Check & Connect Sustainability: Supporting and Retaining Quality Mentors

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Outline of presentation

- The cost of student dropout

- Overview of Check & Connect study in San Jose, CA

- Mentor retention viewed through NIRN's Implementation Drivers Framework

- Direct mentor feedback from SJUSD study

Why is student engagement important?

- School disengagement and dropout costs society:
  - A single 18-year-old dropout earns $260,000 less over a lifetime and contributes $60,000 less in federal and state income taxes. (National High School Center)
  - Estimates indicate that approximately 30 percent of federal inmates, 40 percent of state prison inmates, and 50 percent of persons on death row are high school non-completers. (National High School Center)

Why is student engagement important?

- . . . Non-completers are 3.5 times more likely than high school completers to be imprisoned at some point during their lifetime. (National High School Center)

- In 2004, the high school dropout earned only 37 cents for each dollar earned by an individual with more education. (National High School Center)

Check & Connect
Study Overview

Funders and partners

- Funders
  - Department of Education, IES, NCSER (Goal 3 RCT)
- Partners:
  - Local School District: San Jose Unified School District
  - Univ of Minn, Institute on Community Integration: training, technical assistance

School participation

- Selected **5 high schools** in SJUSD
- Each school had at least *almost* 1.0 FTE mentor
- Each participating school received:
  - **Resources** and **support** to implement C&C
  - Yearly **stipends** ($1,000 per school)
  - Local **Resource Guide** for dropout prevention and mental health services

Screening and recruitment process

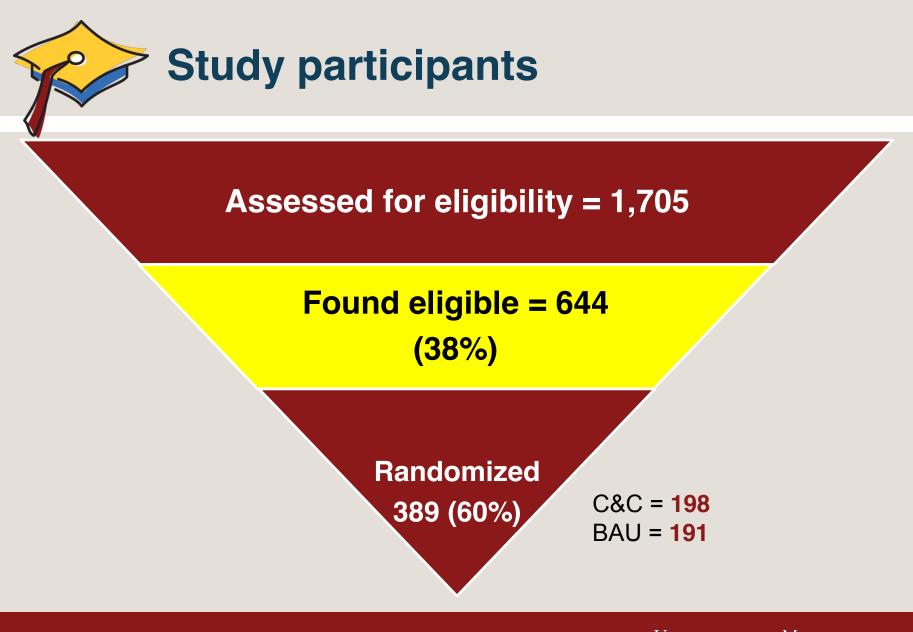- **Eligibility Criteria –** Guided by the National High School Center Early Warning Signs
  - Reviewed 8th grade transcripts of incoming 9th grade students.
    - 3 or more absences in a month and D or F in a major course (e.g., English, Math, etc)
    - Behavior referrals
    - Special education for EBD or LD with behavior goals
- **Randomization** (after consent and assent) to:
  - C&C group or
  - *Business-as-usual* comparison group
    - Both received *Local Resource Guide*

Study participants

Assessed for eligibility = 1,705

Found eligible = 644 (38%)

Randomized 389 (60%)

C&C = 198
BAU = 191

Data collection

Instrument	Purpose	Respondent
SSIS-T (Gresham & Elliott, 2008)	Problem behavior, prosocial skills, ac comp	Teacher
SSIS-S (Gresham & Elliott, 2008)	Problem behavior, prosocial skills	Student (self report)
Student Engage Instrument (ICI)	Engagement	Student (self report)
SACA (Stiffman et al., 2001)	Services outside C&C	Student (self report)
Items from CA Healthy Kids Survey	Substance use, perceptions of safety	Student (self report)

Data collected fall 2012, spring 2013, 2014, and 2015

Other measures

- Student Record data
  - Attendance, grades, and services (e.g., special education)
- Social Validity surveys (students and mentors)
  - Assess satisfaction with program content, materials, and impact
- Alliance surveys (students and mentors)
  - Assess satisfaction with relationship
- Fidelity monitoring
  - Online database to track student data checks

Mentors

- Full-time mentors served an average of 40 students (4 schools); part-time mentors served an average of 25 students (1 school).
  - SRI employees, not district personnel
- One C&C coordinator (part time) supervised all 6 mentors.
- Mentors, coordinator and project staff trained by the University of Minnesota's Institute on Community Integration (ICI) on the Check & Connect model; ongoing guidance from ICI.
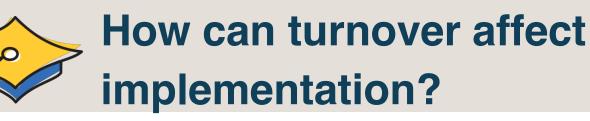
Mentor Retention

Why is retention important?

- Turnover may affect **fidelity of implementation**.

- What is implementation?

    - According to the National Implementation Research Network (NIRN): "Implementation is defined as a specified set of activities designed to put into practice an activity or program of known dimensions.

- What is fidelity of implementation? (NIRN): "Evidence-based programs are interesting but not much help unless they can be put into practice and produce the same good results in practice that they produced under laboratory conditions ."

How can turnover affect implementation?

- Turnover may affect fidelity of implementation through mechanisms such as:

  - Disrupting the relationship-building that is the foundation of Check & Connect

  - Impacting other mentors' caseloads until new staff are found

  - Impacting supervisory and administrative staff by requiring their time and attention to find and train new staff

Implementation Driver Framework

- **Staff Competence**
  - Selection
  - Training
  - Coaching

- **Organizational Supports**
  - Systems intervention
  - Facilitative administration
  - Decision support data system

- **Leadership**
  - Technical
  - Adaptive

Fixsen, D. L., & Blase, K. A. (2008). Drivers framework. *Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, The National Implementation Research Network, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute*.

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Staff Competence – Selection

It is important to have staff with the skills, knowledge and buy-in necessary for implementing the program or intervention.

- Personal characteristics of an effective mentor (from the C&C manual):
  - A personal belief that all students, particularly those living in at-risk circumstances, have abilities and strengths, and can learn.
  - A personal belief that students can make progress and change their level of engagement at school and with learning.
  - A belief in the power and value of problem solving with students to develop personal competencies.
  - A willingness to cooperate and collaborate with families and school staff.

Staff Competence – Selection

- Personal characteristics of an effective C&C mentor:
  - The willingness to persist with students, despite their behavior and decision making.
  - A willingness to cooperate and collaborate with families and school staff.
  - Advocacy skills, including the ability to negotiate, compromise and confront conflict.
  - Organizational and case management skills.
  - A nonjudgmental attitude toward others.
  - An ability to work independently in a variety of settings.
  - A willingness to be a mentor (i.e. "*wanting* to rather than being *obligated* to").

Staff Competence – Selection

For the C&C project in SJUSD we also required/requested:

- Experience working with youth, and in particular, adolescents from disadvantaged backgrounds.

- Spanish-speaking.

- Open to the job's parameters: part-time, flexible, no benefits, three years, based at high school sites.

- Willingness and understanding that they needed to follow the C&C framework and implement with fidelity to the model.

Staff Competence – Selection

For the C&C project in SJUSD we also needed a C&C Coordinator with the following qualifications:

- Master's degree in a behavioral science.

- Experience supervising staff in a human services capacity (ideally youth services).

- Ability to work independently.

- Ability to assess needs of staff and provide training.

- Successful working with different staff personalities.

- Someone who could provide supervision and leadership but who was also comfortable supervising with relatively autonomous professionals.

Staff Competence – Training

- ICI Collaborative Communication/Trainings
- Coordinator Mentoring Experience
- Adaptive
    - Mentor Feedback/Issues
    - Youth/Student Issues
    - Reflective Coordinator Supervision/Team Decisions

Staff Competence – Training

Year One

- 2 day Introductory C&C Training (Pre-Service)
  - Overview of C&C Model-Core Program Model/Tools
  - Program Policy and Procedures
- Training & Group Discussion bi-monthly (In-Service)
  - Relationship Development Tools & Process
  - Communication and Intervention Tools
  - Crisis Management/addressing major issues
  - Education Related Topics & Relevant Speakers

Staff Competence – Training

SRI Check & Connect Training (*ICI collaborative training)	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Check & Connect: the model	X	X	X
Relationship Development Tools & Process*	X	X	X
Basic Communication Tools	X	X	X
Crisis Management	X	X	X

Staff Competence – Training

SRI Check & Connect Training (*ICI collaborative training)	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Basic Intervention Tools*	X	X	X
Outside Speakers	X	X	X
High Risk Students	X	X	X
Advanced Mentoring Skills (e.g., problem solving)	X	X	X
Reflective Practice*			X
Transition Planning*/Grief & Loss/Closure*	X	X	X

Staff Competence – Coaching

- The Check & Connect coordinator is essentially a coach.
    - The coordinator is there to support the mentors, walk through difficult scenarios.
    - The coordinator provides assistance when necessary to get mentors "back on track".
    - The coordinator helps mentors monitor fidelity to implementation.

Staff Competence – Coaching

- Keys to coaching and supervision: Lead as an example of mentoring
  - Supportive supervision
  - Meet them where they are
  - Help them develop boundaries
  - Empowerment – include the mentors in decision-making
  - Don't take things personally

Staff Competence – Coaching

- Teach Paradigm shift of mentoring
    - Mentoring requires a different mindset than other positions
    - What to expect when mentoring
    - Prepare with basic and advanced tools for mentoring

Implementation Driver Framework

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- Organizational Supports
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Organizational Supports – Systems

- This often refers to working at the local, state and federal policy levels to affect changes necessary to support an intervention and changes to the system.

    - Project staff and the coordinator ensured that the school sites were hospitable to the C&C mentors and intervention.

    - The coordinator regularly addressed challenges with local service systems (e.g., probation).

Organizational Supports – Systems

- We built and maintained relationships with school and district personnel before bringing the program to the schools.
  - Gained commitment to hosting the intervention
  - Answered questions
  - Kept the communication lines open
  - Regularly shared data with schools
  - Allowed mentors to be paid for time spent integrating themselves into the schools through helping the schools (e.g., staffing events)

Organizational Supports – Facilitative Administration

- Empowered the mentors to build and maintain relationships with school staff and integrate themselves into the school culture/system. Supported efforts to:
  - Attend faculty meetings
  - Participate in school events
  - Attend extracurricular activities (e.g., sporting events, concerts, school functions, etc.)
  - Help in classrooms
- Provided mentors with resources

Organizational Supports – Decision Support Data Systems

■ Check & Connect is a data-driven intervention!

■ Our database facilitated this system: project staff employed an iterative process of integrating mentor and coordinator feedback throughout the project to improve the database to better serve mentor and coordinator needs.

■ Coordinator regularly checked mentors' data entry and followed-up on intervention decisions by mentors.

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Leadership - Technical

- Created a collaborative, team environment among the mentors.

- Employed a "strengths-based" perspective of the mentors.

- Empowered the mentors as professionals.

- Allowed for flexibility whenever possible.

- Supported the coordinator.

Leadership – Adaptive

This implementation driver is about managing a program through change.

- Our project didn't experience this need per se, but the coordinator played a role in helping the mentors adapt their interventions to meet their ever-changing students' needs.

- The C&C model implementation required the mentors to observe the person-environment fit for each student.

Mentor Insights/Feedback

Why did the mentors stay?

- We interviewed the mentors about the reasons that they stayed on the job, their perception of supports given, what they liked, what they would have changed, and similar topics.

- Three themes emerged:
    - A community of practice
    - Hiring the "right" people as mentors
    - Professionalism and support

What the mentors said: Community of practice

- Having a supportive group of colleagues to talk about difficult issues and brainstorm solutions. This helped reduce stress and increase capacity to do the job.

  - "We all got along well, there was this relationship that we had that was strong, we were dealing with a lot of stress . . . and when we were together we were able to laugh that off. . .that's definitely one of the reasons I stayed, it felt like a team."

  - "I had a supportive partner to work with."

  - "We had a release when we were together."

What the mentors said: Hiring the right people

- The mentors all felt like the entire group (of mentors) was there for the "right" reason: to serve youth. Everyone had experience, desire and a commitment to serving youth.
  - "You have to pick the right people in the first place."
  - "You feel an obligation to stay with the students. At that point it isn't a job."
  - "I had made a commitment to the students."

What the mentors said: Professionalism and support

- The mentors felt that their supervisor was supportive but also respectful of them as professionals.

  - "Autonomy contributed to my job satisfaction. I didn't need to go to anybody else to figure out what needed to be done. I could write emails, I could call, I could do what was needed."

  - "She'd say 'consider this approach," and never 'you blew it.'"

  - "If I had a question she gave me advice. . . we brainstormed together, but it was up to me to do what I needed to do . . she gave me the freedom."

Summary: Supporting and retaining mentors

- Retaining quality mentors can maintain fidelity of implementation to the C&C program.

- Selecting mentors with the necessary qualities and characteristics will help ensure a good fit for the program.

- Supporting mentors through quality training and supervision can be key to meeting their needs.

- Ensuring a good fit with the school and integrating into the culture/system can increase job satisfaction (and performance!).

Questions?

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Fidelity?

Activity	Average Number of Times	
	August – December 2014	January – May 2015
Check grades, attendance and other data	14 (3.7)	16.7 (4.5)
Meet formally or informally with students	6.2 (3.1)	8.3 (3.9)
Share data with students	6.0 (3.0)	7.5 (3.9)

SRI International   SJUSD