fewer referrals from schools than is ideal. This has meant that there is a smaller pool of eligible program candidates. In order to meet the program's target number of youth served, the program has done less rigorous screening of potential participants than they would if there were a larger pool. Staff do not attribute the low referral rate to a lack of demand from interested families,

but rather cite challenges for school staff based on their limited time and capacity to make timely referrals.

Student readiness for services has surfaced as an important recruitment criterion. Project READY staff find that the program is most impactful among young people who genuinely want to participate and who have some level of openness to receiving support services. These readiness factors are important to consider during recruitment, as there are times when parents or caregivers are eager to have their child participate, but the young person is reluctant or unwilling to participate. Project READY staff do an excellent job of working with young people who may have reservations or are slow to warm up to the program, but staff find that if the young person is not open to services at all, they do not benefit from the program the way that other participants do. Staff therefore considers it very important that participation is the youth's own choice.

Program retention is strong with most young people involved through the entire duration of the program (currently defined as through the first semester of their 9th grade year). Among the 67 students who have enrolled in the program to date, the average duration of participation is 15 months (ranging from 2.5 to 23 months), with many of these participants still currently enrolled and continuing their participation. To date, only five students have dropped out or disenrolled early from the program, having participated in between one and three sessions with a case manager. These young people participated for an average of six months (ranging from 2.5 to 10 months). According to Project READY staff, reasons that young people discontinue participation in the program include moving out of the service area or refusing to participate in case management sessions, though in some instances, students report doing well following their transition to 9th grade and feel like they no longer need to continue with the program.

Operating as a School-Based Program

As a school-based program, Project READY is able to make services accessible for young people, and better coordinate with teachers and school support staff than if the program operated off campus. However, there are also challenges to operating as a school-based program despite having supportive school partners. Many of these challenges are issues that many school systems struggle with including: insufficient time and resources, operating in a context of constant pressure and reaction-mode, as well as ways in which school systems are poorly equipped to counter the negative impacts of racism, poverty, and community trauma. These challenges are part of why it is so valuable to have Project READY embedded within schools so that Project READY and its school partners can work together to navigate these contextual realities of operating within the school system to make the program as successful as possible.

Project READY provides accessible on-site services to young people. Case managers and the program therapist spend time on each of the school campuses to meet with participating youth. Students are excused from class to attend case management and therapy sessions during select periods of the day. The program has implemented small changes at the two schools to encourage students' attendance at the group sessions. In the 2018-19 school year, the group session at the MLK school site was held during the students' elective period, which was typically a favorite class. This meant that sometimes students did not want to miss class to participate in the group. This past school year, the program met with students during their advisory period or their physical education period, which has increased students' willingness to attend.

Project READY staff communicate with teachers to align case management support with students' individualized academic needs. Case managers meet regularly with young people's teachers so they can communicate about the students' grades, behavior, and specific upcoming assignments. One case manager shared that she reviews the students' grades weekly so that she can talk about the student's progress during their weekly case management sessions. This practice provides a level of accountability

for the student because the student knows that someone will be reviewing their grades and discussing it with them. Over the course of program participation, case managers met with teachers an average of four times per participant. Case managers also held in-person meetings with teachers and with the young person and/or family member present, an average of three times over the course of the program.

Partnership and Coordination with Schools

Project READY has cultivated good relationships with the school staff over the years. Project READY staff invests time in developing relationships with the wellness coordinators, social workers, and student support staff at the schools, as well as staff who play crucial roles in providing school data to Project READY. One of the staff explained that part of the reason Project READY staff has strong relationships with the schools is "because [the school staff have] seen changes in the youth in the program." While Project READY acknowledges that the school partnerships are stronger now than when the program initially launched, further streamlining the partnerships and integration of the program's services within the schools would be helpful. For example, obtaining student data is largely dependent on relationships with an individual school staff person, and is not systematized in a way that makes data access timely and consistent.

Project READY partners closely with schools to address challenging behaviors among youth. The relationships that case managers and the program therapist have with young people, their families, and the school staff positions them well to advocate on students' behalf and help the school address disciplinary concerns. This is one of the important ways in which Project READY's role as a bridge between students, families, and the school helps keep young people in school and on track. The school is able to lean on Project READY to support young people, which may include holding mediation, communicating with teachers or parents, and providing individual therapy. Project READY's presence on campus and involvement with students and families helps the schools take a preventive rather than punitive approach (i.e. suspension or arrests).

> **The schools we are in are not trying to criminalize kids. They really want to work with them.** [...]. There are a lot of behaviors they exhibit in which they are technically breaking the law, such as being caught with marijuana or getting physical with teachers or other students on campus. The school can easily suspend them and arrest them. **The schools lean on us to help them with the kids so they don't get arrested.** They try to be more preventative as a whole, so they don't have to call police.
>
> *Project READY staff member*

Challenges of Being a School-Based Program

As a school-based program, one of the challenges Project READY faces is being able to connect with and support young people when they are not at school. Chronic absenteeism is a tremendous challenge for Project READY's ability to effectively engage students. While frequent unexcused absences is one of the reasons young people are referred to Project READY, students who are habitually truant are challenging to serve through Project READY's existing program model, which entails participation in case management, therapy, and group sessions at school. Case managers are

> Since it is a school-based program, **sometimes we can't touch base with students because they're not at school.** We do try to go to their house and have impromptu meetings with them. This does become a big barrier though. If they're not coming to school, we can't see them. **When they do go back to school, the teachers don't want them pulled out.**
>
> *Project READY staff member*

creative, flexible, and adaptive in trying to connect with young people who struggle with school attendance. Case managers will pick up young people up at their homes to bring them to school, check in by text or visit them at their homes, partner with parents/guardians via family meetings, and even provide young people with incentives to encourage them to attend school. These supports make a difference in staying connected with young people, though low school attendance remains a challenge to delivering the program's intended dosage.

Program managers also report that students' engagement often declines over the summer when young people are not in school. One strategy Project READY staff hopes may help is to extend the program through the full 9th grade year to help make up for some of the connection and engagement that may be lost over the summer.

> **It's great working in the schools but it is also a big barrier.** They get conditioned to only seeing us in schools, so with summer engagement they don't want to see us. Not being in communication with them in summer bleeds into 9th grade.
>
> *Project READY staff member*

While partnership with the schools is strong and has grown even stronger over the years, school staff operate in a context of very limited time which creates challenges for program implementation. As noted above, teacher time constraints have affected timely programming. Teacher and staff time constraints also pose challenges related to availability to meet with Project READY staff or ability to share timely, complete student data. Project READY staff observe that the school systems operate in a culture of overwhelm that makes it difficult to support a program that seems external or additional to the core school functions. Project READY staff recognize this as a symptom of underinvestment in schools, rather than a lack of partnership and commitment from school staff. As Project READY has demonstrated its impact and success with young people, the program has gained increased buy-in from schools and become more integrated within the school culture, but Project READY staff fear that the program is still viewed as another thing on school staff's already full plate. Project READY aims to be as collaborative and mindful of school staff's time as possible, while also maintaining the types of partnership needed for the program to be successful.

> I never realized until I worked in the schools how quickly the school year goes and **how valuable a resource time is.** Nobody has time for anything. Getting them to give us time feels like a huge battle and time just passes so quickly.
>
> **It's hard to play a support role** and feel like you're productive and getting in there when you can because you need things from [the school staff] no matter what. **We're trying to help but we feel like we can be a burden.**
>
> *Project READY staff members*

Providing Responsive Youth Services

The success of Project READY is rooted in its commitment to provide intensive, comprehensive, and youth-focused services. Project READY maintains a balance of consistency and adherence to a structured curriculum, while also being flexible, adaptive, and attentive to the needs of young people. Project READY staff identified three core aspects of providing responsive services to young people: 1) meeting youth where they are at; 2) establishing authentic relationships; and 3) connecting young people to additional supports as needed. These are discussed further below.

Project READY serves young people in a way that is client-centered and flexible. For case managers and the therapist, this often means meeting with youth when they are willing to meet, but not forcing them. Case managers use various strategies to encourage young people to participate by making meetings more appealing, such as meeting outside, talking while doing art or playing basketball, or

meeting in other unconventional ways or settings. Young people vary in how they prefer to express themselves, according to one case manager, and it is their job to figure out what works best for each person. Case managers tailor their approach to best suit different young people's needs and attitudes. For instance, according to one staff member "Sometimes we have to be more gentle and patient, while with other kids we have to be more assertive and aggressive. These are things that help the relationship be successful. Having healthy boundaries while staying flexible and open." Staff also aim to connect with young people where and when they can, including at their house if they did not make it to school. Conducting home visits can be a challenge on staff's schedules, and one ongoing goal for Project READY is to find the right balance between being school- and community-based.

Case managers build rapport with young people by being authentic, accountable, and persistent. One case manager explained that how you carry yourself as a case manager is important. "Case managers are confident and comfortable with themselves. [It is important to] be authentic and be yourself – kids can tell when you're being fake." By doing so, not only are staff modeling behaviors that are important aspects of social-emotional learning for young people, such as follow through, but they are also building trust to strengthen the relationship.

> **Be consistent. Persistent.** If a kid is saying that they don't want to meet now, but maybe later – make sure to call back later, actually do it. Professionalism, responsibility: **having high expectations while also meeting them where they're at.**
>
> *Project READY staff member*

Serving a youth population mostly comprised of students of color means that Project READY staff diversity matters. Parents acknowledge the importance of having their child interact with adults from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds and view the racial/ethnic diversity of Project READY's staff as a tremendous asset of the program. A next step for Project READY to enhance representation among staff might be to enhance the gender diversity of case managers or therapists. One parent commented, "Project READY staff is already ethnic which I appreciate, but males would help. Especially if [the young people] don't have positive males in their lives." Project READY staff agree that having gender diversity in additional to racial/ethnic diversity among staff would be a positive shift for the program.

Project READY connects young people to additional supports as needed. In addition to ongoing work with case managers, and optional weekly individual therapy for young people, Project READY provides ad hoc referrals to connect youth with outside community-based resources to address needs that are beyond the scope of the program. One staff member shared, "we do a lot of good work with our program, but we also realize we can't do 100% of things, so [we work on] bringing in other partners, referring [the youth] to summer jobs, other things, and providing resources for them." For the 2016-20 cohorts, Project READY provided outside referrals to 16% of participants, for services such as academic support or college prep, afterschool programming, mentoring, housing, community service/volunteer hours, mental health, and transportation.

> Our staff are all really invested in helping the youth we work with and helping support them and their families. And whatever it is that they need, whether its help with school, food, housing. Anything that could come up for them, **we try to make happen.** I think we're pretty good at helping refer them.
>
> *Project READY staff member*

Engaging Families

Project READY staff consider effective partnership with families to be one of the core factors that supports young people's success in the program. Program staff typically see deeper engagement and greater program impact among students whose families are actively engaged. The program therapist leads monthly family

> The more I have **connection with parents**, the more improvement I see with the kids.
>
> *Project READY staff member*

meetings to keep parents/caregivers informed about the young person's progress in the program and at school, and provides optional family therapy sessions for families who want additional support. One staff member commented, "Everything we deal with starts at home first. If we're not building relationships with families, it's difficult to start with kids." However, as there are challenges to engaging students, engaging parents/family members can also be challenging. Project READY has a strong history of connecting with parents, and staff look to the successes, challenges, and opportunities for parent engagement to continue strengthening this component of the program.

Project READY understands that some parents have initial hesitation to engage with the program. Project READY staff acknowledge that many families have some initial skepticism, which may be rooted in an underlying distrust of the school system, or a sense that the program is a punitive or disciplinary measure. According to program staff, this initial uncertainty makes some families resistant to participating.

> We offer to have family meetings in their homes. **Sometimes they don't want us in their homes …**[because they] are unsure of what is going to happen in family meetings. If we have at least one, they're more likely to continue. **There's initial skepticism. I think it is a stigma thing.** They associate us with school staff. Even if we explain we're not school staff and aren't associated with school, they think it's a punishment or disciplinary thing.
>
> *Project READY staff member*

Project READY staff build trust and develop relationships with parents by being consistent, celebrating positive news, and demonstrating genuine concern and empathy for the parents as well as the young people. Case managers and therapists are consistent with calling and texting parents and checking in to see how their child and the family is doing. Parents appreciate this level of outreach. One parent shared "They called me regularly to ask how we were doing and to share information with me. I like that they are a source of support to me. The case manager calls me regularly to ask how I am doing too." And while case managers are persistent, they are also compassionate and understanding if parents do not respond. They understand the great deal that families are juggling. Being consistent but in a non-judgmental way is crucial for building trust.

Finally, another way in which staff's consistent and caring approach helps to build strong parent engagement is through communicating regularly about successes. According to staff, parents frequently are accustomed to hearing from school staff only when their child does something wrong. Project READY maintains regular communication with parents, and staff make sure to focus on students' strengths, successes, and progress. "A lot of our communications are providing parents with good news about them being in school on time and attending school," said one staff member. She

> If your kid is doing great, we're going to tell you. **You're going to hear from us regardless.** I think that's really important. I think sometimes the parents ignore the school calls because they're like 'what did my kid do this time.' At first parents might think that way with us too, but then I'm calling to share a resource. Or check in – see how things are going. **I have no agenda. I just want to check in.**
>
> *Project READY staff member*

continued, "Our communication is more consistent. Even when we call with bad news, they know we will also share good news."

Project READY functions as a bridge between parents and schools. Project READY staff play an intensive support role, reaching out and connecting with families. Through this connection, program staff not only support parents' involvement and students' engagement in the program, but also serve as a valuable partner to help families navigate the school experience. For example, case managers may help parents establish an Individualized Education Program (IEP) with the school by supporting parents to complete necessary paperwork to get the process started, or even attending an IEP meeting to help advocate for the student and help relay information. One parent expressed appreciation for the ways that Project READY staff helped her to communicate with the school, advocate for her son's needs, and understand the role she could play to support him. "[Project READY staff] would be at the school to help me talk and meet with the teachers. They are always at school looking out for what my son needs help with. They also help to clarify his school assignments. …[and] have also helped me know how to better interact and relate to him." According to one staff member, "we align ourselves with the family. We let them know we're here to help them navigate the process, walking things through with them."

> **Creating that bridge between the school and the family** when possible is good. Especially for the disengaged family. I wouldn't say we always are successful, but **we always are trying**. Even without the success the trying means a lot because it is sending messages. That **your kid is important**, that **school is important**. And maybe you're not ready to engage, but they are getting the message that they are important.
>
> *Project READY staff member*

Project READY is committed to further strengthening its parent engagement component and attentively explores challenges and opportunities. While some families may experience initial hesitation or distrust which ease over time, other families remain hard to reach. Family participation rates in family meetings is not as high as program staff would like, hovering at about 50%. Because it is more challenging to engage young people when the families are not engaged, Project READY is committed to understanding and addressing the barriers to connecting with harder to reach parents. Some of the constraints for parents involve work schedules, or transportation. Staff work to accommodate families' needs by offering flexible times as well as the option to meet with families in their homes if preferred. Staff also understand what a privilege it is to be welcomed into families' homes, and it requires trust which must be developed over time. While Project READY implements practices that encourage, strengthen and support parent trust and engagement, there are still families whose engagement and participation remains low or inconsistent. Project READY is eager to explore best practices to further strengthen its ability to connect with parents and encourage buy-in. Furthermore, Project READY staff reflect on how greater clarity about program components and expectations during enrollment might help support increased follow-through from parents throughout the program experience.

> At the point of recruitment, getting more info about the family in regards to dynamics: who works, who doesn't, what are their jobs, and **let them know what they're committing to**. Letting them know about the dynamics and set up and asking them if it would work. Historically, staff are so focused on getting kids into the program, but we should be focused on screening before *and* after to **make sure [parents] are clear of expectations**.
>
> *Project READY staff member*

Youth Engagement and Program Participation

The following section describes young people's participation in the program including program attendance and level of engagement – data points that give insight about the program dosage that young people receive. While the program has a prescribed frequency and number of sessions with young people, not all students participate in all sessions as designed. Gathering information about participants' level of participation and exploring factors that facilitate or hinder youth engagement is important for the program's efforts to continually refine its approach so that youth get the maximum benefit of the program.

Academic Support

Academic support is a core component of the Project READY program and it is individualized to the needs of each young person. In partnership with their case manager, young people develop academic case plan goals, and they work with their case manager to achieve progress towards those goals. Case managers meet weekly with students during their 8th grade year, and these sessions alternate between focusing on social emotional learning and development (SEL/D), and academic support. During the third cohort of Project READY, the program also had in-class academic support specialist positions (staffed by Bay Area Youth Agency Consortium, AmeriCorps volunteers). Young people could go to their academic support specialist for tutoring help during lunch or after school. However, due to a lack of applicants for this position, Project READY has been operating without the in-class support for the most recent cohorts. To fill this gap, case managers refer young people to outside tutoring support (which is limited) as needed, and work with students to develop accountability practices to support their academic performance.

Exhibit 5. Participation in Academic Support Sessions
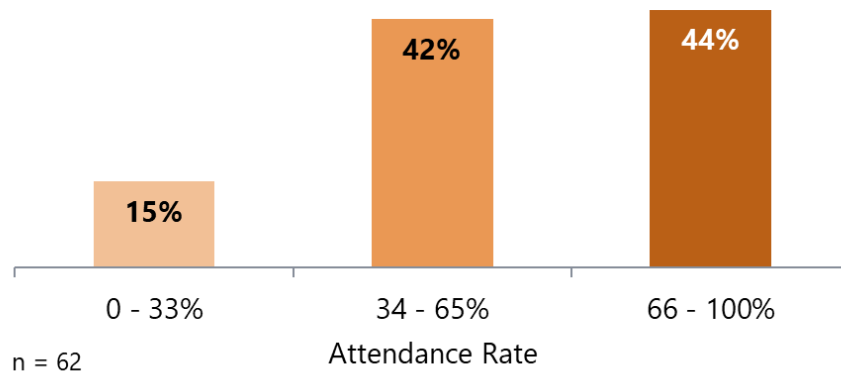
Close to half (44%) of Project READY participants met the target threshold of participating in two thirds of the total academic support sessions offered. Another 42% participated in between one and two thirds of the total number of sessions offered. Only a small minority (15%) attended less than one third of the sessions offered.

Project READY staff note that the academic support component has been more challenging since the loss of the AmeriCorps interns, and the program hopes to reinstate a more formal academic support component to provide more of the direct tutoring support to students. Currently, the program provides academic support through the case management component. Having a dedicated academic support person – someone who checks in with young people about what upcoming assignments they have, the grades they are getting in their classes, leads them through remedial and individualized practices to help them understand concepts, and also talks about the young people's stress or anxiety about their classwork –promotes greater student accountability.

In the first cohort there were a couple of kids who really **didn't see the importance of school** at all. [They] really didn't care about school and **through that case management relationship, we were able to kind of just challenge that idea** and where that comes from and also challenge the parents perpetuating that idea for the kids.

Project READY staff member

Supporting Social Emotional Learning and Development

The social emotional learning and development (SEL/D) component of the program serves to support all the program's intended outcomes: improving school attendance, behavior at school and at home, and avoiding arrests. Developing and practicing self-awareness, control, and strategies for coping with stress and frustration are key to young people's safe and healthy development in all these areas of their lives. All students are invited to meet with Project READY therapists in individual or family settings, and meet with case managers weekly, where every other weekly session is dedicated to SEL/D. Additionally, in tandem with case managers, therapists lead personalized family meetings with both youth and their parents/caregivers monthly to address any issues they are dealing with, ranging from school attendance to family conflict. Project READY uses a highly collaborative program model, in which therapists, case managers, and academic support specialists (when staffed and available) triangulate information to provide customized interventions for youths' diverse needs.

Upon entry to the program, participants complete an SEL/D assessment[5] with a case manager, which helps to identify specific areas of strength and areas for development. These assessments become a starting point for conversation, goal setting, and follow up throughout the program. Therapists and case managers collaboratively monitor student progress using an SEL/D rubric designed to assess young people's progress over time. [6]

Case managers are flexible in their SEL/D approach so that they can meet young people's needs. Sessions with case managers vary from being structured, such as completing SEL worksheets that lead to reflection and conversation, to being unstructured, such as talking about issues the young person is struggling with. Case managers are flexible in where and when they deliver supports to young people, for example case managers may talk to students while they are playing basketball or doing art.

[5] The assessment Project READY uses upon enrollment is the Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS)

[6] The SEL/D rubric was co-developed by Learning for Action and Project READY for the program's use.

Case managers use a strengths-based approach to support young people's SEL/D. Case managers help young people to articulate and set goals for how they want to grow. The approach case managers use includes techniques such as coaching, role modeling, or role playing to help young people identify positive ways to engage with adults at school or home, and with their peers. For instance, case managers can help young people reframe what they are saying. For

How do you learn how to interact? How do you learn how to communicate? **Having those conversations about who you are in the world is really powerful** in middle school because it's like who do you want to be. Talk about it, set some goals and do some skill building.

Project READY staff member

example, a case manager may tell a young person: rather than lashing out and refusing to do something you can instead say "I could do this, but let me do it in 5 minutes. I need a break." Case managers are there to engage in role modeling and coaching in the moment as challenges arise, and to engage young people in reflection after difficult situations or confrontations occur. Case managers will ask the young person about what other options they had in a situation and help them reflect on how they might be able to apply those skills and approaches in the future. The combination of weekly case management meetings and weekly therapy sessions provide youth with multiple touchpoints to reflect on their emotions, feelings, and actions.

Exhibit 6.Participation in SEL Individual Sessions

n = 62
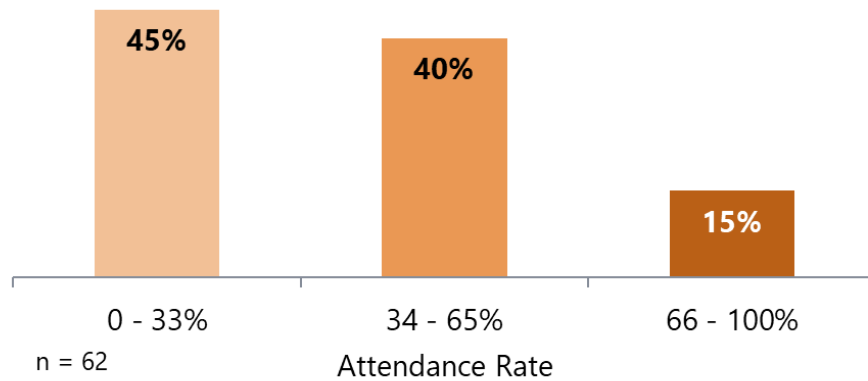
Participation in the individual SEL/D sessions is lower than the desired participation rate. The program goal was for all participants to attend at least two thirds of the SEL/D sessions offered. Only 15% of participants achieved this threshold. Of the remaining young people, 40% attended between one and two thirds, and 45% of young people attended fewer than one third. Project READY staff note several observations about why participation is lower than desired. One challenge is that students sometimes are reluctant to be pulled out of class – they may not want to miss a favorite class, or they

Some kids often feel overwhelmed, others just feel that way for the first one to two weeks. **Some are strong about communicating that, other times they avoid us or don't show up** to appointments or sessions, or just stay in class and do their work.

Project READY staff member

want to be with their friends. Project READY staff also note that sometimes participants skip sessions because they find the frequency of meetings with case managers, therapists, academic support specialists, and other adults overwhelming. Finally, school attendance impacts program participation, as case managers are not able to meet with students if the student is not at school. Interestingly, the proportion of students who attend at least two-thirds of the target number of sessions is the same at both schools. Of the students below the target threshold, Willie Brown students make up a larger portion of those who attend fewer than one third of the sessions. Project READY may want to further explore this trend to better understand barriers that uniquely impact students at Willie Brown.

Attendance tends to be higher in the group SEL sessions than the individual sessions. The majority (66%) of participating young people attended at least two thirds of the group sessions, as shown in the chart below. There are differences in participation between the students at the two schools, with students at MLK attending group SEL/D sessions more consistently than students at Willie Brown. 71% of MLK students achieved the target threshold of attending at least two thirds of group sessions, while just over half (52%) of students at Willie Brown reached this target rate of participation.

Exhibit 7.Participation in SEL Group Sessions

n = 59

Attendance Rate: 0 - 33% → 10%; 34 - 65% → 24%; 66 - 100% → 66%
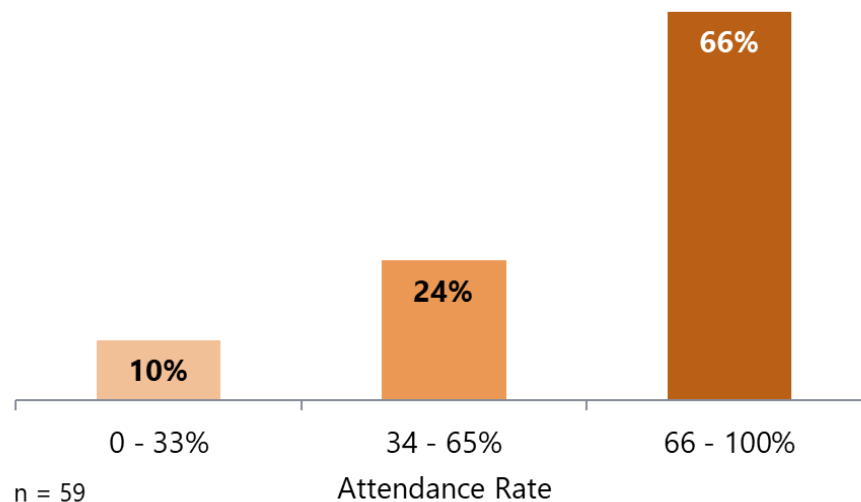
While attendance in group sessions is high there are barriers or challenges that limit young people's engagement in group sessions. One struggle that case managers notice among some participants is social anxiety about being in a group, particularly for those young people who are reserved. One case manager noted that "it's a struggle. [There are] different student personalities, [which means that] kids don't want to come because they're not friends. A lot of it depends on students, and for those with anxiety, they just leave [the session]." Case managers also observe that some students hold a sense of stigma about participating in the program. "One young person didn't want to go to group anymore and felt socially different, he felt like our program was for bad kids," shared one staff member even though

I think **group can be really helpful** for some of them. In the second semester, they work on project-based learning. First semester was them getting to know each other, getting to know us. Now they are starting to **develop leadership** and came up with a project. Knowing that they are in a cohort, that makes them **feel like they are not alone**. They are not the only one who gets pulled out and checks in with someone.

Project READY staff member

not all of the students who participate in the program are referred because of frequent behavioral incidents.

Program staff aim to ensure that the group sessions are suited for young people with a range of personalities and strengths, and they believe that exposure to diverse peers is beneficial to students' growth. Case managers try to emphasize that they work with students with a range of strengths and opportunities, so everyone has room to grow and develop. One staff member commented "having a mix of kids who are more reserved, some who are more like the kids who speak up and take charge, having multiple intelligences, different ways to be a leader, and incorporating their strengths." Group sessions use SEL ice breakers, and other activities to foster group trust, collaboration, and bonding. Young people did an SEL escape room – a competitive activity in which a team of players cooperatively discover clues, solve puzzles, and accomplish tasks in a room in order to progress and accomplish a specific goal in a limited amount of time - developed by one of the program staff. The activity required and put to use different forms of intelligence, including doing a word scramble, some math, reading words backwards in a mirror, giving an opportunity for young people with different strengths to contribute.

Recreation and Group Bonding Activities

Project READY youth participate in a summer intensive program which focuses on recreational activities such as field trips, and group activities to support relationship building among their cohort and with case managers. As illustrated in the chart below, participation in the summer intensive program tends to be either high (with more than half of students attending two thirds of the activities or more), or low (less than one third). Project READY staff note that many young people have competing commitments over the summer, like summer jobs, or they simply do not want to engage in program activities over the summer. Among participants who do attend, they typically enjoy the summer intensive program very much as reflected by the high rate of participation among young people who give it a chance. One hypothesis Project READY might explore is whether getting earlier referrals and completing enrollment earlier in the 7th grade year helps boost participation in the summer intensive among young people between the 7th and 8th grade year.

Exhibit 8.Participation in Group Recreation, Bonding, and Team-building Activities

n = 40
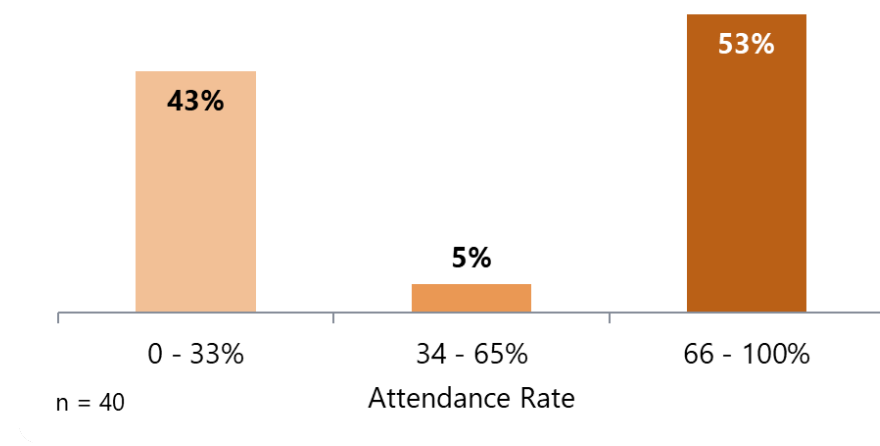
Program Outcomes for Project READY Participants

To understand Project Ready's impact, the evaluation team assessed the extent to which youth made progress in the following outcome areas:

- Goal Planning and Achievement
- Academic Performance
- School Attendance
- Behavior
- Social Emotional Development

First, it is important to note some limitations of the data presented below. Project READY works in partnership with schools to obtain outcomes data; however, it can be challenging to secure this information from schools. Project READY especially struggles to get 7th grade data for incoming students and 9th grade data when students have transitioned to high schools where the program does not have an on-campus presence, and the established relationships that the program has with the middle school staff. So, in the charts presented below, the sample size (n) is a smaller proportion of the total students served than is ideal. With a larger sample size, the evaluation team would have more confidence that the trends presented below are representative of the population served.

Goal Planning and Achievement

Project READY supports students to set and achieve goals for how they want to develop and grow. Goals are typically academic or behavioral in nature (e.g. arriving to school on time); however, they are also highly tailored to each youth's self-identified vision for themselves. For example, one student wanted to learn how to ride the bus as part of their goal to becoming independent. Students varied in terms of how many goals they set for themselves – some identified as few as two and others identified up to 19 goals, and the average number of goals students set for themselves was eight.

He is a little lazy about getting up to go to school on time. **The program helped him set academic goals** (e.g. arriving on-time to school) and they give him opportunities to try to achieve those goals. They also give him little prizes and other rewards if he achieves his goals. **He says it helps to motivate him.** The program helped him academically at school and now he is doing well. They are helping him read more and better understand math.

Parent/caregiver interviewee

The overwhelming majority of Project READY participants achieved progress on their case plan goals.
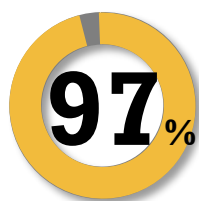
97% of students made improvements on or met at least one case plan goal.

Eighty-one percent of participants made progress on at least half of their goals, with 48% of participants making progress on all their goals. It is important to note that in case management work it is important to help identify a mix of goals – some that can be achieved in the short-term and some that may be ambitious and require long-term effort. So, the expectation is NOT that the client will achieve every goal in their case plan. The exercise of setting goals is a positive outcome in and of itself.

Academic Performance

Project READY students make a lot of academic gains in 8th grade. Eighty percent of participants increased their GPA from 7th to 8th grade. The average GPA increased from 2.1 to 2.7 (see Exhibit 9). Parents deeply appreciated the improvements in their child's academic performance, such as increases in GPA and improved math and reading skills, as well as their child's enthusiasm for school and setting academic goals (e.g. arriving to school on time). One parent noted "After Project READY, [my son] brought his grades up. He got a 3.13 GPA, which is a huge improvement from 1.17. He took studying more seriously. He's more focused on school and sports now...He's on track with wanting to go to 4-year college." Another parent noted, "[Before the program, my son's] grades were an issue, he was getting D's and F's, I just wanted C's. Then, after the program he got on the honor roll! He finally started getting A's. He has a 3.5 GPA now, he moved up. He started reading books, teaching himself new topics." Another key indicator of academic success in the 8th grade is promotion to the 9th grade. All Project READY students achieved this milestone.

> **After Project READY, [my son] brought his grades up.** He got a 3.13 GPA, which is a huge improvement from 1.17. He took studying more seriously. He's more focused on school and sports now...**He's on track with wanting to go to 4-year college.**
>
> *Parent/caregiver interviewee*

100% of Project READY students successfully matriculated in 9th grade.

Exhibit 9. Student GPA by Grade Level*

Legend: A (3.5 - 4.0) B (2.5 - 3.4) C (1.5 - 2.4) D (0.5 - 1.4) F (0 - 0.4)

Mean GPA	7th Grade (n = 27)	8th Grade (n = 66)	9th Grade (n = 29)
	2.1	2.5	1.7
A		15%	7%
B	30%	41%	17%
C	52%	33%	34%
D	19%	8%	28%
F		3%	14%
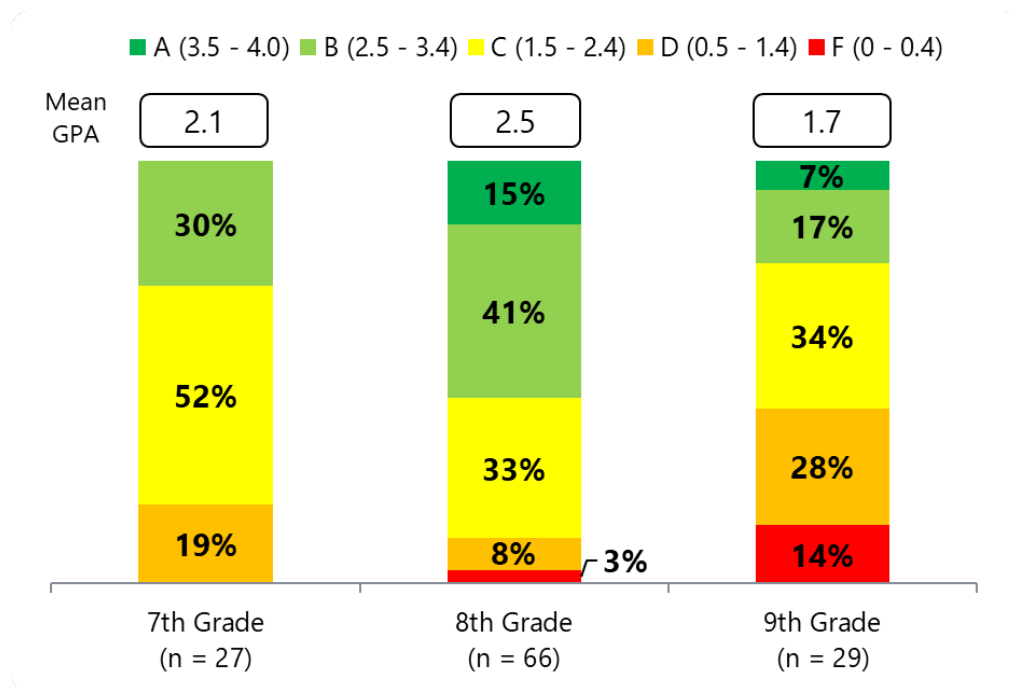
* The sum of the percentages may be more than 100% due to rounding.

While some students sustain academic gains into 9th grade others appear to regress academically. The GPA of a large proportion (86%) of participants dropped in 9th grade. The average GPA dropped from 2.5 to 1.7. The program design in relation to the level of student need may help explain this drop. Project READY works with youth from the summer before 8th grade through the first semester of 9th grade, with

the most intensive services offered during 8th grade. Because students are receiving less support in 9th grade it may be harder for them to keep up with the academic demands of 9th grade. The evaluation data supports what program staff already suspected to be true: the transition to high school is a challenging time which can impact academic performance; and ground is often lost over the summer before 9th grade (in particular for participants who do not engage in the summer programming), thus much of the first semester is often spent on academic catch up. The program aims to address the 9th grade regression in two ways: the first is reinstating an academic support specialist position to resume providing more intensive academic supports; the second is to extend the program duration through the full 9th grade year. Continuing the program through the full 9th grade year is expected to better support students through the transition to high school and conclude the program when students have a more solid footing on their high school academics.

Though some students appear to struggle academically in the 9th grade, the majority are sufficiently on-track in order to matriculate into the 10th grade. Unfortunately, data on actual 10th grade matriculation was not available for the evaluation, so the percent of credits completed is used as a proxy for students being academically on track to matriculate to 10th grade. The average percentage of academic credits completed was 85%, and a majority of participants (81%) completed the target threshold of at least 75% of the school credits that they attempted.
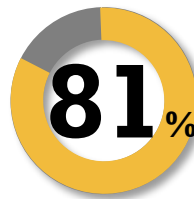
81% of students completed at least 75% of credits attempted in 9th grade.

School Attendance

Project READY students improve their attendance in 8th grade and maintain a stable attendance into 9th grade. Sixty three percent of participants decreased the number of absences from 7th to 8th grade. The average number of absences decreased from 20 days in 7th grade to 18 days in 8th grade. This trend continues somewhat in the following year. While there's improvement in the attendance of 62% of participants between 8th and 9th grade, the average number of absences remains at 18 days, an important predictor of school success. In school attendance research, 18 absences (excused or unexcused) is a threshold for chronic absenteeism and an empirically supported indicator of whether a student is at academic risk due to absenteeism.[7]

One of my students was referred because of attendance which was really bad. I told him I am there to help him. **I asked him what he thought his struggles were**. Every week we check in on why he is tardy – he would say because he woke up late. So we worked on setting alarm earlier, and checking in with his mom to have him sleep earlier.

Project READY staff member

While the average number of absences did *not* dip below the 18 absences threshold in 8th and 9th grade, attendance among Project READY trended in a positive direction in other ways. Between 7th and 8th grade the proportion of students with excellent or satisfactory attendance increased from 24% to 30%. And between 8th grade and 9th grade, the proportion of students with excellent or satisfactory attendance increased to 38%.

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[7] Attendance Works. (2017). Present and Counting: A look at chronic absenteeism in Mississippi public schools. Retrieved from https://attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Chronic-Absenteeism_web-2.pdf

Exhibit 10. Student Attendance by Grade*

Legend:
- ■ 36+ days (Severely Chronically Absent)
- ■ 18 - 35 days (Chronically Absent)
- ■ 9-17 days (Manageable Attendance)
- ■ 2 - 8 days (Satisfactory Attendance)
- ■ 0 - 1 day (Excellent Attendance)

Mean Absences

	7th Grade (n = 17)	8th Grade (n = 61)	9th Grade (n = 29)
Mean Absences	20	18	18
0 - 1 day	6%	2%	7%
2 - 8 days	18%	28%	31%
9-17 days	29%	23%	21%
18 - 35 days	24%	38%	28%
36+ days	24%	10%	14%
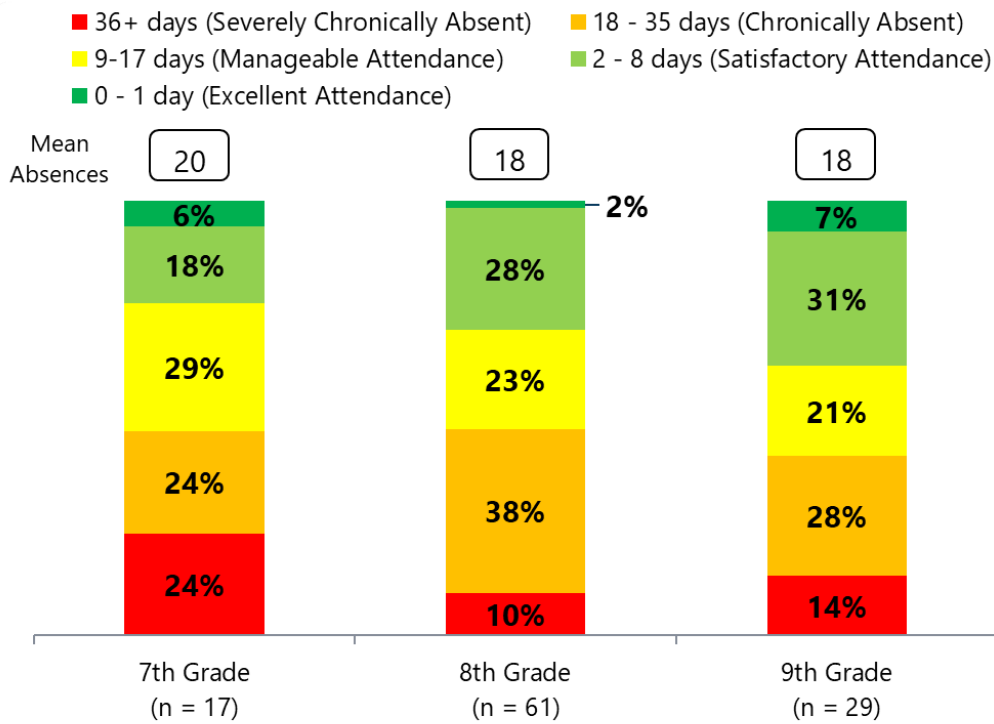
* The sum of the percentages may be more than 100% due to rounding.

Behavior

Project READY students' behavior improved. Students reduce the number of behavioral incidents they have at school during their time in Project READY. Over one-third (36%) of students decreased their number of behavioral incidents from 7th to 8th grade, and 83% of students decreased their number of behavioral incidents from 8th to 9th grade. Parents also observe these positive changes. One parent shared: "[My daughter] was very misbehaved. She would back talk to me and the teachers. And her behavior was difficult. My daughter's behavior has changed. I can now talk to her more now. She was very rebellious. The last time I spoke to her teachers they told me her behavior had changed. Before her teachers couldn't tell her anything because she would get upset/angry really quickly or not listen to them. She is more calm now. She seems more focused on what you are saying to her and is more focused on her academics." According to Project READY staff, teachers also notice these changes and report that Project READY students "...stay in class [and] they do more work, instead of randomly walking out of classes."

Social Emotional Development

Critical to the improvements in academics, attendance, and behavior is the progress that Project READY students make in social emotional learning and development (SEL/D) areas that are critical to understanding and managing emotions, setting and achieving positive goals, feeling and showing empathy for others, establishing and maintaining positive relationships, and making responsible decisions. Project READY staff assess students' strength in five SEL/D components along a six-point scale, using a rubric developed collaboratively by Project READY staff and Learning for Action (Project READY's evaluation partner).

In aggregate, Project READY students improved in three out of the five core SEL competencies: self-awareness; social awareness; and responsible decision-making (see Exhibits 11, 13, 15). Parents also observe these positive changes. Parents shared that Project READY's therapy has helped their child become aware of and manage their emotions, which has resulted in a calmer demeanor and more frequent positive interactions with peers and family members. One parent said, "[My son is] more aware of how he's feeling, the therapy has helped. He'll talk about how he's feeling down and has better skills to pick himself back up. Before when he was down, he wouldn't shower, he wouldn't leave his room, do chores or anything. That used to get me mad, but now he does all of that without me asking."

Findings from the SEL assessment are shown below, organized by the five core SEL competencies.[8]

Self-Awareness

Project READY defines, self-awareness as the ability to accurately recognize one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior. The ability to accurately assess one's strengths and limitations, with a well-grounded sense of confidence, optimism, and a "growth mindset."
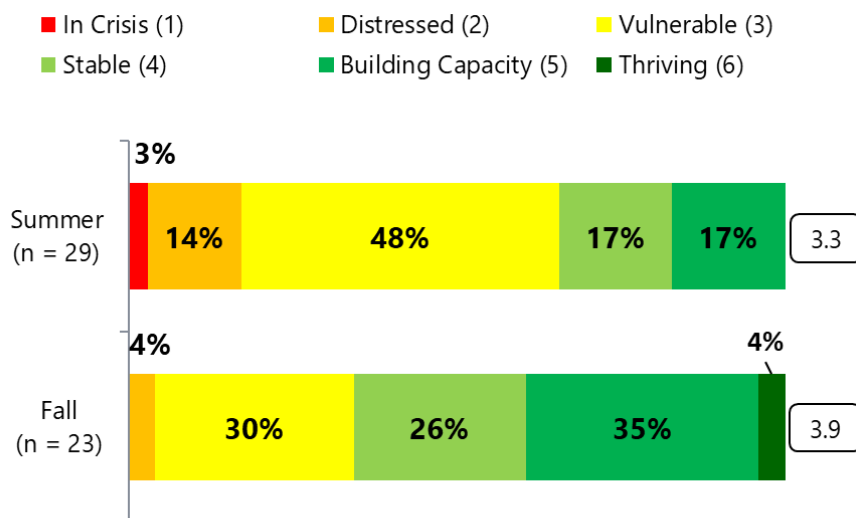
As shown in Exhibit 11 below, the average self-awareness rating increased among Project READY participants between the initial assessment and follow-up assessment. More than half (56%) of young people increased their self-awareness between the summer and fall. Additionally, at the initial assessment 17% were rated in the most vulnerable categories ("in crisis" and "distressed"). Upon re-assessment, only 4% of participants were in the most vulnerable categories for this measure.

> **Stories of Youth Progress**
>
> "We see the positive impact of the program. They'll talk about how staff person helped build their self-esteem and confidence and [how it helped them] do things independently."
>
> *Project READY staff member*

Exhibit 11.   Self-Awareness*

Legend:
- In Crisis (1)
- Distressed (2)
- Vulnerable (3)
- Stable (4)
- Building Capacity (5)
- Thriving (6)

Summer (n = 29): 3% | 14% | 48% | 17% | 17% — 3.3

Fall (n = 23): 4% | 30% | 26% | 35% | 4% — 3.9

* The sum of the percentages may be more than 100% due to rounding.

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[8] The five core competencies used in the Project READY SEL rubric are based on the CASEL framework described here https://casel.org/core-competencies/

Self-Management

Project READY defines self-management as the ability to successfully regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations — effectively managing stress, controlling impulses, and motivating oneself. The ability to set and work toward personal and academic goals.
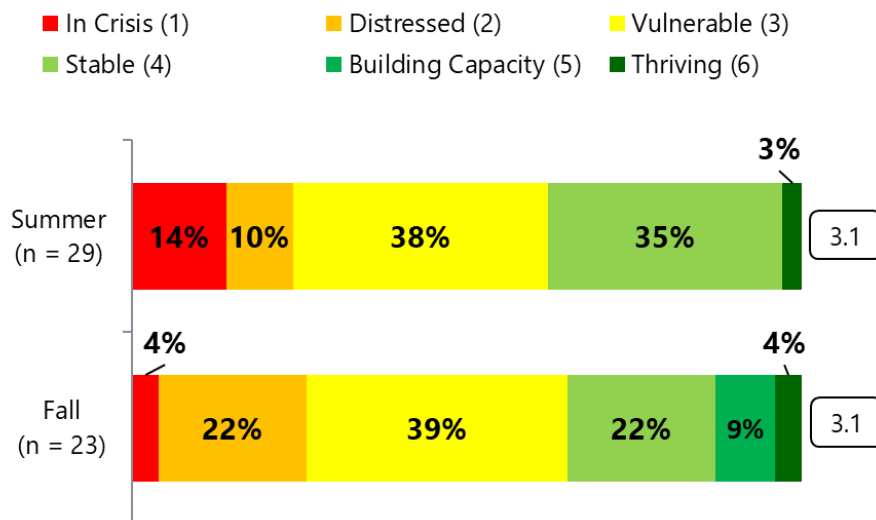
In aggregate, participants did not show an overall increase in their self-management, with the mean score remaining the same; however, 31% of individuals increased their competence in self-management between the two assessments. Notably, while the proportion of participants in the two most vulnerable categories ("in crisis" and "distressed") remained nearly constant, the proportion of participants "in crisis" decreased from 14% at initial assessment to 4% at follow up. This finding is a testament to the program's ability to support young people with the most acute needs.

> **Stories of Youth Progress**
>
> "One of my students is all over the place and has a lot of energy. She keeps skipping class because she likes to move. She has a push-in because she was playing hide-and-seek in a not safe way. I asked how she felt about that, and she told me she was bored. I asked why she does that when she's bored, she said she feels like there is nothing else to do. Now she knows that when she is bored, she asks for a break and goes outside. So the next session, she said she was bored and started asking for breaks."
>
> *Project READY staff member*

Exhibit 12.   Self-Management*

- ■ In Crisis (1)
- ■ Distressed (2)
- ■ Vulnerable (3)
- ■ Stable (4)
- ■ Building Capacity (5)
- ■ Thriving (6)

	In Crisis (1)	Distressed (2)	Vulnerable (3)	Stable (4)	Building Capacity (5)	Thriving (6)	Mean
Summer (n = 29)	14%	10%	38%	35%		3%	3.1
Fall (n = 23)	4%	22%	39%	22%	9%	4%	3.1

* The sum of the percentages may be more than 100% due to rounding.

Social Awareness

Project READY defines social awareness as the ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures. The ability to understand social and ethical norms for behavior and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.
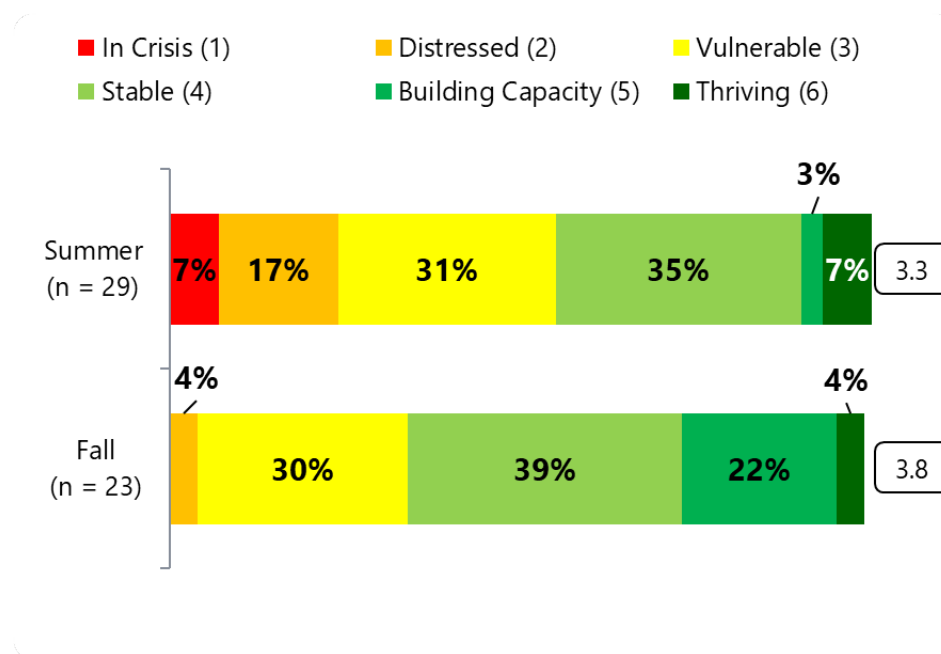
More than half (56%) of participants increased their competence in social awareness, with the average score rising from 3.3 to 3.8 between initial assessment and follow up. The proportion of young people whose initial scores fell in the two lowest categories ("in crisis" and "distressed") shrank from almost a quarter (24%) to 4%.

> **Stories of Youth Progress**
>
> "Another student is very tough and doesn't like showing emotions. She is very blunt with her friends, and her friends are getting mad at her, but she thinks 'I'm just being honest.' We did a relationship worksheet about how to express things to friends so she can be real and honest. She didn't like her friends talking to others who she wasn't friends with, but after the worksheet we talked about it being okay with her friends having other friends."
>
> *Project READY staff member*

Exhibit 13.   Social Awareness*

Legend:
- In Crisis (1)
- Distressed (2)
- Vulnerable (3)
- Stable (4)
- Building Capacity (5)
- Thriving (6)

Group	In Crisis (1)	Distressed (2)	Vulnerable (3)	Stable (4)	Building Capacity (5)	Thriving (6)	Avg
Summer (n = 29)	7%	17%	31%	35%	7%	3%	3.3
Fall (n = 23)		4%	30%	39%	22%	4%	3.8

* The sum of the percentages may be more than 100% due to rounding.

Relationship Skills

Project READY defines relationship skills as the ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. The ability to communicate clearly, listen well, cooperate with others, resist inappropriate social pressure, negotiate conflict constructively, and seek and offer help when needed.
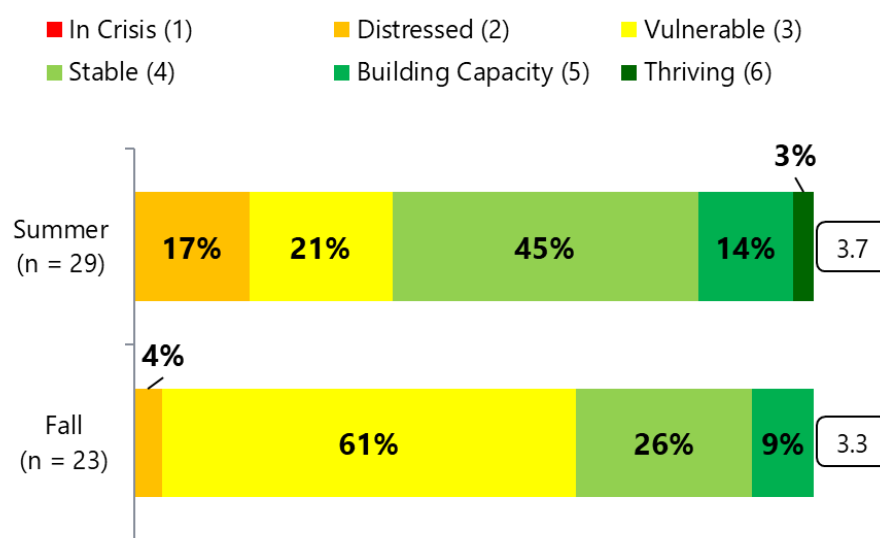
Interestingly, the average rating for relationship skills did *not* increase over time, with only 19% of young people improving in this competency, and the other 81% remaining constant or scoring lower at follow up. However, similar to other domains, there was improvement among the young people with the lowest ratings, with 17% of young people scoring in the "distressed" category at initial assessment, and only 4% in this category at follow up.

> **Stories of Youth Progress**
>
> "[I've seen improvement] with relationship skills. He had really good relationship skills with adults but not as much with peers. We would sometimes role play. He was fearful of how other kids would perceive him. If he said the wrong answer to them in response to whatever they said, we practiced that a lot. He was taking more initiative in initiating conversations with other people and hanging out with people outside of school."
>
> *Project READY staff member*

Exhibit 14. Relationship Skills*

Legend:
- ■ In Crisis (1)
- ■ Distressed (2)
- ■ Vulnerable (3)
- ■ Stable (4)
- ■ Building Capacity (5)
- ■ Thriving (6)

Summer (n = 29): 17% | 21% | 45% | 14% | 3% — 3.7

Fall (n = 23): 4% | 61% | 26% | 9% — 3.3

* The sum of the percentages may be more than 100% due to rounding.

Responsible Decision Making

Project READY defines responsible decision making as the ability to make constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on ethical standards, safety concerns, and social norms. The realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and a consideration of the well-being of oneself and others.
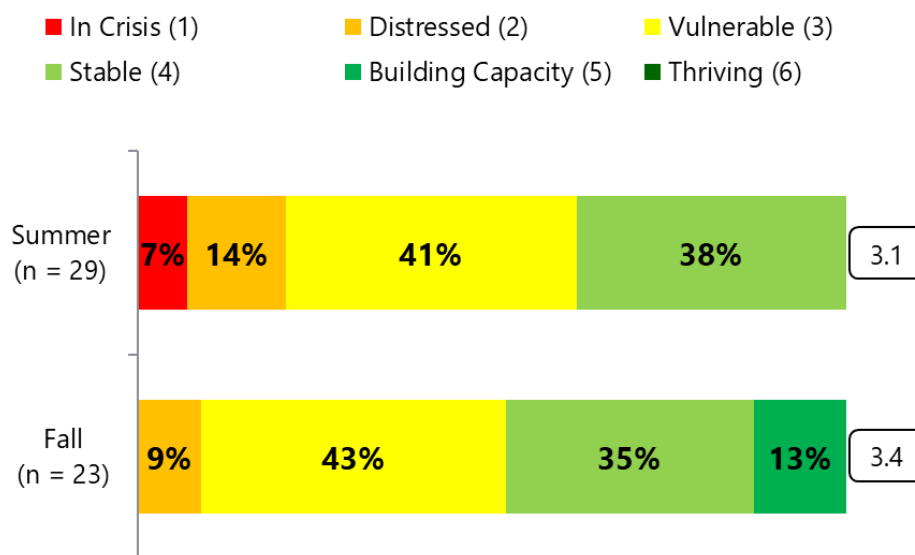
Many participants (44%) strengthened their capacity for responsible decision making between the two assessments. For this domain, meaningful shifts took place at both ends of the spectrum. In addition to seeing a shrinking proportion of the most vulnerable categories (from 21% to 9% "in crisis" or "distressed"), there were not any participants in the "thriving" category upon initial assessment, and 13% of participants were "thriving" at follow up.

Stories of Youth Progress

"I had a 9th grader who didn't know how to take the bus, didn't know how to do his own laundry. Didn't have house keys because he didn't trust himself to have house keys because he thought he would lose them. Working with him, he really enjoyed art, and was using art and activities and artistic worksheets and activities that helped him. I did notice at the end he was taking a lot more initiative."

Project READY staff member

Exhibit 15.   Responsible Decision Making*

- ■ In Crisis (1)
- ■ Distressed (2)
- ■ Vulnerable (3)
- ■ Stable (4)
- ■ Building Capacity (5)
- ■ Thriving (6)

	In Crisis	Distressed	Vulnerable	Stable	Building Capacity	Score
Summer (n = 29)	7%	14%	41%	38%		3.1
Fall (n = 23)		9%	43%	35%	13%	3.4

* The sum of the percentages may be more than 100% due to rounding.

Juvenile Justice Involvement

The majority of Project READY participants complete the program without involvement with the juvenile justice system. At the time of this report, 89% of participating youth had no arrests. Among the seven participants who have been arrested, three were arrested prior to Project READY, and four were arrested since joining the program. While in the absence of a comparison group it is difficult to know the extent to which this can be attributed to the program itself, research demonstrates that having at least one positive relationship with an adult supports youth to thrive. In a context in which many Project READY participants are living in poverty, and dealing with stressors and challenges that disproportionately impact youth of color, helping young people develop strengths that help them to avoid contact a racially unjust criminal justice system.

For the most part, our youth don't get arrested. I think helping them with goals and **figuring out the path they want to choose for themselves** helps deter things like this. We try to stop things earlier on. **There is definitely a correlation between doing well in school and staying out of system involvement.**

A big part of the issue is that **there are a ton of systemic issues.** A lot of our youth live in poverty and they do struggle with kind of basic things their family being able to provide for them. **So they sometimes do get in trouble.** To make sure that we're there when that happens. That **we're supporting them through that if that does happen.**

Project READY staff member

Project READY staff attribute this success to a number of aspects of the program. One is the development of young people's social emotional skills. By enhancing their ability to understand and regulate their own emotions and behavior, young people are better able to navigate challenging situations and avoid or deescalate conflict. Additionally, Project READY provides young people options for positive and engaging activities that can be – alternatives to spending time with peers who may be engaging in high-risk or unhealthy activities. One staff person commented, "I try to make sure my youth are involved in some sort of activity after school or on the weekends. You get to choose what that activity is. So if you want to join black student union, or biking club, or play basketball, that's fine. Whatever it may be, I will help them with that. I like to keep them busy and make sure they have activities for summer or jobs if they are able to." Lastly, Project READY empowers youth to develop a positive self-image where they can see a future for themselves that holds positive opportunities, and helps them stay motivated to achieve their goals for success.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This evaluation provides affirming evidence of Project READY's success in delivering high-quality, youth-centered programming in schools. The evaluation lends insights into the program's core strengths, as well as lessons about opportunities to further refine the program in the service of enhanced impact. The conclusions and recommendations below were co-developed in conversation with Project READY staff and are organized in four categories: student support, family engagement, evaluation and learning, and program refinements.

Student Support

Project READY's flexible and responsive approach of engaging youth is critical. It is through this youth-centered approach that Project READY case managers, therapists, and program staff build trusting relationships that become the foundation of the program's success. As Project READY considers future refinements to program implementation, the flexible and responsive approach to working with young people should be considered a core component of the program design. Project READY continually strives to maintain the right balance between structure and flexibility, which often varies from student to student. While the need for this flexibility creates some challenges for program staff, such as needing to leave the campus to connect with students who are not at school, it can also be the lifeline that maintains the connection with harder to reach youth. While Project READY considers various approaches to staffing and scheduling to balance being school-and-community-based, it should maintain its commitment to meeting youth where they are at, holding young people's needs at the center of its work.

Project READY works to achieve the right balance between being school and community based. As a school-based program, Project READY is challenged to serve the students who are habitually truant. This presents a range of opportunities including modifying their program model to include more community-based, or home-based supports, or potentially identifying a threshold of absences as a criterion for eligibility. However, Project READY currently fills an important niche supporting youth with low school attendance. Absent other trusted, full-service providers who can meet the needs of chronically absent students, there is a greater chance of these young people falling through the cracks. Project READY will need to continue to consider if this is a niche it is best positioned to fill, and if so how best to meet the needs of those students who are frequently missing school.

Staff diversity is an asset for the program. Parents expressed what Project READY has long believed to be the case: that representation of people of color on the team is valuable for connecting with and supporting young people, many of whom are black and brown youth. Program staff found it affirming to hear parents explicitly articulate that they felt it was important for their child to have diverse and supportive adults they interact with. Additionally, one parent expressed that it would be valuable to have more gender diversity on the team. Project READY embraces how diversity and representation among the case managers and therapists strengthens staff's ability to connect with and engage young people and welcomes opportunities to enhance the gender diversity of the staff team.

Parent Engagement

Parent engagement is key to youth engagement and success. Project READY staff clearly understand the tremendous impact that family involvement plays in supporting young people's participation and progress in the program. Young people whose families are more engaged show greater improvement throughout the course of the program. Project READY has identified best practices for connecting with parents in non-judgmental ways, encouraging and supporting entire families as a whole, addressing

issues at home that impact young people's participation and success at school, and helping to serve as a bridge between families and schools. These best practices include frequent and consistent communication, sharing successes and celebrations in addition to areas for improvement, and checking in on parent/caregivers' wellbeing in addition to focusing on youth. However, unlocking the secret to successful parent engagement remains elusive when trying to connect with some harder to reach parents. One practice that Project READY has identified to help support parent engagement is to provide greater clarity about what program participation entails up front, so that parents know what they can expect and understand the commitment involved. Project READY might also consider formalizing the parent liaison component of the therapist's work with families, in an effort to enhance and codify the program's approach to family engagement. Given the link between family engagement and youth engagement, the program has identified this as a priority to further strengthen.

Evaluation and Learning

Project READY is in the process of developing and strengthening data collection and reflection practices. The program has robust data collection practices in place, including gathering extensive program participation data, conducting assessments that inform individualized case management as well as progress monitoring, and integrating program data with school and arrest data. Project READY also has the infrastructure to support its data culture - a Salesforce database and a dedicated staff person responsible for internal learning and data use. These assets and the program's commitment are important to being an effective, data driven program . There are also areas for improvement that can further strengthen the program's ability to gather and meaningfully use data for program evaluation and improvement.

- **Improving processes for obtain school data will support Project READY's ability to track key indicators.** Currently, Project READY receives school data in a way that is labor intensive for both school and Project READY staff. Data are shared on hard copy and then entered manually by program staff. The processes for obtaining school data differ between the two schools, and the requests for school data are not always met with prompt and complete data from the schools. Project READY identified two specific ways it can strengthen the process to access complete and reliable data from schools. The first of these is to have a single Project READY staff person serve as the liaison with the schools regarding all data-related requests, rather than multiple staff members requesting data. Staff believe that streamlining communications about data will improve the process of getting necessary records from schools. A second measure that Project READY can pursue is to establish an MOU with the school district that will allow the program access to student records electronically without needing to obtain the data from school staff directly. While this will not obviate the need to obtain some information from schools directly, it will ensure more seamless access to data that are captured in the district level electronic database. Not only will this improve data quality and completeness, while reducing effort required from school staff, but it will also reduce data entry work. The process of signing a data-sharing agreement with the school district can be a labor intensive process, however, this one-time investment will pay off in the long term and systematize what will be an ongoing need for student records.

- **Strengthening Project READY's internal data entry and reflection practices will position the program to understand and demonstrate the program's impact.** Project READY acknowledges that keeping up with data entry is a challenge. There are some data that are incomplete or missing, which may be the result of backlogs in data entry. Unless Project READY keeps up with data entry and checks periodically for data completeness and accuracy, it is difficult to understand why certain numbers are low. Project READY has expressed its commitment to ensuring that program data are entered and kept up to date. In addition to improving data entry practices,

Project READY also aspires to establish more frequent data reflection practices. Currently staff run reports and review and discuss data once per semester. Doing so more frequently will help in several ways: it reminds program staff of the importance of maintaining accurate participant data, it provides real-time information about individual and cohort-level performance that can inform program delivery, and it strengthens the culture of learning – embracing data as something that goes beyond compliance and evaluation, but as a real tool for continuous improvement.

▪ **Bolstering data practices will enhance the program's ability to speak to the value of the program.** While the current evaluation presents findings on participant outcomes, there are some limitations of the data due to small numbers. Increasing the sample size and completeness of the data will enhance the ability make statistical inferences about the impact of the program on participants.

The program may consider various ways to define and measure success. Participants in the program mostly met the two core program objectives (matriculation to 10th grade, and avoiding arrests). However, participants vary greatly in the extent to which they achieved specific program targets, such as rates of program participation, and school attendance and behavior improvements. While these targets provide useful guideposts for goal setting and improvement, the failure to meet these targets may underrepresent "success" for many participants who seem (anecdotally) to benefit tremendously from the program. Project READY may want to explore options for tracking other meaningful measures of progress. For instance, the program might consider the use of a comparison group or school/district data to assess the impact of the program. For example, Project READY noted some backsliding in GPA between 8th and 9th grade. Comparing Project READY participant data with non-participating peers may lend insight into aspects of performance that may reflect broader trends among 8th graders transitioning to 9th grade, and which may be opportunities for the program to double down on supports during specific times of transition. Additionally, Project READY serves a diverse group of participants, consisting of some students who demonstrate notable improvement in academic performance and attendance, and others who continue to struggle. Setting and achieving realistic goals, tailored for students with different starting points is a successful program outcome, yet some of these achievements may be underrepresented by current program targets that focus primarily on school performance. It might be worth identifying measures of improvement that encompass progress for students on varying trajectories. For instance, Project READY may consider ways to define success that are more deeply rooted in achievement of SEL goals, such as development of key life skills that may help prepare young people for GED achievement, self-sufficiency, and/or careers that may be less dependent on traditional academic measures of performance and success.

Program Refinements

The social emotional learning and development component is one of Project READY's core strengths, and the program wishes to further develop its SEL/D supports. The intensive, hands-on SEL/D support the program provides young people is one of the things that sets Project READY apart from other youth serving programs. The evaluation provides confirming evidence that the program supports young people's progress in a range of SEL competencies. However, program staff believe that the SEL/D supports they provide young people can be further strengthened by having a pool of resources to pull from, specific SEL/D activities, and more of a structured curriculum for doing SEL/D work with youth. Project READY may explore what external resources already exist in addition to potentially developing and refining its own custom resources to further enhance the program's SEL/D offerings.

Project READY seeks to reintegrate an academic support position as part of the program's offerings. Program staff recognize the value that the AmeriCorps Academic Support Specialists added to the program, having a person who could: sit in on students' classes, provide tutoring support, and serve

as an academic resource to participating youth. The program still continues to support students to stay on track academically, through promoting accountability, encouraging young people to stay in class, and working with young people to address social-emotional, behavioral, or logistical challenges that interfere with their school performance. However, staff acknowledges the value of having a dedicated academic support to work with young people on their schoolwork. Project READY has applied for a grant, which, if secured, will fund an Academic Support Specialist position to fill this need.

Continuing Project READY supports through the full ninth grade year may help the program support students achieve and sustain greater gains through participation. Currently the program provides case management through the first semester of the 9th grade year. With young people getting adjusted to high school, and some students spending some of the fall semester regaining momentum lost over the summer, case managers have limited time to engage and support ninth graders before the program concludes. Additionally, the data show that many students backslide academically between 8th and 9th grade, suggesting this is a particularly important time for sustained intervention and support. Project READY aims to secure additional grant funding that will allow it to extend the program duration through the full ninth grade year. This shift will provide a valuable opportunity for Project READY to experiment and learn how it can best support students over the course of a longer engagement.

Appendix: Project READY Logic Model

HUCKLEBERRY YOUTH PROGRAMS

Inputs
Case Managers • Partnership with SFUSD and Martin Luther King and Willie Brown Middle Schools
Commitment to a Positive Youth Development framework • Research-based program model • BSCC funding

Activities	Outputs	Outcomes
Case Management • Review and monitor progress towards goals • Advocacy by attending school counseling meetings, Student Success Team meetings • Review regular progress reports from teachers • Support transition to ninth grade in sessions with youth and parents	• Completion of intake forms • Youth participation in sessions with case manager • Referrals made • Development of case plan • Case manager attendance at school counseling meetings • Regular review of progress reports • Completion of transition support sessions with youth and parents	• Minimum 2/3 participation of youth in case management, academic support, and SEL/D activities • Progress towards goals identified in case plan • Reduced school absences in the 8th grade (compared to 7th grade) • Reduced school absences in the 9th grade (compared to 8th grade)
Academic Support • Work with teachers to assess need for academic remediation/enrichment and develop/update academic success plan w/appropriate referrals • Connect youth with school-based and other available community-based learning services • Transition to High School Summer Intensive • Tutoring	• Development of academic success plans • Case managers make appropriate referrals as needed • Youth are connected with school-based and other community-based learning services • Youth participate in High School Summer Intensive • Youth receive tutoring	• Students enter 9th grade • Improved scores on academic proficiency tests • Achievement of 75% of credits attempted in the 9th grade • Youth build strong relationships with staff and with each other • Improved life skills and SEL skills, such as stress reduction, self-regulation, communication, goal setting, problem solving) • Decreased incidents of disciplinary action in school
Social Emotional Learning/Development • Develop stabilization plan to address attendance, behavior and barriers to school engagement • Provide three day session of group recreation, bonding, and team-building activities • Individualized SEL/D activities for youth based on SSIS evaluation • Weekly Life Skills/SEL workshop (spring and fall semesters)	• Stabilization plan developed • Completion of three-day group team-building session • Completion of individualized SEL/D activities for each youth twice per month • Completion of SEL/D groups and workshops for eighth graders	
Parent Support • Initial engagement of parents and family orientation • Monthly parent skill-building meetings • As-needed support from case manager	• Completion of family orientation	• Parents have increased capacity to engage in their children's education • Parents have increased adolescent parenting skills • Parental skills and engagement further support youth in being successful

Impact
Youth successfully matriculate into the 10th grade, academically on track and with no arrests.