

# Project REAL Report

NATIONAL RESEARCH CENTER  
ON RURAL EDUCATION SUPPORT

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## Project Description

The Rural Early Adolescent Learning Program (Project REAL) has been developed to help teachers promote the academic, behavioral, and social adjustment of rural youth as they transition from childhood to adolescence. While the program is designed to help support youth who are most likely to experience difficulty in school, the strategies and techniques have been carefully selected to promote the engagement of all students, including typical learners and high achieving students.

The Project REAL intervention is designed to address the key factors that systematically work together to influence adaptation in early adolescence. The intervention consists of three distinct intervention components:

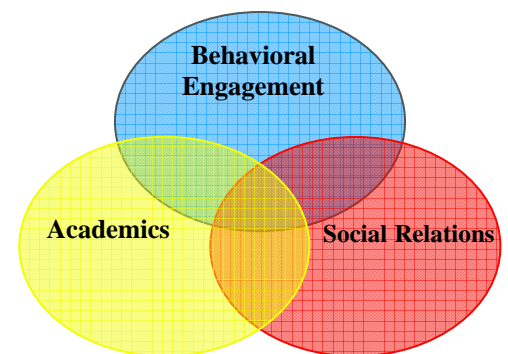
- **Academic Engagement Enhancement-** Focuses on organizational and instructional strategies that foster and support student interest and achievement during early adolescence. The emphasis is not on the content (this is decided by the school district's own curriculum team) but rather on general strategies that promote an instructional context that is responsive to the need of a broad and diverse range of students.
- **Competence Enhancement Behavior Management (CEBM)** – The CEBM component focuses on establishing a whole-grade system of behavior management that provides structure and consistency across classes while fostering responsible self-directed behavior. This includes proactive approaches aimed at preventing behavioral difficulties and the use of problems as an opportunity to teach and reinforce new skills.
- **Social Dynamics Training (SDT)** – The SDT component focuses on promoting teachers' awareness of the impact of peers on motivation and achievement. This training includes (a) recognizing peer groups and social roles, (b) identifying youth who are experiencing social difficulties that interfere with their learning or the learning of others, (c) strategies to use peer group dynamics to foster classroom engagement, and (d) helping students with social difficulties to develop positive, supportive relationships with peers and adults.

## Our Goals

The goals of the intervention program are to:

- Provide professional development training to teachers to support youth who are at-risk for school difficulties and youth with learning needs that extend beyond the general curriculum.
- Enhance achievement and school engagement of all youth during early adolescence.
- Provide a system of supports to teachers with high concentrations of students who present a range of instructional needs and challenges.
- Foster collaborative and supportive relationships among teachers, both within sixth grade teams and across fifth and sixth grades.

## Conceptual Framework



## The Scope of Project REAL

Since its inception, Project REAL has included:

- Almost 3000 participating students (grades 4 to 7).
- Over 700 teachers from 71 schools.
- 10 states in the following regions of the US: Appalachian, Midwest, Southwest, Deep South, Southeast, Northwest, and Northern Plains.
- 1539 girls (52.6 %) and 1389 boys (47.4 %).
- 60.1% of our participating students are White, 21.8% are African American, 5.2% are Hispanic, 3.4 % are American Indian, and <1% are Asian. Children participating in our study were ethnically diverse, reflecting the ethnic diversity of the population at our various sites.
- School-level child poverty rates for children in schools participating in Project REAL range from 29% to 99%.
- Half of our schools have been an elementary-middle school transition configuration and the other half are K-8 or K-12 configurations.

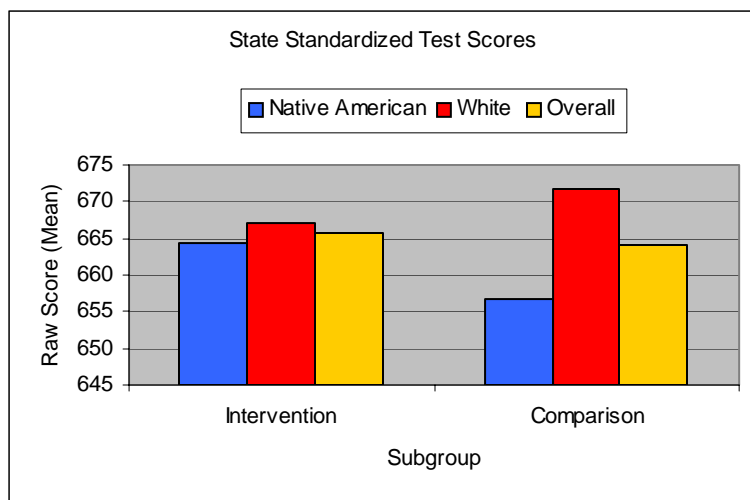
## OVERALL SUMMARY OF PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Project REAL has been in progress for over three years; since the spring of 2005. As schools finish their participation in professional development and research, we can begin to assess the impact of Project REAL on these schools. Here we describe outcomes in two states that have completed Project REAL.

### 1. Project REAL improves academic achievement.

For our K-8/K-12 schools, we found that the Project REAL intervention had a positive impact on student achievement. After controlling for previous year and fall scores on outcomes, students in Project REAL schools, compared to students in the matched control school, reported significantly higher end of year grades.

In K-8/K-12 schools, we also found that minority students in intervention schools had higher achievement on state standardized end-of-year tests than minority students in the control schools. While overall standardized achievement test scores in the intervention schools were only slightly higher than control schools, the minority students in intervention schools scored higher than those in control schools. In control schools, there was a considerable gap in the achievement of minority and non-minority students. In intervention schools, however, the performance of minority students in intervention schools was comparable to the performance of non-minority students.

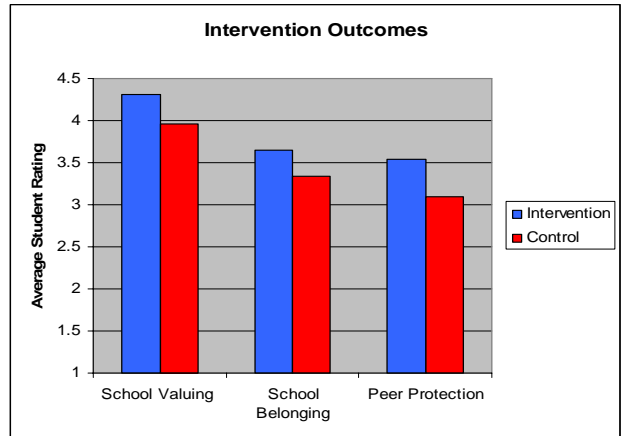


### 2. Project REAL impacts how students perceive their schools and classrooms.

For our **K-8/K-12 configuration** schools that have completed the study, we've found several ways that the intervention had an impact on students' perceptions of their school social environment. Middle school students' perceptions of the social context of the classroom are foundational to academic achievement and achievement motivation.

After controlling for previous year and fall scores on outcomes, we found the following results for students in Project REAL schools when compared to their matched control schools:

- Students in intervention schools felt that their peers were more accepting of making an effort and achieving success in school (referred to as *Peer Norms for Effort and Achievement*). The peers were more accepting of things like volunteering to answer questions in class and having a reputation as being smart and less accepting of things like fooling around in class and hating school.
- Students in intervention schools felt that other kids in their school were more likely to come to their defense or try to make them feel better if they were being bullied (referred to as *Peer Protection from Bullying*). Students in intervention schools had a greater sense of *School Belonging*, meaning that they felt more personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others (including teachers and peers) in the school social environment.
- Students in intervention schools also felt that school was more important to their lives and their future success (referred to as *School Valuing*).



Additionally, we found that effects of the intervention were even stronger for students of ethnic minority groups in our K-8/K-12 schools:

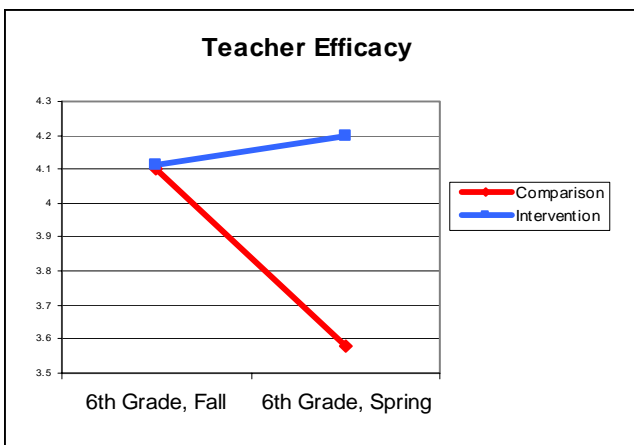
- Minority students in intervention schools felt that their peers were more accepting of making an effort and achieving success in school (referred to as *Peer Norms for Effort and Achievement*).
- Minority students in intervention schools were less likely to fear embarrassment or ridicule for giving a wrong answer in class (referred to as *Emotional Risk of Participation*).

For our **middle school transition** schools that have completed the study, we found ways that the intervention had an impact on students’ perceptions of their school social environment. After controlling for demographic characteristics and baseline (5th grade) scores, students in intervention classrooms showed the following results when compared to students in control classrooms:

- Like K-8/K-12 configuration schools, students in middle school transition intervention schools felt that their peers were more accepting of making an effort and achieving success in school (referred to as *Peer Norms for Effort and Achievement*).
- Students in intervention schools were less likely to fear embarrassment or ridicule for giving a wrong answer in class (referred to as *Emotional Risk of Participation*).
- In intervention schools, teachers reported fewer aggressive behaviors of students.

Moreover, In addition, previous research demonstrates that perceptions of the social context of the classroom tend to decline across the middle school transition year (from fall to spring of 6<sup>th</sup> grade). Our findings indicate that students in intervention classrooms don’t experience this decline in perceptions across the 6th grade year. Students in control classrooms, however, did experience a significant decline in perceptions of the social context of the classroom.

### 3. Project REAL impacts teachers.



In addition to our findings on Project REAL’s impact on students, we also looked at outcomes for teachers participating in our professional development. Teacher efficacy refers to teachers’ beliefs that they are contributing significantly to the academic progress of their students and can effectively teach all students. Teacher efficacy has been shown to relate to student outcomes such as achievement and motivation; teachers with higher levels of efficacy tend to have students with greater achievement and motivation.

When we looked at a group of teachers in our middle school transition sample, we saw that teachers who participated in Project REAL’s professional development (shown below as the “intervention” group in blue) tended to increase slightly in efficacy over the sixth grade year. In comparison, teachers in our control group (the red “comparison” group), who did not receive our intervention, showed a significant decline in teacher efficacy from the fall to the spring of the sixth grade year.

## Future Directions

In summary, these findings indicate that when teachers use strategies to enhance social, behavioral, and academic adjustment during the transition to early adolescence, they can enhance students' academic performance and increase students' positive views of the classroom. In addition, teachers using these strategies have demonstrated an increase in teacher efficacy, which research has linked to greater achievement and motivation in students.

The above findings are some preliminary results from our earliest sites; many more sites are currently participating in the study. Our final data will be collected in the spring of 2009. We will continue to send out newsletters as we gather and analyze more data.

We would like to thank everyone who has been involved in Project REAL. It is the participation of schools, principals, teachers and students that makes this research possible.

For more information about Project REAL or other activities conducted by NRCRES, please visit our website: <http://www.nrcres.org>



THE UNIVERSITY  
of NORTH CAROLINA  
at CHAPEL HILL

NATIONAL RESEARCH CENTER ON  
RURAL EDUCATION SUPPORT

Contact Information:

**Dr. Jill Hamm**

Associate Professor of Educational Psychology  
School of Education  
University of North Carolina  
at Chapel Hill  
CB# 3500, Peabody Hall  
Chapel Hill, NC 27599  
Tel. 919.843.7877  
Fax 919.962.1533  
Email: [jhamm@email.unc.edu](mailto:jhamm@email.unc.edu)

Visit NRCRES online:  
[www.nrcres.org](http://www.nrcres.org)

**The National Research Center on Rural Education Support (NRCRES) was established in 2004 with funding from the Institute for Educational Sciences of the U.S. Department of Education. This center is based at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.**

**NRCRES will conduct a focused program of research that addresses significant problems in rural education. More than 40% of all American schools are in rural areas and 30% of all students attend rural schools. The research and development work of NRCRES will seek solutions that will improve the quality of rural education.**