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Assessing the Feasibility of a Peer Developed Risk Reduction Plan in a Rural Middle School

Sara Brennan
University of Vermont

Christian Brooks
University of Vermont

Patrick Clarke
University of Vermont

Isaac de La Bruere
University of Vermont

Nicole Delgado
University of Vermont

See next page for additional authors

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Authors

Sara Brennan, Christian Brooks, Patrick Clarke, Isaac de La Bruere, Nicole Delgado, Alexandra Kuzma, Emma Levine, Joanna Jerose, and Leigh Ann Holterman

Background

Students at Sheldon Middle School (Sheldon, VT) indicated **higher than average rates of suicidal ideation and risky behavior such as sexual activity, access to alcohol and poorer nutrition** on the 2017 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS). Analyses of the YRBS data indicated bullying behaviors were a root cause to increased levels of suicidal ideation.¹

Current literature highlights several programs designed to reduce risky youth behavior.² However, there is relatively little research on the feasibility of designing and implementing peer-created, peer-driven intervention programs.³ Additionally, there is a gap in the literature around parent and faculty surrounding the feasibility and predicted success of these programs.

Thus, our aim was to create an empirically-based, co-curricular program that addresses the root causes of the risky behaviors identified by the school and the YRBS. Our first goal was to work alongside students in Sheldon Middle School to design an intervention program. Our second goal was to measure faculty and parent attitudes about the program and the feasibility of future implementation.

Methods

Consultation with Students:

We met with ten 8th grade students from Sheldon Middle School to gather input on the development of a program to improve peer-to-peer interpersonal relationships.

Intervention Program Conception:

Developed the **Communication, Relationships, & Reflection (CRR) Program** modeled after the Professionalism, Community and Reflection (PCR) Course at the Robert Larner, MD College of Medicine.

Faculty Presentation:

We presented the program to faculty and parents at Sheldon Middle School. Meeting participants completed a survey on the strengths and weakness of the program, and attitudes toward implementation. Descriptive results from the survey were then compiled.

Results

WHAT IS CRR?

Modified from the Professionalism, Communication and Reflections course from the Robert Larner, M.D. College of Medicine at the University of Vermont

Communication

Students would meet bimonthly with an advisor and learn how to effectively discuss issues such as body image, risky behaviors such as alcohol and drug use, etc.

Relationships

There would be groups of 7 students, paired with a faculty mentor or a community member

Students and facilitators would be encouraged to foster strong relationships among the group, hoping to bridge communication gaps and facilitate learning about healthy social relationships and behaviors

Reflection

Students would be encouraged to process and reflect on the different perspectives from fellow classmates on these tough issues

This will hopefully reduce the interpersonal conflict identified by Sheldon Middle School as potential propagators of the high scores in the YRBS.

COMMENTS FROM SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

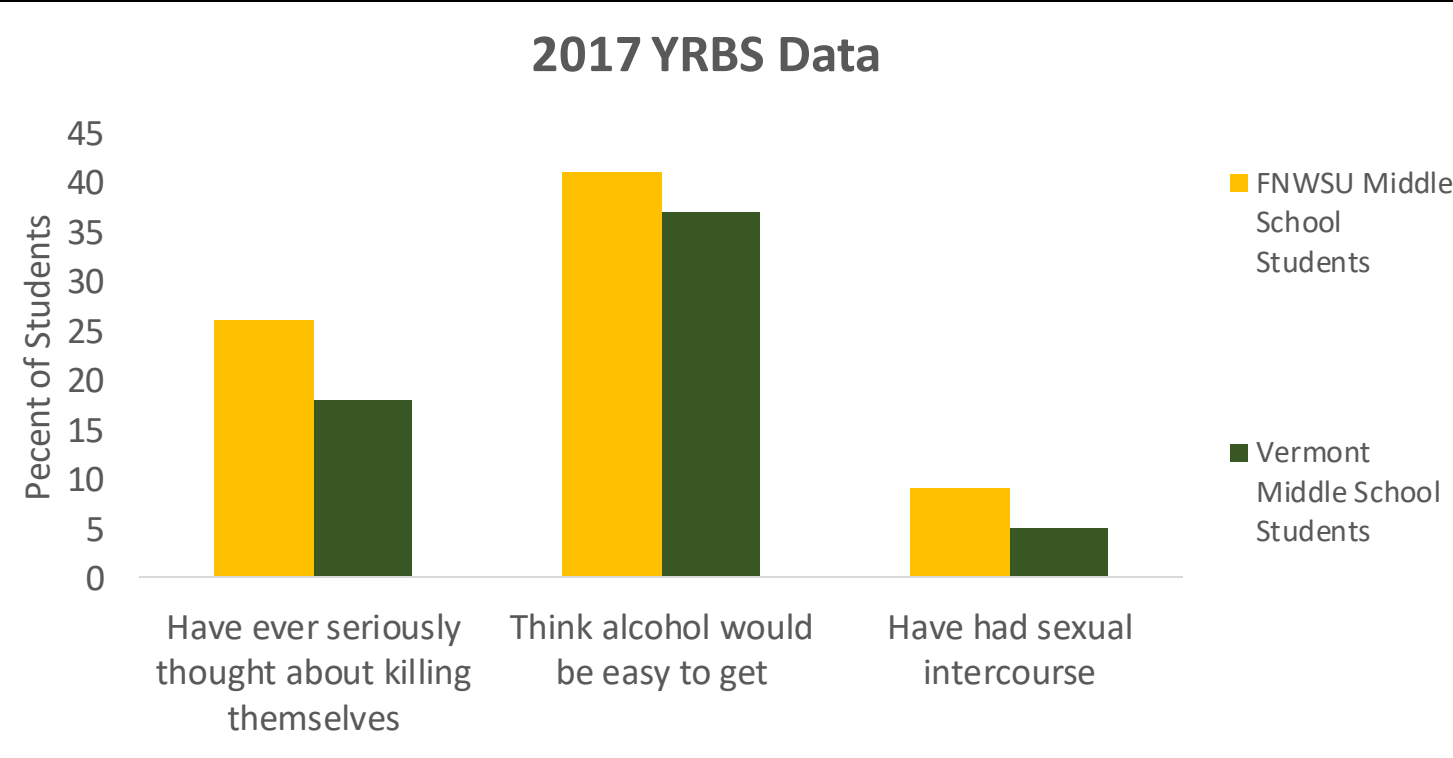
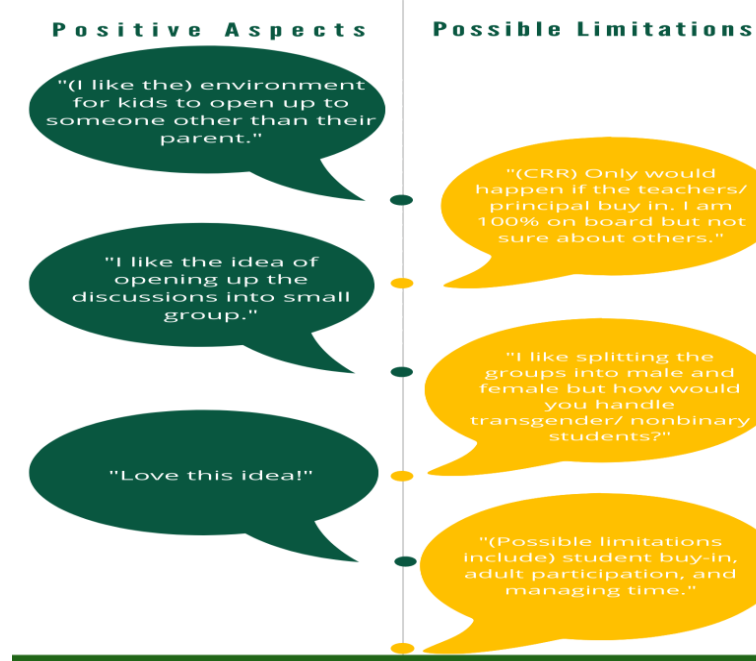


Figure 1. 2017 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) Data; FNWSU Middle School students vs. Vermont Middle School students statewide

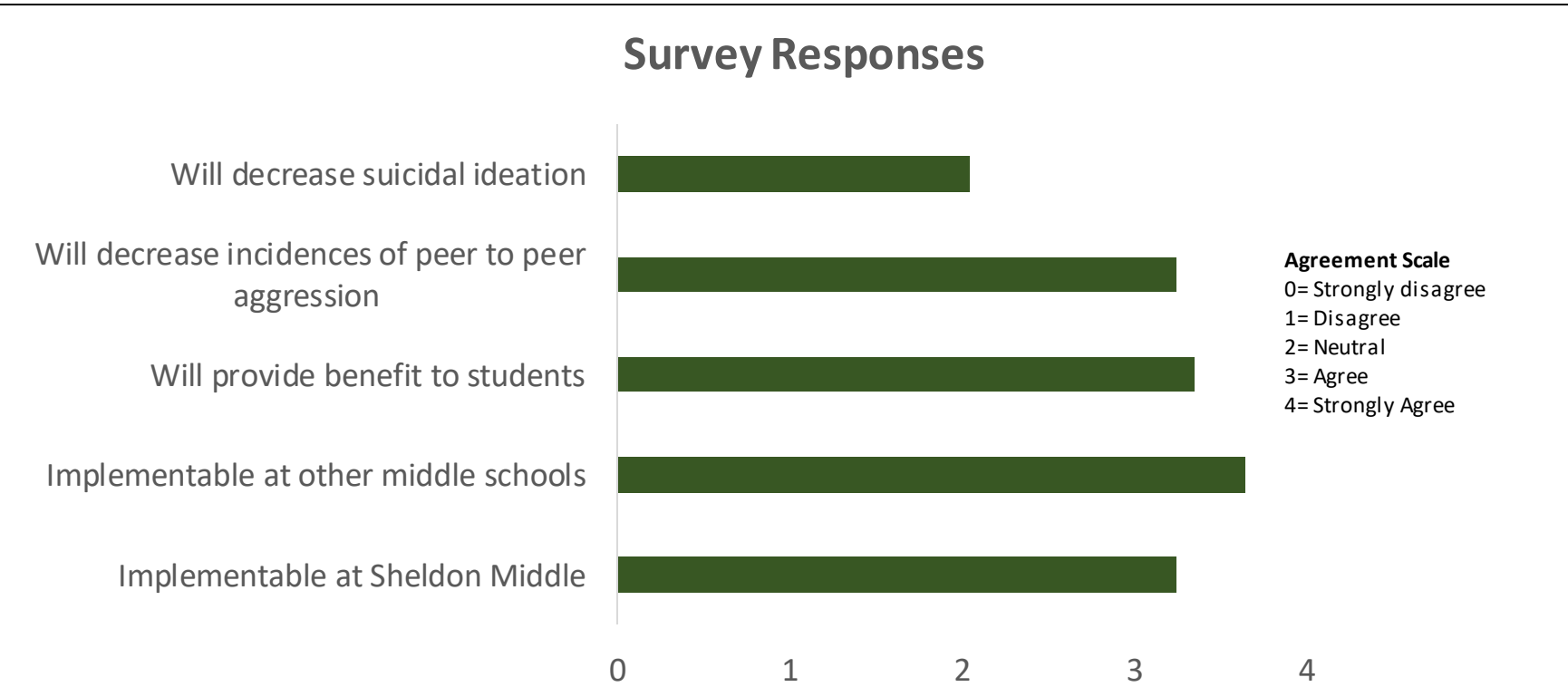


Figure 2. Responses to survey questions administered following presentation of CRR. Responses of "strongly disagree", "disagree", "neutral", "agree", and "strongly agree" were assigned numerical values of 0, 1, 2, 3, and 4 respectively.

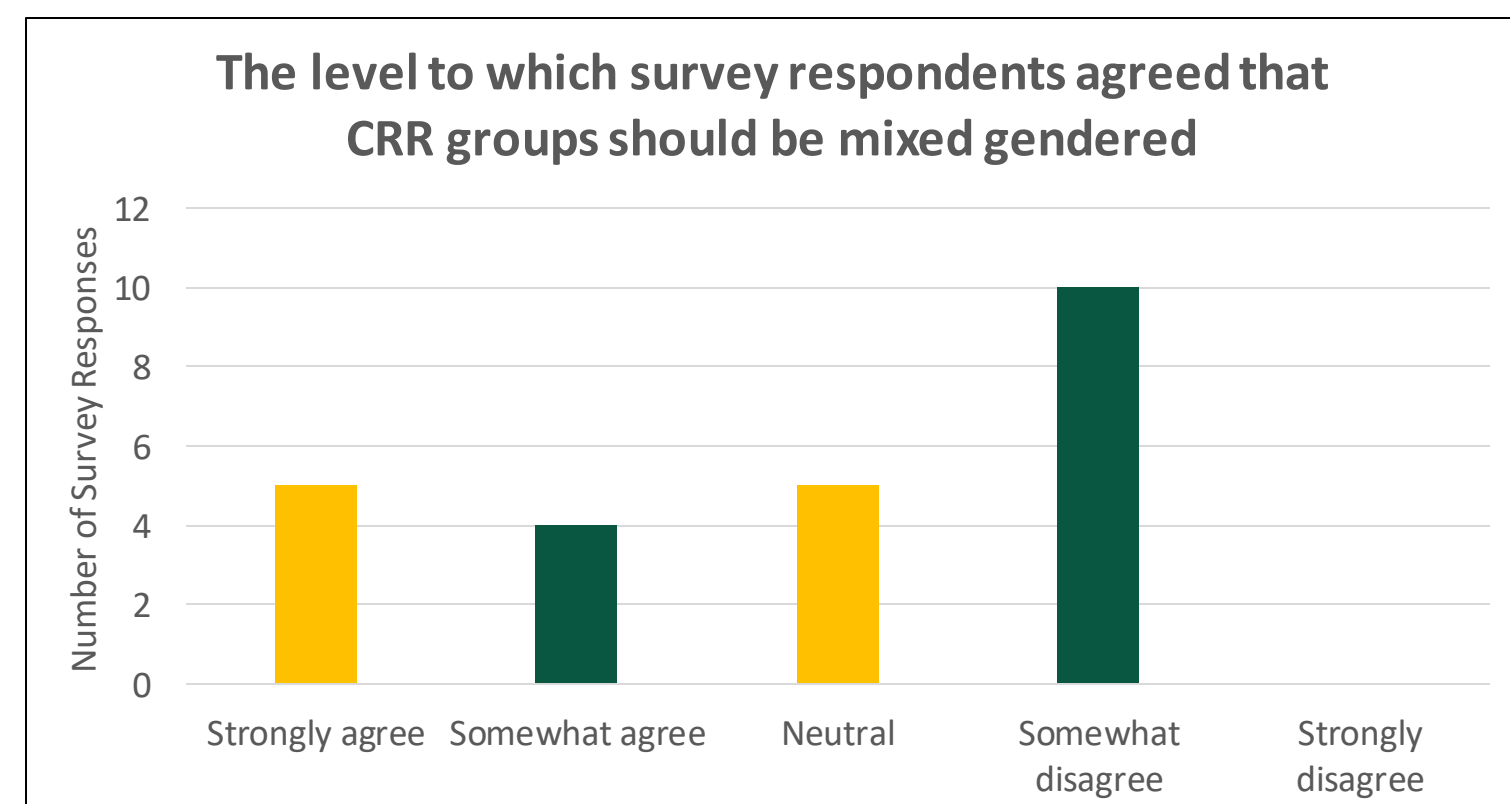


Figure 3. Survey respondents were asked how strongly they felt about the CRR groups being mixed gendered

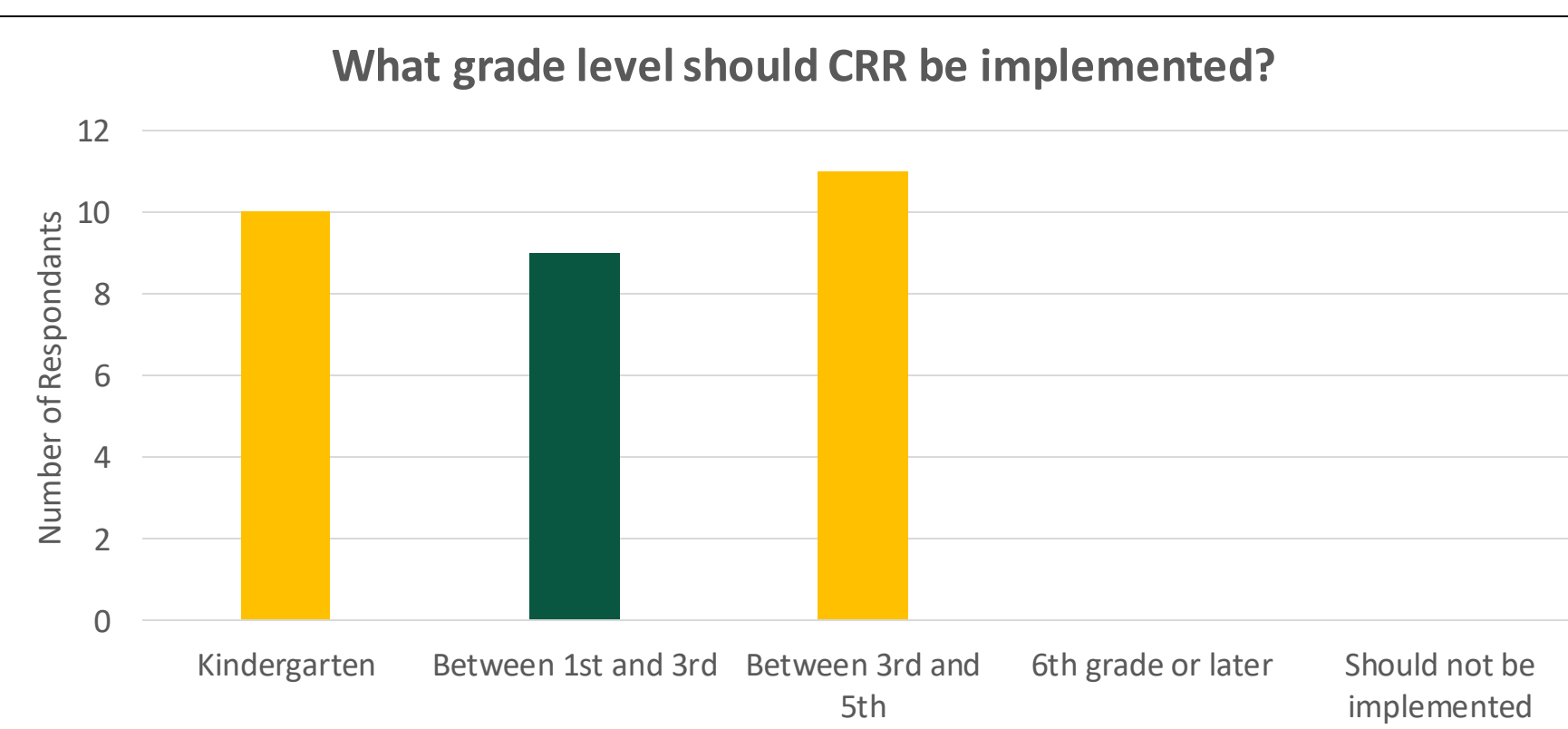


Figure 4. Survey respondents were asked how early they believed the CRR program, if implemented, should be started

Survey Open Responses

- The biggest limitation that faculty, staff, and parents foresaw was finding time in the schedule and finding enough facilitators
- The changes that they would want to make to the program were: changes to the format (i.e. deeper questions and a range material for homework)
- Strengths of CRR were that it was an open group that allows for the creation of intimate relationships
- Weaknesses of CRR were 1.) extra homework for the students-and 2.) stigma resulting from the conversations with peers.

Conclusion

The Communication, Relationships, and Reflection (CRR) peer advisory program was very well received by parents and faculty. It was generally believed that CRR could benefit students, decrease incidences of peer-to-peer aggression, and decrease suicidal ideation by survey respondents.

Finding sufficient staff and resources were the primary concerns expressed regarding the feasibility of implementation.

This program is unique because it was designed locally, using a combination of research and direct student input. The student-driven process used to design CRR was intended to meet the specific needs of a rural Vermont middle school. The students were very enthusiastic about the potential implementation of CRR.

This process could be used as a model by other schools to create local programs to meet their own students' needs.

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