



## Kentucky

### Year 4 Evaluation Report (2017- 2018)

This report is for the 4th year of the ongoing *U Connect* program in Frankfort, KY. The after-school program includes mentoring sessions, STEM education, nutrition education, and family engagement sessions for middle school students and their parents, family members, or guardians. This report describes the general attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of the *U Connect* program participants in KY during the 2017-18 school year.

This project is funded by USDA, National Institute of Food and Agriculture, Children, Youth and Families at Risk (CYFAR) Grant Program, 2014-2019 (Dr. Joanne Bankston, PI, Kentucky State University, College of Agriculture, Food Science, and Sustainable Systems). The foundation program, *Check & Connect*, is an evidence-based intervention developed at the University of Minnesota to promote young people's self-regulation, intrinsic motivation, and persistence to increase engagement with school and learning. The *Check & Connect* approach to mentoring helps ensure that *U Connect* youth, who may be at risk for disengagement with school, develop positive relationships with an adult mentor, develop academic and social skills, and strengthen connection to school and learning.

At the beginning and the end of each academic year, participating students in grades 6-8 completed a pretest and a posttest survey. In Fall 2017, the pretest survey was completed by 28 students (24% female). In Spring 2018, 21 students (23% female) completed the postsurvey. In addition to the survey, program mentors tracked student attendance, academic performance, school behavior, interventions, and communication with students and their families. This report includes a summary of these *Check & Connect* data.

### Survey Findings

**1. What Students Learned in the Program.** Students use a five-point scale ranging from "Never" to "Always." Participant responses indicated students gained new skills and knowledge by the end of the school year, i.e., learning about treating each other with respect, making good decisions, learning of different ways to communicate and provide leadership. Students also reported learning from challenging activities.

Participant Learning	Pre (n=28)	Post (n=21)
	"A lot" or "Always"	
Young people learn about treating others with respect	71.0%	81.9%
Young people learn how to make good decisions	71.0%	77.3%
Young people learn different ways to talk to one another	67.7%	77.3%
Young people learn from activities that are challenging	77.5%	81.8%
Young people are encouraged to be leaders	71.0%	72.8%

### 2. Experiences with Peers in the Program

Students reported on their experiences with peers in the program using a five-point scale ranging from "Never" to "Always." Overall, participants' interactions with peers stayed positive or improved throughout the school year.

Experiences with Peers	Pre (n=28)	Post (n=21)
	"A lot" or "Always"	
Young people respect one another	51.6%	50.0%
Young people are willing to help each other	51.6%	50.0%
If someone is being picked on, young people try to stop it	32.3%	40.9%
Young people protect others from bullies	29.0%	36.4%

### 3. Experiences with Adults in the Program

Students reported on their experiences with adults (mentors and other program staff) using a five-point scale ranging from "Never" to "Always." Participants reported experiencing positive interactions with adults in the program, with most participants indicating that adults in the program helped enforce the rules and were eager to help students and an increase in working together to plan activities by the end of the school year.

Experiences with Adults	Pre (n=28)	Post (n=21)
	"A lot" or "Always"	
Adults make sure the rules are being followed	90.4%	77.3%
Adults are eager to help young people	90.4%	77.2%
Young people and adults work together to plan activities	64.5%	77.3%

**4. Personal Values and Beliefs**

Students responded to a series of questions about the beliefs they held and how important each of the beliefs were to them, on a four-point scale from “Not Important” to “Extremely Important.” Responses indicated a high level of commitment to personal values, such as honesty, responsibility, and acting in ways consistent with one’s values under pressure.

<b>Participant Personal Values</b>	<b>Pre (n=28)</b>	<b>Post (n=21)</b>
<b>How important is each of the following to you?</b>	“Important” or “Extremely Important”	
Doing my best, even when I have a job I don’t like	90.3%	86.4%
Standing up for what I believe, even when it’s unpopular to do	87.1%	72.7%
Accepting responsibility for my actions when I make a mistake or get in trouble	83.9%	86.4%

**5. Future Academic Goals**

Students reported on their beliefs about future education on a four-point scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree.” Most program participants reported a positive attitude toward and strong commitment to education in high school and beyond. Most students planned to continue their education following high school and felt that school would create opportunities and allow them to achieve their future goals.

<b>Student statements about future goals</b>	<b>Pre (n=28)</b>	<b>Post (n=21)</b>
	“Agree” or “Strongly Agree”	
I plan to continue my education following high school	90.4%	90.9%
I am hopeful about my future	93.5%	93.5%
Going to school after high school is important	90.3%	90.9%
School is important for achieving my future goal	87.1%	86.4%

**6. Family Support**

Students reported on their experiences of family support on a four-point scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree.” Most students reported very high levels of family support for engagement with school throughout the school year, both when students were doing well and when they faced challenges.

<b>Student statements about family support</b>	<b>Pre (n=28)</b>	<b>Post (n=21)</b>
	“Agree” or “Strongly Agree”	
My family/guardian want me to keep trying when things are tough at school	93.5%	90.9%
When something good happens at school, my family/guardian want to know about it	93.5%	90.9%

When I have problems at school my family/guardian are willing to help me	83.9%	81.8%
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**7. Learning about Nutrition**

Students reported how hard it would be to choose healthy food options on a three-point scale from “Not Hard at All” to “Very Hard.” Program participants reported some challenges in making healthy food choices. Students reported an increase in some healthy behaviors (such as drinking 1% or skim milk) and a decrease in others.

How hard students thought it would be to...	Pre (n=28)	Post (n=21)
	“Not hard at all”	
Eat fruit for an after-school snack	67.7%	59.1%
Drink 1% or skim milk instead of 2% or whole milk	45.2%	50.0%
Choose water instead of soda pop or Kool-Aid	61.3%	36.4%
Eat vegetables for a snack	51.6%	31.8%
Eat smaller servings of high fat foods like French fries, chips, snack cakes, cookies, or ice-cream	51.6%	36.4%

**Check & Connect Mentor Form Summary**

Mentors filled out the *Check & Connect* mentor forms in Excel in the fall of 2017 (September 2017 - December 2017) for 35 students and via a web-based application in the spring of 2018 (January 2018 - May 2018) for 35 students.

The “Check” data included behavioral engagement information (tardy to school, skipping classes, absenteeism, suspension, behavior referrals, detention) and academic engagement data (core course grades). These data were collected primarily from *U Connect* student school records, with the help of school staff and teachers, in order to discuss them with students.

The “Connect” component of the model refers to both formal and informal meetings between mentor and the student throughout the school year, designed to build mentor-student relationships, offer students feedback and support as well as addressing student concerns or challenges via interventions. The “Connect” component also includes communication between the mentor and student’s parents, family members or guardians.

**Mentor-Student Communication.** On average, students formally met with their mentor 11 times and informally met 7 times in the fall of 2017. In the spring of 2018, they met with their mentor on average 12 times both formally and informally. Formal mentor-student communication occurred mostly in the program classroom spaces. Informal communication occurred in and outside the classrooms.

The four basic interventions used by the mentors at both Minnesota sites were “Providing regular feedback on student progress”, “Discussing staying in school”, and “Problem-

solving about risk”. Intensive interventions were tailored for each student based on student interest or needs that were identified during the check-in meetings and informal conversations. The mentor utilized multiple intensive interventions, including facilitating goal-setting, discussing academic progress and supports, discussing behavior and supports, and intensive problem solving; discussions with youth how current choices impact the likelihood of graduating from high school; facilitating goal setting; discussing academic progress, behavior and supports; and facilitating social skills training.

**Mentor-Family Communication.** Mentors communicated with 54% of participating families (n=19) in the fall of 2017 and with 80% of participating families (n=28) in the spring of 2018. Communication formats included sending a note home, calling on the phone or leaving a message, meeting in person, and home visits. Family communication focused on informal conversations while connecting, partnering, and engaging with participants’ family members/guardians. Examples of communication included greeting parents when they picked their kids up in hallways or on the playground, conversations about how students were doing in school, and follow-up calls when students were behind on their homework.

**Student Attendance and Behavior Patterns.** In the fall of 2017, 43% of students (n=15) had at least one recorded unexcused absence. In the spring of 2018, 83% of students (n=29) had at least one recorded unexcused absence.

In the fall of 2017, 6% of students (n=2) received at least one suspension and 20% (n=7) had at least one behavior referral. During spring 2018, 11% of students (n=4) received at least one suspension and 34% (n=12) had at least one behavior referral.

## Conclusion

This report summarizes 2017-18 *U Connect* participant experiences in the program in Frankfort, KY, including participant behavioral engagement indicators, their attitudes towards the program, personal values and beliefs, and how much family support for education they received. Three main themes emerged from *U Connect* participants:

1. **Development of positive behaviors and attitudes.** Close to eighty-two percent of students participating in the program indicated they learned about treating others with respect, while about 77% indicated they learned about making good decisions and about different ways of talking with each other. Overall, youth reported that *U Connect* was helping them become better peers and communicators - youth believed that they were respected and helped by peers (50%) and that the adults in the program were eager to help them (77%).

By the end of the school year, 91% of participating youth planned to continue their education following high school, 94% felt hopeful about the future, and 86% felt school was important for achieving future goals. In regard to personal values supporting learning, 86% indicated they felt it was important to do one’s best in spite of challenges, 73% reported standing up for their beliefs, and 86% were committed to accepting

responsibility for their actions. The responses around personal values reflected participants' development of character, coping skills, and self-control, qualities that are important for setting and reaching academic goals.

For many program participants it was still challenging to choose healthy food and drink options at the end of the school year. Program participants reported an increase in one healthy behavior (50% of youth thought it would not be hard to drink 1% or skim milk instead of 2% or whole milk).

2. ***Family involvement in and connection to school.*** About eighty-two percent of participating youth responded that their parents, family members, or guardians were willing to help them with problems at school. Over 90% shared academic successes and positive school experiences with parents, family members, or guardians. The mentor also worked to establish a relationship with participants' families.

*U Connect* was designed to facilitate cognitive, behavioral, and affective engagement with school and learning for academically at-risk middle school youth in a safe and nurturing environment. The promising results outlined above suggest that young people in the program in Kentucky are developing confidence and skills to achieve academic success.

*Report prepared by Diana Yefanova, University of Minnesota, Department of Family Social Science, with support from Dr. Jodi Dworkin and Samantha LeBouef, M.A. Please direct questions to Dr. Jodi Dworkin ([jdworkin@umn.edu](mailto:jdworkin@umn.edu)). *U Connect* will continue strengthening partnerships between families and schools until August 2019.*