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# Program Evaluation of Bridges to Success Program

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Program Evaluation of Bridges to Success Program

By  
Michael Cory

A Dissertation Submitted to the  
Gardner-Webb University School of Education  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Doctor of Education

Gardner-Webb University  
2015

## Approval Page

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## **Abstract**

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The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the alternative education model, the Bridges to Success Program, and the program's impact on teachers teaching within the program in a middle school in the Upstate of South Carolina. The Bridges to Success Program was initiated in September 2009 for at-risk students in eighth grade with a history of poor attendance, behavior issues, and low math and reading academic performance.

The evaluation model used was the Logic Model. The research questions set the framework for this study. Research questions focused on short-term outcomes that evaluated how teacher knowledge of at-risk students changed as well as how their knowledge of their own teaching skills and instructional strategies changed from teaching within the Bridges to Success Program. Another research question focused on intermediate outcomes that would demonstrate if teacher behavior and attitudes had changed as a result of the implementation of the Bridges to Success Program. The final research question focused on the long-term outcomes that revealed the impact of the Bridges to Success Program on the culture of the eighth grade. The researcher used surveys and focus group interviews with the staff to answer the research questions. Participants for this study included Bridges to Success Program teachers and eighth-grade teachers within the school of the study. The data methods were studied individually for trends as well as combined for themes across all data methods. The data were shared in frequency distribution tables. Each of the outcomes was addressed, and evidence from the study was provided as to the impact to the teachers in this study.

The study revealed the impact of the Bridges to Success Program on the teachers within the Bridges to Success Program. An analysis of the data showed that the Bridges to Success Program had a positive impact on teacher knowledge, behaviors, attitude, and overall culture in the eighth grade of the school in the study. Themes that contributed to the positive impact were caring teachers who set high expectations, engaging parents, developing self-efficacy in students, incorporating professional development, and single-gender education.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Middle school education systems receive students from elementary schools and within a few years must prepare them for high school environments and beyond.

Young adolescents face significant turning points. For many youth 10 to 15 years old, early adolescence offers opportunities to choose a path toward a productive and fulfilling life. For many others, it represents their last best chance to avoid a diminished future. (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development [CCAD], 1989, p. 8).

Middle school educational reform initiatives of today realize the magnitude of these turning points, and an impetus for this reform movement is *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (CCAD, 1989).

*Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (CCAD, 1989) was a foundational study of the middle school movement. This report produced the framework of what high-quality education for young adolescents should include. It placed the compelling challenges of the middle school years in the national spotlight. This publication launched the decade-long follow-up report *Turning Points 2000* (Jackson & Davis, 2000) which also included the latest middle school research and practical examples of how to implement this new model.

According to Jackson and Davis (2000), “The *Turning Points 2000* recommendations for improving middle schools were:

1. Teach a curriculum grounded in rigorous, public academic standards for what students should know and be able to do, relevant to the concerns of adolescents and based on how students learn best.
2. Use instructional methods designed to prepare all students to achieve higher

standards and become lifelong learners.

3. Staff middle grades schools with teachers who are experts at teaching young adolescents, and engage teachers in ongoing, targeted professional development opportunities.
4. Organize relationships for learning to create a climate of intellectual development and a caring community of shared educational purpose.
5. Govern democratically, through direct or representative participation by all school staff members, the adults who know the students best.
6. Provide a safe and healthy school environment as part of improving academic performance and developing caring and ethical citizens.
7. Involve parents and communities in supporting student learning and healthy development. (Jackson & Davis, 2000, pp. 23-24)

As a result of this report, the learning of middle school students was now at the heart of school reform efforts, and this began the national dialogue that was needed to develop and improve middle schools as well as the entire educational system through college and beyond.

Educational systems that do not recognize and value the early adolescent learner in our middle schools may face the dilemma described in *Turning Points*:

Under current conditions, . . . far too many young people will not make the passage through early adolescence successfully. Their basic human needs--caring relationships with adults, guidance in facing sometimes overwhelming biological and physiological changes, the security of belonging to constructive peer groups, and the perception of future opportunity--go unmet at this critical stage of life.

Millions of these young adolescents will never reach their full potential. . . . Early



adolescence for these youth is a turning point towards a diminished future (CCAD, 1989, p. 20).

Students who are unsuccessful during the middle school years often transition to a high school environment for which they are unprepared and eventually contribute to the problematic high school dropout rate that creates a diminished future. Comparisons of American middle school students' academic performances across the nation revealed a disturbing trend in 1995, just a few years following this warning from *Turning Points*. In 2011, the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement carried out the fifth administration of the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). This study compared eighth-grade students in 56 countries. In mathematics, the United States scored below the average scores of 11 other countries' educational systems including Korea, Singapore, Chinese Taipei, Hong Kong, Japan, the Russian Federation, Israel, and Finland. In eighth-grade science, the United States average score was below the average scores of 12 international educational systems (Provasnik et al., 2012).

The most recent data from middle school students shows the potential still exists to ensure success for all early adolescents in our middle schools. According to research done by the American College Testing Program (ACT, 2008),

Among the students in the research study discussed in this report, fewer than two in ten eighth graders were on target to be ready for college-level work by the time they graduate from high school. This means that more than eight of ten eighth-grade students do not have the knowledge and skills they need to enter high school and succeed there. And not surprisingly, our research shows that students who are not prepared for high school are less likely than other students to be

prepared for college and career by the time they graduate from high school. So although the gates of high school are technically open to all students, for more than 80 percent of them the door to their futures may already be closed (p. 11).

The ACT EXPLORE Test, written and produced by ACT, Inc., is a test that measures academic achievement in English, math, reading, and science. It was developed for eighth-grade students to measure their academic achievement through middle school grades. As shown in Table 1, eighth-grade achievement as measured by the four ACT EXPLORE scores in English, mathematics, reading, and science displays a stronger relationship with eleventh- or twelfth-grade ACT scores and therefore with college and career readiness than does any other factor. Eighth-grade student achievement has a stronger relationship with college readiness than student family background, high school coursework, or high school grade point average. The predictive power of eighth-grade academic achievement ranged from more than two-and-a-half times as strong as the next strongest factor in English to three-and-a-half times the strength of the next strongest factor in science (ACT, 2008, p. 9).

Table 1

*Relative Magnitude of Effect in Predicting Eleventh-/Twelfth-Grade College and Career Readiness*

Factors	English: Predictive Relationship (%)	Reading: Predictive Relationship (%)	Mathematics: Predictive Relationship (%)	Science: Predictive Relationship (%)
Eighth-Grade Achievement	54%	60%	42%	49%
Student Testing Behaviors	21%	18%	10%	14%
High School Grade Point Average	9%	9%	12%	9%
Advanced/Honors Coursework	8%	8%	9%	6%
Background Characteristics	7%	5%	15%	14%
Standard Coursework	1%	0%	12%	8%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

In all four subject areas, eighth-grade academic achievement as measured by ACT EXPLORE and meeting all four ACT EXPLORE College Readiness Benchmarks have a stronger relationship with college and career readiness as measured by performance on the ACT in Grades 11 or 12 than factors such as student background characteristics, the courses they take in high school, or the grades they earn in those courses (ACT, 2008, p. 30).

The population that will determine an educational system's ultimate success is the

positive results of at-risk middle school students. At-risk middle school students may be the most important component of school improvement initiatives; however, this subgroup in our middle schools continues to be a problem facing our schools.

### **Background of the Study**

The subject of this study was a middle school with students in Grades 6-8 in the Upstate of South Carolina. The demographics of the school that is the subject of this study are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

#### *School Demographics*

Demographic	Number	Percentage
Total Number of Students	1,318	100%
White Students	1,054	79.97%
African-American Students	172	13.05%
Hispanic Students	66	5.01%
Other	26	1.97%
Subsidized Meals-qualify for free or reduced meals	608	46.13%
Disabled Students	155	11.76%
Limited English Proficient Students	42	3.19%
Attendance Rate		95.7%
Gifted and Talented Students		27.1%

*Note.* Information obtained from the State of South Carolina 2011 Annual School Report Card.

During the study period, the federal and state educational systems associated with the middle school in this study were setting a number of reform targets. First, at the federal level, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 set a goal of 100% proficiency by 2014. At the state level, the Education Oversight Committee (EOC) established that by the year 2010, South Carolina's student achievement would be ranked in the top half of states nationally. Also, the EOC's updated state goal was included in the 2020 vision: By

2020, all students will graduate with the knowledge and skills necessary to compete successfully in the global economy, participate in a democratic society, and contribute positively as members of families and communities.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Locally, the middle school studied had 28.1% of students not meeting state English standards in 2011 and 34.3% of students not meeting math standards. Also, the middle school in the study fed into a large high school whose graduation rate in the 4-year cohort method was calculated at 71.8% with nearly one of every four students becoming a high school dropout. This on-time graduation rate was lower than the South Carolina state average of 73.7% in 2011. The subject school decided to meet these high expectations by improving student learning and results immediately instead of waiting for students to fail or dropout. The teachers realized the importance of middle-level education and its impact on the education system. The administrative team of the school used data-based decision making in assessing the educational performance of the most at-risk eighth-grade students and developed an alternative educational model within their school. These at-risk middle school students had high absenteeism, high student discipline referral rates, and poor academic achievement in math and English. The administrative team and two eighth-grade teachers decided to design and implement a pilot program called Bridges to Success beginning September 1, 2009.

### **Program Description**

Bridges to Success is a single-gender program of school choice available to approximately 20 at-risk males and 20 at-risk females. The original goals of the Bridges to Success Program were to increase student engagement, increase individual support, and achieve academic success. The goals would be reached through lower class size

ratios, employing high-quality teachers, emphasizing parent communication, utilizing behavior interventions, encouraging community involvement, offering student performance incentives, and increasing parent and student engagement. There are three main components of the Bridges to Success Program.

1. **Single-Gender Academic Classes:** Allowing choice within the educational system is a growing trend in South Carolina, and offering some single-gender classes is one of the growing school choices. Parents can choose the educational structure that best serves their child's educational needs. Federal regulations issued in October 2006 authorized the use of single-gender classrooms. Currently, there are over 200 schools in South Carolina that offer some form of single-gender program. "Students also perceive single-sex environments as providing higher levels of organization, order, and control" (Jenkins, 2006, para. 25). This emphasis on organization provides needed structure for at-risk youth. Females have traditionally benefited from single-gender math and science classes. "Other research suggests that some boys, particularly disadvantaged boys, benefit from single-sex education" (Jenkins, 2006, para. 27).
2. **Individualized Support:** Smaller class size is offered in the Bridges to Success academic classrooms. The average class size of traditional coed classes is approximately 30 students; however, the single-gender classes for at-risk youth are maintained with a class size of 20 or less students. According to research reported by Halbach, Ehrle, Zahorik, and Molnar (2001) from the Wisconsin SAGE Program that initiated and studied class size reduction efforts, teachers knew their students better and faster; increased instructional

time; had more time to work with individual students; experienced an overall reduction in discipline problems; and generally reported more opportunities for practice, questions, and feedback (pp. 32-33). Individualized support is also enhanced by caring teachers with high expectations. Smith-McIlwain concluded that caring relationships were the key to reengaging disengaged learners (Strahan, 2008). Demonstrating care for the students is an important factor in creating the resiliency that will be needed for at-risk students to be successful (National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP], 2006). Setting high expectations is particularly important during the middle school years when many students disengage in school and motivation becomes increasingly important to at-risk students. The U.S. Department of Education (1995) conducted a study of effective school programs and identified several essential characteristics of successful programs, among them setting high expectations for all students. Individual support can also impact student self-efficacy. Students who do well in school have developed self-efficacy; they believe they can perform the academic task. The development of self-efficacy is needed to build academic momentum for at-risk students, and a smaller class size ratio may support this development. Velez, Sorenson, McKim, and Cano (2013), in a research study of 208 students, found that self-efficacy scores were higher for students in classes with smaller class sizes and decreased as class sizes increased.

3. Parent and Student Engagement: The parent is required to engage in their child's education when enrolled in the Bridges to Success Program. Parent involvement in education has been associated with a variety of academic

outcomes including higher grade point averages and increased achievement in reading, writing, and mathematics (Anderson & Minke, 2007). The lead teacher of the Bridges to Success Program required parent conferences during various times to accommodate families, scheduled parenting “pizza nights,” and administered behavior interventions with the student and his/her family in lieu of the traditional out-of-school suspensions and other discipline actions that negatively impacted student attendance and engagement with school. The school and the PTO supported the Bridges to Success Program financially with funds for field trips, meals, and incentive-based gift cards. Community partnerships supported weekly career guest speakers and quarterly field trips to technical schools and colleges. The Bridges to Success Program strived to increase the parent and student engagement through these community partnerships. The Bridges to Success faculty also incorporated high expectations for their students by establishing a motto that “Failure Is Not an Option” and demanded that all work be completed. This may have required students to report back to Bridges to Success staff for boxed lunches so they could complete academic work while having their lunch. The program utilized this strategy to improve the student’s self-efficacy and educational outcomes.

### **Program Implementation**

The Bridges to Success Program began in September 2009. Parents were invited to an informational meeting for this program of choice and enrolled their child in the at-risk intervention program. The program started with approximately 40 students in the eighth-grade program and 40 students in the seventh-grade program. The eighth-grade



program consisted of 20 males and 20 females in single-gender classrooms. The seventh-grade program consisted of 20 males and 20 females in heterogeneously mixed classes. The seventh-grade program was discontinued for 2010-2011 as it was noted that negative behaviors did not decrease in the heterogeneously mixed classes compared to the single-gender environment in eighth grade. The program was expanded in the 2011-2012 school year to also serve an additional group of seventh-grade students in a single-gender environment. Two additional staff members were hired to lead Bridges to Success in seventh grade, but this component of the program was discontinued due to budget cuts in the district. Bridges to Success continued in the 2012-2013 school year as an eighth-grade single-gender program for at-risk students serving approximately 20 males and 20 females. High school credit classes of Math Technology I, Keyboarding, and Keyboarding Applications that the students could be successful with were offered within the Bridges to Success Program to earn credits towards a high school diploma. The program continued in 2013-2014 as well as 2014-2015 and served 20 eighth-grade males and 20 eighth-grade females in single-gender academic classes. High school credit classes of Freshman Success and Skills-Algebra I were added as elective courses for Bridges to Success students in 2014-2015 to accompany the traditional Keyboarding and Keyboarding Applications courses offered.

### **Participants**

The focus group for the Bridges to Success Program was made up of the identified at-risk students at the selected school in the Upstate of South Carolina. In the previous school year, the administrators and Bridges to Success teachers reviewed several reports on the rising eighth-grade students. The summary reports included seventh-grade attendance data, report card data, Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) score data in

math and reading, discipline records, and South Carolina Palmetto Assessment of State Standards (PASS) scores. Teacher recommendations were also provided from the seventh-grade faculty. The Bridges to Success teachers then reviewed this data on 60-70 students and selected students for personal interviews for admittance to this program. The Bridges to Success faculty utilized research from John Hopkins University which reported that attendance, behavior, and coursework were key indicators for identification of at-risk students. This major study on preventing student disengagement from used longitudinal analyses by following 13,000 students from 1996 to 2004 in the Philadelphia area. This study provided the foundation of an early identification and intervention system for middle grade schools and demonstrated how four predictive factors (poor attendance, misbehavior, and course failures in math and English) can be used to identify 60% of the students who will not graduate from high school (Belfanz, Herzog, & MacIver, 2007, p. 223). Students were then notified of their acceptance into the Bridges to Success Program and were invited to a parent orientation. A parent orientation was held to provide the families with an overview of this program of choice. During the 2014-2015 school year, approximately 40 participants were studied in the four single-gender classrooms where the Bridges to Success Program was implemented. Written permission to conduct the study was obtained from the superintendent of the school district as well as the school board and the Gardner-Webb University Institutional Review Board.

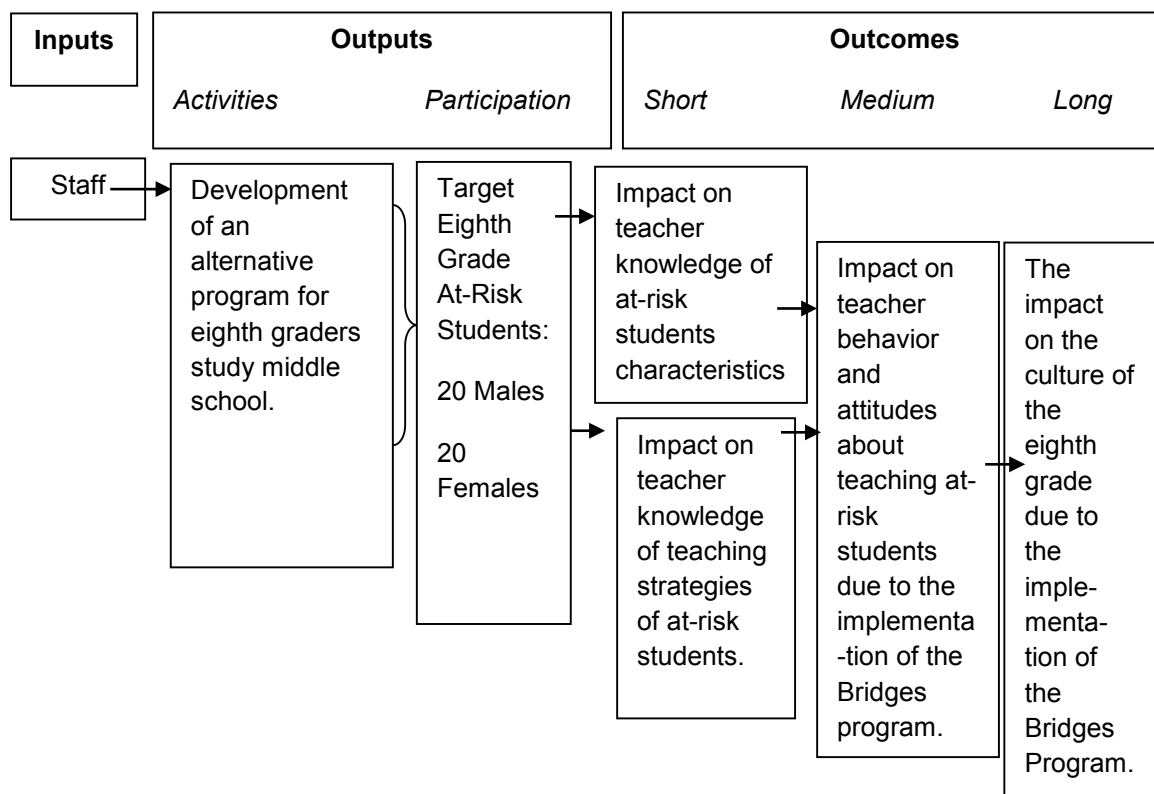
### **Procedures and Timeline**

The study period of the Bridges to Success Program was from August 2014 to June 2015. The Bridges to Success teachers and traditional eighth-grade teachers were surveyed in April 2015 (see Appendix A for the Survey Protocol). Survey data from staff

were analyzed and included in the program evaluation of the Bridges to Success Program. Focus groups were convened in May 2015 with Bridges to Success teachers as well as traditional eighth-grade teachers. The Focus Group Protocol for Bridges to Success Teachers was shown in Appendix B and the Focus Group Protocol for Regular Education Eighth Grade Teachers was shown in Appendix C. The focus group interview questions were based on the initial survey data collection.

### **Program Evaluation Model**

A logic model was used to evaluate the effectiveness of the alternative education model, Bridges to Success. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation (2004) detailed three types of logic models: theory, activity, and outcome. The outcomes-approach logic model emphasizes the relationships of resources (or activities/program) to outcomes. Logic models link program outcomes with program activities, inputs, and outputs. The outcomes-approach logic model was used to assess the outcomes or impact of the Bridges to Success Program on at-risk eighth-grade students and their teachers. The outcomes were categorized into short-term outcomes, intermediate-term outcomes, and long-term outcomes. In this case study, the problem was low math and English skills of eighth-grade students in a school in the Upstate of South Carolina. For the purpose of this study, the short-term outcomes focused on teacher knowledge of at-risk student characteristics and their knowledge of teaching strategies with at-risk students. Intermediate outcomes evaluated how teacher behaviors and attitudes of teaching at-risk students had changed as a result of the program's implementation. Long-term outcomes examined the impact of the program on the school culture within the eighth grade. The Figure illustrates the framework for the study.



*Figure.* Logic Model – Program Action.

## Research Questions

Utilizing the logic model, this case study focused on four research questions that included short-term, intermediate-term, and long-term outcomes.

### Short-term outcomes.

1. How has teacher knowledge of at-risk students changed from the Bridges to Success Program?
2. How has teacher knowledge of his/her own teaching skills and instructional strategies changed from the Bridges to Success Program?

### Intermediate-term outcomes.

3. How have teacher behavior and attitudes changed towards the Bridges to Success Program?

**Long-term outcomes.**

4. What is the impact of the Bridges to Success Program on the culture within the eighth grade?

**Definition of Terms**

For the purposes of this evaluation, the following terms and definitions are defined to clarify their use in this study.

**ACT, Inc.** The ACT Program that was established in 1959 is known for its college and admissions placement test, the ACT college readiness assessment, and is a nonprofit organization that offers assessment, research, information, and program management to support education and workforce development.

**At-risk students.** The phrase refers to students who are negatively affected in their educational performance by environmental, societal, economic, political, and educational factors (Tidwell & Corona, 1994).

**EXPLORE test.** The EXPLORE test is an above-level, multiple choice test that measures academic achievement in English, math, reading, and science. The EXPLORE test is written and produced by ACT, Inc. It is a test that was developed for eighth-grade students to measure their academic achievement through middle school grades.

**MAP test.** An NWEA assessment and computerized adaptive test which helps teachers, parents, and administrators improve learning for all students and make informed decisions to promote a child's academic growth. The final score is an estimate of the student's achievement level.

**Single-gender education.** Refers to educating males and females in separate academic classrooms. The single-gender classes are in the same gender academic classes and travel to all four academic classes in their single-gender cohort. The only time

students are in coeducational classes is during their exploratory elective classes. The students are in a coeducational setting before school, during lunch, and after school.

### **Summary**

The school in this study recognized the critical need of adequately preparing all eighth-grade students for high school and their future. The gaps in student achievement established the need to develop an alternative program of education to support at-risk students. The school administrators, along with the lead science and English teachers, developed the Bridges to Success Program for their eighth-grade classrooms. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the Bridges to Success Program as it was implemented in one middle school.

A qualitative study was used to evaluate the Bridges to Success Program and the impact of the program on the culture within the eighth grade. Teacher knowledge, attitudes, and skills were analyzed. A logic model was used to evaluate the Bridges to Success program with a focus on short-term, intermediate-term, and long-term outcomes. The researcher analyzed these outcomes by examining how well the teachers understood their knowledge and teaching skills of at-risk students, their changes in behavior and attitudes as a result from implementing the program, and the change in the culture within the eighth grade as a result of implementing this program.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Based on the research, some argue that a high school dropout is really the culmination of a long process of disengagement from school that starts early and builds over time (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001). Two keys to this disengagement process are the timing of events or experiences and “turning points” such as the transition from middle to high school (Alexander et al., 2001). Neild, Balfanz, and Herzog (2007) found, “Many students who drop out of high school send strong distress signals for years” (p. 28). “For many youth 10 to 15 years old, early adolescence offers opportunities to choose a path toward a productive and fulfilling life. For many others, it represents their last best chance to avoid a diminished future” (CCAD, 1989, p. 8). Data summarized by ACT (2008) concluded that more than eight of 10 eighth-grade students do not have the knowledge and skills they need to enter high school and succeed there. This research revealed that effective interventions are needed at the middle school level to reduce high school dropouts. As of the 2003-2004 school year, the national average for cohort graduation rate or those graduating within 4 years was 75%, leaving 25% of students facing a crisis (Seastrom, Hoffman, Chapman, & Stillwell, 2007). The larger crisis is that it is practically impossible for individuals lacking a high school diploma to earn a living or participate meaningfully in civic life (Neild et al., 2007).

This program evaluation analyzed the Bridges to Success Program as a middle school intervention model for at-risk students in a large middle school in the Upstate of South Carolina. Finn (1989) outlined components of successful alternative programs for at-risk students that included organizational and interpersonal components. A review of literature focused on the organizational and interpersonal components that are effective for teaching at-risk students and incorporated into the Bridges to Success Program.

### **Organizational Component: Single-Gender Classes**

An organizational component often used to support at-risk students is a placement in environments dissimilar to traditional schools, often in separate schools or in a school-within-a-school (Weir, 1996). Single-gender classes or single-gender schools have been an increasing alternative to improve educational outcomes for at-risk students. In the 2000-2001 school year, fewer than a dozen public schools in the country offered any kind of single-gender educational options; by the 2011-2012 school year over 506 public schools offered single-gender options (National Association for Single Sex Public Education, 2011). In the 19th century, single-sex schools were common especially in Grades 7-12, but classes for girls often did not include academic subjects. Many secondary schools maintained single-sex physical education classes until 1975 when Title IX provisions specifically forbade such physical education classes (Spielhagen, 2006). The previous practices of single-sex education have led some to debate its appropriateness today, but interest has grown in this organizational component as policymakers demand a reversal in the declines in student achievement among both boys and girls (Spielhagen, 2006).

Educational systems continue to experiment with single-gender classes based on several theories. Girls perform better, particularly in math and science, says one of these theories, if they are separated from their male counterparts. Another says boys, especially those in the inner city at risk for dropping out, have their own set of learning needs that can best be addressed in an all-male environment (Schachter, 2003). On October 24, 2006, United States Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings in a press release related to the decreased regulations of Title IX commented that research shows that some students may learn better in single-sex education environments (Weiss, 2007).



Large-scale academic research needs to be collected, but some dissertation and case studies of this recent initiative show the impact of single-gender classes in coeducational schools.

One case study by Roth (2009) compared the effectiveness of single-gender eighth-grade English, history, mathematics, and science with coed classes across subject area, gender, at-risk status, and socioeconomic status at DeSoto West Junior High School. This study is of particular relevance to the program evaluation of the Bridges to Success Program as both of them include single-gender classes in all eighth-grade academic subjects. Sample sizes in the study were approximately 900 students in each subject area. The study employed a quantitative casual-comparative design that utilized final grade percentages and the analyses included an independent samples *t* test to compare single-gender classes to coed classes. The reported findings concluded that the mean scores of single-gender classes were significantly greater than those of the coed classes in all subject areas (Roth, 2009). Further analysis revealed that the boys in the single-gender English, math, and science classes scored significantly higher than the coed boys (Roth, 2009).

Another recent study by Spielhagen (2011) at a small public middle school that offered single-gender classes for choice in sixth-, seventh- and eighth-grade levels suggested that single-gender classes worked for some students across all grade levels. This study found that the younger the student, the more they favored the single-sex arrangement. The quantitative portion of this same study examined the effects of single-gender classes on standardized test scores and yielded specific gains in test scores among both boys' and girls' classes (Spielhagen, 2011).

Piechura-Couture, Tichenor, and Heins (2007) reported on 3 years of data

analysis, and their research analyzed the effect of single-gender classroom placement compared to mixed-classroom placements at various elementary grade levels. Their study examined the reading, mathematics, and writing achievement of students based on their standardized test scores on the norm-referenced test section of the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (Stanford 9), standardized test scores from the criterion reference test of the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test, and overall reading levels from the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS). A Fisher's Probability Test was used to determine probability scores. The researchers' 3-year data analysis from 2004 to 2007 revealed two patterns that emerged: only the single-gender classrooms were found to have statistical significance and the effects of placing students in a single-gender classroom were more beneficial for boys than girls. Piechura-Couture et al. (2007) distinguished 20 separate measures to be significant at the  $p < .05$  or  $p < .01$  level. These measures were found equally between the boys' and girls' classes; however, the all-boys' classes had more incidences of highly ( $p < .05$ ) or extremely significant ( $p < .01$ ) differences: seven of 10 tests for the boys as compared to three of 10 for the girls.

Piechura-Couture et al.'s (2007) data from the first year revealed positive results. Of the seven original tests reviewed, four yielded significant results in the first year of their study. Three of the tests that were significant at the  $p = .01$  level were fourth-grade boys' math, fourth-grade boys' writing, and fourth-grade girls' mathematics scores. The fourth-grade boys' writing scores were highly significant with  $p = .001$ . In the second year of their study, no significant differences were found. However, all single-gender classes performed better than the mixed-gender classes except for second-grade girls' mathematics. In year 3 of their research, they found that 11 of the 23 tests conducted

yielded statistically significant results. Piechura-Couture et al. noted that 100% of the boys in the all-boys' class were at or above grade level at the end of the kindergarten year, while fourth-grade data revealed significant levels in reading ( $p=.01$ ) and in mathematics ( $p=.02$ ) for the boys' classroom, and reading ( $p=.04$ ) and mathematics ( $p=.009$ ) for the girls' classroom. The fifth-grade data reported similar results to fourth grade. This research suggests that placing students in single-gender classes can increase their academic performance. One noted limitation to the work of Piechura-Couture et al. was the researchers determined problems in the equality of the sample because of the inability to assign children randomly to single-gender and coeducational classes. Because children were placed in single-gender classes by parent choice, the sample could be skewed.

It is rare to have data that includes random assignment of students to single-gender or mixed-gender classes due to the nature of education and school choice in American schools. However, one study by Park, Behrman, and Choi (2013) did include random assignment of students to single-gender high schools or coeducational schools in Seoul, South Korea. This unique random assignment international study could address any inequality in samples that usually occurs when parents have choice in single-gender educational choices. The numbers of male students for the analysis of Korean and English scores included 46,191 and 45,879, respectively who are enrolled within 68 all-boys schools and 68 coeducational schools within the 11 school districts in Seoul. The numbers of female students for the analysis of Korean and English scores were 42,162 and 42,042, respectively, within 60 all-girls schools and 68 coeducational schools. The research of Park et al. concluded that attending all-boys schools or all-girls schools, rather than coeducational schools, is significantly associated with higher average scores

on Korean and English test scores and produce a higher percentage of graduates who attended 4-year colleges than coeducational schools.

Some research also suggests that educational outcomes may not be significantly improved by changing the student's environment to single-gender classrooms. The United States Department of Education commissioned a quantitative analysis of single-gender schooling research. The quantitative review by Mael, Alonso, Gibson, Rogers, and Smith (2005) retained 40 studies that satisfied all requirements of the systematic review process. Mael et al. found that in general, most studies reported positive effects for single-education schools on all-subject achievement tests. Studies examining performance on mathematics, science, English, and social studies achievement tests found similar findings. Within each of these subject-specific content areas, roughly a third of all studies reported findings favoring single-gender schools, no studies favoring coeducational schools, and the remainder of studies split between null and mixed results (Mael et al., 2005).

Pahlke, Hyde, and Allison (2014) meta-analyzed data from 184 studies representing the testing of 1.6 million students in Grades K-12 from 21 nations for multiple outcomes to determine the effect of single-gender education compared with coeducational schooling. Each study was coded as higher quality controlled or lower quality uncontrolled. Several methods were used to obtain relevant research for inclusion in Pahlke et al.'s study. Computerized database searches of ERIC, PsycINFO, and Sociological Abstracts were used to generate potential articles. Prominent single-gender researchers were also contacted and research studies were included that dated up until 2013. This process included 2,382 usable studies for consideration and 454 studies met the selection criteria. The final search and review procedures led to a final sample of 184

articles that were comprised of 1,663,662 participants. Overall statistical analysis was conducted using a mixed-effects model.

Pahlke et al. (2014) mixed-effects analyses of controlled, high-quality studies showed only trivial differences between students in single-gender education compared with coeducational schooling. Single-gender education had a positive effect size on student mathematical performance among boys and girls; however, given that the effect sizes are small, these effects can be interpreted as being close to zero (Pahlke et al., 2014). Effect sizes for controlled studies were also positive on student's verbal performance among boys and girls at 0.11 and 0.07, respectively, but like math performance suggest a close to zero difference between single-gender education and coeducational schooling.

The mixed-effects analyses of uncontrolled, lower quality studies showed benefits of students in single-gender schooling compared to a coeducational setting. Single-gender education had a medium positive effect size on student mathematical performance among boys and girls with average weighted effect sizes among girls of 0.57 and among boys of 0.54 (Pahlke et al., 2014). The weighted effect sizes for uncontrolled studies suggest a small to medium advantage for single-gender education on verbal performance among boys of 0.68 and among girls of 0.28 (Pahlke et al., 2014). Among uncontrolled studies, the mixed-effects analyses of the impact on single-gender education on the general school achievement showed a minimal positive effect size among girls of 0.34 and among boys of 0.18 (Pahlke et al., 2014).

Pahlke et al.'s (2014) meta-analyzed data from 184 studies, representing the testing of 1.6 million students in Grades K-12 from 21 nations, concluded that single-gender education produced only trivial advantages over coeducational settings with most

weighted effect sizes smaller than 0.10 in controlled studies. The researchers summarized that there was little evidence in studies that used the best research methods of an advantage of single-gender education for girls or boys for any of the outcomes studied (Pahlke et al., 2014).

Research has also studied the impact of single-gender education on at-risk students as educational systems try alternative approaches to improve student outcomes. Benefits for underserved student groups such as African-American and Hispanic students have yielded mixed results. Cornelius Riordan's studies found positive effects on achievement for disadvantaged students, including nonaffluent girls (American Association of University Women Educational Foundation [AAUW], 1998). Riordan also found that the performance of African-American and Hispanic students in single-sex schools is stronger on all tests, scoring on average almost a year higher than similar students in coeducational settings (AAUW, 1998). However, in the meta-analysis of 184 studies performed by Pahlke et al. (2014), the researchers found there were insufficient numbers of controlled, high-quality studies that were conducted with ethnic minority youth to draw any conclusions. Pahlke et al. also found that lower quality uncontrolled studies failed to find substantial advantages of single-gender education for African Americans and Latinos.

### **Organizational Component: Individualized Support—Reduced Class Size**

One of the organizational components often used to support at-risk students is a low student-teacher ratio (Weir, 1996). There have been several research studies on the impact of class size on student achievement. Early small field experiments on the effects of class size began to appear in the 1920s. A large body of nearly 80 identified studies was included in a systematic review of literature on the relationship between class size

and student learning by Glass and Smith (1979). In the 1980s, state legislatures debated the effects of small class size; and they began trial programs or large-scale field experiments such as Tennessee's Project STAR, one of the largest and best-designed field experiments in education (Finn & Achilles, 1990).

Tennessee's Student Teacher Achievement Ratio (STAR) study was a statewide longitudinal education experiment to analyze the effects of class size reduction on 11,601 K-3 students from 1985 to 1989. Early grade students were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: standard classes with class size of 20 or more students, supplemented classes with one teacher and one instructional aide, and small classes with one teacher and approximately 15 students. The only manipulated variable was class size.

Researchers determined that students who had been in small classes had higher levels of achievement than their peers in regular classes or in classes with aides (Achilles, Finn, & Pate-Bain, 2002). Small class advantages appeared for all types of students across the study. The gains were similar for boys and girls but they were greater for impoverished students, African-American students, and students from inner-city schools—groups that are traditionally disadvantaged in education (Biddle & Berliner, 2002b).

Another large research project focused on the needs of disadvantaged students is the Wisconsin Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE) Program that paralleled the previous Tennessee STAR study. Led by Alex Molnar in 1996, this program began as a 5-year pilot project for K-3 classes in school districts that had at least 50% of students living below the poverty level. The SAGE program's major intervention was to reduce the average K-3 class size to 15 students for each teacher. Findings of this research project have shown larger gains for students from small classes in achievement scores for language arts, reading, and mathematics that are roughly comparable to those

from Project STAR. In addition, as with Project STAR, African-American students have made relatively larger gains (Biddle & Berliner, 2002a). Also, the SAGE program involved more Hispanic, Asian, and Native American students than Tennessee's STAR project. "The research rather consistently finds that students who are economically disadvantaged or from some ethnic minorities perform better academically in smaller classes" (Robinson, 1990, p. 85).

Research studies have shown the positive impact of reduced class size on mostly early grades, disadvantaged students, and students exposed to smaller class sizes over consecutive years of school. Research has been inconclusive for middle school students specifically. In Grades 4-8, a group of eight of 21 studies or 38% indicated that smaller classes have a slightly positive effect on pupil achievement, but the evidence is not nearly as strong as in Grades K-3 where 50% indicate benefits to reduced class size (Robinson, 1990). Table 3 itemizes several early adolescent research studies on reduced class size's impact on student achievement.



Table 3

*Studies of Fourth- to Eighth-Grade Greater Student Achievement in Class Sizes of 22 Students or Fewer*

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<u>Greater Achievement in Smaller Classes</u>
Woodson 1968 (R, M)
Balow 1969 (R)
Moody and others 1973 (M)
Manos 1975 (G)
Doss and Holley 1982 (R, M, L)
<u>Greater Achievement in Neither Smaller or Larger Classes</u>
Marklund 1963 (R, M, L, S)
Fox 1967 (R, M)
Katzman 1971 (R, M)
Wright and others 1977 (R, M, L, O)
Mueller 1985 (R, M, L, O)

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*Note.* Letters indicate subject area of study. R: Reading; M: Math; L: Language Arts; E: English; S: Social Science; N: Natural Science; O: Other Subjects; G: General. Table adapted by (Robinson & Wittebols, 1986).

The Wisconsin SAGE evaluation project included researchers who gathered data from teacher interviews, classroom observations, and teacher questionnaires. The researchers reported that teachers of smaller classes reported an overall reduction in discipline problems (Halbach et al., 2001). Their research data noted that teachers knew their students better and faster, increased instructional time, and had more time to work with individual students and generally more opportunities for practice and questions or feedback from the teacher (Halbach et al., 2001).

Another substantial study on reduced class size was a sophisticated statistical model by Rivkin, Hanushek, and Kain (2005) who examined the effects of natural variation in class size in Texas in the 1990s. The study utilized longitudinal data from

more than 500,000 students in over 3,000 schools. The researchers found positive effects of smaller class size on reading and mathematics in fourth grade, a smaller but still statistically significant effect in fifth grade, and little or no effects in later grades (Rivkin et al., 2005).

Internationally, the variable of class size has also been considered for hundreds of years. One of the earliest references on this topic is the Babylonian Talmud, completed around the beginning of the sixth century, which discusses rules for the determination of class size and pupil-teacher ratios in Bible study. The 12th century, rabbinic scholar, Maimonides interpreted the Talmud discussion as follows:

Twenty five children may be put in charge of one teacher. If the number in the class exceeds twenty-five but is not more than forty, he should have an assistant to help with the instruction. If there are more than forty, two teachers must be appointed. (Angrist & Lavy, 1999, p. 2)

This standard is still used today in Israeli public schools, which is very different than its U.S. counterparts. The researchers found positive evidence for the effects of class-size reduction. Angrist and Lavy (1999) concluded there were positive effects on smaller fourth- and fifth-grade classes and no effects on third-grade classes.

Research on class size has also found reduced class size has mixed results on student achievement, and other research has found class size reduction has no positive effects on student achievement. A major obstacle to research on class size reduction is that educational policies often do not occur in a vacuum. Some classes or schools may have a reduction in class size but they are different in other ways that may impact the results.

Recent research by Chingos (2012) systematically examined the broad policy of

Florida class size reduction. In 2002, voters approved an amendment to the Florida state constitution that set limits on the number of students in core classes. Beginning with the 2010-2011 school year, the maximum number of students in each core class would be 18 students through Grade 3, 22 students in Grades 4-8, and 25 students in Grades 9-12. In 2003, the Florida Legislature enacted a law that amended the original law by first requiring, from 2003-2004 to 2005-2006, districts to reduce their average class sizes either to the maximum for each grade grouping or by at least two students per year until they reached the maximum. The implementation of Florida's policy lends itself to a comparative interrupted time series (CITS) research design at two levels of aggregation: district-level implementation from 2004 to 2006 and school-level implementation from 2007 to 2009. The results of both analyses suggest that mandated class size reduction (CSR) in Florida had little, if any, effect on student achievement in math and reading in fourth grade through eighth grade (Chingos, 2012).

### **Interpersonal Component: Individualized Support—Caring Teachers with High Expectations**

Alternative programs made up of caring teachers and staff who choose to work with at-risk students and have positive attitudes about these students are other interpersonal components often used to support at-risk students (Weir, 1996). Middle school teachers provide an essential role in establishing a positive environment for students that can increase trust within students and facilitate improved student learning. To explore ways teachers might rekindle trust with students who have struggled in school, Smith-McIlwain conducted a case study with seven students and their teacher (Strahan, 2008). Based on observations, interviews, and analysis of writing samples, Smith-McIlwain identified three types of care: discovery talk, help, and friendly listening

(Strahan, 2008). Discovery talk was conversation aimed at discovering the details of student's personal lives to extend understanding. Help came in two forms: help for personal problems and instructional help. Friendly listening was listening to discover personal issues that affect classroom behaviors and academic performance. Smith-McIlwain concluded that caring relationships were the key to reengaging disengaged learners, more so than any specific instructional practice or classroom procedure (Strahan, 2008).

Demonstrating care for the students is an important factor in creating the resiliency that will be needed for at-risk students to be successful (NASSP, 2006). Tosolt (2010) investigated differences in 50 fifth- through eighth-grade mathematics students' perceptions of caring teacher behaviors. Students completed a Likert-style survey. Students identified listening, encouragement to keep trying, helpful comments, protection, intervening on students' behalf, and checking for understanding as teacher behaviors most valued by students (Tosolt, 2010). Ryan and Patrick (2001) related student motivation and success to settings that are caring and supportive. Their research examined the perceptions of 233 eighth-grade mathematics students and found that students considered teacher support, interaction, and mutual respect as important to their motivation to do well in the classroom. Teachers set the tone in their classrooms; therefore, showing care with all students is an integral part of the classroom environment.

Teachers play an important role in developing resiliency among their students. In three qualitative studies, resilient at-risk students mentioned school staff who had taken a personal interest in them as being important to their success (Coburn & Nelson, 1989; Geary, 1988; McMillan & Reed, 1993). These interpersonal relations as well as professional competence are important to at-risk students. Teachers can foster resiliency

within their students by caring and setting high expectations (McMillan & Reed, 1994).

At-risk student motivation often is at a critical stage during the middle school years. It is often in the middle school years that students feel the subject-area content is hard and motivation suffers. This occurrence can be alleviated by teachers setting high expectations in a supportive classroom environment. The U.S. Department of Education (1995) conducted a study of effective school programs and identified several essential characteristics of successful programs. Among them was setting high expectations for all students. Setting high expectations may give rise to the Pygmalion Effect, which may change student behavior. The Pygmalion Effect asserts that students who are expected to perform well usually do so, and students of whom teachers have lower expectations will generally not perform as well. Setting high expectations is particularly important during the middle school years when many students disengage in school and motivation becomes increasingly important to at-risk students. Also, increasing student academic motivation is paramount to ensuring they remain on the high school graduation path (Honig, 1987).

### **Interpersonal Components: Individual Support—Developing Student Self-Efficacy**

Researchers have often used two constructs to describe how students achieve success in school: the integration of skill and will. Students need the will to want to understand the information and the skill to know how best to invest their energies in the learning process (Strahan, 2008). McCombs and Marzano (1990) found students learning to reflect on their own thinking were important to student development of self-efficacy and students who succeeded academically understood that they made choices about how to approach tasks and how to engage. Students who do well in school have developed self-efficacy; they believe they can perform the academic task. Students need self-

efficacy to choose to engage with academic tasks and to persist when learning becomes more difficult (Strahan, 2008). The development of self-efficacy within students will allow academic momentum that is needed for at-risk students to be successful to build over time.

“Bandura (1977) hypothesized that self-efficacy affects an individual’s choice of activities, effort, and persistence” (Schunk, 1991, p. 208). At-risk students who may have a low sense of efficacy for accomplishing a task may avoid it. Successes raise efficacy and failures lower it; but once a strong sense of efficacy is developed, a failure may not have much impact (Bandura, 1986). Therefore, the greater a student’s self-efficacy, the greater his/her effort and persistence should be, therefore leading to improved achievement. Ames (1984) and Nichols and Miller (1994) found that student self-perceptions of ability (self-efficacy) are positively related to motivation and achievement.

Another motivational factor within effective interpersonal components of alternative programs is self-esteem, which is closely linked to self-efficacy. According to Weir (1996), many at-risk students have problems to address before academic pursuits and effective programs develop student confidence and self-esteem to foster positive attitudes about school. Where self-efficacy is an individual’s belief that he or she has the ability to perform the academic task, self-esteem is an individual’s perceived sense of worth or respect of oneself. Adolescence is a time of great introspection and multiple changes such as puberty. Self-esteem among junior high school students has been shown to decline from sixth through eighth grade; and since self-esteem is an important marker of general well-being, it should be further analyzed by educators (Adams, Kuhn, & Rhodes, 2006). Young adolescent perceptions of their self may impact their academic

achievement and motivation in powerful ways and it is critical for middle grade educators to be aware of the influences of these constructs.

### **Interpersonal Component: Parent and Student Engagement**

Many at-risk students have emotional, physical, and mental problems to address before academic pursuits can become their main focus (Weir, 1996). An effective interpersonal component to support at-risk students is parent involvement (Weir, 1996). Section 1118, Title I, of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 is devoted solely to parent involvement (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002). In federal law as well as educational systems around the country, parent involvement in school has remained a top priority. For the first time in history of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the law contains a definition of parent involvement.

The participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school related activities including ensuring-that parents play an integral role in assisting their child's learning; that parents are encouraged to be actively involved in their child's education at school; that parents are full partners in their child's education and are included, as appropriate, in decision-making and on advisory committees to assist in the education of their child; and that other activities are carried out, such as those described in section 1118 of the ESEA. (NCLB, 2002, Sec. 9101 Definitions, para. 32)

To successfully support young adolescents, middle schools should reengage families whose involvement in schools declines progressively during the elementary school years and is significantly reduced by the middle school years and in some cases is nonexistent (CCAD, 1989).

A review of the research on parent involvement reveals that parent involvement positively affects student: achievement, attendance, self-esteem, behavior, graduation, emotional well-being, and life goals (Anfara & Mertens, 2008). Anderson and Minke (2007) also noted other academic benefits that include lower dropout rates, fewer retentions, and special education placements increased ability to self-regulate behavior and higher levels of social skills. Much research has been done to show the positive correlation between parent involvement and positive student outcomes such as student achievement. However, further research has been done recently to examine what types of parental involvement are the most effective and could support at-risk students.

One particular aspect of parental involvement needed is the responsibility of parents to make sure their middle school child attends school and for educators to emphasize attendance. Weir (1996) noted one strategy that has been identified as being part of effective at-risk programs is attendance improvement projects. The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network at Clemson University conducted a comprehensive study of the dropout crisis in the United States. This study identified the risk factors that significantly increase the probability of students dropping out of school. The literature review included studies from 1980 to 2005 and 75 were judged worthy of further analysis. Four factors to significantly increase the probability of a student becoming a high school dropout at all three school levels of elementary, middle, and high school are low student achievement, retention and being over-age for grade, low socioeconomic status, and poor attendance. A major study on preventing student disengagement from John Hopkins University used longitudinal analyses by following 13,000 students from 1996 to 2004 in the Philadelphia area. This study provided the foundation of an early identification and intervention system for middle grade schools and demonstrated how



four predictive factors (poor attendance, misbehavior, course failure in sixth-grade Math, and course failure in sixth-grade English) can be used to identify 60% of the students who will not graduate from high school (Belfanz et al., 2007). Parental involvement was found to have a significant effect on student attendance in school (Belfanz et al., 2007). Another study on the perceptions of parent involvement on educational outcomes surveyed and interviewed 301 parents, 234 junior high students, and 22 teachers (DePlanty, Coulter-Kern, & Duchane, 2007). “All participants believed that ensuring children attend school daily was the most important component of parental involvement” (DePlanty et al., 2007, p. 364).

Hill and Tyson (2009) conducted a meta-analysis about types of parent involvement and which have the strongest relationship to achievement. Their review was restricted to studies from 1985 to 2006 and included 50 empirical reports. In this meta-analysis, Hill and Tyson examined three types of parental involvement: home-based involvement; school-based involvement; and academic socialization that include communicating parental expectations for education and its value, linking school work to current events, and fostering educational aspirations and occupational plans for the future. “Parental involvement that creates an understanding about the purposes, goals and meaning of academic performance; communicates expectations about involvement; and provides strategies that students can effectively use (i.e., academic socialization) has the strongest positive relation with achievement” (Hill & Tyson, 2009, p. 758). School-based involvement including visiting the school and attending school events was moderately positive. Parent involvement that results in socialization around the goals and purposes of education and provides adolescents with useful strategies they can use in semiautonomous decision making is the most effective (Hill & Tyson, 2009). This

finding can also be supported in the work of Chen and Gregory (2009). Chen and Gregory surveyed 59 ninth-grade students who were grouped into a program specifically designed for low achievers in the Southeastern United States. They found that students who perceived parental involvement through socialization of educational values such as parents having high expectations about grades and attainment had the strongest association with student GPA and classroom engagement (Chen & Gregory, 2009).

Another case study focused on parent involvement and the effects on student school engagement and school performance. This study used data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (AddHealth) and included 1,971 seventh and eighth graders nationally. An important finding from this study for middle school educators and parents alike is that once again parental involvement will have positive effects. Based on this national sample, this study shows that students whose parents stay connected to their children and schools are likely to have higher school engagement and better performance (Mo & Singh, 2008).

### **Summary**

In summary, the review of literature focused on the organizational and interpersonal components that were cited in research as effective strategies of alternative programs that support at-risk students. Substantial research has been reported in the organizational areas of reduced class sizes and single-gender classrooms as well as the interpersonal strategies of increasing parent engagement, student self-efficacy, and a caring environment with high expectations that is essential to the success of at-risk students. Even though this research showed that there is no silver bullet for successful intervention with at-risk students, these components are strategies used in a myriad of school systems. Each school system must determine the priorities of their specific

students and the strategies that can lead them to high school success and beyond.

According to the research done by ACT (2008), more than eight of 10 eighth-grade students do not have the knowledge and skills they need to enter high school and succeed there. The research showed the critical need to support at-risk middle school students to improve their preparedness for high school and increase the graduation rate for these students. Based on this research and the need to address the gaps in student achievement, the school in this study piloted the Bridges to Success Program in their eighth-grade classrooms.

In this study, the researcher conducted a program evaluation of the Bridges to Success Program. The researcher evaluated the program in regards to how well the teachers increased their knowledge of at-risk student characteristics and increased knowledge of teaching strategies for at-risk students, change in teacher behavior and attitudes towards at-risk students, and the impact of the program on the culture within the eighth grade.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Overview**

Middle school education systems receive students from elementary schools and within a few years must prepare them for high school environments and beyond.

Young adolescents face significant turning points. For many youth 10 to 15 years old, early adolescence offers opportunities to choose a path toward a productive and fulfilling life. Many others, it represents their last best chance to avoid a diminished future. (CCAD, 1989, p. 8)

Middle school educational reform initiatives of today realize the magnitude of these turning points.

### **Problem Statement**

The school in this qualitative study recognized the critical need of adequately preparing all eighth-grade students for high school and their futures. The gaps in at-risk student achievement established the need to develop an alternative educational program to support at-risk students. The school administrators, along with the lead science and English teachers, developed the Bridges to Success Program for their eighth-grade classrooms. A summative evaluation of the program's impact needed to be conducted as student success in the middle school is predictive of success in high school. This study addressed the need of implementing an alternative school option for at-risk students and provided the evaluation of the program.

### **Research Design**

A logic model was used to evaluate the Bridges to Success Program with a focus on short-term, intermediate-term, and long-term outcomes of teachers as it was implemented in one middle school. According to the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (2004), a

program logic model links outcomes (both short- and long-term) with program processes and theoretical principles of the program. This model made it possible for program stakeholders to analyze data and provide an evaluation tool that facilitated effective program planning, implementation, and evaluation (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004).

The researcher studied the Bridges to Success Program and the school's process for implementation of this program. The data collection methods used were surveys and focus groups. The data were collected and examined as they related to three areas of the Bridges to Success Program: single gender, individualized support, and parent-student engagement.

In this chapter, the researcher describes the research methodology in detail. These details included the researcher's selection process for the participants, methods that were used to collect data, and the method of data analysis. The researcher also addresses his role in the research, the trustworthiness of the study, and any problems which arose.

### **Significance of the Study**

This research was significant because the findings provided valuable insights to the local school district. School systems that are discussing nontraditional approaches to meet the needs of at-risk learners may find this study relevant. Also, for the local school district, the evaluation of the program's effectiveness served to inform district leadership of the value of the program. The school in this study learned the effectiveness of the Bridges to Success Program. The program's teachers have an evaluation of the program's impact on teacher outcomes, which subsequently will impact student achievement. If eighth-grade student achievement increases, students have an improved chance of succeeding at high school and later in life.

## Research Questions

Adhering to the logic model and the short-, intermediate-, and long-term outcomes, this study focused around the following four research questions.

### **Short-term outcomes.**

**1. How has teacher knowledge of at-risk students changed from the Bridges to Success Program?** The Bridges to Success teachers were asked to self-report on their own knowledge of at-risk students as a result of their implementation of the Bridges to Success Program. Teachers provided input in written form using a Likert scale to respond to survey questions. Statements used an ordinal scale of strongly positive, moderately positive, neutral, moderately negative, or strongly negative (Creswell, 2009). The teacher survey included questions related to the teacher perceptions of at-risk factors that impacted students such as academic factors, motivational factors, environmental factors, support factors, and relationship factors. Participant responses from the teacher survey were recorded for content analysis. Mean scores were presented to determine positive or negative relationships. Focus groups were held with teachers for another form of data collection. Responses were categorized into themes, tallied, and presented in a frequency chart.

**2. How has teacher knowledge of his/her own teaching skills and instructional strategies changed from the Bridges to Success Program?** The Bridges to Success teachers were asked to self-report on their own knowledge of their teaching skills and instructional strategies that were impacted due to the implementation of the Bridges to Success Program. Teachers were provided input in written form using a Likert scale to respond to survey questions. Statements used an ordinal scale of strongly positive, moderately positive, neutral, moderately negative, or strongly negative

(Creswell, 2009). The teacher survey included questions related to the teachers' perceptions of their knowledge of teaching strategies related to the following: motivational, active teaching, supportive, collaborative, community-based, and gender-based teaching strategies. Participant responses from the teacher survey were recorded for content analysis. Mean scores were presented to determine positive or negative relationships. Focus groups were held with teachers for another form of data collection. Responses were categorized into themes, tallied, and presented in a frequency chart.

#### **Intermediate-term outcomes.**

**3. How have teacher behavior and attitudes changed towards the Bridges to Success Program?** The Bridges to Success teachers were asked to self-report on their own behaviors and attitudes that were impacted from their implementation of the Bridges to Success program. Teachers provided input in written form using a Likert scale to respond to survey questions. Statements used an ordinal scale of strongly positive, moderately positive, neutral, moderately negative, or strongly negative (Creswell, 2009). The teacher survey included questions related to teacher perceptions of changes to their own behaviors or attitudes related to their use of teaching strategies associated with the following: motivational strategies, active teaching strategies, supportive strategies, parent engagement strategies, and teacher confidence. Participant responses from the teacher survey were recorded for content analysis. Mean scores were presented to determine positive or negative relationships. Focus groups were held with teachers for another form of data collection. Responses were categorized into themes, tallied, and presented in a frequency chart.

#### **Long-term outcomes.**

#### **4. What is the impact of the Bridges to Success Program on the culture**

**within the eighth grade?** The Bridges to Success teachers and randomly selected regular education (non-Bridges teachers) eighth-grade teachers self-reported on their own perceptions of the impact of the Bridges to Success Program on the school culture within the eighth grade. Teachers provided input in written form using a Likert scale to respond to survey questions. Statements used an ordinal scale of strongly positive, moderately positive, neutral, moderately negative, or strongly negative (Creswell, 2009). The teacher survey included questions related to the teachers' perceptions of the impact of the Bridges to Success Program on school climate, student/teacher relationships, math and English skills, and teacher attitudes. Participant responses from the teacher survey were recorded for content analysis. Mean scores were presented to determine positive or negative relationships. Focus groups were held with teachers for another form of data collection. Responses were categorized into themes, tallied, and presented in a frequency chart.

### **Participants**

Participants in this study were four teachers included in the Bridges to Success Program and four regular education teachers in the eighth grade. The Bridges to Success Program teachers all worked at the school during the year in which the Bridges to Success program was studied. The researcher contacted the School District's superintendent to make him aware of the study and gave him details of what he hoped to accomplish through the study. The superintendent gave his permission for this study to occur. The principal spoke with the possible participants who met the research criteria. The researcher emailed each teacher on the list to explain the study's purpose and to describe each one's possible role in the study. The researcher utilized the logic model to link the program resources and the teachers involved in teaching the Bridges to Success



program to the short-, intermediate-, and long-term outcomes. The researcher also used four additional participants in one focus group, which included four regular education teachers, to gather additional data for the long-term outcome. By using the data garnered from participant real-world experiences, the researcher was better able to assess the program's viability. The researcher looked at how each participant viewed the decision-making process, which enabled him to evaluate and validate emerging themes in three areas of the Bridges to Success Program: single gender, individualized support, and parent-student engagement. This careful and methodical approach to the research resulted in a more reliable study.

An accurate description of any study's participants is essential to an understanding of the data collected. To achieve this accuracy, the researcher provided the method of selection of the target group, the number of people in the group, and the group's demographic information including years of teaching and teaching credentials. Qualitative research requires such detailed descriptions so that those who access the study can determine if results might be applicable to their own situations.

### **Instruments**

**Surveys.** The first data collection instrument was a survey that was administered to two groups: the Bridges to Success teachers and randomly chosen traditional eighth-grade teachers. The Bridges to Success teachers provided input on a 36-question survey that included the three areas of the Bridges to Success Program and their impact on short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes. The randomly chosen regular education eighth-grade teachers provided input on a five-question survey that evaluated the long-term outcome of the Bridges to Success Program. The survey answers were rated from Strongly Positive to Strongly Negative. The participants also had the chance to justify

their responses at the bottom of each question.

The Bridges to Success teacher survey was pretested by a retired teacher with experience in teaching in the Bridges to Success Program. The regular education teacher survey was pretested by a former eighth-grade teacher with experience in teaching in the same grade level as the Bridges to Success Program. This field testing of the survey allowed for an evaluation in advance to determine if the questionnaire caused any problems for the interviewer or the respondents. The field testing of the survey included several revisions to the survey that produced a higher quality survey for the respondents.

The surveys were reviewed and validated by two experts in the field of alternative programming. The first expert who validated the survey was the Director of the Student Intervention Services Department of the South Carolina Department of Education. The second expert to validate the survey questions was the Director of Career and Technology Education in the school district of the study school (survey validation letters are in Appendix D). Both experts reviewed the survey questions in March 2015 and provided many recommendations that were included in the final revision provided to respondents. The experts determined that the survey was valid, aligned with the proposed research questions, was appropriate, and served as an effective way to measure the research questions.

After the surveys were collected and analyzed, the data findings were displayed in a frequency chart which shows cumulative data and percentages of each response choice. Survey results and an item analysis summary are reported in Appendix E. The surveys allowed the researcher to determine which questions to emphasize when working with each of the focus groups. As Creswell (2009) explained, "From sample results, the researcher generalizes or makes claims about the populations" (p. 145). When

conclusions are reached from the participants of the study, the researcher followed up on those claims with further research.

**Focus group.** After assessing the results of the survey, a second data source used for this study was a focus group. Questions for this focus group were created from the information gathered through the survey questions. The researcher used two focus groups for each of the participant groups: One group included the Bridges to Success teachers, and the second group included randomly chosen eighth-grade teachers. The focus group for the short-, intermediate-, and long-term outcomes consisted of the teachers who taught in the Bridges to Success program. The focus group for the long-term outcome was randomly chosen regular education teachers from the eighth grade. In total, the researcher developed two focus groups to gather data.

The researcher used two focus groups because people who discuss and share their ideas and opinions with others are likely to be more thoughtful when they take part in discussions. This open forum gave the participants new and useful perspectives on the issues at hand. Patton (2002) explained,

In a focus group, participants get to hear each other's responses and to make additional comments beyond their own original responses as they hear what other people have to say. The object is to get high-quality data in a social context where people can consider their own views in the context of the views of others.  
(p. 386)

## **Procedures**

The data collection process included data collected from surveys, a focus group with Bridges to Success teacher participants, and a focus group with randomly chosen regular education eighth-grade teacher participants. Participants for each of the data

sources were chosen based on their experiences at the school.

Qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the many levels of meaning that can be ascribed to a single problem. The research leads to the discovery of new information and procedures using data typically collected from participants in their own environment. This data analysis builds inductively, progressing from specific to more general themes, and allows the researcher to draw valid conclusions from the data provided (Creswell, 2009).

After conducting the surveys and focus groups, the researcher transcribed the data. After transcribing the data, the researcher coded the data to find what common themes might exist. By creating a matrix, keeping field notes, and writing analytical memos, the researcher saw emerging themes and created more effective questions to guide the study. The researcher conducted both a single-case analysis and a cross-case analysis of the surveys and focus groups to determine if the same themes emerged in each of these types of data collection.

In-vivo coding and descriptive coding were used as the first cycle coding methods. When using in-vivo, the researcher read each transcript carefully and used the participants' exact words to code the information. By using this coding method, the researcher respected the words and ideas of each participant. The second coding method which was used was descriptive or topic coding. The use of descriptive coding enabled the researcher to examine in detail the topics that emerged from the data. Using these two coding methods, a solid foundation was laid on which to build (Saldana, 2009).

### **Limitations**

As suggested by Marshall and Rossman (2011), no research study is perfect. Researchers gather data to disseminate information to their audience but certain

necessary constraints can impose limitations on both the quality and the amount of the information conveyed. An understanding of a study's limitations is necessary to help readers know how useful the study could be to them. The study's purpose was to determine what impact, if any, the Bridges to Success Program might have on short-term (knowledge of teachers and skills gained), medium-term (attitudes and behaviors of teachers) and long-term (culture of the school) outcomes of the Logic Model. The following limitations should be considered when reading this study.

The study was framed by Bridges to Success Program ideas and beliefs which were built on single-gender classes, individualized support, and parent-student engagement. Therefore, this study should be viewed from that perspective. This study is limited to the descriptions and explanations given by individuals working within the school during the implementation of this program. Therefore, the findings from this study are specific to only the data and conclusions described. The researcher serves as principal of the school in this study and supervises the Bridges to Success Program students and eighth grade staff. The researcher's goal was to enable the reader to "understand the phenomena from the participant's perspective" (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 77). Another limitation of this study is this unique program is a new program and no comparable programs existed at the time of the study. The scope of this study's sample size was also a limiting factor in this newly developed alternative program of choice. However, the participants in the sample size were experienced teachers with a previous history in the Bridges to Success Program who provided insightful feedback. A consideration for further study would be to include additional research on other programs as this program may be replicated at other sites due to the noted positive outcomes and relatively low cost and ease of implementation.

The researcher utilized strategies to address these limitations to ensure the quality of the survey and focus group interviews. First, the survey was reviewed by experts in the alternative program field at the state and district levels. Second, the survey was field-tested with a retired Bridges to Success teacher and former eighth-grade teacher to improve respondent understanding of each question and to receive additional recommendations for the final survey. Third, the survey was administered in an online environment where the researcher notified each willing participant that the responses would be anonymous and the researcher, who was also the administrator at the study school, would not know of the individual respondent's identity. Finally, the focus group questions were peer-reviewed for appropriateness and an independent facilitator was utilized to conduct the focus group questions since the researcher was also an administrator at the school and the researcher wanted authentic responses from each participant.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the Bridges to Success Program as it was implemented in one middle school. Successful eighth-grade student achievement is critical to student success in high school and beyond. The evaluation of the alternative program Bridges to Success that this school piloted helped the school and teachers ensure that the programs and strategies implemented were achieving desired results.

A qualitative methods approach was used to determine the effectiveness and impact of the Bridges to Success Program. Teacher knowledge of at-risk students, teaching strategies to use with at-risk students, teacher behavior and attitudes, and the overall impact on the culture within the eighth grade were all explored. A logic model was used to evaluate the Bridges to Success Program with a focus on short-,

intermediate-, and long-term outcomes. Research and data from this study were used to guide future decisions of the continued implementation of the program and areas to improve.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

Middle school education systems receive students from elementary schools and within a few years must prepare them for high school environments and beyond. ACT (2008) reported, “Our research shows that students who are not prepared for high school are less likely than other students to be prepared for college and career by the time they graduate from high school” (p. 11). The school in this study recognized the critical need of adequately preparing all eighth-grade students for high school and their future. The Bridges to Success Program is an alternative single-gender program of school choice available to approximately 20 at-risk males and 20 at-risk females in one middle school in the Upstate of South Carolina.

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the Bridges to Success Program as it was implemented in one middle school. The program was implemented at one middle school beginning in the 2009-2010 school year and evaluated for this study during the 2014-2015 school year. Four eighth-grade teachers implemented this program with nearly 40 middle school students. The three main components of the Bridges to Success Program were single-gender academic classes, individualized support, and parent-student engagement.

A qualitative study that utilized the outcomes approach logic model assessed the outcomes or impact of the Bridges to Success Program on at-risk eighth-grade students. The outcomes were categorized into short-term outcomes, intermediate-term outcomes, and long-term outcomes. The short-term outcomes focused on teacher knowledge of at-risk student characteristics and their knowledge of teaching strategies with at-risk students. Intermediate outcomes reviewed how teacher behaviors and attitudes of teaching at-risk students have changed as a result of the program’s implementation.



Long-term outcomes examined the impact of the program on the school culture within the eighth grade.

Multiple data collection instruments were utilized to receive qualitative data on this alternative program. The qualitative measures used included surveys and focus group discussions to summarize teacher understanding, attitudes, and behaviors in regard to the Bridges to Success Program. The teacher online surveys allowed teachers to self-report and provide input towards the Bridges to Success Program using a Likert scale to respond to survey questions. Questions for the focus group were created from the information gathered through the survey questions. The researcher used focus groups because people who discuss and share their ideas and opinions with others are likely to be more thoughtful when they take part in discussions (Patton, 2002). The focus groups led to valuable conclusions about teacher understanding, attitudes, and behaviors related to at-risk students in the Bridges to Success Program.

## **Findings**

The data analysis section of this study reports the qualitative data collected and is organized by the framework of the logic model, following the four research questions that encompass short-, intermediate-, and long-term outcomes. This study was carried out through a qualitative research method. Qualitative research was used as a means for exploring and understanding the many levels of meaning that can be ascribed to a single problem. The qualitative research led to the discovery of new information from teacher input through surveys and focus groups.

### **Short-term outcomes.**

**1. How has teacher knowledge of at-risk students changed from involvement with the Bridges to Success Program?** The Bridges to Success teachers were asked to

self-report on their own knowledge of at-risk students as a result of their implementation of the Bridges to Success Program. Teachers provided input in written form using a Likert scale to respond to survey questions. Statements used an ordinal scale of strongly positive, moderately positive, neutral, moderately negative, or strongly negative (Creswell, 2009). The teacher survey included questions related to the teacher perceptions of at-risk factors that impacted students such as academic factors, motivational factors, environmental factors, support factors, and relationship factors.

Survey data were received from all four of the Bridges to Success teachers participating in this study. The number of years of teaching experience ranged from 3 to 32 years. Descriptive data about the teachers can be found in Table 4.

Table 4

*Teacher Demographic Data*

Teaching Experience	Number of Respondents
Years	
3 or less	1
4-10	0
11-15	2
16 or more	1
Educational Level	
Bachelor's	0
Master's	3
Master's +30	1
Specialist's	0
Doctorate	0

Questions from the teacher survey (see Appendix A) as shown in Table 5 focused on teacher understanding of at-risk student characteristics within the Bridges to Success

Program. Statements used an ordinal scale of strongly positive=5, moderately positive=4, neutral=3, moderately negative=2, or strongly negative=1 (Creswell, 2009). Teachers reported positively with an overall mean of 4.55 to the survey questions relating to how teacher knowledge of at-risk students had changed since the implementation of the Bridges to Success Program. The teacher survey for short-term outcomes, Research Question 1, yielded the highest positive results regarding their knowledge of at-risk student behaviors, home support, school support, knowledge of at-risk males and knowledge of at-risk females with a mean response of 5.0 or strongly positive. The teachers reported the least impact on their knowledge of at-risk students' socioeconomic status, home/school relationships, and environmental factors with one teacher reporting that they already had knowledge of these at-risk student characteristics. Even though these topics were reported to have the least impact on teacher knowledge, overall they were all generally positive with a mean response >4.0 or moderately positive.

Table 5

*Teacher Survey Results-Teacher Understanding of At-Risk Student Characteristics*

Question	Teacher (n=4) mean responses
Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program has impacted my knowledge of at risk student behavior(s).	5.0
My knowledge of at risk student's socioeconomic status has been impacted.	4.0
My knowledge of at-risk student's home support has been impacted (what the home has to offer or not offer to the student).	5.0
My knowledge of at-risk student's school support has been impacted (knowledge of how to better teach them at school).	5.0
My knowledge of at-risk student's home/school relationships has been impacted (how to best get parents involved to help their students).	4.0
My knowledge of academic factors that negatively impact at-risk students has been affected.	4.75
My knowledge of academic factors that positively impact at-risk students has been affected.	4.75
My knowledge of environmental factors that negatively impact at-risk students has been affected.	4.0
My knowledge of environmental factors that positively impact at-risk students has been affected.	4.0
My knowledge of motivational factors that negatively impact at-risk students has been affected.	4.25
My knowledge of motivational factors that positively impact at-risk students has been affected.	4.5
My knowledge of at-risk male students has been impacted.	5.0
My knowledge of at-risk female students has been impacted.	5.0
My knowledge of at-risk students with school attendance problems has been impacted. (empathy)	4.25
My knowledge of why at-risk students may have scored low on standardized tests has been impacted.	4.75
Overall Average Mean Response Short Term Outcomes #1	4.55

The strongly positive teacher responses in the areas of the impact on teacher

knowledge of at-risk students' home support and teacher knowledge of at-risk males and females were also indicated in the focus group discussions that were held with the four Bridges to Success teachers. The focus group discussions related to the short-term outcome of how teacher knowledge of at-risk students had changed produced three themes: parent engagement, single-gender, and professional development. One teacher commented,

I would say there are maybe two main reasons why my knowledge of at-risk students has evolved and increased. Number one, I think having the contact with the home so much more and being able to see how the home life impacts the student . . . just the increased parent communication. And then we just have had a tremendous amount of professional development.

Another teacher in the focus group commented, "I've just seen how important it is that you have that home and school support. I think some of our parents have also grown and knowing how to support their students and what type of support their students need."

The focus group with Bridges to Success teachers also had positive comments about the single-gender component of the program. One teacher stated, "My boys' classes are extremely willing to make the connections from the real world. So where my boys may do better at the hands on problem solving things, my girls do so much better in cooperative learning environments." Another teacher spoke of the importance of the single-gender environment:

I feel like we've all learned as far as the single-gender goes. The single-gender really is as significant as the at-risk aspect of the program. It's crucial for our program. I don't think we could do this if we mixed the genders.

The focus group discussion on the short-term outcome of the impact on teacher

knowledge of at-risk students yielded four themes that were categorized. An analysis of the transcript responses for this research question noted the number of times each theme was reported and tallied. A summary of the findings of the teachers' change in their knowledge of at-risk students is provided in Table 6.

Table 6

*Change in Teacher Knowledge of At-Risk Students*

Overall Themes	Frequency of Response
Parent Engagement	6
Professional Development	5
Single-Gender	4
Individual Support-Caring Teachers	2

**2. How has teacher knowledge of his/her own teaching skills and instructional strategies changed from the Bridges to Success Program?** The Bridges to Success teachers were asked to self-report on their own knowledge of their teaching skills and instructional strategies that were impacted due to the implementation of the Bridges to Success Program. Teachers provided input in written form using a Likert scale to respond to survey questions. Statements used an ordinal scale of strongly positive=5, moderately positive=4, neutral=3, moderately negative=2, or strongly negative=1 (Creswell, 2009). The teacher survey included questions related to teacher perceptions of their knowledge of teaching strategies related to the following: motivational, active teaching, supportive, collaborative, community-based, and gender-based teaching strategies. Survey data were received from all of the Bridges to Success

teachers participating in this study. Descriptive data for the teacher participants can be found in Table 4.

Questions from the teacher survey (see Appendix A) shown in Table 7 focused on the change in teacher knowledge of teaching skills and instructional strategies as a result of teaching within the Bridges to Success Program. Statements used an ordinal scale of strongly positive=5, moderately positive=4, neutral=3, moderately negative=2, or strongly negative=1 (Creswell, 2009). Teachers reported positively with an overall mean of 4.08 to the survey questions relating to the impact on teacher knowledge of teaching skills and instructional strategies to utilize in teaching at-risk students. The teacher survey for short-term outcomes, Research Question 2, yielded the highest positive results for the impact on their knowledge of motivational strategies, active teaching strategies that engage at-risk students, and support behaviors that demonstrate high expectations for at-risk students with a positive mean response of 4.5. The teachers reported the least impact on their knowledge of community-based teaching strategies that support at-risk students' real-world learning and goal development with a neutral mean response of 3.25.

Table 7

*Teacher Survey Results-Teacher Understanding of Teaching Skills and Instructional Strategies to Support At-Risk Students*

Question	Teacher (n=4) mean responses
My knowledge of motivational teaching strategies with at-risk students has changed.	4.5
My knowledge of active teaching strategies that engage at-risk students has changed.	4.5
My knowledge of support behaviors that demonstrate high expectations for at-risk students has changed.	4.5
My knowledge of teaching strategies that allow for opportunities for at-risk students to work together has changed.	3.75
My knowledge of community-based teaching strategies that support at-risk students' read world learning and goal development has changed.	3.25
My knowledge of gender-based teaching strategies that allow for opportunities for at-risk students to work together has changed.	4.0
Overall Average Mean Response Short-Term Outcomes #2	4.08

The four Bridges to Success teachers also reported positive teacher responses in the focus group discussion. The teachers reported changes in their knowledge of motivational strategies and support behaviors that demonstrate high expectations for at-risk learners. The focus group discussions related to the short-term outcome of how teacher knowledge of his/her own teaching skills and instructional strategies had changed produced four themes: individual support with high expectations, individual support with caring teachers, real-world connections, and individual support by developing student



self-efficacy.

One teacher commented on the support behavior of setting high expectations:

The thing that I look at here that kind of connects these things for me is a term called gentle insistence. You motivate through continually saying the same thing, drumming the same beat, being as consistent as you possibly can, pushing them forward, setting high expectations and motivating them.

Another teacher commented, “So us staying on them, it adds that high expectation factor that they probably never had before.”

Caring relationships between the at-risk student and his/her teacher also revealed positive changes in teacher support behavior. One focus group teacher stated,

Just building the relationship with the students. We get to know our students very well. But I have found that if they know that you truly, sincerely care about them . . . they may kick and scream but at the end they at least have some level of appreciation.

The change in supportive behaviors of setting high expectations and the individual care also contributed to teacher strategies of developing self-efficacy within their students. One teacher commented, “We have to be the motivator. Once their confidence in themselves and their confidence in their ability gets built up a little bit, then they can kind of start to do it.” Another teacher speaking about self-efficacy stated,

Because I really think the motivation comes from them having early successes, and if I can give them some really good early successes, I have students, in particular the girls, where they just tap into a wealth of knowledge that’s there that they haven’t been able to express or they haven’t had the confidence to feel capable of doing the work.

Topics in the teacher survey that did not produce strongly positive responses and to which the focus group discussion did not yield specific positive responses were the teachers' change in teaching strategies that allow at-risk students to work together and their knowledge of community-based teaching strategies. Community-based teaching strategies were discussed several times but the teachers did not discuss present teaching strategies that were utilized; and one teacher commented, "I'm just weak in it. I've needed to work on other areas first, but now I am trying to kind of delve into that a little bit more and figure out what we can use." However, when discussing teaching strategies that allow at-risk students to work together, three of the teachers referenced using their knowledge of single-gender strategies in decisions to allow the at-risk students to work together. For example, one teacher stated,

I've had my girls do group things together that the boys have done individually and vice versa because I know the topic, the girls will embrace it, they'll do well, whereas the boys not so much. I don't know that the at-risk component as far as working together is as significant at least in my room as the single gender.

Both of these topics, strategies that allow at-risk students to work together and knowledge of active teaching strategies, were rated between neutral or no change and moderately positive and could be considered as topics for further development and study.

The focus group discussion on the short-term outcome of the impact on teacher knowledge of their own teaching skills and instructional strategies produced four themes that were categorized. An analysis of the transcript responses for this research question noted the number of times each theme was reported and tallied. A summary of the themes that emerged are shown in Table 8.

Table 8

*Change in Teacher Knowledge of His/Her Own Teaching Skills and Instructional Strategies*

Overall themes	Frequency of Response
Individual Support—Setting High Expectations	8
Individual Support—Caring Teachers	6
Active Teaching Strategies—Real-World Connections	6
Individual Support—Developing Student’s Self-Efficacy	3

**Medium-term outcomes.**

**3. How have teacher behavior and attitudes changed towards the Bridges to Success Program?** The Bridges to Success teachers were asked to self-report on their own behaviors and attitudes that were impacted from their implementation of the Bridges to Success Program. Teachers provided input in written form using a Likert scale to respond to survey questions. Statements used an ordinal scale of strongly positive=5, moderately positive=4, neutral=3, moderately negative=2, or strongly negative=1 (Creswell, 2009). The teacher survey included questions related to teacher perceptions of changes to their own behaviors or attitudes related to their use of teaching strategies associated with the following: motivational, active teaching, supportive, parent engagement, and teacher confidence. Survey data were received from all of the Bridges to Success teachers participating in this study. Descriptive data for the teacher participants can be found in Table 4.

Questions from the teacher survey (see Appendix A) shown in Table 9 focused on

the change in teacher behaviors and attitudes as a result of teaching within the Bridges to Success Program. Statements used an ordinal scale of strongly positive=5, moderately positive=4, neutral=3, moderately negative=2, or strongly negative=1 (Creswell, 2009). Teachers reported positively with an overall mean of 4.325 to the survey questions relating to the impact on teacher behavior and attitudes in teaching at-risk students. The teacher survey for medium-term outcomes, Research Question 3, yielded the highest positive results for the amount of professional development support they received, the change in motivational strategies used to teach at-risk students, the educational success of Bridges to Success students, the use of setting high expectations with a caring and supportive environment, and their confidence in implementing an alternative program—all having a mean positive response of 4.5 or greater. The teachers reported the least impact or neutral mean response of 3.25 on their enjoyment of teaching at-risk students with comments that they have always had a passion and enjoyment for teaching at-risk students.

Table 9

*Teacher Survey Results—Teacher Behavior and Attitudes*

Question	Teacher (n=4) mean responses
My use of motivational strategies with my Bridges to Success students has changed.	4.75
My use of active learning strategies, such as hands-on activities with my Bridges to Success students, has changed.	4.25
My use of setting high expectations in a supportive and caring environment for my Bridges to Success students has changed.	4.5
My use of teaching strategies that impact my Bridges to Success student's self-efficacy has changed.	3.75
My use of strategies to engage parents more regularly has changed.	4.25
My confidence in my ability to implement an alternative education program for at-risk students has changed.	4.5
The Bridges to Success Program has impacted the educational success of at-risk students.	4.75
My enjoyment of teaching at-risk students in the Bridges to Success Program has changed.	3.25
The amount of professional support has impacted my effectiveness to teach at-risk students in the Bridges to Success Program.	5.0
Participation in the Bridges to Success Program shows that student achievement results as demonstrated by local, state, and national measures has been impacted.	4.25
Overall Average Mean Response Medium-Term Outcomes	4.325

All of the Bridges to Success teachers responded in the teacher survey with a strongly positive response that the amount of professional support has impacted their effectiveness to teach at-risk students. The Bridges to Success teachers also responded

with 100% positive responses of either strongly positive or moderately positive in the areas of their use of motivational strategies, the overall impact on the educational success of their students, and their confidence in their ability to implement an alternative education program for at-risk students. The use of motivational strategies to build a student's self-efficacy and increasing professional support were also themes noted in the focus group discussions that were held with Bridges to Success teachers. The focus group discussions related to medium-term outcomes that impacted teacher behaviors and attitudes produced four themes: parent engagement, individual support of developing student's self-efficacy, professional support and collaboration, and individual support of caring teachers.

One teacher commented on the team's use of strategies to engage parents more regularly, "All of us make a lot of parent contacts." Another teacher stated,

We don't give them a choice. You may not have been involved in your child's education before, but you will be now. One way or another you're going to be involved, and if I have to call you every day, three times a day, I've called some at 7:00 o'clock in the morning. We almost push the parents as much as we do the children.

The focus group discussion also centered on another motivational strategy, providing individual support to at-risk students by developing the student's self-efficacy; and several positive changes were noted from teacher comments. One teacher said, "I think self-efficacy is one of the most important things we can give them as they head off to high school and that belief that they can complete anything that they can put their mind to." Another teacher commented,

That's where we see the biggest results, when we can get the attitude and

academics on board. We just unlock what we need to unlock, that comes from motivation and showing them what they can do and believing in them.

One attribute from the teacher survey that had 100% strongly positive responses and was a major theme in the focus group discussion of medium-term outcomes was related to professional support. One teacher noted the increase in teacher collaboration: “The four of us work together so closely, we couldn’t do it if we weren’t able to talk and collaborate every single day.” Another teacher spoke of changing her behavior based on what she has learned from a colleague:

One of them is doing a lot more in regards to test corrections and things that I haven’t done before and I’m thinking I need to do something like that next year.

So I think we learn from each other a lot.

Another teacher discussed the importance of professional support: “I have learned so much from the three people sitting in this room and the one that’s not sitting in this room that started the program at the very beginning.”

Another attribute from the teacher survey that had a 100% positive response and produced positive comments in the focus group discussion was related to the overall impact on the educational success of at-risk students and its impact on their attitude and confidence in implementing an alternative program for at-risk students. One Bridges to Success teacher commented,

The two years I’ve done this the MAP score results from beginning to end of the year, just leaps and bounds above for Bridges, particularly my girls over regular education students, the regular ones I teach just really nowhere close.

Another teacher commented on the educational success of these at-risk students: “And not only do we see it through the tests that they take, like MAPS and what have you, but

just within the daily activities within the classroom.”

The focus group discussion on the medium-term outcome corroborated the responses from the teacher survey and revealed four themes that were categorized. An analysis of the transcript responses for this research question noted the number of times each theme was reported and tallied. A summary of the themes that emerged are shown in Table 10.

Table 10

*Change in Teacher Behavior and Attitudes*

Overall Themes	Frequency of Response
Parent Engagement	6
Individual Support-Developing Student's Self-Efficacy	5
Professional Support and Collaboration	4
Individual Support-Caring Teachers	4

**Long-term outcomes.**

**4. What is the impact of the Bridges to Success Program on the culture within the eighth grade?** The Bridges to Success teachers and randomly selected regular education eighth-grade teachers self-reported on their own perceptions of the impact of the Bridges to Success Program on the school culture within the eighth grade. Teachers provided input in written form using a Likert scale to respond to survey questions. Statements used an ordinal scale of strongly positive=5, moderately positive=4, neutral=3, moderately negative=2, or strongly negative=1 (Creswell, 2009). The teacher survey included questions related to teacher perception of the impact of the



Bridges to Success Program on school climate, student/teacher relationships, math and English skills, and teacher attitudes within the eighth grade. Survey data were received from all of the Bridges to Success teachers participating in this study and descriptive data for the Bridges to Success teacher participants can be found in Table 4. Survey data were also received from randomly chosen regular education teachers in the eighth grade.

Descriptive data for the randomly chosen regular education teachers in the eighth grade can be found in Table 11.

Table 11

*Regular Teacher Demographic Data*

Teaching Experience	Number of Respondents
Years	
3 or less	0
4-10	2
11-15	1
16 or more	1
Educational Level	
Bachelor's	0
Master's	2
Master's +30	2
Specialist's	0
Doctorate	0

Questions from the teacher survey (see Appendix A) shown in Table 12 focused on the long-term outcomes and any impact on the school culture within the eighth grade of the study school where the Bridges to Success Program was implemented. Statements used an ordinal scale of strongly positive=5, moderately positive=4, neutral=3, moderately negative=2, or strongly negative=1 (Creswell, 2009). Teachers reported positively with an overall mean of 4.35 to the survey questions relating to the impact of

the Bridges to Success Program on the change in culture within the eighth grade. The teacher survey for long-term outcomes, Research Question 4, yielded the highest positive results for the impact on teacher knowledge of teaching at-risk students in the eighth grade and their belief in the positive change of student achievement data in math and English in the eighth grade with positive mean responses of 4.625. The teachers reported the least impact on the overall educational climate in the eighth grade and the impact on their attitudes in teaching at-risk eighth-grade students with a mean response of 4.0; however, it should be noted that both of these items remained a moderately positive response.

Table 12

*Teacher Survey Results—Impact on Culture within the Eighth Grade*

Question	Teacher (n=8) mean responses
I believe the Bridges to Success Program has impacted the overall 8th grade educational climate in 8th grade.	4.0 (n=6)
I believe the Bridges to Success Program has impacted relationships between Bridges to Success students and their Bridges to Success teachers in the 8th grade.	4.5
I believe the Bridges to Success Program has impacted at-risk student's achievement data in Math and English in the 8th grade.	4.625
The Bridges to Success Program has impacted my attitude of teaching at-risk students in the 8th grade.	4.0
The Bridges to Success Program has impacted my knowledge of teaching at-risk students in the 8th grade.	4.625
Overall Average Mean Response Long-Term Outcomes	4.35

The study of the long-term outcomes from the Bridges to Success Program included data from the teacher survey that was administered to the Bridges to Success teachers and traditional regular education teachers within the eighth grade where the alternative program is housed. One hundred percent of the two surveyed groups reported positive responses of either strongly positive or moderately positive that the Bridges to Success Program has impacted their knowledge of teaching at-risk students in the eighth grade. The research participants also reported 100% positive response that the Bridges to Success Program has impacted at-risk student achievement data in eighth-grade math and English.

The focus group discussions with the Bridges to Success teachers sought to inquire what factor influenced the change, if any, in the culture within the eighth grade. The Bridges to Success teacher focus group discussion yielded positive comments about the overall impact of the Bridges to Success Program on the culture in the eighth grade. One of the factors that impacted the long-term outcomes and changes within the eighth-grade climate that was discussed in the focus group was the individual support of developing self-efficacy within at-risk students. Students who do well in school have developed self-efficacy; they believe they can perform the academic task. They have the skill and the will to succeed. Students need self-efficacy to choose to engage with academic tasks and to persist when learning becomes more difficult (Strahan, 2008). One teacher commented that we are “giving them confidence and belief in themselves that they can do it as much as teaching them the new stuff.” The themes of the focus group discussion with the Bridges to Success teachers on the long-term outcomes and the impact on the culture within the eighth grade are shown in Table 13.

Table 13

*Changes in the Culture within the Eighth Grade Reported by Bridges to Success Teachers*

Overall Themes	Frequency of Response
Individual Support-Developing Student's Self-Efficacy	2
Single-Gender	2
Professional Support and Collaboration	1

The focus group discussions with the regular education teachers also used the teacher survey as a basis for further study and discussion. A major theme for the regular education eighth-grade teachers who emerged from their focus group discussion that they felt impacted the long-term outcomes and changes within the eighth-grade climate was the individual support of caring teachers who they observed in the Bridges teacher and at-risk student interactions. A teacher stated,

I feel like the program has put me in a position, seeing those teachers deal with students like that, who a lot of times escalate beyond where a single individual teacher can bring them back to where they need to be. I feel like that's helped me just seeing how the students respond to those teachers when they discuss issues instead of saying this is what you're going to do.

Another teacher commented, "It has a positive behavior for the Bridges students because they had a structured environment and you could see that when they were out of the classroom. And their behavior was improved as well." One teacher summarized the impact on the eighth-grade culture and commented,

I feel like some of these eighth-grade students that did look up to these Bridges

students notice those interactions and it might at times cause them to react differently. So I do feel like some of the students outside of the Bridges Program that are friends with those students within the Bridges Program do see those interactions and do take them to heart and say, you know, if this student can change and if they can get their grades up and if they can be that way, then I can be this way as well.

Teacher collaboration and professional support was another change and long-term outcome of the Bridges to Success Program. One teacher stated, “I think just watching and having conversation with those teachers, being able to hear how they’re approaching things in their classroom, has definitely made an impact on different techniques and things that I know.” Another regular educational teacher stated,

Also this year, in particular, they’ve had several professional developments that we’ve been able to go to that helped actually see what that program is more about and to hear different techniques and things that they’re using in the classroom, and that’s been beneficial.

Another teacher commented, “The professional element that the Bridges teachers provided was stuff that I’d learned before but they kind of refreshed my knowledge about some of those things.” The themes of the focus group discussion with the traditional regular education teachers on the long-term outcomes and the impact on the culture within the eighth grade are shown in Table 14.

Table 14

*Changes in the Culture within the Eighth Grade Reported by Traditional Teachers*

Overall Themes	Frequency of Response
Individual Support of Caring Teachers and Relationships	6
Observations and Interactions with Bridges Students	6
Observations and Interactions with Bridges Teachers	5
Professional Support and Collaboration	2

Neutral or negative comments that emerged in the focus group discussions with the traditional regular education teachers on the impact of the Bridges to Success Program on the culture within the eighth grade reported the Bridges to Success Program as a subculture and alluded to an isolated program. One regular education teacher commented, “They’re in their own community.” The school recently moved from a previous facility, and in the new location the Bridges to Success Program is not in the same direct hallway with other eighth-grade classes. One teacher commented on this placement, “It could also be that they are now all four of their classrooms are right next to each other.” When this issue was discussed further by the focus group facilitator, it was asked if Bridges has formed its own subculture within the eighth grade. One teacher responded, “Yes” and another teacher said, “Definitely.” This subculture theme and these comments could be considered for further development and study in the future on the impact of the Bridges to Success Program. The regular education teachers also suggested publishing the criteria used for enrollment in the Bridges to Success Program and the educational outcomes of the program such as attendance, grades, and graduation

rate.

### Summary

Data from the teacher surveys and focus groups were used to address each research question. The teacher surveys reported moderately positive responses (mean>4.0) on short-, intermediate-, and long-term outcomes. Table 15 shows the overall mean scores reported for each of the research questions in this study.

Table 15

#### *Overall Mean Scores for Each Research Question from the Teacher Surveys*

Question	Impact Strength
Short-Term Outcomes (n=4 teachers):	
Teacher knowledge of at-risk students change since the implementation of the Bridges to Success program (RQ1)?	4.55
Teacher knowledge of his/her own teaching skills and instructional strategies change from the Bridges to Success program (RQ2)?	4.08
Intermediate-Term Outcomes (n=4 teachers):	
Teacher behavior and attitudes change from the implementation of the Bridges to Success program (RQ3)?	4.325
Long-Term Outcomes (n=8 teachers):	
Impact of the Bridges to Success program on the culture within the eighth grade (RQ4)?	4.35

The overall mean score of 4.55 indicated the strongest impact of the Bridges to Success Program was on the change in teacher knowledge of at-risk students. Conversely, the overall mean score of 4.08 showed the least positive impact on the change in teacher knowledge of their own teaching skills and instructional strategies.

The focus group discussions produced several factors that teachers believe have contributed to successful outcomes of the Bridges to Success Program. Teachers identified parent engagement and individual support by caring teachers, setting high expectations, and developing at-risk student self-efficacy as components that contributed to positive changes from implementation of the alternative program. Both Bridges to Success teachers and regular education teachers in the eighth grade also indicated that professional support and collaboration were positive factors. Topics that could warrant further study and development in the future were teaching strategies that allow at-risk students to work together and their knowledge of community-based teaching strategies. Further examination of the subculture concept noted by regular education teachers could be explored for strategies to produce a greater impact on the long-term outcome of positive change in the culture in eighth grade.



## **Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations**

This research study was conducted to evaluate the Bridges to Success Program whose initial goal was to improve the eighth-grade math and English skills of at-risk students. As shown in Table 1, and according to research done by ACT (2008),

Eighth-grade achievement as measured by the four ACT EXPLORE scores in English, Mathematics, Reading, and Science displays a stronger relationship with eleventh or twelfth-grade ACT scores, and therefore with college and career readiness, than does any other factor. Eighth-grade student achievement has a stronger relationship with college readiness than students' family background, high school coursework, or high school grade point average. (p. 9)

As all schools strive to produce college- and career-ready students, the success of students in eighth grade prior to their high school enrollment is a key factor in future student outcomes.

Improved student achievement outcomes are one component to consider in any reform initiative; but for more effective and sustainable results, schools must focus on the changes in teacher knowledge, strategies, behavior, and overall culture to truly impact educational outcomes. Hattie (2003) included a review of over 500,000 studies and concluded that teacher response was one of the most significant with 30% of the variance of determining what influenced student learning the most. Hattie further suggested, "We should focus on the greatest source of variance that can make the difference—the teacher" (p. 3). Also, in the value-added assessment model created by Balls et al. (2011), changing student learning is most effectively impacted by changing the learning culture. Balls et al. further explained this focus on teachers and learning cultures for sustainable improved educational outcomes: "While learning might be most commonly associated

with student demonstrations of cognitive gains, a more contributive approach, as indicated in this value-added model, is the level of adult gains in the context of learning” (p. 37). Therefore, more specifically, this study aimed to evaluate the program’s effects on teacher change in their own understanding and knowledge, attitudes and behavior, and overall culture.

The researcher used a logic model to guide this program evaluation of the Bridges to Success Program. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation (2004) detailed three types of logic models: theory, activity, and outcome. The researcher chose the outcomes approach logic model because of its emphasis on the relationships of resources (or activities/program) to outcomes. Logic models link program outcomes with program activities, inputs, and outputs. The outcomes-approach logic model was used to assess the outcomes or impact of the Bridges to Success Program on at-risk eighth-grade students and their teachers. The outcomes were categorized into short-term outcomes, intermediate-term outcomes, and long-term outcomes.

For the purpose of this study the short-term outcomes focused on teacher knowledge of at-risk student characteristics and their knowledge of teaching strategies with at-risk students. Intermediate outcomes evaluated how teacher behaviors and attitudes of teaching at-risk students had changed as a result of the program’s implementation. Long-term outcomes examined the impact of the program on the school culture within the eighth grade. The short-, intermediate-, and long-term outcomes affected teachers and components of the overall culture in the school being studied.

Finn (1989) outlined components of successful alternative programs for at-risk students that included organizational and interpersonal components. Collected data revealed the significance of the interpersonal components: individual support of caring

teachers who set high expectations, individual support by developing student self-efficacy, professional development, and teacher collaboration. Data also revealed the organizational component of single-gender education as an integral component of the program's effectiveness. Teacher survey data and focus group discussions showed that this alternative education program for at-risk eighth-grade students had a positive impact on teacher knowledge of at-risk student characteristics and their knowledge of teaching strategies with at-risk students. The data also showed a positive impact on teacher behavior and attitudes of teaching at-risk students. Further, there were positive impacts on the school culture within the eighth grade as a result of the program. Analysis of each research question validated the effectiveness of the Bridges to Success Program.

#### **Short-term outcomes.**

**1. How has teacher knowledge of at-risk students changed from the Bridges to Success Program?** The impact of this short-term outcome relied upon the change in the teacher's own knowledge of at-risk students. Surveyed teachers reported positively with an overall mean of 4.55 on an ordinal scale of 1 (strongly negative) to 5 (strongly positive) to the survey questions relating to how teacher knowledge of at-risk students has changed since the implementation of the Bridges to Success Program. This change in teacher knowledge provided a strong indicator that the short-term outcome of teacher knowledge of at-risk students had been met.

The teacher survey for short-term outcomes, Research Question 1, yielded the highest positive results for their knowledge of at-risk student behaviors, home support, school support, knowledge of at-risk males, and knowledge of at-risk females with a mean response of 5.0 or strongly positive as seen in Table 5. The teachers reported the least impact on their knowledge of at-risk student socioeconomic status, home/school

relationships, and environmental factors with one teacher reporting that he/she already had knowledge of these at-risk student characteristics.

The strongly positive teacher survey responses in the areas of the impact on teacher knowledge of at-risk student home support and teacher knowledge of at-risk males and females were also indicated in the focus group discussions that were held with the Bridges to Success teachers. Some of the teacher comments revealed that by increasing parent engagement and parent communication the teachers learned more about the home support and environment which allowed them to better teach the at-risk student. Research on parental engagement reveals the benefits of engaging the parent, as parent involvement positively affects student achievement, attendance, self-esteem, behavior, graduation, emotional well-being, and life goals (Anfara & Mertens, 2008). Hill and Tyson (2009) also found that parent engagement that results in socialization around the goals and purposes of education and provides adolescents with useful strategies that they can use in semiautonomous decision making is the most effective for educational stakeholders. The research on increasing knowledge of at-risk males and at-risk females also shows that educational systems may experience improved educational outcomes by increasing teacher knowledge on single-gender environments. Cornelius Riordan's studies found positive effects on achievement for disadvantaged students, including nonaffluent girls (AAUW, 1998). Riordan also found the performance of African-American and Hispanic students in single-gender environments is stronger on tests, scoring on average almost a year higher than similar students in coeducational settings (AAUW, 1998). In 2006, the United States Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings in a press release related to the decreased regulations of Title IX commented that research from the United States Department of Education shows that some students may learn

better in single-sex education environments (Weiss, 2007). The focus group discussions related to this research question produced three themes as seen in Table 6: parent engagement, single-gender, and professional development. The focus group with Bridges to Success teachers also had positive comments about the importance of professional development to their increase in knowledge, especially in their knowledge of at-risk males and at-risk females. The positive results self-reported by teachers in their survey and focus group discussions related to the first short-term outcome of teacher knowledge of at-risk students served as a precursor to the program's opportunity to meet the intermediate and long-term outcomes.

**2. How has teacher knowledge of his/her own teaching skills and instructional strategies changed from the Bridges to Success Program?** The impact of this short-term outcome relied upon the change in teacher knowledge of their own teaching skills and instructional strategies for teaching at-risk students. Teachers reported positively, with an overall mean of 4.08 as seen in Table 7 on an ordinal scale of 1 (strongly negative) to 5 (strongly positive), to the survey questions relating to the impact on teacher knowledge of teaching skills and instructional strategies to utilize in teaching at-risk students. This change in teacher knowledge of teaching skills and instructional strategies provided a strong indicator that the short-term outcome had been met.

The teacher survey for short-term outcomes, Research Question 2, yielded the highest positive results for the impact on their knowledge of motivational strategies, active teaching strategies that engage at-risk students, and support behaviors that demonstrate high expectations for at-risk students with a positive mean response of 4.5. The teachers reported the least impact on their knowledge of community-based teaching

strategies that support at-risk students' real-world learning and goal development with a neutral mean response of 3.25.

The Bridges to Success teachers also supported the positive survey responses by reporting positive responses in the focus group discussion. The teachers reported changes in their knowledge of motivational strategies and support behaviors that demonstrated high expectations for at-risk learners. The focus group discussions related to this short-term outcome produced four themes as shown in Table 8: individual support with high expectations, individual support with caring teachers, real-world connections, and individual support by developing student self-efficacy. One teacher's positive comments included a term "gentle insistence" that described his/her new motivational strategy of consistency, caring, and high expectations. Research shows that demonstrating care for students is an important factor in building resiliency that is needed for at-risk students to be successful (NASSP, 2006). McMillan and Reed (1994) found that teachers can foster resiliency within their students by caring and setting high expectations. The U.S. Department of Education (1995) conducted a study of effective school programs and identified several essential characteristics of successful programs, among them was setting high expectations for all students. Smith-McIlwain concluded that caring relationships were the key to reengaging disengaged learners, more so than any specific instructional practice or classroom procedure (Strahan, 2008). The positive results self-reported by teachers in their survey and focus group discussions related to the short-term outcome of teacher knowledge of teaching skills and instructional strategies contributed to the program's opportunity to meet the intermediate- and long-term outcomes.

### **Intermediate-term outcomes.**

**3. How have teacher behavior and attitudes changed towards the Bridges to Success Program?** This research question asked the teachers to self-report on their own changes in behavior and attitudes from their teaching within the Bridges to Success Program. This research question was also answered by data derived from the teacher survey and focus group discussion.

Teachers reported positively, with an overall mean of 4.325 as seen in Table 9 on an ordinal scale of 1 (strongly negative) to 5 (strongly positive), to the survey questions relating to the impact on teacher behavior and attitudes in teaching at-risk students. The teacher survey for medium-term outcomes, Research Question 3, yielded 100% positive responses of either strongly positive or moderately positive in the areas of the amount of professional development support they received, the change in motivational strategies used to teach at-risk students, the educational success of Bridges to Success students, the use of setting high expectations with a caring and supportive environment, and their confidence in implementing an alternative program with all having a mean positive response of 4.5 or greater. The teachers reported the least impact or neutral mean response of 3.25 on their enjoyment of teaching at-risk students with comments that they have always had a passion and enjoyment for teaching at-risk students.

The use of motivational strategies to build student self-efficacy and increase professional support were also themes noted in the focus group discussions that were held with Bridges to Success teachers. The focus group discussions related to the medium-term outcomes produced four themes shown in Table 10: parent engagement, individual support of developing student self-efficacy, professional support and collaboration, and individual support of caring teachers. Teachers commented on the importance of

developing at-risk student self-efficacy and how it is an essential ingredient to establish as students transition to high school. Successes raise efficacy and failures lower it; but once a strong sense of efficacy is developed, a failure may not have much impact (Bandura, 1986). Therefore, the greater a student's self-efficacy, the greater his/her effort and persistence should be, leading to improved achievement. Ames (1984) and Nichols and Miller (1994) found that student self-perceptions of ability (self-efficacy) are positively related to motivation and achievement.

Data collected from the focus group discussions corroborated the survey data derived from the teacher survey. The 100% positive response by teachers in their self-reporting of changes in their attitudes in areas such as their confidence to implement an alternative education program or the educational success of their Bridges to Success students reveals the medium-term outcomes are being met. Also, the changes in teacher behavior that was reported in areas such as their use of motivational strategies in developing student self-efficacy indicate that the overall medium term-outcome of changes in teacher behavior and attitudes was met.

#### **Long-term outcomes.**

**4. What is the impact of the Bridges to Success Program on the culture within the eighth grade?** The long-term outcome focused on cultural changes in the eighth grade. The Bridges to Success teachers and randomly selected regular education eighth-grade teachers self-reported on their own perceptions of the impact of the Bridges to Success Program on the school culture within the eighth grade. Teachers reported positively, as shown in Table 12, with an overall mean of 4.35 to the survey questions relating to the impact of the Bridges to Success Program on the change in culture within the eighth grade. One hundred percent of the two surveyed groups reported positive



responses of either strongly positive or moderately positive that the Bridges to Success Program has impacted their knowledge of teaching at-risk students in the eighth grade. The research participants also reported 100% positive response that the Bridges to Success Program has impacted at-risk student achievement data in eighth-grade math and English. The teachers reported the least impact on the overall educational climate in the eighth grade and the impact on their attitudes in teaching at-risk eighth-grade students. This finding of teacher knowledge increasing but their attitudes not being impacted equally is a significant finding regarding the importance of educational systems allowing time for full implementation and impact of new initiatives. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation (2004) stated that a program's full impact may not be seen until 7 to 10 years after implementation. Therefore, these data that the change in teacher knowledge has not been fully realized in a comparable change in teacher attitudes may reveal that this long-term outcome is still being realized in this new initiative.

The focus group discussions with the Bridges to Success teachers sought to inquire what factor influenced the change, if any, in the culture within the eighth grade. The Bridges to Success teacher focus group discussion yielded positive comments about the overall impact of the Bridges to Success Program on the culture in the eighth grade. One of the factors that impacted the long-term outcomes and changes within the eighth-grade climate that was reported in the focus group was the individual support of developing self-efficacy within at-risk students. Students who do well in school have developed self-efficacy; they believe they can perform the academic task. The development of self-efficacy will allow academic momentum that is needed for at-risk learners to build. Strahan's (2008) research noted that students need self-efficacy to choose to engage with academic tasks and to persist when learning becomes more

difficult. Two additional themes of single-gender and professional support/collaboration were noted and shown in Table 13.

Focus group data were also collected from traditional eighth-grade teachers to record their perceptions of any change in the culture within the eighth grade. The focus group protocol used the teacher survey as a basis for further study and discussion. A major theme as shown in Table 14 for the regular education eighth-grade teachers was the individual support of caring teachers they observed in the Bridges teacher and at-risk student interactions. Teacher collaboration and professional support was another change and long-term outcome of the Bridges to Success Program cited by the regular education teachers. Positive teacher comments on culture showed that their observing, discussing, and professional development on observed at-risk teaching strategies were impacting their own knowledge of teaching at-risk students and also factors in other eighth-grade student relationships that contributed to the change in the eighth-grade climate.

Neutral or negative comments that emerged in the focus group discussions with the regular education teachers on the impact of the Bridges to Success Program on the culture within the eighth grade reported the Bridges to Success Program as a subculture and alluded to an isolated program. One teacher commented that the Bridges to Success Program was like its own community. Following the school's recent building renovation, the four Bridges to Success classrooms are located in a different facility wing than the other eighth-grade classes which could also contribute to this perception. Focus group discussions also reported that the corresponding increase in the regular education teacher knowledge did not also have a corresponding increase in their attitude of teaching at-risk students. The traditional eighth-grade teachers agreed that their knowledge of teaching at-risk students was positively impacted but continued professional development and

teacher collaboration may have a more substantial impact on their attitude and behavior. Both of these areas should be reviewed for future development and study when considering the overall impact on the culture within eighth grade.

### **Limitations**

As suggested by Marshall and Rossman (2011), no research study is perfect. Researchers gather data to disseminate information to their audience but certain necessary constraints can impose limitations on both the quality and the amount of the information conveyed. An understanding of a study's limitations is necessary to help readers know how useful the study could be to them. The study's purpose was to determine what impact, if any, the Bridges to Success Program might have on short-term (knowledge of teachers and skills gained), medium-term (attitudes and behaviors of teachers) and long-term (culture of the school) outcomes of the Logic Model. The following limitations should be considered when reading this study.

The study was framed by Bridges to Success Program ideas and beliefs which were built on single-gender classes, individualized support, and parent-student engagement. Therefore, this study should be viewed from that perspective. This study is limited to the descriptions and explanations given by individuals working within the school during the implementation of this program. Therefore, the findings from this study are specific to only the data and conclusions described. The researcher serves as principal of the school in this study and supervises the Bridges to Success Program students and staff. The researcher's goal was to enable the reader to "understand the phenomena from the participant's perspective" (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 77). Another limitation of this study is this unique program is a new program, and no comparable programs existed at the time of the study. The scope of this study's sample

size was also a limiting factor in this newly developed alternative program of choice. However, the participants in the sample size were experienced teachers with a previous history in the Bridges to Success Program who provided insightful feedback. A consideration for further study would be to include additional research on other programs as this program may be replicated at other sites due to the noted positive outcomes and relatively low cost and ease of implementation.

The researcher utilized strategies to address these limitations to ensure the quality of the survey and focus group interviews. First, the survey was reviewed by experts in the alternative program field at the state and district levels. Second, the survey was field-tested with a retired Bridges to Success teacher and former eighth-grade teacher to improve respondent understanding of each question and to receive additional recommendations for the final survey. Third, the survey was administered in an online environment where the researcher notified each willing participant that the responses would be anonymous and the researcher, who was also the administrator at the study school, would not know of the individual respondent's identity. Finally, the focus group questions were peer-reviewed for appropriateness and an independent facilitator was utilized to conduct the focus group questions since the researcher was also an administrator at the school and the researcher wanted authentic responses from each participant.

### **Implications for Future Change**

This study provided evidence that the alternative program, Bridges to Success implemented by the one middle school in this study was effective and had a positive impact on the teachers and the learning culture.

Findings of this study provided important information related to the Bridges to

Success Program and whether or not the program is achieving its intended results and goals. The use of the results from this study will assist the school, district, and other programs to support their at-risk or alternative program development and implementation. The insights in this study will also allow the school of study and other middle schools to improve the educational outcomes of critical eighth-grade students and their teachers in the students becoming more college and career ready.

### **Recommendations**

Findings of this study support that the Bridges to Success Program is an effective alternative education program. This conclusion is supported by numerous data sources including teacher surveys and focus group discussions. The teacher surveys and focus group data were collected from Bridges to Success teachers and regular education eighth-grade teachers. The focus group data corroborated the teacher survey data and both sets of data showed that teacher perceptions of the Bridges to Success Program were positive and that the program had a positive change on their teaching knowledge, behavior, attitudes, and grade-level culture. Findings of this study could be shared with the students, parents, and teachers within the Bridges to Success Program as well as district and state-level administrators.

Some additional insights were revealed in the teacher surveys and focus group discussions that warrant attention. First, teacher input showed that the single-gender component was an integral component of the program's success and the teachers felt the program would not have the same success without maintaining this component. Second, using the Bridges to Success Program teachers to conduct professional development should be continued for two purposes: to increase the knowledge of traditional regular education in teaching at-risk students and to positively contribute to the learning culture

and collaboration among the entire eighth grade and prevent the perception of a subculture within the Bridges to Success Program. Peer observations of Bridges to Success classrooms could also increase teacher understanding, knowledge, and collaboration of the Bridges to Success Program and the teaching strategies used with at-risk students from which all teachers could benefit. Several of the regular education teachers commented on the benefits of simply observing and discussing the interactions between Bridges to Success teachers and their students and how these observations and discussions impacted their learning on how to work with their own at-risk students. Third, the Bridges to Success teachers should emphasize the criteria for their program selection, components, and results with increased communication and publications to staff and the school community. Finally, as challenges in teaching at-risk students increase, teachers should seek more ways to engage the learner in community-based learning strategies that offer real-world applications of their curriculums. Some of the Bridges to Success teachers commented that this was an area for further development and a topic they wanted to pursue further but time or knowledge was limited.

An additional recommendation for future study is to collect data on the students as they transition to high school and subsequently high school graduation. This longitudinal review would provide additional insights into the long-term outcomes of the Bridges to Success Program. Currently, the Bridges to Success teachers visit the high school to receive student feedback and monitor their initial progress, but formal data collection would prove beneficial.

A recommendation for any researcher conducting further study is to incorporate student data into this study to add a quantitative component to this qualitative study for further validity. Also, the addition of student surveys to provide student input on the

evaluation of the Bridges to Success program could add another perspective for researchers to consider in evaluating the Bridges to Success Program. A final recommendation for further study is to research similar programs elsewhere that would increase the sample size of the schools being studied as well as the research participants.

## **Conclusions**

Middle school education systems receive students from elementary schools and within a few years must prepare them for high school environments and beyond.

Young adolescents face significant turning points. For many youth 10 to 15 years old, early adolescence offers opportunities to choose a path toward a productive and fulfilling life. For many others, it represents their last best chance to avoid a diminished future. (CCAD, 1989, p. 8)

For all students to be truly on track towards being college and career ready, it is imperative that educational success be evident in the critical eighth-grade year. This study had particular relevance to the middle school educational community as an evaluation of the Bridges to Success Program and to the larger educational community related to alternative education programming.

The Bridges to Success Program was implemented in the 2009-2010 school year and included several revisions to the program implementation in subsequent years. This study was needed to evaluate the effectiveness of the Bridges to Success Program during the 2014-2015 school year. The conclusions from this study are based on the qualitative data analysis through the use of the logic model. The Bridges to Success Program was evaluated based on the short-, intermediate-, and long-term outcomes being achieved.

This study produced several major findings that positively impacted Bridges to Success teachers and created an opportunity for further development for this alternative

education program and others. One hundred percent of the two surveyed groups reported positive responses of either strongly positive or moderately positive that the Bridges to Success Program has impacted their knowledge of teaching at-risk students in the eighth grade. The research participants also reported 100% positive response that the Bridges to Success Program has impacted at-risk student achievement data in eighth-grade math and English.

The data analysis showed that one contributing factor to these positive findings was the individual support provided by caring teachers with high expectations. Caring teachers with high expectations was also the theme with the highest frequency of responses as shown in Table 8 related to the short-term outcome of the impact on the teachers' own knowledge of skills and instructional strategies for teaching at-risk students. It was also the theme with the highest responses among traditional regular education teachers in the eighth grade as shown in Table 14. In Williams (2003), one of the six research-based strategies to improve student learning outcomes was a caring teacher with high expectations for all students. The landmark publication that launched middle school reform, *Turning Points 2000*, provided seven recommendations to improve middle school outcomes (Jackson & Davis, 2000). One of the *Turning Points 2000* recommendations included the organization of relationships for learning to create a climate of intellectual development and a caring community of shared educational purpose (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Another *Turning Points 2000* recommendation included teaching a curriculum grounded in rigorous, public academic standards for what students should know and be able to do, relevant to the concerns of adolescents and based on how students learn best (Jackson & Davis, 2000). This research supported the study's finding that the individual support of caring teachers and setting high expectations for



student learning has a positive impact on educational outcomes.

Another influential factor that the study's data revealed was a contributing factor to the positive outcomes of the Bridges to Success Program evaluation was engaging parents in their child's education. The focus group data collected from the Bridges to Success teachers revealed that the parent engagement theme was the response with the greatest frequency when discussing the short-term outcome of the impact on teacher knowledge of at-risk students in Table 6 and the intermediate-term outcome of the impact on teacher change in behavior and attitudes in Table 10. One of the *Turning Points 2000* recommendations for effective middle school reform was to involve parents and communities in supporting student learning and healthy development (Jackson & Davis, 2000). This research aligns with the study's finding that engaging parents with at-risk student education produced positive learning outcomes.

The individual support provided by developing student self-efficacy was another major finding that was indicated in the study's data analysis. The focus group discussion with Bridges to Success teachers showed that this theme had the highest number of responses when discussing the long-term outcomes of the program's impact on the overall culture in eighth grade. Developing a student's self-efficacy was also a significant theme in the focus group discussion on intermediate-term outcomes of the change in teacher behavior and attitudes as a result of teaching within the Bridges to Success Program. McCombs and Marzano (1990) found student learning to reflect on their own thinking was important to student development of self-efficacy and students who succeeded academically understood that they made choices about how to approach tasks and how to engage. At-risk students need self-efficacy to choose to engage with academic tasks and to persist when learning becomes more difficult (Strahan, 2008).

Also, 100% of the Bridges to Success teachers reported a strongly positive impact on their knowledge of teaching in single-gender environments and behavior from professional development on the teacher surveys. One of the recommendations of *Turning Points 2000* stated that schools should staff middle grade schools with teachers who are experts at teaching young adolescents and engage teachers in ongoing, targeted, professional development opportunities (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Professional learning activities should improve the learning of students and include exposure to environmental relationships (Balls et al., 2011). Positive responses related to professional development were noted by Bridges to Success teachers and it was also cited frequently by traditional regular education teachers as a positive outcome in this study.

Short-, intermediate-, long-term outcomes as stated in the logic model were all positive. The short-term outcome of the impact on teacher knowledge of at-risk students showed a positive change and overall mean of 4.55 as shown in Table 15. This indicated that this short-term outcome had been met. The short-term outcome of the impact on teacher knowledge of their own skills and strategies showed a positive change and overall mean of 4.08 in Table 15 to show the fulfillment of the short-term outcomes. The intermediate-term outcome of the impact on teacher attitude and behavior showed a positive change with an overall mean of 4.325 in Table 15 and revealed that the intermediate-term outcomes had been met. The long-term outcome of the impact of the Bridges to Success Program on the eighth-grade culture also indicated a positive change with a 4.35 overall mean in Table 15 and showed the long-term outcome had been met.

This study suggests that the Bridges to Success Program was successfully implemented in the school in this study and the outcomes matched the desired results. Teacher knowledge, attitude, behavior, and culture were all positively impacted which

directly related to the outcomes of the logic model. The positive impact on the teachers will have a direct impact on their future students and learning culture for sustained educational reform.

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Appendix A  
Survey Protocol

### **Survey Protocol for Short Term Outcomes-Bridges Teachers**

Teachers Knowledge of At-Risk Students: Behavior, SES, Low Grades, Poor Attendance, Low Academic Progress on Standardized Tests, etc.

1. Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program has impacted my knowledge of at risk student behavior(s).
  - a. Strongly Positive
  - b. Moderately Positive
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Moderately Negative
  - e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

2. Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of at risk student's socio- economic status has been impacted.
  - a. Strongly Positively
  - b. Moderately Positive
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Moderately Negative
  - e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

3. Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of at-risk student's home support has been impacted (what the home has to offer or not offer to the student).
  - a. Strongly Positive
  - b. Moderately Positive
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Moderately Negative
  - e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

4. Through the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of at-risk student's school support has been impacted (knowledge of how to better teach them at school).
  - a. Strongly Positive
  - b. Moderately Positive
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Moderately Negative
  - e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

5. Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of at-risk student's home/school relationships has been impacted (how to best get parents involved to help their students).
  - a. Strongly Positive

- b. Moderately Positive
- c. Neutral
- d. Moderately Negative
- e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

6. Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of academic factors that negatively impact at-risk students has been affected.
- a. Strongly Positive
  - b. Moderately Positive
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Moderately Negative
  - e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

7. Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of academic factors that positively impact at-risk students has been affected.
- a. Strongly Positive
  - b. Moderately Positive
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Moderately Negative
  - e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

8. Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of environmental factors that negatively impact at-risk students has been affected.
- a. Strongly Positive
  - b. Moderately Positive
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Moderately Negative
  - e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

9. Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of environmental factors that positively impact at-risk students has been affected.
- a. Strongly Positive
  - b. Moderately Positive
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Moderately Negative
  - e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

10. Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of motivational factors that negatively impact at-risk students has been affected.
- a. Strongly Positive
  - b. Moderately Positive
  - c. Neutral

- d. Moderately Negative
- e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

11. Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of motivational factors that positively impact at-risk students has been affected.
- a. Strongly Positive
  - b. Moderately Positive
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Moderately Negative
  - e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

12. Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of at-risk male students has been impacted.
- a. Strongly Positive
  - b. Moderately Positive
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Moderately Negative
  - e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

13. Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of at-risk female students has been impacted.
- a. Strongly Positive
  - b. Moderately Positive
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Moderately Negative
  - e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

14. Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of at-risk students with school attendance problems has been impacted. (empathy)
- a. Strongly Positive
  - b. Moderately Positive
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Moderately Negative
  - e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

15. Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program my knowledge of why at-risk students may have scored low on standardized tests has been impacted.
- a. Strongly Positive
  - b. Moderately Positive
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Moderately Negative
  - e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

**Teachers Increase Knowledge of Teaching Strategies of At-Risk Students-Bridges Teachers:**

16. Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of motivational teaching strategies with at-risk students has changed.
- a. Strongly Positive
  - b. Moderately Positive
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Moderately Negative
  - e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

17. Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of active teaching strategies that engage at-risk students has changed.
- a. Strongly Positive
  - b. Moderately Positive
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Moderately Negative
  - e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

18. Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of support behaviors that demonstrate high expectations for at-risk students has changed.
- a. Strongly Positive
  - b. Moderately Positive
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Moderately Negative
  - e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

19. Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of teaching strategies that allow for opportunities for at-risk students to work together has changed.
- a. Strongly Positive
  - b. Moderately Positive
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Moderately Negative
  - e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

20. Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of community-based teaching strategies that support at-risk students' real world learning and goal development has changed.
- a. Strongly Positive
  - b. Moderately Positive
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Moderately Negative

- e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

21. Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of gender-based teaching strategies that allow for opportunities for at-risk students to work together has changed.

- a. Strongly Positive
- b. Moderately Positive
- c. Neutral
- d. Moderately Negative
- e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

### **Survey Protocol for Medium Term Outcomes**

#### **Teachers Behaviors and Attitudes Towards At-Risk Students-Bridges Teachers:**

22. As a result of this program, my use of motivational strategies with my Bridges to Success students has changed.

- a. Strongly Positive
- b. Moderately Positive
- c. Neutral
- d. Moderately Negative
- e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

23. As a result of this program, my use of active learning strategies such as hands-on activities with my Bridges to Success students has changed.

- a. Strongly Positive
- b. Moderately Positive
- c. Neutral
- d. Moderately Negative
- e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

24. As a result of this program, my use of setting high expectations in a supportive and caring environment for my Bridges to Success students has changed.

- a. Strongly Positive
- b. Moderately Positive
- c. Neutral
- d. Moderately Negative
- e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

25. As a result of this program, my use of teaching strategies that impact my Bridges to Success student's self-efficacy (or their belief that they can complete the academic task as assigned) has changed.

- a. Strongly Positive
- b. Moderately Positive
- c. Neutral
- d. Moderately Negative
- e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

26. As a result of this program, my use of strategies to engage parents more regularly (making sure students attend school and staying connected to their child and school) has changed.

- a. Strongly Positive
- b. Moderately Positive
- c. Neutral
- d. Moderately Negative
- e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

27. My confidence in my ability to implement an alternative education program for at-risk students has changed.

- a. Strongly Positive
- b. Moderately Positive
- c. Neutral
- d. Moderately Negative
- e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

28. The Bridges to Success Program has impacted the educational success of at-risk students.

- a. Strongly Positive
- b. Moderately Positive
- c. Neutral
- d. Moderately Negative
- e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

29. My enjoyment of teaching at-risk students in the Bridges to Success Program has changed.

- a. Strongly Positive
- b. Moderately Positive
- c. Neutral
- d. Moderately Negative
- e. Strongly Negative

Why or Why Not:

30. The amount of professional support has impacted my effectiveness to teach at-risk students in the Bridges to Success Program.

- a. Strongly Positive



- b. Moderately Positive
- c. Neutral
- d. Moderately Negative
- e. Strongly Negative

Please Provide Examples:

31. Participation in the Bridges to Success Program shows that student achievement results as demonstrated by local, state, and national measures has been impacted.
- a. Strongly Positive
  - b. Moderately Positive
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Moderately Negative
  - e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

### **Survey Protocol for Long Term Outcomes-Bridges Teachers**

#### **The Culture of the 8<sup>th</sup> Grade:**

32. I believe the Bridges to Success Program has impacted the overall 8<sup>th</sup> grade educational climate in 8<sup>th</sup> grade.
- a. Strongly Positive
  - b. Moderately Positive
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Moderately Negative
  - e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

33. I believe the Bridges to Success Program has impacted relationships between Bridges to Success students and their Bridges to Success teachers in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade.
- a. Strongly Positive
  - b. Moderately Positive
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Moderately Negative
  - e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

34. I believe the Bridges to Success Program has impacted at-risk student's achievement data in Math and English in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade.
- a. Strongly Positive
  - b. Moderately Positive
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Moderately Negative
  - e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

35. Participation in the Bridges to Success Program has impacted my attitude of teaching at-risk students in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

- a. Strongly Positive
- b. Moderately Positive
- c. Neutral
- d. Moderately Negative
- e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

36. Participation in the Bridges to Success Program has impacted my knowledge of teaching at-risk students in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

- a. Strongly Positive
- b. Moderately Positive
- c. Neutral
- d. Moderately Negative
- e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

### **Survey Protocol for Long Term Outcomes-Traditional 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Teachers**

#### **The Culture of the 8<sup>th</sup> Grade:**

1. I believe the Bridges to Success Program impacted the overall 8<sup>th</sup> grade educational climate in 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

- a. Strongly Positive
- b. Moderately Positive
- c. Neutral
- d. Moderately Negative
- e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

2. I believe the Bridges to Success Program has impacted relationships between Bridges to Success students and their Bridges to Success teachers in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

- a. Strongly Positive
- b. Moderately Positive
- c. Neutral
- d. Moderately Negative
- e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

3. I believe the Bridges to Success Program has impacted at-risk student's achievement data in Math and English in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

- a. Strongly Positive
- b. Moderately Positive
- c. Neutral
- d. Moderately Negative
- e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

4. The Bridges to Success Program has impacted my attitude of teaching at-risk

students in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

- a. Strongly Positive
- b. Moderately Positive
- c. Neutral
- d. Moderately Negative
- e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

5. The Bridges to Success Program has impacted my knowledge of teaching at-risk students in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

- a. Strongly Positive
- b. Moderately Positive
- c. Neutral
- d. Moderately Negative
- e. Strongly Negative

Comments:

## Appendix B

### Focus Group Protocol for Bridges to Success Teachers

## Welcome

### Introductions

Explain to participants the process of the dissertation, the dissertations goal, and what will be done with the data collected.

### Our topic is ...

The results of this focus group will be used for my dissertation data.

You were selected because you were part of the Bridges to Success faculty during the program's implementation

So far I have completed surveys with you all and we will discuss some of those findings a little later in the focus group.

### Guidelines

No right or wrong answers, only differing points of view

We're tape recording; please one person speaking at a time

We're on a first name basis

You don't need to agree with others, but you must listen respectfully as others share their views

I ask that you turn off your phones

My role as moderator will be to guide the discussion

### Beginning/Tentative Probes

Please tell me your name, your position and responsibilities at the middle school during the Bridges to Success Program's implementation.

Talk to me a little about the Bridges to Success Program and its impact on you as a teacher.

After the survey was given, the survey found specific things that I would like to follow-up with you about. These questions will focus on the short-term, intermediate-term and long-term outcomes.

### Focus Group Questions for Bridges to Success Teachers:

Short-Term Outcomes: How has the teacher's knowledge of at-risk students changed from the Bridges to Success Program? (RQ1)

1. I noticed in the survey data that 100% of you had a strongly positive response that teaching in the Bridges to Success program has impacted your knowledge of at-risk student behavior. Could you please explain this impact on your knowledge?
2. The survey data also revealed that 100% of you had a strongly positive response that your knowledge of at-risk males as well as at-risk females has been impacted from teaching in the Bridges to Success Program. Please discuss how your knowledge of each gender has changed.
3. Two areas in the short-term outcomes survey that had 100% strongly positive responses were: your knowledge of at-risk student's home and school support has been impacted. Home support was defined as what the home has to offer or not offer to the student. School support was defined as knowledge of how to better teach them at school. Can you explain how teaching in the Bridges to Success Program has impacted your knowledge of home and school support?
4. Another observation from the survey data was that the lowest number of strongly positive responses (0%) was seen in the area of the impact on

your knowledge of teaching strategies for at-risk students to work together had changed. Why? *RQ2*

5. Also, another low positive response (25%) was on the impact of your knowledge on how to best get parents involved to help their children and environmental factors that have both a positive and negative impact. Describe why these areas related to your knowledge of parental involvement or environmental factors were least impacted compared to all the short-term outcome survey questions.

Short-Term Outcomes: How has the teacher's knowledge of his/her own teaching skills & instructional strategies changed from the Bridges to Success Program? (RQ2)

6. In the area of the program's impact on your knowledge of teaching skills and instructional strategies, the survey data showed 100% positive response (either strongly positive or moderately positive) in three areas I would like for you to discuss:
  - a. Your knowledge of motivational teaching strategies with at-risk students.
  - b. Your knowledge of active teaching strategies that engage at-risk students.
  - c. Your knowledge of support behaviors that demonstrate high expectations for at-risk students.
7. In the survey of short-term outcomes, the area with the lowest number of positive responses (50%) was the impact on your knowledge of community-based teaching strategies that support at-risk students' real world learning and goal development. Could you explain further why this area had the least positive impact on your knowledge?

Medium-Term Outcomes: How have the teacher's behavior and attitudes changed towards the Bridges to Success Program? (RQ3)

8. One aspect I would like to explore further is the change in your behaviors as a result from teaching in the Bridges to Success Program. 100% of responses were positive (either strongly positive or moderately positive) in the areas of your use of motivational strategies and your use of active learning or hands-on activities. Please describe this positive change. All of you recorded a positive impact on your knowledge and use of motivational strategies. Can you discuss?
9. Parent engagement strategies were defined as strategies that make sure students attend school and how parents stay connected to their child and their school. 100% of responses were positive in the area of your use of strategies to engage parents more regularly. Why is this?
10. Another area that data revealed was a positive response related to how the Bridges to Success Program has impacted the educational success of at-risk students with 100% positive responses. 100% of you also recorded a positive impact that participation in the Bridges to Success Program showed that student achievement results were impacted. Can you elaborate on this positive academic impact?

11. Professional support was noted to have 100% strongly positive impact on your effectiveness to teach at-risk students. How has professional support changed your teacher behaviors or attitude?
12. Two areas that the survey revealed how the lowest number of positive responses (50%) within the medium-term outcomes was your enjoyment of teaching in Bridges had changed and your use of teaching strategies that impact your student's self-efficacy or their belief that they can complete the academic task as assigned had changed. Can you comment on either of these? Have you always enjoyed teaching at-risk students?

Long-Term Outcomes: What is the impact of the Bridges to Success Program on the culture within the eighth grade? (RQ4)

13. One area that the survey addressed was the overall impact of the Bridges to Success Program to the 8<sup>th</sup> grade educational climate in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. This area had 75% positive responses. Can you explain your rationale?
14. 100% of the responses were strongly positive that your participation in the Bridges to Success Program has impacted your knowledge of teaching at-risk students but 75% responded strongly positive that your participation impacted your attitude of teaching at-risk students in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Please discuss.
15. When asked about the impact of the program on at-risk student's achievement data in Math and English, 100% of responses were positive. Why is this?

## Appendix C

### Focus Group Protocol for Regular Education Eighth-Grade Teachers



## **Welcome**

### **Introductions**

Explain to participants the process of the dissertation, the dissertations goal, and what will be done with the data collected.

### **Our topic is ...**

The results of this focus group will be used for my dissertation data.

You were selected because you were part of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade faculty during the Bridges to Success Program's implementation.

So far I have completed surveys with you all and we will discuss some of those findings a little later in the focus group.

### **Guidelines**

No right or wrong answers, only differing points of view

We're tape recording; please one person speaking at a time

We're on a first name basis

You don't need to agree with others, but you must listen respectfully as others share their views

I ask that you turn off your phones

My role as moderator will be to guide the discussion

### **Beginning/Tentative Probes**

Please tell me your name, your position and responsibilities at the middle school during the Bridges to Success Program's implementation.

Talk to me a little about the Bridges to Success Program.

After the survey was given, the survey found specific things that I would like to follow-up with you about. These questions will focus on the long-term outcomes of the Bridges to Success Program from your perspective as a traditional 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher.

Long-Term Outcomes: What is the impact of the Bridges to Success Program on the culture within the eighth grade? (RQ4)

1. One area that the survey addressed was the overall impact of the Bridges to Success Program to the 8<sup>th</sup> grade educational climate in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. This area had 100% positive responses from two participants. The other two respondents provided positive comments but did not indicate the impact as positive, neutral or negative. Therefore, can we first discuss if you believe the Bridges to Success Program impacted the overall 8<sup>th</sup> grade educational climate in 8<sup>th</sup> grade and if you feel that is a positive impact, neutral or negative impact. Can you explain your rationale?
2. 100% of the responses were strongly positive that the Bridges to Success Program has impacted your knowledge of teaching at-risk student. Why is this?
3. The survey also revealed that even though 100% of the responses showed a positive impact on your knowledge of teaching at-risk students in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade only 50% reported a positive impact on your attitude of teaching at-risk students in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Please discuss.
4. 100% of your responses showed a positive impact on the relationships between Bridges to Success students and their Bridges to Success teachers in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Can you elaborate some more on this?
5. How would you describe the overall impact of the Bridges to Success

Program on the culture within the eighth grade?

6. Do you have any additional comments or thoughts on the Bridges to Success Program?

## Appendix D

### Survey Validation Letters



**STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**

**MOLLY M. SPEARMAN**  
*STATE SUPERINTENDENT OF EDUCATION*

March 10, 2015

To whom it may concern,

I currently serve as the Director of the Student Intervention Services Department within the South Carolina Department of Education. The survey questions that researcher and doctoral candidate, Michael Cory, has included with his research align with the proposed research questions and are appropriate for the study.

The questions have been categorized to evaluate the short-term, intermediate and long-term outcomes of the program evaluations logic model. The survey questions will help the researcher answer the research questions by measuring the changes in teachers as a result of teaching in the Bridges to Success Program.

The questions are valid and will serve as a true and effective way to measure the research questions that were developed for this study.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sabrina Moore".

Sabrina Moore, PhD

Director, Student Intervention Services

1006 RUTLEDGE BUILDING • 1429 SENATE STREET • COLUMBIA, SC 29201  
PHONE: 803-734-8500 • FAX 803-734-3389 • ED.SC.GOV



## School District of Pickens County

*Building success beyond the classroom*

### Letter of Approval for Survey Questions

To whom it may concern,

I currently serve as the Coordinator of Career and Technology, School to Work, and STEM Education programs for the School District of Pickens County. The survey questions that researcher and doctoral candidate, Michael Cory has included with his research closely align with the proposed research questions. The questions have been categorized to evaluate the short-term, intermediate, and long-term outcomes of the program evaluations logic model. The survey questions will help the researcher answer the following research questions:

1. How has the teacher's knowledge of at-risk students characteristics changed from the Bridges to Success Program?
2. How has the teacher's knowledge of their own teaching skills and instructional strategies changed from the Bridges to Success Program?
3. How have the teacher's behavior and attitudes changed towards the Bridges to Success Program?
4. What is the impact of the Bridges to Success Program on the culture within the 8th grade?

The questions are valid and will serve as a true and effective way to measure the research questions that was developed for this study.

Best Regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Brian J. Richard'.

Dr. Brian J. Richard, EdD

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### Instructional Services

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[www.pickens.k12.sc.us](http://www.pickens.k12.sc.us)

Appendix E  
Survey Item Analysis

Surveys of Bridges Teachers (4 at-risk teachers responded)											
		Strongly Positive Response Count	Percent Strongly Positive	Modestly Positive Response Count	Percent Modestly Positive	Neutral Response Count	Percent Neutral	Modestly Negative Response Count	Percent Modestly Negative	Strongly Negative Response Count	Percent Strongly Negative
<b>Short-Term Outcomes #1</b>											
<i>How has the teacher's knowledge of at-risk students changed from the Bridges to Success Program? RQ1</i>											
1	Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program has impacted my knowledge of at risk student behavior(s).	4	100%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
2	Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of at risk student's socioeconomic status has been impacted.	2	50%	1	25%	0	0%	1	25%	0	0%
3	Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of at-risk student's home support has been impacted	4	100%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%

	(what the home has to offer or not offer to the student).										
4	Through the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of at-risk student's school support has been impacted (knowledge of how to better teach them at school).	4	100 %	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
5	Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of at-risk student's home/school relationships has been impacted (how to best get parents involved to help their students).	1	25%	2	50%	1	25 %	0	0%	0	0%
6	Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of academic factors that negatively impact at-risk students has been affected.	3	75%	1	25%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%



7	Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of academic factors that positively impact at-risk students has been affected.	3	75%	1	25%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
8	Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of environmental factors that negatively impact at-risk students has been affected.	1	25%	2	50%	1	25%	0	0%	0	0%
9	Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of environmental factors that positively impact at-risk students has been affected.	1	25%	2	50%	1	25%	0	0%	0	0%
10	Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of motivational factors that negatively impact at-risk students	2	50%	1	25%	1	25%	0	0%	0	0%

	has been affected.										
1 1	Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of motivational factors that positively impact at-risk students has been affected.	2	50%	2	50%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
1 2	Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of at-risk male students has been impacted.	4	100%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
1 3	Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of at-risk female students has been impacted.	4	100%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
1 4	Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of at-risk students with school attendance problems has been impacted. (empathy)	2	50%	1	25%	1	25%	0	0%	0	0%

1 5	Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of why at-risk students may have scored low on standardized tests has been impacted.	3	75%	1	25%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
	<b>Short-Term Outcomes #2</b>										
	<i>How has the teacher's knowledge of his/her own teaching skills &amp; instructional strategies changed?(RQ2)</i>										
1 6	Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of motivational teaching strategies with at-risk students has changed.	2	50%	2	50%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
1 7	Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of active teaching strategies that engage at-risk students has changed.	2	50%	2	50%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
1 8	Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of support behaviors that	2	50%	2	50%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%

	demonstrate high expectations for at-risk students has changed.										
19	Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of teaching strategies that allow for opportunities for at-risk students to work together has changed.	0	0%	3	75%	1	25%	0	0%	0	0%
20	Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of community-based teaching strategies that support at-risk students' real world learning and goal development has changed.	1	25%	1	25%	1	25%	0	0%	1	25%
21	Teaching in the Bridges to Success Program, my knowledge of gender-based teaching strategies that allow for opportunities	1	25%	2	50%	1	25%	0	0%	0	0%

	for at-risk students to work together has changed.										
	<b>Medium-Term Outcomes</b>										
	<i>How have the teacher's behavior and attitudes changed towards the Bridges to Success Program? (RQ3)</i>										
2 2	As a result of this program, my use of motivational strategies with my Bridges to Success students has changed.	3	75%	1	25%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
2 3	As a result of this program, my use of active learning strategies, such as hands-on activities with my Bridges to Success students, has changed.	1	25%	3	75%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
2 4	As a result of this program, my use of setting high expectations in a supportive and caring environment for my Bridges to Success students has changed.	3	75%	0	0%	1	25%	0	0%	0	0%

2 5	As a result of this program, my use of teaching strategies that impact my Bridges to Success student's self-efficacy (or their belief that they can complete the academic task as assigned) has changed.	1	25%	1	25%	2	50%	0	0%	0	0%
2 6	As a result of this program, my use of strategies to engage parents more regularly (making sure students attend school and staying connected to their child and school) has changed.	1	25%	3	75%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
2 7	My confidence in my ability to implement an alternative education program for at-risk students has changed.	2	50%	2	50%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
2 8	The Bridges to Success Program has	3	75%	1	25%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%

	impacted the educational success of at-risk students.										
29	My enjoyment of teaching at-risk students in the Bridges to Success Program has changed.	1	25%	1	25%	1	25%	0	0%	1	25%
30	The amount of professional support has impacted my effectiveness to teach at-risk students in the Bridges to Success Program.	4	100%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
31	Participation in the Bridges to Success Program shows that student achievement results as demonstrated by local, state, and national measures has been impacted.	1	25%	3	75%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
	<b>Long-Term Outcomes</b>										
	<i>What is the impact of the Bridges to Success Program on the culture within the eighth grade? (RQ4)</i>										
32	I believe the Bridges to Success Program has impacted the	2	50%	0	0%	1	25%	1	25%	0	0%

	overall 8th grade educational climate in 8th grade.										
3 3	I believe the Bridges to Success Program has impacted relationships between Bridges to Success students and their Bridges to Success teachers in the 8th grade.	3	75%	1	25%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
3 4	I believe the Bridges to Success Program has impacted at-risk student's achievement data in Math and English in the 8th grade.	3	75%	1	25%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
3 5	Participation in the Bridges to Success Program has impacted my attitude of teaching at-risk students in the 8th grade.	3	75%	0	0%	0	0%	1	25%	0	0%
3 6	Participation in the Bridges to Success Program has impacted my knowledge of teaching at-risk	4	100 %	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%



	students in the 8th grade.										
<b>Surveys of 8th grade Teachers (4 traditional 8th grade teachers responded)</b>											
		Strongly Positive Response Count	Percent Strongly Positive	Moderately Positive Response Count	Percent Moderately Positive	Neutral Response Count	Percent Neutral	Moderately Negative Response Count	Percent Moderately Negative	Strongly Negative Response Count	Percent Strongly Negative
	<b>Long-Term Outcomes (Traditional Teachers)</b>										
	<i>What is the impact of the Bridges to Success Program on the culture within the eighth grade? (RQ4)</i>										
1	I believe the Bridges to Success Program impacted the overall 8th grade educational climate in 8th grade. Two teachers answered in comments only but made positive comments.	1	50%	1	50%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
2	I believe the Bridges to Success Program has impacted relationships between Bridges to	1	25%	3	75%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%

	Success students and their Bridges to Success teachers in the 8th grade.										
3	I believe the Bridges to Success Program has impacted at-risk student's achievement data in Math and English in the 8th grade.	2	50%	2	50%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
4	The Bridges to Success Program has impacted my attitude of teaching at-risk students in the 8th grade.	1	25%	1	25%	2	50%	0	0%	0	0%
5	The Bridges to Success Program has impacted my knowledge of teaching at-risk students in the 8th grade.	1	25%	3	75%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%