

Building Bridges Dropout Initiative: 2009–10 Annual Evaluation

Report to the Legislature



Randy I. Dorn
State Superintendent of
Public Instruction

April 2011

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Report to the Legislature

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Executive Summary

Building Bridges began in January 2008 as a state-wide coordinated intervention strategy designed to reduce dropout risk in Washington State. This report provides program information and presents evaluation results for the 2009-10 academic year.

Over two years, Building Bridges has proven to be an effective strategy in reducing dropout risk by increasing academic credits earned toward graduation, and reducing social-emotional distress commonly experienced by at-risk students. This program's lessons can serve as a significant resource in future efforts to reduce dropout risk in Washington State.

Established by the Washington State Legislature, Building Bridges intended to support partnerships of schools and community agencies to develop locally defined dropout prevention, intervention, and retrieval programs. At-risk middle and high school students are the focus of these services. Given the state's budget challenges, only five of the original fifteen local consortia were funded for continuation. The five funded local consortia served 639 individual students in the 2009-10 school year.

The legislation specifically identifies youth in foster care, the juvenile justice system, special education, and youth who have dropped out of school as priority populations for service. Local consortia were effective in addressing these priority populations with 40 percent of enrolled students representing one or more of the groups. The programs engaged a high-risk student population with 75 percent of high school students in extended graduation status at the time they entered the program.

The strategies employed across local programs varied considerably as did the selection of students to be served. Analysis of the actual supports provided demonstrated that Building Bridges principally delivered academic supports. Other intervention supports included addressing career development, social-emotional needs, basic needs, and health but these nonacademic supports were comparatively infrequent. As a result, the Building Bridges strategy was principally academic in nature regardless of the needs of students.

We examined program benefits by looking at earned high school credits, school enrollment and discipline, and change in social-emotional adjustment. The principal outcome findings from this 2009-10 evaluation were:

- More intensive Building Bridges services resulted in significant increases in credits earned by students at risk for dropout.
- These gains, while significant, did not in one year result in significant numbers of students moving from extended graduation status to on-time graduation status. Twelve percent of students moved from extended to on-time graduation in Building Bridges.

- Given the level of need, we conclude more than one academic year is needed to demonstrate significant reduction of dropout risk across the variety of students needing these supports.
- Students in Grades 5–8, Grades 9–10, and Grades 11–12 demonstrate different levels of need and these needs result in differences in program benefit. In general, younger students are identified with higher rates of social–emotional needs. In light of these differences, programs may need to more specifically design interventions to address the needs of these younger children. We recommend that in future development of dropout prevention strategies, that these student differences fully be included in planning of intervention goals.
- We find increased Building Bridges supports stabilized the problem of school attendance. Specifically, without support, we found that students’ attendance significantly deteriorated over time.
- Building Bridges supports improved social–emotional adjustment. While social–emotional competence is a significant predictor of academic success, we were not able to document a direct relationship between social–emotional adjustment and academic progress in this year as we did in the previous year’s evaluation.
- Gender and grade level were both major influences on initial academic and emotional adjustment and affected the level of progress in programs.

These outcomes confirmed the findings from the 2008–09 Building Bridges evaluation. With two years of consistent findings, Building Bridges program results confirmed that real gains can be made with modest program investments. These results strongly support the need to address the range of barriers students experience in engaging in school. The program also provides a set of lessons on how to improve intervention supports for at–risk students.

I. Introduction

A. Dropout Prevention and Retrieval Strategy in Washington State

In 2007, the Washington State Legislature created “Building Bridges” (HB 1573) to support partnerships of schools and community agencies to develop locally defined dropout prevention, intervention, and retrieval programs. At-risk middle and high school students are the focus of these services. The legislation specifically identifies youth in foster care, the juvenile justice system, special education, and youth who have dropped out of school as priority populations for service.

In 2009–10, five local consortia from an original group of 15 programs were selected through a competitive renewal application process to continue to offer services. The program was significantly reduced because of the ongoing budget crisis in the state. Annual local program support was reduced compared to the previous year. The hope was to transition the program to other funds but this did not occur. Like many states, Washington’s budget challenges persist and in the 2010 legislative session the program was ended.

Washington State University Extension’s Area Health Education Center served as the evaluation team for this effort. The outcome evaluation program began in October 2008. The first year’s evaluation report is available at:
<http://www.k12.wa.us/BuildingBridges/pubdocs/BuildingBridgesWSUEvaluationReport.pdf>.

Consortia were to address prevention of risk factors leading to dropout, and deliver outreach and re-engagement strategies (retrieval) for students who had dropped out of school. Ideally, partnerships selected as Building Bridges grant programs met the following common elements in their local plans: (1) Programs were to develop a systematic process for identifying students at risk of dropping out from middle through high school and offer timely interventions to address individual needs. (2) Programs were to provide coaches or mentors for students as a universal practice. (3) Each program also was to support staff with the responsibility for coordinating resources and planning across the local partners. (4) Programs were to develop and deliver strategies for retrieval or re-entry activities for students who had dropped out of schools. (5) Programs were to provide alternative educational programming including alternative school programs, individual plans, and transition through other credit earning programs such as Running Start and work programs with educational programs resulting in a high school diploma or equivalent degree.

In addition to the legislative-identified program requirements, research indicates a positive youth development approach, family supports, youth leadership, and community service opportunities are also important elements of effective dropout prevention, intervention, and retrieval programs. Local consortia included aspects of these goals with varying depth and through a variety of strategies. As a result, the mix

of activities across local programs varied widely. This variety reflected the local program's vision and the initial set of resources identified in each community to address dropout early intervention and retrieval.

The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) managed the Building Bridges initiative in consultation with a state-level workgroup including multiple stakeholders that provided policy recommendations regarding the overall state dropout initiative. Reports from this policy work are available from OSPI at: <http://www.k12.wa.us/BuildingBridges/GrantProgram.aspx>.

B. Evaluation and Analysis Methods

This evaluation tested a central outcome question: do Building Bridges intervention supports result in improvements in academic performance, school behavior and attendance? Secondly, we were interested in determining if improvements in social-emotional adjustment served as a moderator of long-term academic success as suggested in the research literature.

The Building Bridges evaluation did not have a control group. We used the level of supports provided to students as the principal independent variable for the analysis. Our hypothesis was that if students started from equivalent levels of risk, comparatively greater reduction of risk with increasing Building Bridges supports was a logical demonstration that the supports were beneficial to students.

We assessed program outcomes in the domains of social-emotional adjustment, academic performance, and school behavior adjustment. Data were provided by Building Bridges workers who entered de-identified student and family data in a secure web-based data collection system.

Building Bridges workers completed evaluation information from their own program records, and collected the needs assessment and baseline/follow-up outcome measures as evaluation activities required by contract. Data entry into the web-based data system was typically a responsibility of individual line workers. As a result, training, motivation, and local supervision of data collection and entry become major influences on the quality of data collected at individual sites.

In this report, we included students when a minimum level of commitment to participate in the program was established. We asked programs to determine the students for whom they had crossed a threshold where students indicated they were seeking help and the staff had begun to plan for services. We refer to these students as 'enrolled' in Building Bridges and they were the focus of the outcome study. For these enrolled Building Bridges students, staff were to complete needs assessment, baseline information, and follow-up information irrespective of the actual level of Building Bridges grant program involvement. This method allowed us to examine the effect of varying levels of program supports in a comparison group design.

Outcome measures included change in academic performance measures (attendance, on-time graduation status, earned credits, and suspensions), and student self-report of social-emotional adjustment using a validated self-report measure, the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ).¹

Please note that the content of this report was structured as closely as possible to the 2008–09 evaluation report. We used this strategy to assist with comparison across the two reports.

C. Statistical Analysis Methods

In the following outcome analyses, we employed pre/post General Linear Model (GLM) analysis of covariance as the statistical analysis method for continuous outcome measures (student social-emotional adjustment, days absent, and credits earned) and Chi Square and logistic regression analysis for categorical variables. We conducted each outcome analysis using multiple regression analyses that included significant needs assessment and demographic information as predictors for each unique outcome measure.

The effectiveness of local programs in complying with evaluation responsibilities varied widely. This was particularly true in getting complete data sets for both initial and follow-up measures. The result is that the statistical power of some analyses was limited. Some potentially valuable analyses could not be completed this year because of small sample sizes.

II. Baseline Program and Participant Characteristics

Building Bridges optimally involved a mix of program efforts including (1) large group educational and prevention activities, (2) engagement of students who had left school, and (3) school or community-based group and individual support activities to reduce dropout risk in students still in school. With delayed and reduced funding for the 2009–10 program year, Building Bridges programs principally were limited to the support programs for students enrolled in schools.

A. Large Group Education Activities

Building Bridges programs were originally intended to support a variety of awareness building and partnership activities that could create the conditions for effective dropout interventions. These activities might include events such as student assembly and class presentations, enhanced advising strategies in participating schools, community coordination and planning, community education and engagement activities (e.g., food and clothing drives), and targeted support and educational activities for groups of students involved in other existing programs in local consortia.

¹ Goodman, R. (1997). The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire: A Research Note. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 38, 581–586. <http://www.sdqinfo.com/>

Two of the five Building Bridges consortia (Educational Service District (ESD) 113 and Granite Falls School District) in 2009–10 reported substantive efforts in these awareness education efforts. Program staff reported 72 events across the five programs in this program year. These programs were principally delivered in schools (46 percent of reported activities) with the balance of activities in a range of community settings.

B. Student Dropout Retrieval Activities

Building Bridges staff were expected to develop strategies that identified and engaged students who already dropped out of school. In program interviews, these retrieval activities were consistently identified as difficult and requiring community connections not typically part of how schools provide support programs. Examples of engagement strategies included outreach to students who have recently disenrolled from school, promotional activities resulting in youth requesting assistance to come back to school, and development of informal referral systems with employers and youth–serving community programs.

In 2009–10, only two of the five Building Bridges consortia reported substantive dropout retrieval activity (ESD 113 and Granite Falls School District) with 86 youth engaged across the five programs. These limited results in this year did not support any statistical analyses. Thirty–seven percent of the youth contacted were re–enrolled in school which was an increase over the previous year when 16 percent of students contacted in retrieval efforts across 15 consortia resulted in re–enrollment in school.

Understanding how to develop more robust and effective retrieval strategies is a profound development need in school–based dropout initiatives. These retrieval activities were particularly challenging because of the lack of clear mechanisms already in place to identify and permit engagement of youth. Most Building Bridges retrieval efforts were either through the personal relationships of school staff or by informal relationships with community and family representatives.

C. Programs and Students Served in 2009–10

Building Bridges programs in the 2009–10 program year (July 1, 2009 to June 30, 2010) served 639 individual children. This total service population is one–third the size of the students served in the 2008–09 program year. Comparing the five programs funded in both years, there is significant variability in numbers of students served. The five continuing programs served 61 percent of the total number of students compared to the previous year. The following table summarizes this information.

Table 1: Comparison of Program Activities in the Five Programs Funded in both Building Bridges Program Evaluation Years

Building Bridges Program	N 2008–09 Program Year	N 2009–10 Program Year	N Difference	Percent Served 2009–10 Compared to 2008–09
Communities in Schools of Seattle	137	20	-117	15%
ESD 113	348	295	-53	85%
Communities in Schools of Tacoma	91	92	1	101%
Pasco School District	351	69	-282	20%
Granite Falls School District	121	163	42	135%
Funded Program Totals	1,048	639	-409	61%

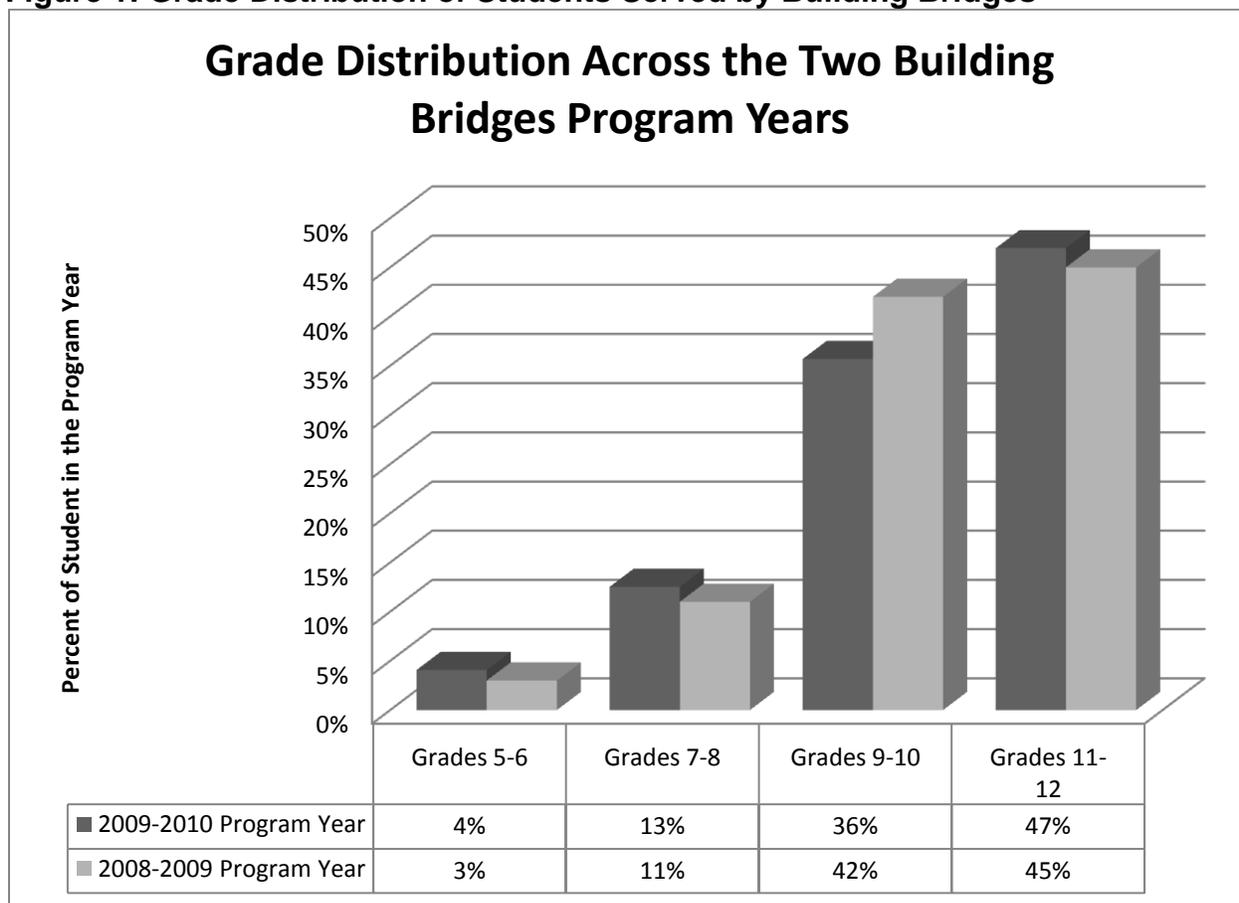
The reduced performance in the programs was largely attributable to reduced awards and staffing disruptions and delays in funding during the 2009–10 program year. There was a funding break over the Summer of 2009 that resulted in several programs suspending programs and losing staff. Other programs were able to maintain levels of program effort because of other local resources that helped sustain programs.

In both years evaluated, Building Bridges was principally a program for older students with a mean student age of 16 in both years. However, reflecting the emphasis of local programs' designs, 14 percent of the supported students in 2008–09 and 17 percent in 2009–10 were in late elementary or middle school grades

In this second year of program evaluation, 26 percent of students were returning program participants. We examined possible demographic differences across new and returning students and did not find substantive differences. We also tested if there were program outcome differences between new and returning students and again did not find significant differences.

Because of developmental differences and the nature of academic needs in this wide range of students, we employed grade level groups (Grades 5–8, Grades 9–10, and Grades 11–12) as a principal group variable in analyses of program outcomes. Figure 1 presents percentage of Building Bridges students enrolled in programs for Grades 5–6, 7–8, 9–10, and 11–12.

Figure 1: Grade Distribution of Students Served by Building Bridges



Thirteen percent of students in Building Bridges services did not speak English as the principal language in the home (19 percent in 2008–09). For nine percent of students, English is not their primary language (12 percent in 2008–09). In the following analyses, we considered English as the students’ primary or secondary language as a possible source of outcome differences but did not find a major influence on outcomes.

Student race and ethnicity in Building Bridges participants this year mirrored the state’s student population (34 percent students of color are in the program compared to 35 percent statewide). The diversity of students in 2009–10 was significantly lower than the students in 2008–09 where 51 percent of program participants were students of color. This reflects the demographic characteristics of the five programs who continued in the second year.

White, African American, and Hispanic/Latino youth are the three largest student groups in the Building Bridges Grant program. Because of the smaller overall size of Building Bridges, it was not possible to examine specific race/ethnicity groups’ outcomes.

D. Priority Student Populations

The Building Bridges legislation specifically identified students in the foster care system, juvenile justice system, and special education as priority populations for support by the local consortia.

We distinguished between two groups with juvenile justice involvement. The first group was identified as having criminal involvement in the juvenile system or under court supervision because of either designation in Children in Need of Services (CHINS) or At Risk Youth (ARY). The second group included students with status offense involvement resulting from poor school attendance as specified in the At Risk and Runaway Youth Act, also referred to as the BECCA Law.

Forty percent of students served in the 2009–10 program year were in one or more of the four legislatively defined priority populations. Fourteen percent of students were identified in two or more of the priority groups which underscores the complexity of many of the students supported by Building Bridges. These results document that Building Bridges continued to be an effective program in addressing the legislature’s program priority populations.

Table 2: Percent of Students in Legislative Priority Populations

Legislatively Defined Priority Student Populations	Percent of Building Bridges Students
Foster Care	14%
Juvenile Justice	24%
BECCA	26%
Special Education	23%

In consultation with the Building Bridges oversight committee, we also identified six additional characteristics of students that are linked in the literature to dropout risk. These additional student characteristics included: low-income students (free and reduced-priced meal enrollment), English as a second language, homelessness, migrant status, disability status, and cultural barriers to school success. With the exception of cultural barriers, priority group status was based on workers’ report of school information. The workers, based on knowledge of the student and family, identified cultural barriers to school success.

Table 3: Percent of Students in Other Dropout Risk Groups

Other Dropout Risk Groups	Percent of Building Bridges Students
Free and Reduced–Priced Meals	55%
English as a Second Language	18%
Homeless	22%
Disability	16%
Cultural	26%
Migrant	15%

Forty–six percent of the students in Building Bridges were identified with two or more of the 10 risk factors identified in the previous two tables.

Workers also reported if Building Bridges students were involved in other school–based support programs for at–risk students. The percentages of enrolled students in the programs were significantly lower than the reported need. The following table summarizes the enrollment data. This gap between need and enrollment may reflect the marginalization of many of the students served in Building Bridges.

Table 4: Building Bridges Enrollment in Other Support Programs

Other Reported Support Program Enrollment	Percent of Building Bridges Students
English Language Learners	4%
Special Education Services	11%
McKinney–Vento	7%
504	4%
Free and Reduced–Priced Meals	44%
Migrant	3%

We conclude that Building Bridges consortia were effective in engaging students with significant dropout risk. Many of these students entered the program with multiple risk indicators and low reported involvement in other school–based support programs.

E. Needs Assessment

Building Bridges workers reported information on student needs based on their cumulative knowledge of students. Based on their standard process of engaging and assessing participant need, workers reported their findings using a categorical (yes/no) strategy to address a range of specific concerns presented by students. The needs assessment was organized in six domains: academic needs, basic needs, health needs, cultural needs, social–emotional needs, and career development needs. In the six domains, there were a total of 28 specific need areas identified.

Needs assessment reports were provided for 75 percent of the students identified for Building Bridges services (N=477). This was a lower rate of data completion compared to the 85 percent completion rate in the 2008–09 program year. The other 25 percent of the records involve students who may have been identified with the ‘intent to serve’ but no substantive assessment information beyond referral and demographic information was collected.

The following tables present needs by domain and then the specific type of need within the domain. The most frequently reported needs are distributed across three of five domains: academic problems, social–emotional problems, and basic needs (housing, clothing, food). Health and cultural concerns are identified for about one in four of participating students.

Table 5: Percentage of Student with Identified Needs by Domain (N=477)

Academic Domain	Percentage of Students	Basic Needs	Percentage of Students	Health Needs	Percentage of Students	Behavior and Emotional Needs	Percentage of Students	Cultural Group Needs	Percentage of Students
Reported Academic Need	81%	Reported Basic Need	48%	Reported Health Need	67%	Reported Social Need	36%	Reported Cultural Concerns	24%
Poor Attendance	65%	Food	26%	Chronic Health Problem	7%	Behavior Problems	29%	Language Limits	12%
School Behavior Problems	33%	Employment	14%	Vision	4%	Emotional Distress	30%	Family Customs	14%
Academic Performance Problems	72%	Clothing	19%	Health Insurance	7%	Substance Abuse	20%	Immigrant	6%
Credit Deficiency	60%	Housing	18%	Pregnancy	6%	Family Violence	9%	Cultural Approach	13%
		Transportation	16%			Other Mental Health Concern	6%		
						Physical Abuse	6%		
						Gang Involvement	3%		
						Transitional Living	6%		

In addition to the five needs domains described in the previous table, workers provided information regarding career development needs identified for a subset of students. We included career development as a need category at the request of staff and the advisory committee, although it reflects a set of experiences/skills and strategies as opposed to barriers and challenges which characterized the other five need domains. Career development identified needs were principally restricted to high school students and most intensively reflected development intentions for 11 and 12 Graders.

Table 6: Career Skills Development Areas and Percent of Students Identified as Needing these Supports

	Grades 5–8	Grades 9–10	Grades 11–12
Life Skills	26%	37%	72%
Real World Experience	2%	34%	70%
Job Readiness	2%	36%	67%
Job Skills	3%	35%	59%
Community Service	2%	33%	70%
Job Shadow	1%	28%	50%
Career Financial Skills	2%	24%	45%

We recommend that the career needs information be viewed as a reflection of workers’ opinions of what students needed rather than as a specific characteristic of the student. From this perspective, the career development of older students was clearly a priority of Building Bridges program staff.

III. Description of Building Bridges Supports

Building Bridges supports included both direct support activities provided by the Building Bridges staff and referral/linkage coordination for supports outside of the funded activities of the Building Bridges grant program staff. Coordination of referred supports included active coordination of referrals (linked services to community partners) and informational referrals.

We were able to describe the frequency, focus, and type of Building Bridges action (provided by staff/referred to other resources). The specific nature of the intervention was not available and programs used a variety of strategies. We were able to identify if a referral was made but had no information about the student’s follow through or the nature of the service provided.

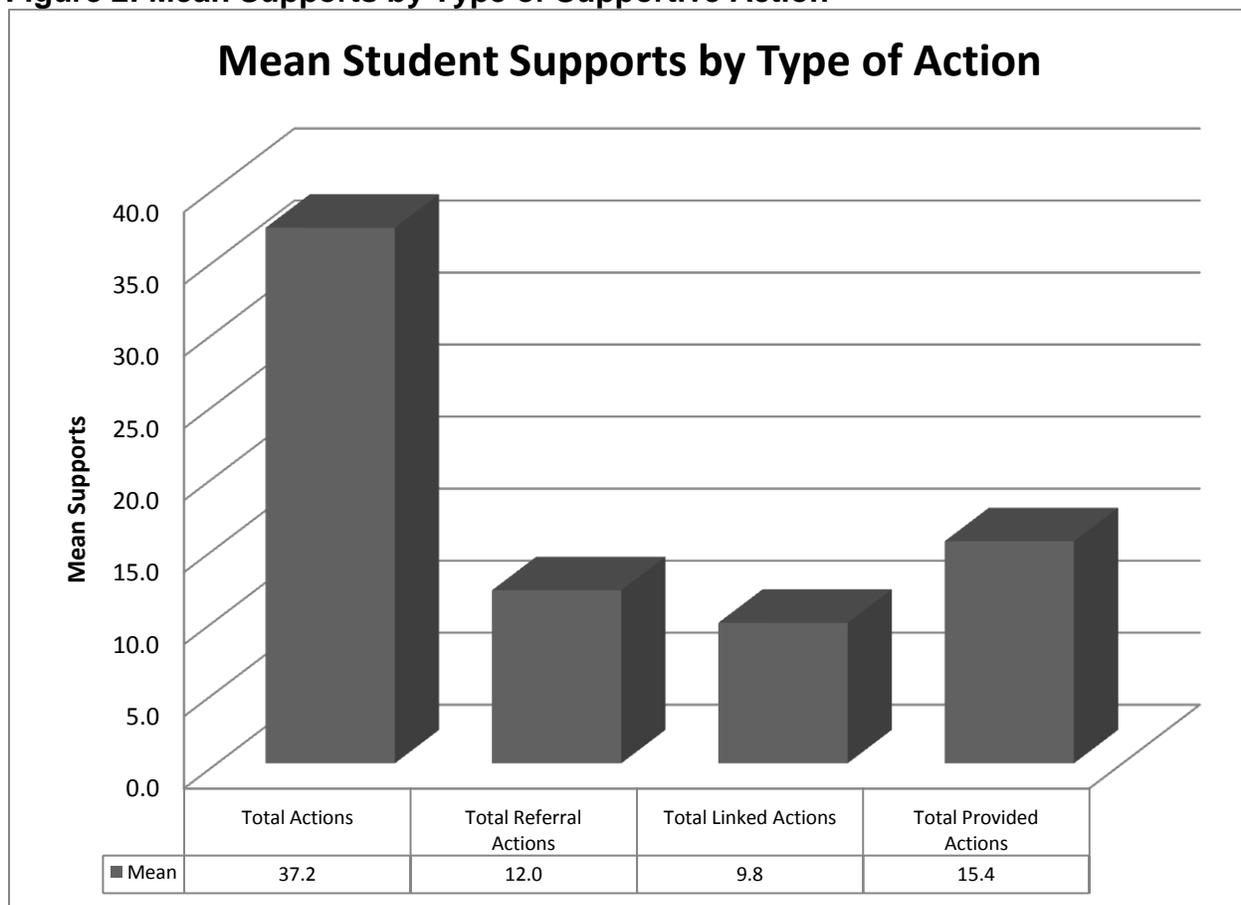
Building Bridges supports were organized in five domains aligned to the needs assessment categories: academic, basic needs, health, social–emotional supports, and career development. Culturally specific support activities are incorporated in addressing

the other support areas. Within each domain, a range of specific categories of activities was developed in consultation with local program staff and leadership. Some level of directed or referred Building Bridges supports were reported for 71 percent of the students in the database N=453. The proportion of students for whom we have some support activity reported is equivalent to the data from the previous program year.

In the 2009–10 program year, local Building Bridges programs relied on a mix of direct supports provided by program staff and referral/linkage/coordination with community resources. This was a change in the overall pattern of Building Bridges activities compared to the previous year. In the previous year, there was a much higher level of directly provided supports. When we compared the total level of reported supports for the five consortia across the two years, the overall level of total activities and directly provided supports were lower in the 2009–10 program year (respectively, mean total supports M=37 vs. M=27; mean directly provided supports M=21 vs. M=15). As a result, we conclude that overall intensity of supports and the pattern of supports changed over the two years in the five consortia.

In the following analyses, we compared total supports of all kinds, total directly provided supports, and then total support within each type of activity.

Figure 2: Mean Supports by Type of Supportive Action



In the previous evaluation report, we focused on *provided* supports and did not include referral and linked supports given evidence these activities added little to the analysis. This year, we modified our strategy to examine all types of support in each category. We took this step because of the overall lower number of students served, more limited number of reported activities, and the reduced power in the evaluation to measure change over time. Directly provided supports by type in 2009–10 (see next table) accounted for an average of 42 percent of all program activity on behalf of students. Social behavioral and career development were the most common directly provided support actions.

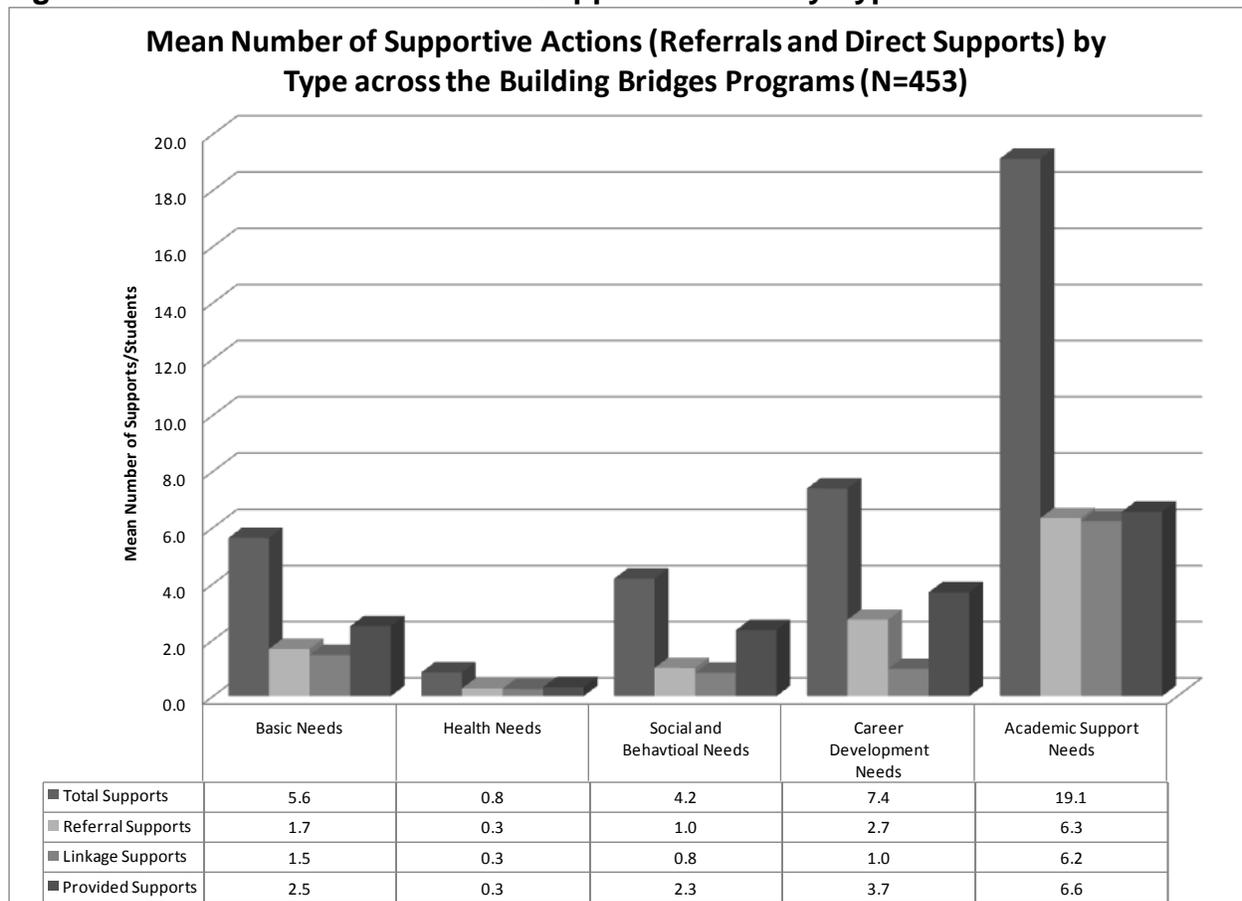
Table 7: Comparison of Total Support Actions and Building Bridges Provided Support Actions 2009–10

	Mean All Support Actions N=406	Mean Building Bridges Provided Supports N=406	Percent Provided Supports
Basic Need Supports	6.2	2.8	44%
Health Supports	0.9	0.4	39%
Social Behavioral Supports	4.6	2.6	57%
Career Development Supports	7.9	4.1	52%
Academic Supports	21.1	7.3	35%
Total Supports	40.8	17.2	42%

For the 406 students (64 percent of students reported in the dataset) with a report of any level of Building Bridges supports, academic supports are overwhelmingly the principal Building Bridges method of intervention with students. Academic supports were provided more frequently (21.1 mean actions per student) than all other supports combined (19.7 mean actions). Career development actions (7.9 mean actions) and social–behavioral supports (4.6 mean actions) were the next most common support actions provide across the consortia.

We conducted analyses on grouped data for total supports, academic supports, career development supports, basic supports, and social–emotional supports. Health supports were not analyzed because they were too infrequent to provide useful information. Supports provided were changed from an average counts of times provided to categorical variables (no supports, and then ranges of supports from few too many) because the support counts were extremely skewed distributions and categorical variables supported the appropriate statistical tests.

Figure 3: Mean Number of Student Support Actions by Type and Focus



In the mean, specific program activities across the five support domains are comparable over the two program years. However, there are some significant differences in the type of academic supports reported in the 2008–09 and 2009–10 program years. The two most notable differences are academic counseling and credit retrieval activities. In both cases, these activities were more common in the 2008–09 academic years. As a result, we found that there were some variations in intervention methods between the two years that largely reflect the strategies of the five continuing consortia compared to the original 15 consortia in the 2008–09 program year.

The following tables present a comparison of provided supports within each domain for the 2008–09 and 2009–10 program years. An analysis of the areas of emphasis in directly provided supports provides a description of the strategies employed across the consortia. We present provided support activities in these tables as what we believe to be the most accurate reflection of how staff efforts were organized to support student needs.

Table 8: Academic Supports Provided

Academic Support Type	Percent Provided 2009–10	Percent Provided 2008–09
Academic Counseling	0%	40%
School Supplies or Fees	12%	23%
Alternative School Program	25%	22%
Credit Retrieval	6%	23%
Student Advocacy	11%	14%
Academic Other	9%	19%
Tutoring	10%	15%
Classroom Behavior Interventions	13%	12%
Adult or Peer Mentors	14%	13%
After School/Evening Activities	13%	12%
Summer Activities	5%	8%
Adult Education/Employment	1%	3%

Table 9: Social–Behavioral Supports Provided

	Percent Provided 2009–10	Percent Provided 2008–09
Child Counseling	25%	10%
Parent/School Engagement Activities	6%	5%
Mental Health Assessment	0%	4%
Social–Emotional Other (Specify)	0%	4%
Family Counseling	13%	4%
Parent Education/Support	3%	3%
Advocacy	8%	3%
Parent/Child Engagement Activities	6%	2%
Alcohol/Drug Treatment/Support	5%	2%
Peer Support Groups	4%	1%
Referral to CPS	2%	1%

Table 10: Career Development Supports Provided, Referred, and Linked

	Percent Provided 2009–10	Percent Provided 2008–09
Life Skill Assessment and Goal Setting	41%	30%
Increase Real World Opportunities	32%	15%
Job Readiness Preparation (Resume/Interview)	32%	15%
Job Skill Training	4%	5%
Community Service	20%	6%
Job Shadowing	1%	3%
Financial Literacy	28%	6%

Table 11: Health Supports Provided

	Percent Provided 2009–10	Percent Provided 2008–09
Health Screening	17%	5%
Health Insurance Access	3%	3%
Dental Care	4%	1%
Health Care Access	2%	1%
Corrective Hearing/Vision	1%	1%
Other Medical Care	1%	1%

Table 12: Basic Need Supports Provided

	Percent Provided 2009–10	Percent Provided 2008–09
Food Assistance	27%	17%
Clothing Assistance	23%	15%
School Lunch or Breakfast Program	21%	14%
Holiday Food or Gift Basket	15%	10%
Transportation	10%	8%
Rent Assistance	5%	3%
Utilities	2%	2%
Legal Assistance	3%	2%
Public Assistance	1%	1%
Misc. Financial	1%	1%
Household Supplies	1%	1%
Translation/Interpretative Services	1%	1%
Basic Needs Other	2%	1%
Child Care	1%	1%
Emergency Housing	1%	1%

Please note that 36 percent of students had needs identified in one or more of the following three areas in the needs assessment (behavior problems, emotional distress, substance abuse), and at least one in five had significant barriers associated with basic needs for daily life. While academic and career development activities align well with

the strengths of schools as organizations, there is a risk that Building Bridges programs emphasized what schools are prepared to do more than aligning support services in a balanced approach to the array of needs presented by students.

IV. Consortia Characteristics

Consortia reflect a range of communities including large urban programs, targeted urban programs to specific student groups, and rural communities. The scope of programs varies significantly in terms of numbers of students the program intended to serve. This variety in local community designs was permitted by the legislation but introduces challenges in the evaluation of overall effects because of population and strategy differences.

The next table presents information about the level of completion of key elements of the evaluation data across the consortia. While overall data completion was very good, one of the consortia (Communities in Schools of Tacoma) had significantly lower completion rates for key elements of the evaluation with respect to academic performance and the SDQ as a measure of social–emotional adjustment. The result was that the outcome analyses effectively describe four, not five consortia.

Table 13: Building Bridges Consortia and Contribution to the State Program

	N Identified Students	Percents Needs Assessment Reported	Percentage of Service Reports Provided	Percent Academic Progress Reports Provided	Percent SDQ Pre/Post Scores Reported
Communities in Schools of Seattle	20	100%	95%	100%	65%
ESD 113	295	77%	74%	92%	35%
Communities in Schools of Tacoma	92	58%	42%	55%	1%
Pasco School District	69	91%	57%	78%	50%
Granite Falls School District	163	71%	85%	98%	53%
Total	639	75%	71%	87%	37%

* Needs assessments, services activities, and academic progress report were readily available information. SDQ (Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire) was a voluntary student report for student older than 11 years of age and as a result data completion percentages were necessarily lower.

The next three tables describe grade, race and ethnicity, and legislatively–defined priority populations across the five consortia.

Table 14: Consortia Grade Distribution

	N	Grades 5–8	Grades 9–10	Grades 11–12
Communities in Schools of Seattle	20	0%	70%	30%
ESD 113	277	33%	38%	29%
Communities in Schools of Tacoma	90	0%	58%	42%
Pasco School District	66	2%	26%	72%
Granite Falls School District	157	0%	23%	77%
Total	610	15%	37%	48%

Table 15: Racial and Ethnic Group Distribution by Consortia

Consortia	N	Asian/ Pacific Islander	Native American	Hispanic	African American	Caucasian
Communities in Schools of Seattle	20	27%	10%	15%	70%	10%
ESD 113	295	0%	11%	15%	1%	75%
Communities in Schools of Tacoma	92	15%	7%	14%	25%	35%
Pasco School District	69	1%	4%	68%	6%	26%
Granite Falls School District	163	2%	1%	4%	1%	96%
Total	639	3%	7%	18%	7%	66%

Table 16: Consortia Percentage of Students Legislative Priority Populations

	Communities in Schools of Seattle	ESD 113	Communities in Schools of Tacoma	Pasco School District	Granite Falls School District	Total
Foster Care	10%	5%	70%	1%	3%	14%
Juvenile Justice	50%	7%	68%	12%	29%	24%
BECCA	55%	12%	68%	16%	28%	26%
Special Education	15%	15%	68%	10%	20%	23%

V. Building Bridges Grant Program Outcomes

A. Outcome Measures

Academic Measures of Adjustment

In the 2009–10 program year, we modified collection of academic data to include reports of academic status and progress on a monthly basis. Previously we had staff provide information on academic status in the marking period prior to entering Building Bridges and status in the last academic marking period of the program year. Our intent with monthly data collection was to collect more complete information for program participants. Overall, we found this to be a productive data collection strategy and recommend its adoption in other evaluations addressing academic program outcomes when staff report of student progress is required.

Please note that data collection was limited to the academic year the student was active in Building Bridges. Because of rolling enrollment in the program, a result of this approach was that we have variable lengths of time students were involved in the program and variable spans of time in which student academic progress was reported. Because of the limited funding of evaluation activities overall and limited capacity in local programs, we were not able to complete longer term follow-up with students. The result was that the time period in which we describe program outcomes is brief. This is not an optimal practice and limits the capacity of this evaluation to examine benefits that may emerge over longer periods of time or to examine persistence of benefits.

Each month a student was active in the program, staff were asked to report:

- Enrollment days for the period.
- Absences.
- Earned academic credits for high school students.
- Graduation standing (on track or not for high school students).
- Number of days suspended in the reporting period.
- GPA.

With monthly academic data reporting, we organized the data for analysis at program entry (baseline), three months of supports, six months of supports, and nine months of supports. For 26 percent of students, we had repeated assessments through nine program months and had repeated assessments for 41 percent of students through six months of program supports. We employed a repeated measures analysis format for days absent, credits earned, and GPA to examine trends in improvement over time in the program at six and nine months. For graduation standing and suspensions, we examined status at program entry and the last reported month of data.

Table 17: Completion of Academic Data at Baseline, Three, Six, and Nine Month Follow-up

Academic Data At:	N	Percent of All Students
Nine Months	165	26%
Six Months	263	41%
Three Months	392	61%
Baseline	556	87%

While we achieved acceptable levels of data completion for the analysis, the level of data completion was lower in 2009–10 measured by the percentage of students for whom we had data. We believe this reflects the disruption in funding, delayed program startup for the year, and the overall uncertainty about continuation of the program. Some of the local consortia were highly cooperative with data reporting while others were noncompliant despite repeated efforts to improve their practice. Given the smaller overall size of Building Bridges in 2009–10, the noncompliant programs had a greater overall effect on the evaluation of the whole program.

Baseline Academic Status

The results support the conclusion that Building Bridges programs were effective in engaging an academically high risk group for supportive services.

- The mean number of days absent in the first month students' data was reported was 2.7 days (S.D.=3.8) on an average academic month of 20 school days.
- At program entry, 15 percent of students were reported to have been absent for more than five days (one school week) in the month.
- Six percent of students were reported as being suspended one or more days in the month they entered Building Bridges.
- Sixty–seven percent of the high school students for whom we had baseline information were in extended graduation status at the time they entered the program. In the outcome reports that follow, 75 percent of the students who we had outcome information were in extended graduation status at program entry.

Social–Emotional Adjustment

We employed the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) as a measure of social–emotional adjustment and change. SDQ information was collected by program staff from student volunteers. The self–assessment and the information were provided as anonymous data for this evaluation.

The SDQ² is a validated and norm–referenced assessment of social–emotional adjustment in children from early childhood through age 18. Teachers, parents, and older students can complete the scale and provide related but distinct reports of

² Goodman, R. (1997). The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire: A Research Note. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 38, 581–586. <http://www.sdqinfo.com/>.

Goodman, R. (1999). The extended version of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire as a guide to child psychiatric caseness and consequent burden. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 40, 791–801.

performance. Scales include Total Difficulties, Emotional Symptoms, Conduct Problems, Hyperactivity, Peer Problems, and Prosocial Behavior. United States normative data is available for parent ratings only. We opted not to collect teacher and parent SDQ reports because of burden concerns for the local programs.

The SDQ is one of the most widely used measures of social–emotional adjustment in the child assessment literature.³ Over 100 peer–reviewed journal articles include the SDQ as a tool addressing one or more of these functions. The SDQ is used in the literature in three fashions: as a screening tool for mental health problems,⁴ as a descriptive measure of social–emotional adjustment in community samples,⁵ and as an outcome measure in intervention programs.⁶ For example, the SDQ is used in the recurring United States Centers for Disease Control’s National Health Interview Survey, which is a principal source of descriptive information on the health of the civilian, noninstitutionalized, household populations of the United States. The SDQ’s strong psychometric characteristics are documented in multiple published studies.⁷

The SDQ provides information consistent with other widely used assessment tools (e.g., Achenbach Child Behavior Checklist, Behavioral Assessment Scale of Children) but has the advantage of being far shorter and requiring no special training for administration. The SDQ is a brief tool typically requiring less than five minutes to complete. A benefit of the SDQ is that it provides a positive behavior (Prosocial Behavior) measure and, as a result, the assessment of children is not exclusively deficit–based. The SDQ is available in an extensive range of language versions. The SDQ is employed as a culturally acceptable measure of adjustment in children across multiple language and cultural groups.

The SDQ is a principal outcome measure in itself and a potential moderator measure for the effect of Building Bridges supports on academic progress. As a moderator variable, we were interested in determining if improvements in social–emotional adjustment measured by the SDQ could be correlated with improvements in academic performance and reduction in dropout risk. In 2008–09, we found that social–emotional adjustment was a moderator of academic outcomes but were not able to replicate this result this year in part because of smaller sample sizes.

³ Vostanis, P. (2006). Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire: research and clinical. Applications. *Current Opinions in Psychiatry*, 19: 367–372.

⁴ Vostanis, 2006.

⁵ Goodman, R., Ford, T., Simmons, H., Gatward, R., and Meltzer H (2000) Using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) to screen for child psychiatric disorders in a community sample. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 177, 534–539.

⁶ Mathai, J., Anderson P., and Bourne A (2003). Use of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire as an outcome measure in a child and adolescent mental health service. *Australasian Psychiatry*, 11, 334–337.

⁷ Goodman, R. (2001). Psychometric properties of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 40, 1337–1345.

Completion of the SDQ optimally occurred as soon after program entry as rapport with the student permits. Students' completion of the SDQ was strictly voluntary. Building Bridges workers use their discretion about when and if to introduce the SDQ. Workers were to consider the state of their relationship with the student and family and the needs of the student when requesting completion of the assessment. For example, we would instruct workers to avoid completion of the SDQ with a student during an acute crisis. If a baseline SDQ was completed, we requested workers to complete the follow-up SDQ as close to the end of the academic year as feasible. Because of voluntary participation and worker discretion in introducing the SDQ, SDQ completion was expected to be in a sub-set of Building Bridges participants.

We examined group differences between students for whom we had SDQ data and those we did not. Several student demographic differences were observed but the differences were not so extreme as to raise concerns about representative findings. Key differences included slightly lower rates of SDQ completion in students of color compared to white students (31 percent vs. 40 percent), lower rates of cooperation in free and reduced-priced meal program eligible students (a proxy for poverty, 31 percent vs. 45 percent), and lower rates of cooperation for students in several legislatively-defined priority populations including foster care (13 percent vs. 41 percent), juvenile justice-involved youth (24 percent vs. 42 percent), and BECCA Law involved students (26 percent vs. 41 percent). As a result, this year, some of the most vulnerable students were under-represented in the SDQ data.

Pre-post SDQs were available for 38 percent (N=240) of students. This result replicated the completion rate for SDQ paired scores in 2008-09. The SDQ is often used as a screening tool for further mental health intervention. When the SDQ is used as a screening tool, scores are presented in three categories: normal, borderline, and abnormal levels of difficulty. In 2009-10, 13 percent of students provided self-report indicating levels of social-emotional distress that would warrant further mental health needs assessment. This is a significantly lower percent than we found in 2008-09 when 28 percent of students reported elevated levels of distress. While 13 percent of students in distress indicates high levels of need, the fact that the reported levels of distress were significantly lower than the previous year suggest that programs in 2009-10 may have served a less socially and behaviorally vulnerable population.

Table 18: Students' Report of Initial Adjustment Using the SDQ

	Building Bridges Students 2008-09 N=1,024	Building Bridges Students 2009-10 N=237
Normal	72%	87%
Borderline	11%	9%
Abnormal	17%	4%

Our experience in using the SDQ in OSPI's Readiness to Learn (RTL) student population is that students significantly under-report social-emotional problems compared to reports provided by teachers and parents about the students. Based on

our RTL experience, we believe that the students' report that one in eight Building Bridges students has significant adjustment concerns is a conservative estimation of actual need.

Legislative Priority Populations and Outcome Measures

We found that the legislatively–defined priority students were comparable to other students in Building Bridges with respect to need and academic status. We did not find significant outcome differences between these two student groups.

B. Outcome Findings

Building Bridges support services were effective in improving the overall academic progress and reducing social–emotional distress in participating students. These results confirm similar findings from the 2008–09 report. However, because of smaller overall participant numbers, the scope of our analysis was more limited in this report.

The key findings in this section include:

- Greater levels of Building Bridges supports were associated with increased earned credits toward graduation in high school students.
- In this at–risk group of students, providing more intensive supports resulted in preventing further deterioration in levels of school attendance.
- In the 75 percent of high school students who entered Building Bridges in extended graduation status, one in eight students transitioned to on–time graduation in this academic year.
- Social–emotional adjustment improved with higher levels of Building Bridges supports directly provided by staff as compared to referrals to community resources.

We were unable to demonstrate changes in school suspensions or in GPA as two additional academic measures. We also were unable to test if improvement in social–emotional adjustment moderated academic progress because of the reduced numbers of students in the analyses.

In the following analyses, the time period over which we examined differences ranged but unless otherwise indicated we conducted analyses first on students for whom we had a full year of program data (baseline to nine month follow–up) and then examined shorter time periods to test program effects at three and six month follow–ups. Because students entered the program at various times during the year and stayed in the program for varying lengths of time, we had the most information for a smaller number of students. The numbers of students for whom we had the longest follow–up were adequate to support the following analyses and conclusions.

Student Characteristics and Outcome Measures

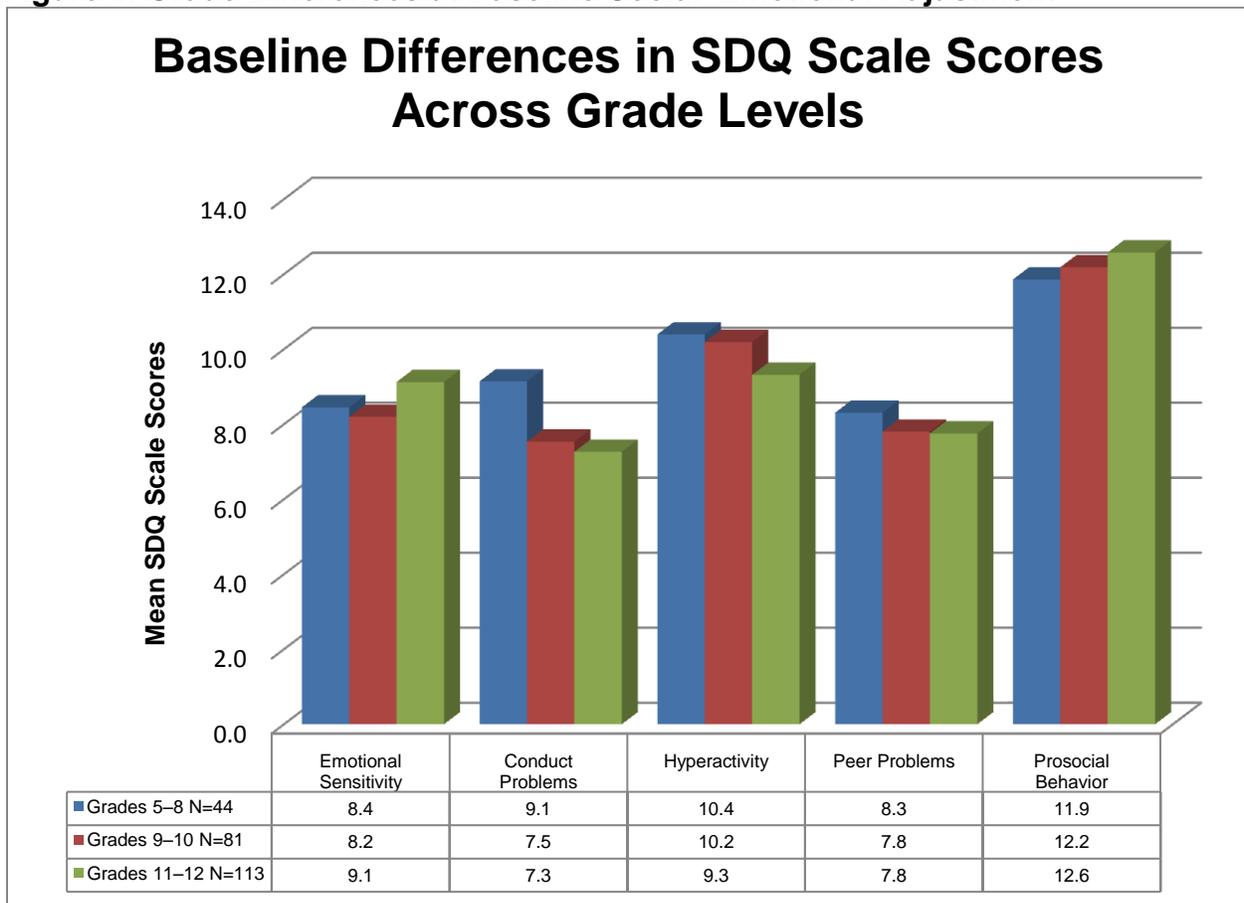
For grade level, we found no outcome differences on credits earned or absences. We did find that suspensions were significantly more common in younger students (Grades 5–8) where 21 percent of younger students were suspended compared to 4 percent of Grades 9–10 students and 1 percent of Grades 11–12 students. Please note that almost all younger students this year were served in ESD 113 and this difference may reflect this specific program’s identification practices for enrollment in Building Bridges.

We also found that level of social–emotional dysfunction was associated with both grade level and with gender. In general, boys and younger students report greater levels of social–emotional distress. This finding replicates results in the 2008–09 evaluation. For both gender and grade level in this dropout program, these two types of student differences offer strong effects on the needs students have as they enter the dropout prevention programs. While programs may not be able to choose students entering the programs, understanding how these student differences affect outcomes is essential.

In the following outcome analyses, we controlled for gender and grade level as we examined the effect of the program on student progress.

In the following figures, we note the significant results and present ‘partial eta squared’ results. Partial eta squared is a measure of how powerful the group differences being examined are in explaining. Partial eta squared results of approaching 10 percent indicate that these are powerful findings.

Figure 4: Grade Differences at Baseline Social–Emotional Adjustment



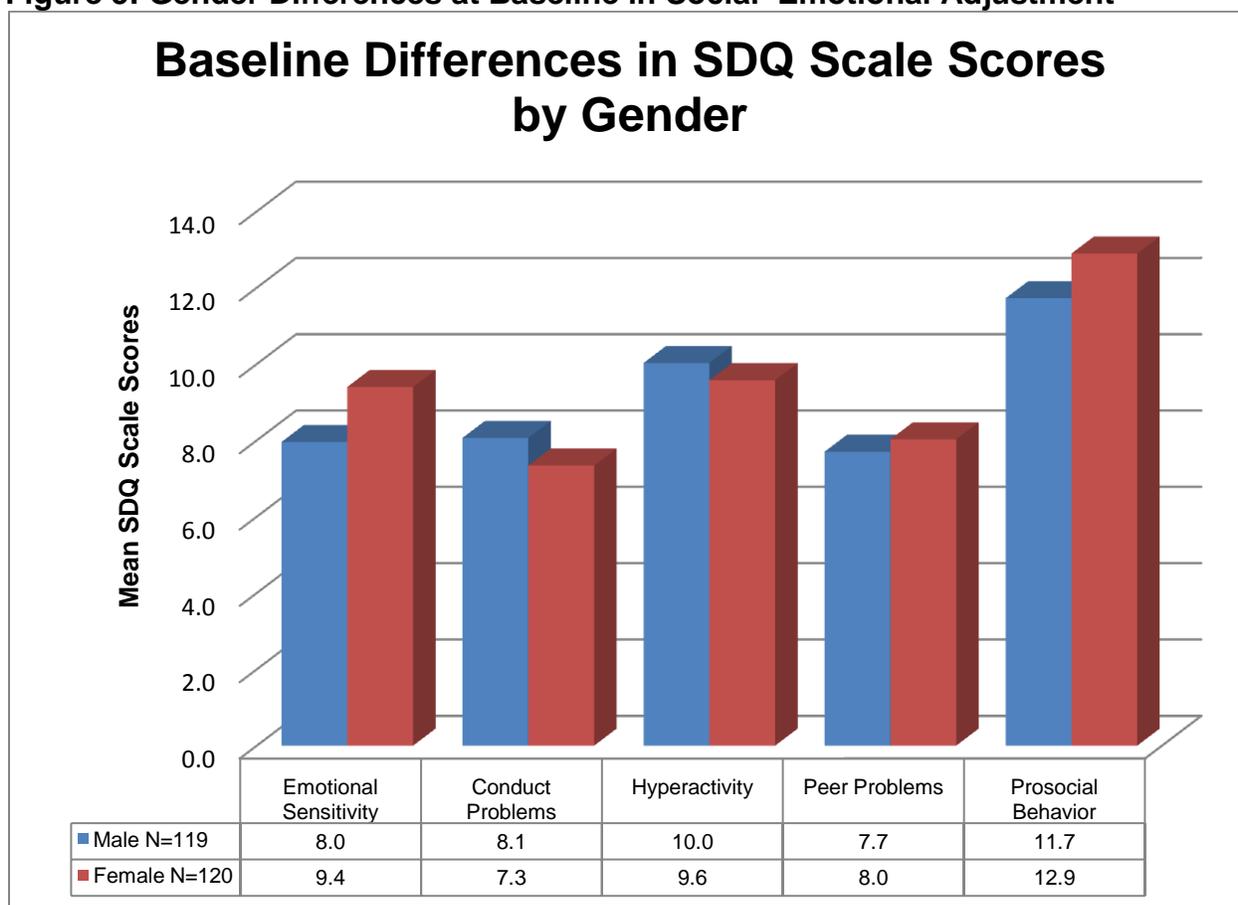
Statistically significant differences:

Emotional Sensitivity– $F(2,237)=3.4$, $p<.04$; partial eta squared=3%

Conduct Problems– $F(2,237)=16.6$, $p<.0001$; partial eta squared=12%

Hyperactivity– $F(2,237)=5.2$, $p<.006$; partial eta squared=4%

Figure 5: Gender Differences at Baseline in Social–Emotional Adjustment



Statistically significant differences:

Emotional Sensitivity– $F(1,238)=20.3, p<.0001$; partial eta squared=8%

Conduct Problems– $F(1,238)=8.3.4, p<.004$; partial eta squared=3%

Prosocial Behavior– $F(1,238)=22.0, p<.0001$; partial eta squared=9%

Graduation Status

In examining graduation status program benefits, 75 percent of the high school students for whom we had outcome data (N=467) were in extended graduation status as they entered the program. We examined the question if after three or more months of Building Bridges supports, had students progressed to on–time graduation status? Students could be in the program for varying lengths of time and one positive reason for exiting the program was that they achieved on–time graduation status. Among 261 students who had follow–up information over at least three months, 12 percent (N=32) improved to on–time graduation. An additional 12 percent of students showed a period of time in which they achieved on–time graduation status during the year but subsequent reports indicate that they were not able to maintain this over the full year.

We found that students in Grades 11–12 (26 of 32 students improving) were more likely to transition to on–time graduation than students in Grades 9–10⁸. This result again

⁸ Chi Square (1)=5.6, $p<.02$

suggests that students may have different needs depending on when in their school careers they are identified for dropout intervention supports.

We did not find that change to on-time graduation status was associated with level of Building Bridges supports but caution that the group of 32 students is very small for statistical analyses.

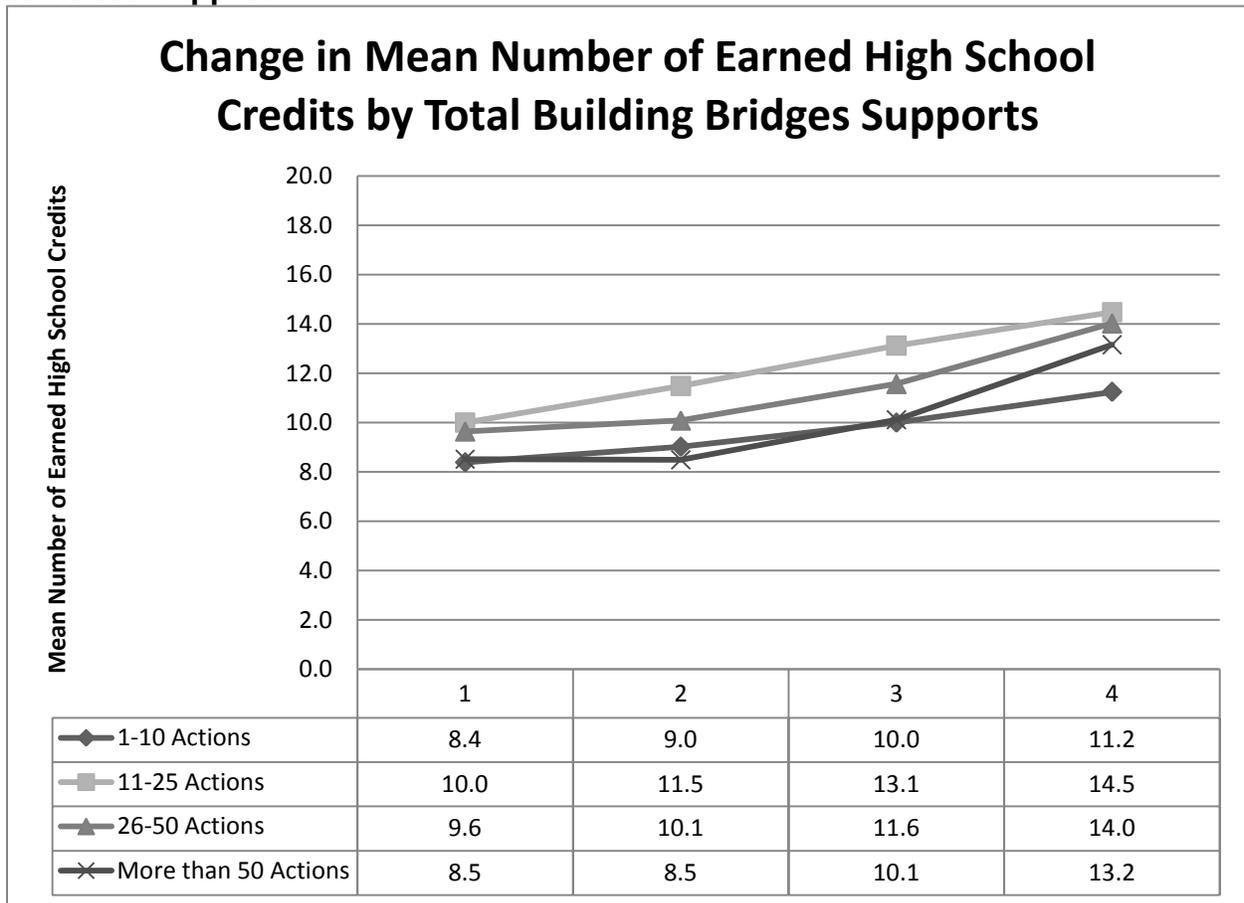
Credits Earned

There was a significant increase in credits earned toward graduation from initial to nine month follow-up. Examining intermediate change indicates that the change does not occur at three or six months but requires the full period of follow-up.

The more intensively served students show a mean increase of 4.5 earned credits compared to 2.9 for students receiving minimal (1–10 actions) levels of supports. We did not find that specific types of supports were significantly resulted with improvements in earned credits.

The mean relative gain was 1.5 credits for at-risk students receiving more intensive supports provided by this one year program. It is important to recall that some level of gain in credits earned is to be expected even in students not benefitting from schools or specialized programs like Building Bridges. With a common minimum of 19 credits for high school graduation in Washington State, we suggest that the gain achieved in Building Bridges is of practical importance demonstrating that this program effort meaningfully supported students to progress toward graduation. However, as seen in the previous section this progress is not in one year sufficient to change status to on-time graduation for more than about one in eight students. Addressing the barriers in these students is a complex process that requires time and persistent effort.

Figure 6: Building Bridges Gains in High School Credits Earned with More Intensive Supports



Linear change: $F(3, 108)=2.0$, not significant

Quadratic Change: $F(3,108)=6.9$, $p<.001$; partial eta squared=16%

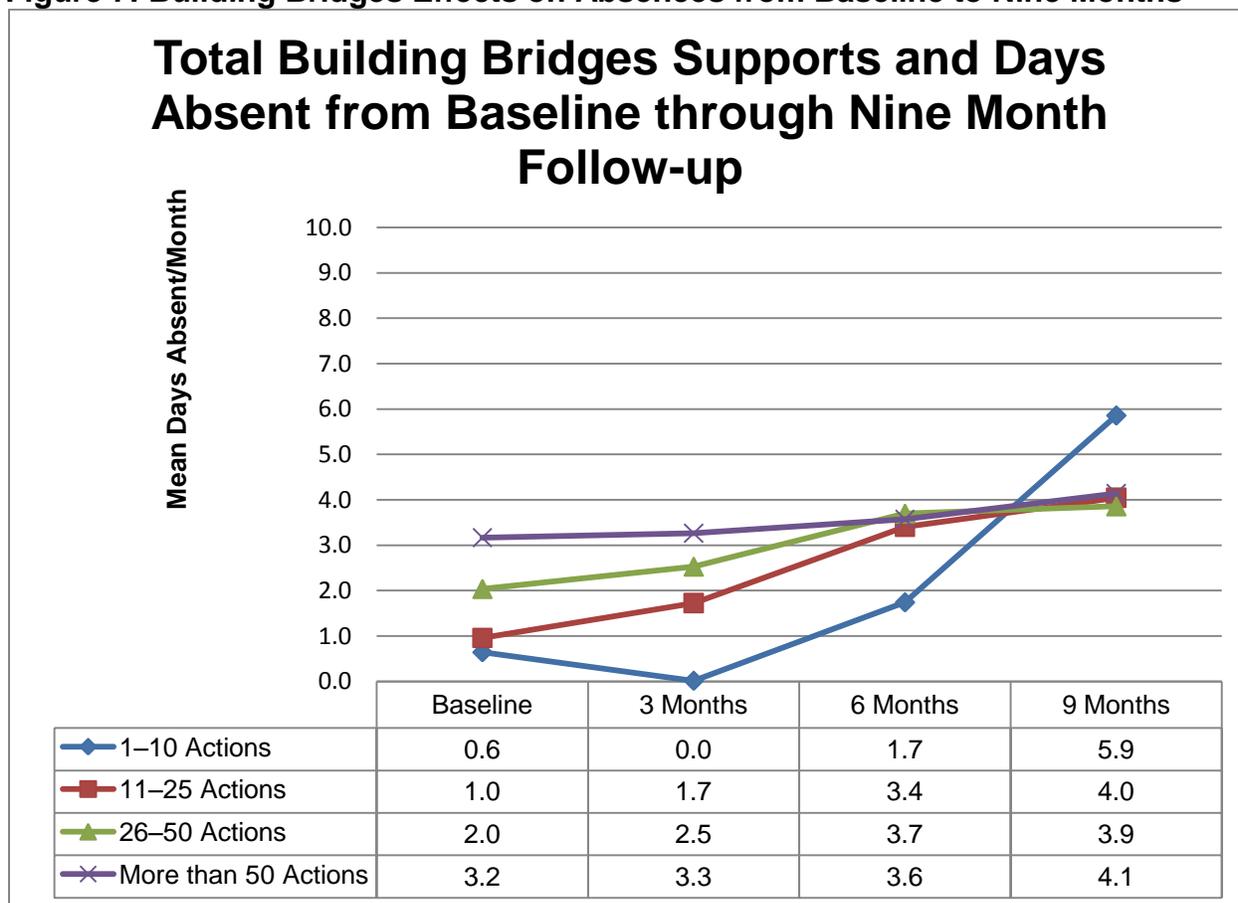
Days Absent

Days absent from school were reported monthly for Building Bridges students. Because May is the last full month of schools, for calculating absences and suspension days we used May as the last month for comparisons. We also excluded students who graduated in conducting this analysis because of varying schedules for graduating students.

For days absent in a month, we find significant effects for total supports, career development supports, and social behavioral supports. Similar to the results from OSPI's RTL program, Building Bridges this last year appeared to stabilize students with more intensive supports compared to a deterioration in attendance with less supports. The follow figure provides the results for total supports but the pattern of results are replicated for career development and social behavioral supports.

As was the case for earned credits, change through three and six month follow-ups were not significant and the full year of effort was necessary to demonstrate change.

Figure 7: Building Bridges Effects on Absences from Baseline to Nine Months



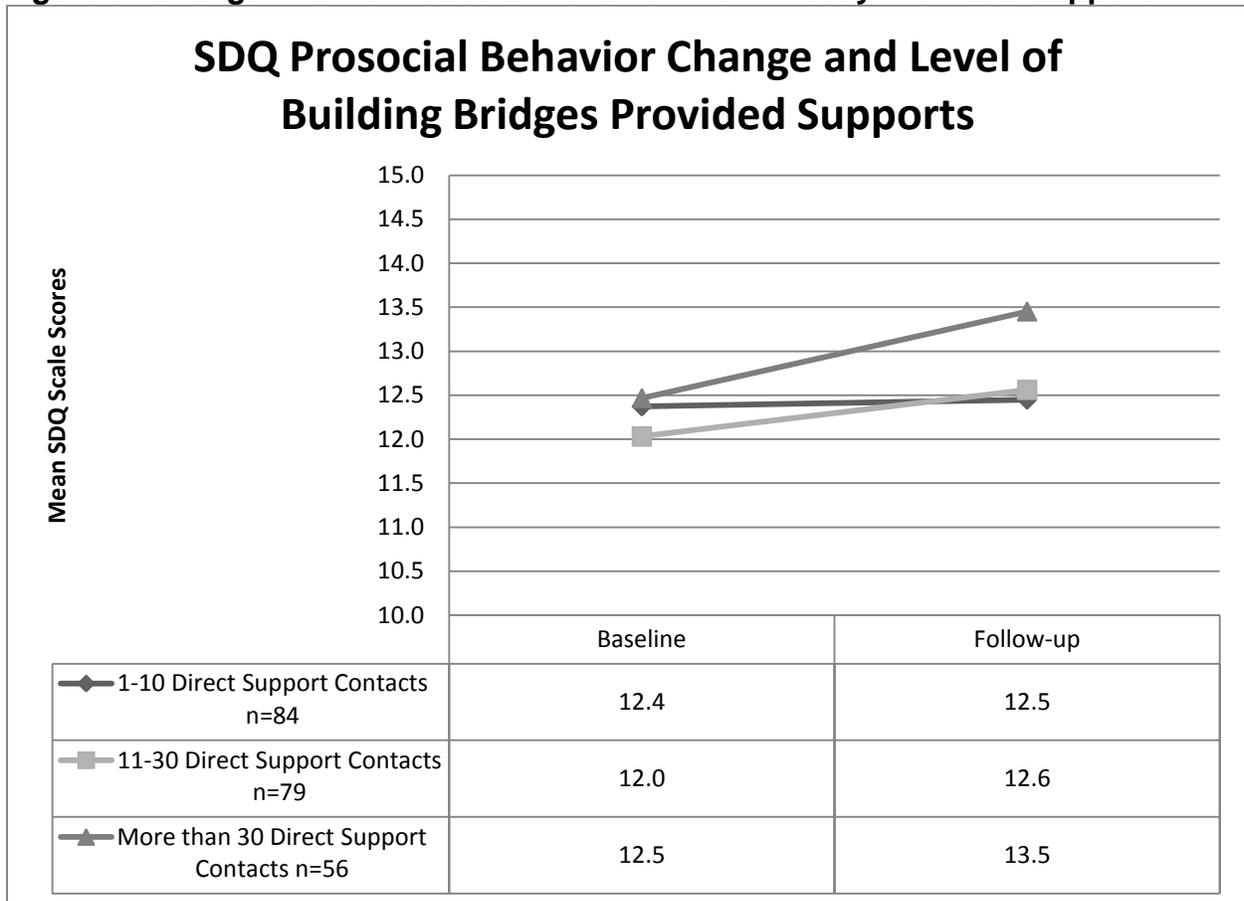
Linear change: $F(3, 118)=2.4$, not significant

Quadratic Change: $F(3,118)=7.2$, $p<.001$; partial eta squared=16%

Social-Emotional Adjustment

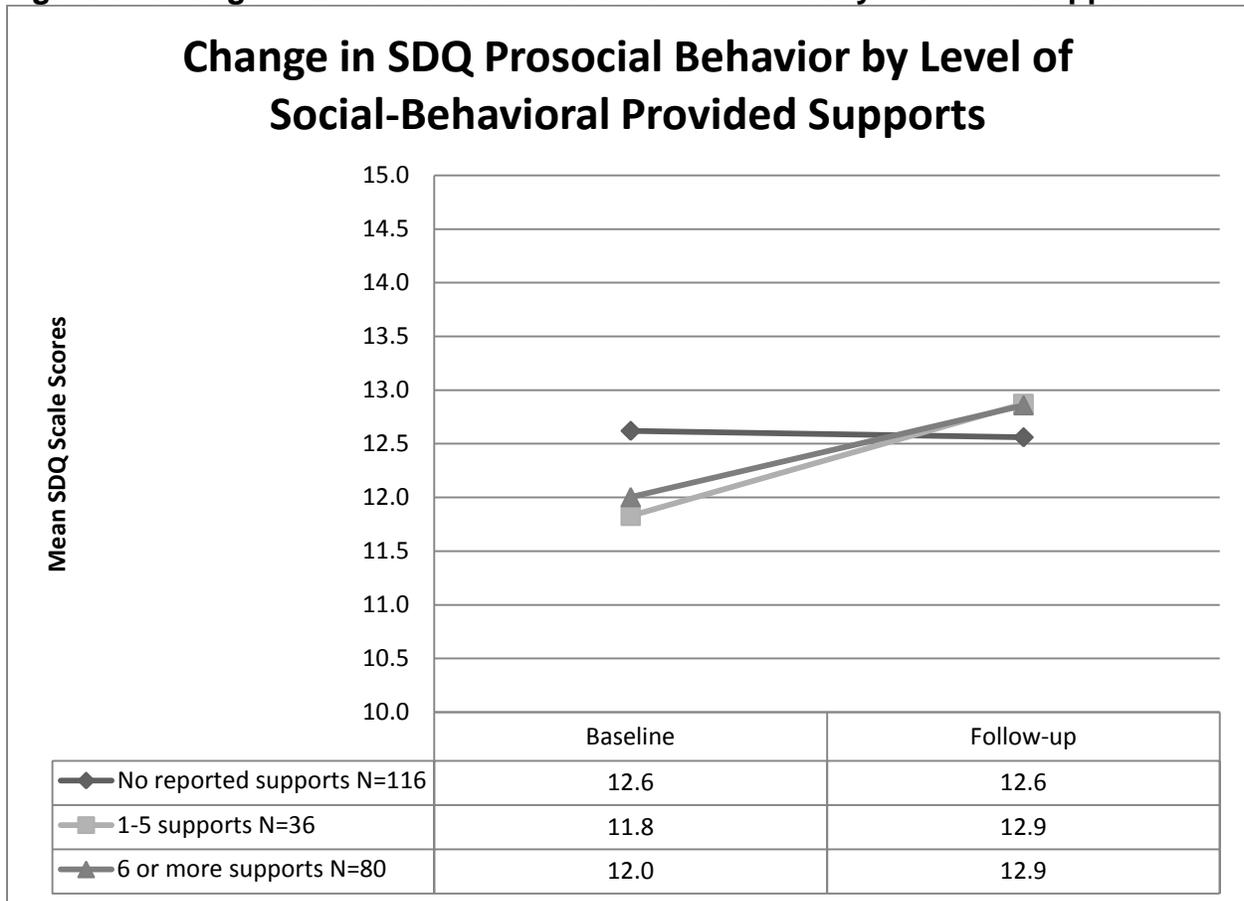
Building Bridges supports resulted in improved social-emotional adjustment for students. Specifically, we found that more intensive levels of directly provided supports and social behavioral supports were associated with increases on the SDQ Prosocial Behavior scale, reduction on the Conduct Problems scale, and reduction on the SDQ Peer Problems scale. These results generally replicated findings from the previous Building Bridges report.

Figure 8: Change in SDQ Prosocial Behavior with Directly Provided Support



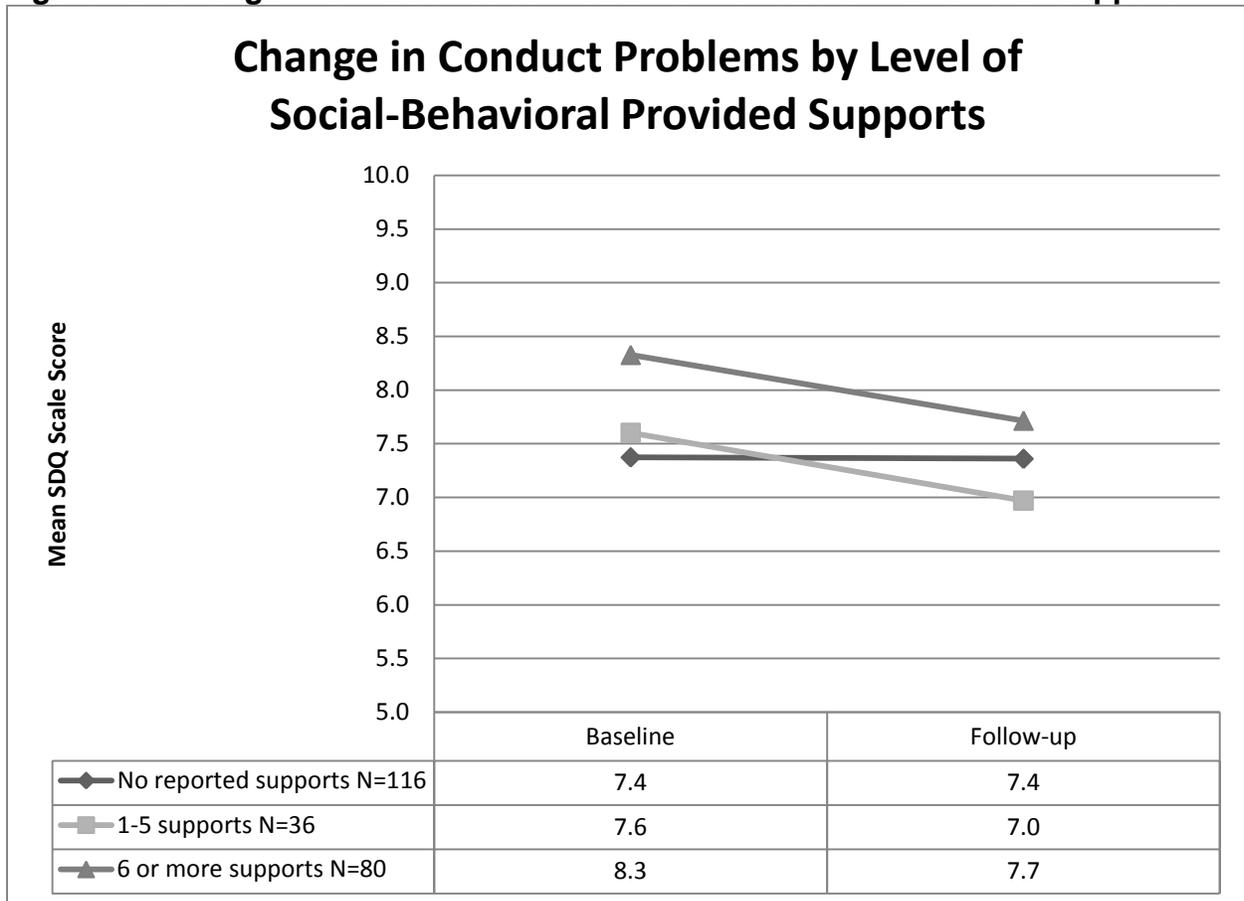
F (2, 216)=3.6. p<.02; partial eta squared=3%

Figure 9: Change in SDQ Prosocial Behavior with Directly Provided Support



F (2, 227)=7.2. $p < .001$ for change over time; partial eta squared=6%

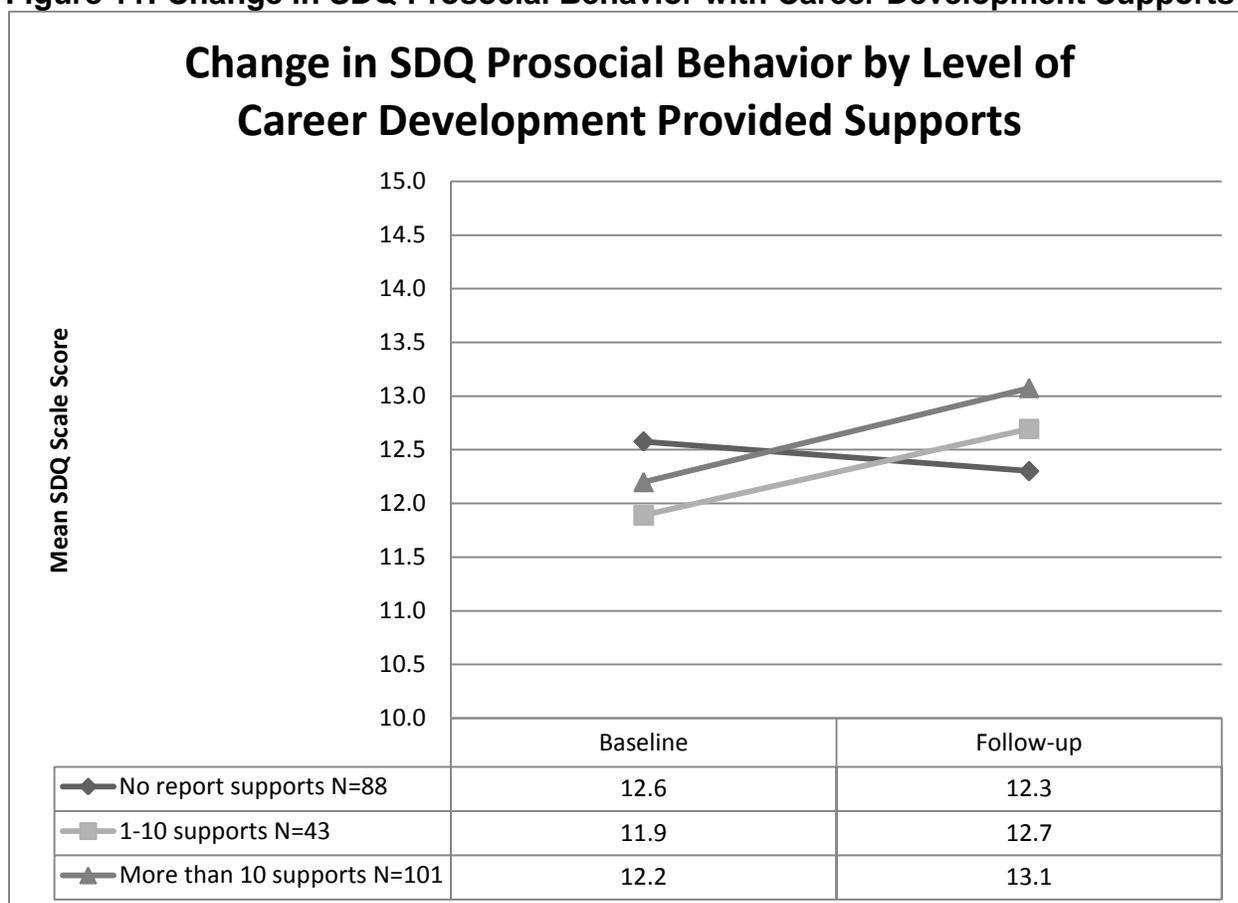
Figure 10: Change in SDQ Conduct Problems with Social-Behavioral Support



F (2, 227)=3.9. p<.02; partial eta squared=3% for change over time

F (2, 227)=4.1. p<.02 for support group main effect differences

Figure 11: Change in SDQ Prosocial Behavior with Career Development Supports



F (2, 227)=5.5. p<.005 for change over time; partial eta squared=5%

VI. Discussion

While significantly reduced in scope in its final year, this evaluation largely replicated the findings of program benefits to students initially reported in the 2008–09 Building Bridges report. The program was effective in reaching a group of high need students, and showed meaningful gains in school attendance, high school credits earned, and social–emotional adjustment. The programs were effective in reaching the legislatively–defined priority populations. A smaller group of students were able to move to on–time graduation in this one year of program supports. While this program effort ended in Summer 2010 because of the state’s budget crisis, the Building Bridges experience provides a guide for returning to the development of dropout supports when state financial resources permit.

With relatively modest annual investments, the past two years demonstrated that school partnerships can reach the right students and show meaningful gains using a varied set of support strategies. The needs assessment data also demonstrated the complex and persistent problems facing these students. Building Bridges programs were effective in engaging often isolated and marginalized students in meaningful levels of program supports.

There is often a desire to measure the benefit of programs like Building Bridges in a single academic year. We strongly recommend, based on the experience in Building Bridges, that such a program assumption be challenged. Students engaged by Building Bridges as a group did not suddenly demonstrate academic problems. Rather, the students typically show a pattern of risks consistent with persistent and complex needs that have defined much if not all of their lives. As a result, these are problems that frequently have multiple sources and can be resistant to change. From this perspective, demonstrating that earned credits can significantly be improved with more intensive supports speaks to the value of this program even if only 12 percent of students reach the goal of on-time graduation in this single year. Complex problems require persistent efforts to change.

While the level of social-emotional need in this year was less than in the more diverse and larger set of 15 consortia from the first year, social-emotional need remains a hallmark of the students identified at dropout risk. Improving social-emotional adjustment also appears to be one of the early benefits of dropout prevention efforts. Consistent with our findings from the previous evaluation report, school staff often are uncomfortable with prioritizing social-emotional supports and often feel ill-equipped to deliver these supports. This is at odds with the large literature indicating that social-emotional competencies are among the most powerful predictors of academic success. We are not suggesting that mental health therapies are automatically the response. Rather, psycho educational supports and intentional use of mentoring and other programs to address social-emotional goals are strategies that are effective and well-aligned with the mission of schools. Based on the need of students, recognizing and addressing effective social-emotional supports for students is a major lesson from Building Bridges.

Overall, we did not find compelling evidence for one support strategy over another. Indeed, the guidance for the local programs permitted significant discretion in choice of methods to address dropout risk. We did, however, find that direct supports and persistence of effort are critical to improving outcomes. Several implications follow from these findings. First, the idea that exclusive reliance on brief strategies such as credit retrieval efforts will work is not supported by the data. Credit retrieval is a critical strategy but has to be embedded in a more persistent individualized and relational engagement of the student. Second, programs will produce results with direct hands-on efforts; referral and linkage activities are supportive of these direct personal efforts not a substitute for them. Finally, allowing such a range of strategies is consistent with the tradition of local control in schools but risks ignoring what we know about adoption and effective use of established program strategies. Indeed, given the range of strategies used by Building Bridges programs, this evaluation may most properly be considered as documentation that engagement and support to students as a general strategy has benefit. The question for future dropout programs is if more rigorously defined interventions can produce greater benefits than seen with the diverse support strategies that define Building Bridges.

There are several constraints on this evaluation to acknowledge. First, the variety of program strategies and populations served is great and such variability makes finding significant change across programs difficult. Second, the level of investment available for the evaluation was limited with the result that we relied on program information to guide the evaluation. We do want to acknowledge the exceptional professionalism of many of our local partners but have to also point out that noncompliance by a few comprised the quality of the data and the ability to fully represent this important work. Third, without a control group, these findings are potentially biased by selective attrition in participating students that do not permit a full test of the interventions.

Finally, we wish to thank OSPI and particularly Annie Blackledge as the program manager for the opportunity to participate in this important work.

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