

United at Twin Rivers Evaluation
Annual Evaluation Report
July 2024

Prepared by:

Talia Stol, PhD

Rosemary McNelis, EdD

Jennifer Iriti, PhD

Brooke English, MA

Danielle Lowry, PhD

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 3

 FINDINGS RELATED TO MODEL IMPLEMENTATION 3

 FINDINGS RELATED TO VALUE 4

 FINDINGS RELATED TO MODEL-BUILDING 6

INTRODUCTION 7

 THE UNITED MODEL 7

 EVALUATION DESIGN & METHODS 8

Evaluation Framework..... 8

Theory of Change..... 10

Evaluation Activities (May 2023 – June 2024)..... 10

 REPORT STRUCTURE 11

EVALUATION INQUIRY AREA: IMPLEMENTATION OF THE UNITED MODEL 12

 IMPLEMENTATION QUESTION: IS THE MODEL DOING WHAT IT SAID IT WOULD DO WITH REGARDS TO RIGOROUS ACADEMICS? WHAT ADAPTATIONS ARE BEING MADE, WHY, AND TO WHAT EFFECT?..... 12

Findings – Ready to Learn (RTL) Approach 12

Developmental insights and considerations – Ready to Learn (RTL) Approach..... 17

Findings - Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)..... 18

Developmental insights and considerations – Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) 20

 IMPLEMENTATION QUESTIONS: IS THE MODEL DOING WHAT IT SAID IT WOULD DO WITH REGARDS TO HEALTHY & ACTIVE LIFESTYLES (HAL)? WHAT ADAPTATIONS ARE BEING MADE, WHY, AND TO WHAT EFFECT? 21

Findings..... 21

Developmental insights and considerations..... 24

 IMPLEMENTATION QUESTION: IS THE MODEL DOING WHAT IT SAID IT WOULD DO WITH REGARDS TO WRAP-AROUND SUPPORTS? WHAT ADAPTATIONS ARE BEING MADE, WHY, AND TO WHAT EFFECT?..... 25

Findings..... 25

Developmental insights and considerations..... 28

EVALUATION INQUIRY AREA: VALUE OF THE UNITED MODEL 29

 VALUE QUESTION: IN WHAT WAYS, AND TO WHAT EXTENT, DOES THIS MODEL BENEFIT **STUDENTS** IN TERMS OF BASIC NEEDS, HOLISTIC WELL-BEING, AND ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT? 29

Findings..... 29

Developmental Insights and considerations..... 39

 VALUE QUESTION: IN WHAT WAYS, AND TO WHAT EXTENT, DOES THIS MODEL BENEFIT UNITED **FAMILIES**? 40

Findings..... 40

United at Twin Rivers Evaluation
Annual Evaluation Report – Evaluation Year 1, July 2024

Developmental insights and considerations..... 41

VALUE QUESTION: IN WHAT WAYS, AND TO WHAT EXTENT, DOES THIS MODEL CULTIVATE **STAFF** EMPOWERMENT AND EFFICACY? 42

Findings..... 42

Developmental insights and considerations..... 47

VALUE QUESTION: WHAT IS THE ADDED VALUE OF THIS MODEL TO COMMUNITY MEMBERS, AND THE **COMMUNITY AS A WHOLE**? 48

Developmental insights and considerations..... 48

EVALUATION INQUIRY AREA: MODEL-BUILDING AND SUSTAINABILITY..... 49

MODEL-BUILDING QUESTION: HOW DO DIFFERENT COMPONENTS OF THE MODEL CONTRIBUTE TO VALUED OUTCOMES, AND WHY? 49

Developmental insights and considerations..... 49

SUSTAINABILITY QUESTION: WHAT WILL IT TAKE TO SUSTAIN COMPONENTS OF THE MODEL BEYOND THE INITIAL PERIOD OF PARTNERSHIP SUPPORT, AND WHY? 51

Developmental insights and considerations..... 51

APPENDIX A – UNITED THEORY OF CHANGE..... 53

APPENDIX B – BREAKDOWN OF DATA COLLECTION ACTIVITIES BY DATA SOURCE 54

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

FINDINGS RELATED TO MODEL IMPLEMENTATION

- ◆ The model's Ready to Learn (RTL) approach has become part of a shared school culture, with the regular provision of just-in-time emotional and material support from a holistic and mental health-focused lens. Continued and consistent integrity of model implementation and sustainability may be aided by clarification on process and priorities for use of dedicated staff to address students' essential needs.
- ◆ Mid-Day Block (MDB) is widely lauded across staff members, students, and families as a vital strategy of the model's Healthy, Active Lifestyles (HAL) pillar, fulfilling its intended purpose of providing students with a much-needed break, daily physical activity, and a chance to socialize. Now embedded in the school's daily schedule, logistical challenges presented in its first year of implementation have been largely resolved. However, spillover student conflict and transitions back to classrooms persist as challenges that dampen the overall positive effects reported.
- ◆ Critical across all three design pillars, Learning Relationship Specialists (LRSs) are being deployed as the linchpin of Wellness Welcome and managers of MDB. They play a significant role in re-directing and addressing behavioral challenges, which in turn enhance teachers' ability to deliver quality instruction. However, they are under-utilized for academic support within the classroom, a function envisioned in the original design of the LRS role.
- ◆ Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are utilized as a valued space for teacher collaboration and communication, leveraged for examining data and sharing information that enables teachers to better support each other and their students. PLCs have not yet been activated systematically for strategic professional development or to collectively address shared problems of practice that advance a shared goal.
- ◆ LRSs, United administrative team members, and other school staff regularly utilize the Tiger's Den component of the Wrap-Around Support pillar to meet students' essential needs. The United at McKeesport Community Center is likewise on a growth trajectory, with evidence of increasing use by the greater MASD community.

FINDINGS RELATED TO VALUE

- ◆ There is compelling evidence that the model is enabling the systematic provision of resources for students which contribute to their readiness to learn. A pre-existing culture of care has been activated and magnified by the robust availability of these resources, and by staff committed to connecting students with them.
- ◆ Practices enacted through the model have further nurtured trusting relationships between adults and students—a key condition of the model’s theory of change, and an important building block of academic growth. Educational research is clear that both cognitive and affective trust is a necessary condition for students to be willing to take risks, persist through struggle, and deeply engage in the classroom.¹
- ◆ The translation of “Healthy Minds, Healthy Bodies, Healthy Relationships” into the day-to-day ethos of “Smart, Strong, Kind” is becoming an internalized framework for language and behavior among staff and students alike. They, along with United family members, overwhelmingly view the school as a welcoming and humanizing space – functioning more than just as a school building, but as a community of people who care about being Smart, Strong, and Kind.
- ◆ Across school staff and stakeholder groups, there is a general sense that the model has enhanced to student positivity towards school and cultivated healthy behaviors, contributing to a school environment conducive to personal and academic growth. Despite evidence that great strides have been made in the school environment and peer culture, fights and bullying continue to surface as an area of concern among students
- ◆ There is an understanding across stakeholder groups that student attendance has improved since the inception of the partnership. School staff members attribute this to components of the model, including resources infused by the partnership’s Wrap-around Support structure, the Ready to Learn approach, and

¹ Allen, KA., Slaten, C.D., Arslan, G., Roffey, S., Craig, H., Vella-Brodrick, D.A. (2021). School Belonging: The Importance of Student and Teacher Relationships. In: Kern, M.L., Wehmeyer, M.L. (eds) The Palgrave Handbook of Positive Education. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-64537-3_21

Biesta, G. J. J., & Stengel, B. S. (2016). [Thinking Philosophically About Teaching](#). In D. H. Gitomer & C. A. Bell (Eds.), Handbook of Research on Teaching (Fifth, pp. 7–67). American Educational Research Association.

Schneider, B., & Bryk, A. (2002). Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

United at Twin Rivers Evaluation
Annual Evaluation Report – Evaluation Year 1, July 2024

Mid-Day Block. However, chronic absenteeism remains a barrier to realizing greater gains toward the key theory of change condition of “Students come to school.” District attendance data will be critical for corroborating these findings and unpacking the complexities surrounding student attendance.

- ◆ Families see United as a warm and inviting space – one that provides more than an academic experience for their children. They describe the culture as one in which people take care of one another – an authentic community that often feels like family. Within the magnitude of this achievement, a challenge remains for how the model might broaden and deepen circles of engagement among caregivers who are not represented by the family members who participated in this year’s evaluation activities.
- ◆ Administrative team culture and leadership has been an essential factor driving model implementation. Their embodiment of the model’s shared beliefs regarding student potential and humanizing relationship-building has generated strong levels of trust across the school’s ecosystem that grant a level of flexibility and goodwill in the face of change and growing pains on the road to improvement.
- ◆ United teachers are experiencing an increased sense of efficacy in their own and their colleagues’ ability to support students’ holistic needs, which they attribute to changes catalyzed by the model design, implementation, and staunch support of school leaders. Importantly, these developments build upon a widespread, pre-existing culture of care and collegiality among staff.
- ◆ There is an eagerness to move deeper into strategies to activate other aspects of the Rigorous Academics pillar, particularly given longstanding concerns among staff regarding student proficiency levels. As the partnership positions itself to address this challenge, finding avenue to continue to integrate and support both social emotional well-being and academic rigor within the classroom is key.
- ◆ Examining the degree and extent to which the model is impacting the broader McKeesport community has not been an emphasis of this year’s evaluation activities. As the United model enters its third year of implementation, the partnership is in the process of more clearly defining "the community" and articulating a vision for community impact.

FINDINGS RELATED TO MODEL-BUILDING

- ◆ Evaluation data strongly suggests that the United model has reached a critical mass in realizing several conditions in the model’s theory of change, particularly around students, family, and staff feelings of welcome, care, respect, and empowerment. The partnership’s focus on cultivating relationships, intentionally modelled and supported by school leadership, has bolstered high-integrity implementation of key program components. In the process, the import of strong student relationships with adults across the school ecosystem has been validated as a key ingredient to the model’s early successes.
- ◆ While there is evidence that model implementation has helped build supportive, learning-friendly peer communities within classrooms, the theory of change may require fine tuning to further enhance and actively support the development of positive peer relationships within the school.
- ◆ The realization of early conditions hypothesized in the model’s theory of change suggests that an array of supports and caring healthy relationships positively influence students’ attitudes, motivation, and eagerness toward coming to school. The theory may be underdeveloped, however, for addressing absenteeism resulting from realities and circumstances beyond a student’s control.
- ◆ While theory of change conditions that have propelled United’s success in creating a community environment in which family members are embraced and valued, there may be additional conditions which must be realized to broaden the scope of family engagement.

INTRODUCTION

In 2021, the McKeesport Area School District (MASD) entered an innovative partnership with the DICK’S Sporting Goods Foundation (DSGF) to co-design a new school model with the following vision:

“We work together to ensure that all students, families, and community members have their needs met, develop positive relationships, and maintain healthy bodies. Our collaboration fosters the confidence necessary for individuals to pursue their paths and achieve their dreams, whatever they may be.”

In spring of 2023, the Evaluation for Learning group (EFL) at the University of Pittsburgh’s Learning Research and Development Center was contracted by the DSGF, in partnership with MASD, to conduct a three-year evaluation assessing the implementation, impact and sustainability of the United at Twin Rivers model for public-private partnership and school design (referred to as the “United model” in this report) while supporting a culture of continuous improvement.

The evaluation team’s engagement with partnership leaders and community stakeholders yielded a developmental evaluation approach that is responsive to the emerging and evolving nature of the United model. Developmental evaluation differs from traditional evaluation in that it explicitly attends to key characteristics of complex and adaptive change efforts to understand the influence of different model components on desired outcomes. Specifically, the goals of the evaluation are to:

- Provide timely and formative feedback on implementation of the model’s three pillars of rigorous academics, healthy and active lifestyles, and wrap-around supports;
- Report on valued outcomes for students, families, staff, and community members; and
- Support responsive, data-driven development, refinement, and sustainability of the model.

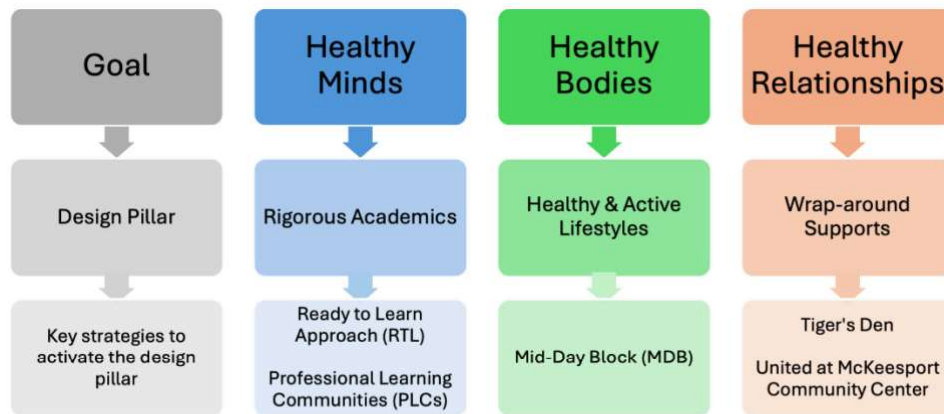
This annual report represents a summary of the evaluation team’s findings based on data collected from May 2023 - June 2024.

THE UNITED MODEL

Through a visioning process facilitated by DSGF and MASD, partnership and community stakeholders – including school staff, students, families, and community partners – articulated the overarching goal of the model to be “healthy minds, healthy bodies, healthy relationships.” To ensure all design efforts were rooted in these goals, they identified three pillars – Rigorous Academics, Healthy & Active Lifestyles, Wrap-around Supports – to organize design activities. An extended co-design process subsequently generated a set of core strategies to activate each pillar. Figure 1 shows a streamlined version of the pillars and their corresponding

strategies for each goal; it is important to note that in practice, these components are interrelated and build upon each other.

Figure 1. United model components



The evaluation design was subsequently tethered to this conceptualization of the model.

EVALUATION DESIGN & METHODS

In keeping with the partnership’s core value of co-design and community engagement, the evaluation team adopted an approach to proactively incorporate multiple community voices and perspectives into the evaluation design. The evaluation team first engaged the voices of students, staff, family, community members and administrators in the development of the evaluation foci and indicators which would be used to understand if, and to what extent, the model is working. The evaluation team conducted three human-centered design focus groups with members of these groups to better understand what they envision as successful outcomes. The team then created an evaluation framework informed by data from these sessions, particularly the themes of relationship-building, mental health, students’ holistic well-being, and community pride.

EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

Figure 2 presents the framework that has guided all evaluation and data collection activities. Each year's evaluation activities focus on elements of the framework appropriate to the timeline and stage of implementation, and in alignment with the model’s underlying theory of change. Therefore, ***this first annual report emphasizes findings related to implementation and early indicators of impact and will shift towards more mature outcomes measurement and sustainability indicators in years 2 and 3.***

United at Twin Rivers Evaluation
Annual Evaluation Report – Evaluation Year 1, July 2024

Figure 2. Framework for evaluation of the United model

Inquiry Area	Description	Evaluation Question	Focus
Implementation of the school model	This inquiry area drives evaluation activities that track how the intended design is enacted in practice.	1. Is the model doing what it said it would do with regards to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rigorous Academics? Healthy and Active Lifestyles (HAL)? Wrap-around Supports? 	Evaluation Year 1-2
		2. What adaptations to the intended design are being made, why, and to what effect?	Evaluation Year 1-2
Value to community	This inquiry area targets measurement of outcomes that matter to the partnership and its stakeholders.	3. In what ways, and to what extent, does this model benefit students in terms of basic needs, holistic well-being, and academic development?	Evaluation Year 1-3
		4. In what ways, and to what extent, does this model benefit United families ?	Evaluation year 1-3
		5. In what ways, and to what extent, does this model cultivate staff empowerment and efficacy?	Evaluation Year 1-3
		6. What is the added value of this model to community members, and the community as a whole ?	Evaluation Year 2-3
Model-building & sustainability	This inquiry area focuses on understanding relationships between model components and conditions for sustainability.	7. How do different components of the model contribute to valued outcomes, and why?	Evaluation Year 2-3
		8. What will it take to sustain components of the model beyond the initial period of partnership support, and why?	Evaluation Year 2-3

THEORY OF CHANGE

Part of the role of a developmental evaluator is to help innovators articulate and test their emerging theory of change. The evaluation team facilitated a process to support United leadership in codifying a theory of change between January and March 2024. Subsequent data collection instruments and processes were constructed to align with theory of change conditions where applicable. Appendix A contains the full theory of change document; this report offers early insights into progress on the conditions hypothesized as important and achievable within the first three years of model implementation and will be referenced in both the impact and model-building sections.

EVALUATION ACTIVITIES (MAY 2023 – JUNE 2024)

A variety of evaluation activities were designed and conducted over the year to gather data on the inquiry areas of implementation and value. Evaluation team members observed programmatic elements in action, created and administered a staff survey, and conducted interviews and focus groups with a range of stakeholder groups. In addition, the team reviewed documents pertaining to partnership development, the school model co-design process, and implementation artifacts. These included job descriptions, research and community needs assessments, public-facing communication about the model, and professional development and instructional artifacts.

Over the year, the evaluation team engaged with 194 unique individuals directly about their experience and perspectives of the United model during 58 interviews and 23 focus groups (see Table 1). Most interviews were conducted at United across 13 site visits, with some taking place by zoom or phone. Teacher and family interviews each included representation across grades K-5. Appendix B of this report offers a more detailed breakdown of evaluation activities and participants.

Table 1. Overview of 2023-2024 evaluation data collection by participant group

Participant Group	Unique Participants*	Interviews	Focus Groups
School, District, and DSGF Staff	59	34	9
Students (Grades 4-5)	90	0	11
Family Members	26	24	0
Community Members	19	0	2
<i>Total</i>	194	58	22

*Some individuals participated in both an interview and focus group; this overlap has been accounted for in the reporting total of 194 unique individuals.

REPORT STRUCTURE

In the sections that follow, we report our evaluation findings in relation to the three evaluation inquiry areas. We offer examples and specific data points where helpful, but these are meant to be illustrative and do not represent the full body of data underlying a given finding. Each section also includes developmental insights and considerations based on evaluation evidence and offers considerations for model design and implementation. In the first section, we highlight successes and challenges in implementing and adapting key components of the model. We then turn to a discussion of the model’s value for three stakeholder groups: students, families, and staff. Additionally, we touch briefly on the value to the broader community in terms of the partnership’s efforts to define what kinds of community impact it hopes to achieve. The closing section offers developmental insights *only* related to Model-building & Sustainability because this first evaluation year is focused primarily on implementation and value assessment.

EVALUATION INQUIRY AREA: IMPLEMENTATION OF THE UNITED MODEL

The first area of inquiry focuses on understanding the extent to which model components have been implemented as intended, as well as what adaptations have been made and to what effect. Understanding implementation is critical both for understanding observed outcomes and for codifying the model for future spread and scale. Where features of the model look different than envisioned, we seek to understand the context and conditions under which adaptation is occurring. This can be used to inform course corrections, and to strengthen and refine the model.

IMPLEMENTATION QUESTION: IS THE MODEL DOING WHAT IT SAID IT WOULD DO WITH REGARDS TO RIGOROUS ACADEMICS? WHAT ADAPTATIONS ARE BEING MADE, WHY, AND TO WHAT EFFECT?

FINDINGS – READY TO LEARN (RTL) APPROACH

The partnership has enabled and embedded routines designed to support students' capacity to engage in school socially and academically. The approach starts with a "Wellness Welcome" that is meant to occur every morning during homeroom. Using either a physical magnet or a virtual platform, students identify one of several possible emotions that reflect how they feel. The design envisions teachers, Learning & Relationship Specialists (LRSs), and United administrative team members² subsequently pushing in to offer individualized attention to students whose check-ins suggest a need for more support. Students are also invited to share their responses to a question posed during the morning announcement (e.g., "What are you thankful for?" "Who is your favorite superhero?"), which is intended to build familiarity and community within the classroom. Beyond the daily Wellness Welcome routine, each class is supposed to engage in a Restorative Circle protocol on a regular rotation to help students tackle conflicts and issues affecting their classroom community.

❖ ***Evaluation data suggest that the Wellness Welcome is being implemented largely as intended, with staff utilizing an emotion check-in that offers insight into how their students are showing up for the school day.*** In grades K-2, students place their name next to one of several possible "emoji" on a designated board in their classroom to indicate how they are feeling. In grades 3-5, students use a virtual platform

² For the purposes of this report, United administrative team refers to the Principal, Assistant Principal, Healthy & Active Lifestyle (HAL) Coordinator, Environmental Coordinator, and Student & Family Mental Health Coordinator.

United at Twin Rivers Evaluation
Annual Evaluation Report – Evaluation Year 1, July 2024

(YouHue) to choose from among several options for how they are feeling and to elaborate on the cause of those feelings.

I like it because it gives me a chance to see where the kids are. Normally, someone might come in and they don't feel good, and they just sit down, and they do nothing. But if I look at the [emotion check-in] and see that they're not feeling well, I'll cut him some slack ... put your head down for a minute ... [Or if] somebody's mad about something, I can say 'What's up? Why are you angry this morning?'

- Upper Elementary Teacher

- ❖ **Across grades, school staff seek to use the emotion check-in to proactively address issues before they manifest in disruptive behavior or disengagement.** For K-2 students, LRSs walk around in the morning to view the emoji boards for each classroom in their assigned grade, following up with students who signal distress or communicating to other staff members (via text or walkie-talkie) for back-up support. For 3-5th graders who use YouHue, entries containing certain key words or phrases are flagged and trigger an email to the student's teacher, the United administrative team, the LRSs, and school counselor. This group uses the email thread to coordinate who will follow up based on the nature of the entry, the relationships that student may have with specific people, and staff availability. The emotion check-in is also supported by LRSs and United administrative team members who engage in routine "rounding" in the morning as well as following Mid-Day Block (MDB).

Third through fifth grade has an app through YouHue, where it's an online platform that they can check in. But they can also message me privately. And it's also connected to the guidance counselor, [Environmental Coordinator], and the principals so that if there's something that they truly do need to talk about, we already have it on our radar. And I think without that component, we would be missing out on a lot. Just being able to sit there and have that app that says, 'Hey, you have a student that's had a negative trend for three days,' and you can see what she's typing and how she's feeling, you already have a better sense of what you're working with...[For example], she was up all night because the police were there - I know that she's going to be tired in class. I don't want them sleeping in class, but if she needs that 10-15 minutes, I'd rather give her that so that she's then better able to focus because she knows that I'm hearing her.

- Upper Elementary Teacher

The whole point of us [LRSs] is to build relationships. And once you build that relationship, you get the trust...but...before we have that relationship, it starts with us checking that Wellness Welcome board.

- Learning & Relationship Specialist

- ❖ **Some teachers have adapted the Wellness Welcome routine, keeping the core elements in place, with confidence that the United administrative team trusts their discretion.** For example, in response to some students' inclination to move their emoji to reflect changing feelings, one Primary Teacher formalized specific times during the day in which they were encouraged to do so they could still express their feelings

without interrupting class time. Others observe that while school leadership reiterates the importance of intentional time to check-in with students, the morning routine practices are not overly prescriptive; these teachers feel that if the central practice is there, the contours of implementation are flexible.

- ❖ ***Despite widespread endorsement of the practice, students may not all benefit equally from the emotion check-in and follow-up routine due to tardiness and scheduling conflicts.*** Both teachers and 4th and 5th grade students report that those who arrive early for breakfast often do not return to homeroom in time for the check-in, and specials scheduled during first period disrupt the daily routine of homeroom teachers seeing their students first thing in the morning.
- ❖ ***The frequency of the emotion check-in routine and staff follow up appears to have declined in the second half of the year in some classrooms.***
 - ◇ In the staff survey administered in April 2024, 74% of responding homeroom teachers report that they implement the Wellness Welcome routine almost every day. One selected “Once or twice a week,” and the remaining 24% selected “I don’t feel able to answer.” While we cannot identify the source of this discrepancy, these data suggest hesitance in reporting an implementation rate inconsistent with the known expectation (despite survey confidentiality) and/or unfamiliarity with what Wellness Welcome entails. In either case, this response introduces a level of ambiguity that differs from reports of near-universal implementation given during fall 2024 interviews.
 - ◇ In five out of 10 focus groups, 4th and 5th grade students report that frequency of the emotion check-in routine and follow-up support declined in the second half of the year. Students, along with 3-5th grade teachers participating in focus groups, cite technical issues with logging into the YouHue platform in the morning which reduce or eliminate time for that routine.
 - ◇ A few students also share that they stopped submitting truthful entries after experiences in which they failed to receive outreach or follow-up. One example involved a student who described herself as routinely and confidentially sharing her sadness via YouHue without response from an adult in the building, leaving her skeptical of the value of the check-in process.
- ❖ ***Some teachers and students struggle with the public nature of the emoji board, which they have observed to influence students’ emoji selections or to discourage an expression of their true emotional state.*** Several K-2 teachers observe that students may pick their emoji based on what their friends choose, or playfully use them to spell out a word or create a pattern on the board with their classmates. Similarly,

United at Twin Rivers Evaluation
Annual Evaluation Report – Evaluation Year 1, July 2024

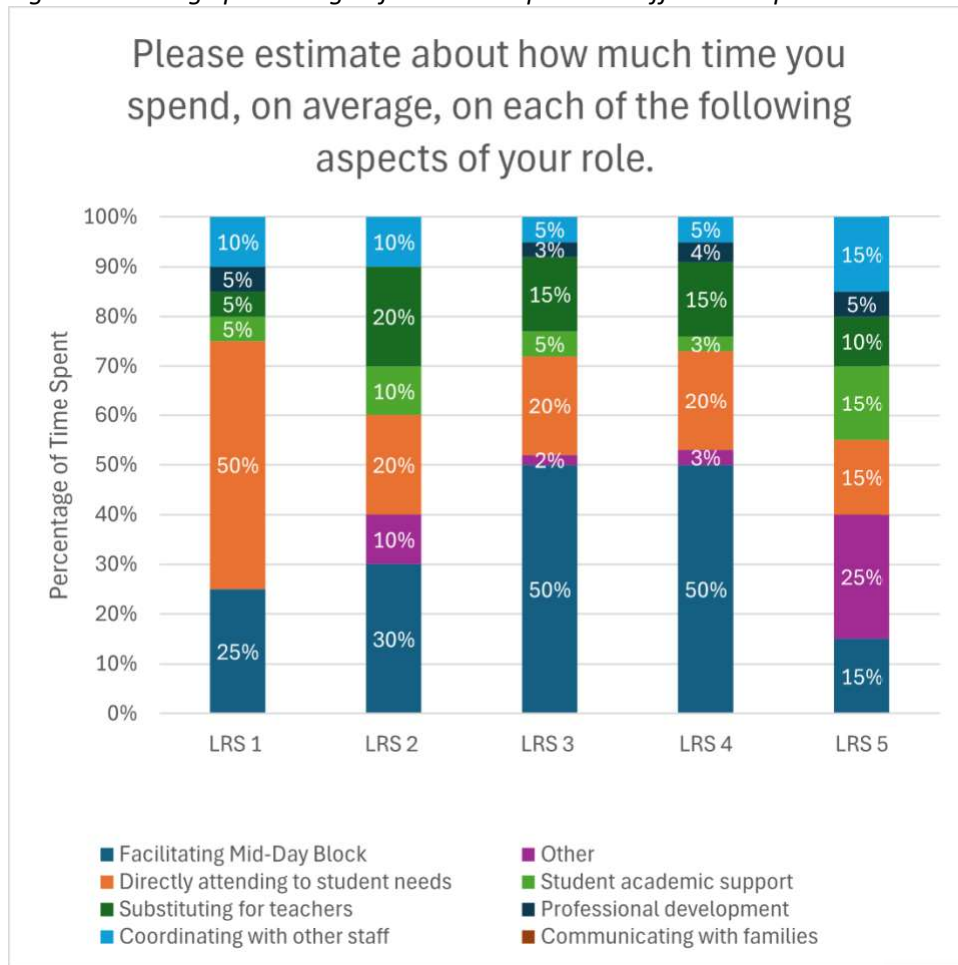
some 4th and 5th grade students noted that their YouHue responses may be visible to the rest of the class as they log their entries, discouraging honest responses.

- ❖ ***A variety of school staff greet students and family members at the door every morning, an organic extension of Wellness Welcome that was not included in the initial design of the RTL approach.*** Data from on-site observations, interviews, and focus groups demonstrates that this daily ritual sets a welcoming and positive tone for the day while functionally serving as a check-in opportunity that occurs before the formal emotion check-in process.
- ❖ ***LRSs are being deployed as the linchpin of Wellness Welcome and managers of MDB, but utilized significantly less for academic support (e.g., small group pull-outs, one-on-one instruction) as initially envisioned in the definition of the role.***
 - ◇ LRSs describe themselves as a “first line of defense” for students whose affect or behavior may signal an underlying need, always operating with the goal of building and maintaining relationships. In interviews and focus groups, teachers cite LRSs as a powerful classroom management support, enabling them to spend less time navigating distracting or disruptive behavior and instead connecting students with staff who can address their needs in constructive and caring ways. School staff across roles concur that LRSs play a vital role in working with students whose behavior, prior to the partnership, would likely have received a punitive, rather than restorative, response.

The LRSs have been a big [partnership resource]. [If] kids act up and you can't connect, you can call an LRS. And they can kind of remove them and chat with them. Whereas before it was straight to the office and a write-up ... I feel like they've kind of created a buffer between me and sending children directly to the office. Because lots of times it's not [an office issue] ... o, whereas before I didn't - I hate to say I didn't have time - but as a classroom teacher trying to get a, b and c completed, it's nice to have somebody that can say, 'Hey, what's going on? Tell me how we can help you.'

- Upper Elementary Teacher
 - ◇ Four of the five LRSs who completed the staff survey estimate that they spend most of their time facilitating MDB and directly attending to student needs, with student academic support comprising 10% or less of their time (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Average percentage of time LRSs spend on different responsibilities



❖ ***LRSs are frequently utilized as substitute teachers – a highly appreciated function but one that simultaneously may displace their ability to perform other key aspects of the role.***

- ◇ Many of the school staff interviewed describe the LRS’ ability to act as substitutes as a game-changer. Before the LRS role, teachers were spending considerable time covering classes at the cost of planning, breaks, and lunch.
- ◇ Data from staff interviews is consistent with LRS self-reports of how they spend their time. When asked in the April 2024 survey, “How many days, in part or in full, have you substituted for a

teacher this year?”, responses from the five respondents ranged from 20-60 days (for an average of 38.8 days). Three of the five indicated that “substituting for teachers” is the activity that takes up the third highest proportion of their time, after facilitating MDB and directly attending to student needs (see Figure 3 above).

- ❖ ***Restorative Circles are implemented on a regular rotation to help students work together to tackle conflicts and issues affecting their classroom community.*** Homeroom teachers are tasked with facilitating the circles using a research-based protocol. These circles also offer an early intervention opportunity for mental health-focused staff who periodically push-in to facilitate and observe the circle conversations.
- ❖ ***Evaluation activities surfaced concerns around the level of training needed to facilitate the circles and maintain confidentiality among students.***
 - ◇ While a majority see value of the activity, facilitating teachers expressed varying degrees of confidence and comfort with their implementation. Some feel they do not have sufficient training to constructively navigate the emotional direction the conversations sometime take, and have experienced times when students disclose personal information that should not be shared with their peers.
 - ◇ Similarly, in three of eleven focus groups, students voiced a lack of trust in the circles, particularly in relation to the sharing of sensitive information. They noted that while there is a ground rule that “What is said in circle stays in circle,” this rule is often ignored by their classmates.

DEVELOPMENTAL INSIGHTS AND CONSIDERATIONS – READY TO LEARN (RTL) APPROACH

- ⇒ *In focus groups, several students noted that they had not had an adult check in with them after repeatedly reporting morning check-in responses that they thought would signal a need for support. Relevant questions for consideration include:*
 - What are the thresholds that trigger adult intervention?
 - How do co-designers know that those are the right thresholds?
 - How might the process be adjusted to ensure that students' expectations are aligned with how the system will be implemented?
- ⇒ *While LRS flexibility is generally viewed as an asset, displacement of LRS time for substitute coverage may alleviate short-term problems but can compromise the effectiveness of the LRS role within the model in the longer-term. The third year of model implementation may be an opportune moment for the United administrative team, LRSs and teachers to collectively revisit the LRS intended scope of work, how it is*

being enacted, and the effects of any adaptations. This may enable the team to implement guardrails which protect the role from dilution of intended functions and ensure LRSs can continue to fulfill their intended responsibilities and priorities.

- ⇒ *The RTL approach has successfully positioned LRSs as a first point of contact for addressing student needs early, and before related behavioral issues arise; perhaps because family members tend to become involved only when problems escalate to the United administrative team, evaluation data suggests that LRSs are not being activated for family engagement on a regular basis.*
- What role, if any, LRSs might play in the school’s family engagement strategies, especially for families not already meaningfully connected to the school?
 - What new strategies might be employed to realize this outreach?
- ⇒ *Successful implementation of restorative justice practices such as the circle protocol may require more leadership from individuals with specialized skills and staff training in this area. Are there opportunities to strengthen teachers’ preparation to appropriately and constructively facilitate the sensitive conversations that may occur? These might take the form of explicit (re)training in the protocol, an extended observation period with gradual release of facilitation responsibility, and/or higher frequency co-teaching or modeling by mental health professionals.*
- ⇒ *Breaches in confidentiality can undermine the trust and community-building aims of restorative circles. Are there opportunities to incorporate protocols or processes to help students understand what is – and is not – appropriate to share in restorative circles? This may be particularly appropriate for younger students who have not yet developed the capacity to filter information that is best disclosed privately and/or shared directly with a mental health professional, counselor, or social worker.*

FINDINGS - PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES (PLCS)

The PLC component of the model’s Rigorous Academics pillar brings grade-level teaching teams together during a daily period dedicated to collaboration and planning. PLCs are a professional space intended to promote regular discourse, sharing of practices, and use of data to understand challenges and potential solutions.

- ❖ ***Daily PLC time (40 minutes) for each grade level has been integrated into the school schedule and normalized within the school culture.*** Like the RTL morning practices and MDB, this is a significant structural change, and a major implementation milestone. One minor drawback of PLCs raised by school

United at Twin Rivers Evaluation
 Annual Evaluation Report – Evaluation Year 1, July 2024

staff is the fact that one member of the grade-level team is absent each day due to how specials are scheduled, which can disrupt the continuity of dialogue and action among team members.

- ❖ **Teachers experience PLCs as a marked contrast to pre-partnership conditions, in which communication and joint planning occurred, but in a more ad-hoc fashion (e.g., passing in the hallways, during schedule transitions, and during their own downtime).**
- ❖ **Teachers characterize the purpose of PLCs as dedicated time for collaboration and planning, enabling them to exchange information, look at data, and to work as a team to support students.** These themes were consistent across interview, focus group, and survey data. Figure 4 offers a snapshot of 34 responses from PLC-participating staff members to an open-ended survey item which simply asked, “In just a few words, what is the purpose of your PLC (Professional Learning Community)?” Higher frequency words and phrases appear in larger text.

Figure 4. Purpose of PLCs word cloud



- ❖ **We also found evidence across data sources that PLC time has strengthened communication and coordination across grade-level teams, and creates an ongoing, direct line to administrative team members.**

I think that if the PLCs went away...as teachers, we would struggle. A lot of the time we get caught up with what we have to do. But having that built in PLC time, where I'm working with my grade team, looking at the data, or looking at the Ready to Learn piece, or you know, even a behavior...we'd completely miss it. You know, without that PLC time, we're not always connecting with each other. And I think it's important to have that...and having that check in with our administrators, being heard, and them understanding our frustrations or what we needed. And then, you know, them telling us like 'Yes, like, that's a good idea, let's go with it' or 'Hey, instead of doing

United at Twin Rivers Evaluation
Annual Evaluation Report – Evaluation Year 1, July 2024

this, why don't we try that.' It's phenomenal. It made us feel like we actually were a united front here, because it wasn't just the teachers and then admin, and then the counselors, it was all of us. And we were all on the same page. And because we were on the same page, the kids were on the same page, which just made everything flow so much easier.

- Upper Elementary Teacher

- ❖ ***While targeted and ongoing data exploration is occurring to varying degrees in PLCs, data has not yet been consistently or systematically activated for extended, data-driven exploration of shared problems of practice and focused professional learning.*** Data use in PLCs is typically facilitated and supported by academic coaches and the United administrative team, with a segment of teachers having developed practices to look at available data regularly and intentionally. In interviews and focus groups, teachers, coaches, and resource specialists highlighted the importance of high-quality data for driving reading and math instruction, and an eagerness to deepen data-driven instructional practices.

DEVELOPMENTAL INSIGHTS AND CONSIDERATIONS – PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES (PLCS)

- ⇒ *As model implementation moves towards leveraging PLCs to drive improvement on the Rigorous Academics pillar of the model, how might leadership consider balancing the cadence of strategic, data-driven uses of PLC time with the more informal and responsive uses which teachers are finding so valuable?*
- ⇒ *What structures or framework will PLCs draw upon or revisit to build routines for identifying focal problems of practice, collecting and making sense of relevant data, supporting teacher reflective practice, and maintaining continuity of focus over time?*

IMPLEMENTATION QUESTIONS: IS THE MODEL DOING WHAT IT SAID IT WOULD DO WITH REGARDS TO HEALTHY & ACTIVE LIFESTYLES (HAL)? WHAT ADAPTATIONS ARE BEING MADE, WHY, AND TO WHAT EFFECT?

In the co-design process, stakeholders innovated another major structural change to the school day intended to activate the HAL pillar. Mid-Day Block (MDB) is a 22-minute period that either precedes or follows lunch, divided into three stations intended to reinforce the HAL values embedded in the Smart-Strong-Kind framework. STRONG station activities center exercise and physical activity using teamwork-oriented games and challenges. SMART station activities are intended to center nutrition and health-themed activities. The KIND station is intended for unstructured free play that promotes pro-social skills.

FINDINGS

- ❖ ***A school-wide focus and messaging around the importance of physical activity and movement – and its relationship to students’ ability to learn and thrive in school – is evident in conversations with family members, school staff, and students.*** In each of its first two years of implementation, United has been recognized by the Healthy Schools Program, a national initiative administered locally through UPMC Children’s Hospital which “helps schools create a culture where healthy eating, physical activity, and social-emotional well-being are the norm³.” Partner schools earn distinction by demonstrating evidence of progress on implementing policies and practices known to support this culture.

As far as the partnership, they're very big on keeping the kids active, teaching them about healthy choices. Health seems to be one of the very big things that they do, even with something as little as like, the snacks they provide.

– United Family Member

- ❖ ***The United team has successfully built a new schedule and staffing model to install MDB and has addressed the initial logistical challenges presented by the new structures.*** It is implemented daily with an established rotation, utilizing multiple spaces Smart (Library), Strong (Gym), and Kind (Playground) stations. Classes rotate among the stations, spending one week in each, facilitated and supervised by

³ University of Pittsburgh Children’s Hospital Community Health, Health & Prevention Programs webpage.
[https://www.chp.edu/our-services/community-health/health-and-prevention#:~:text=The%20Healthy%20Schools%20Program%20\(PDF,well%2Dbeing%20are%20the%20norm](https://www.chp.edu/our-services/community-health/health-and-prevention#:~:text=The%20Healthy%20Schools%20Program%20(PDF,well%2Dbeing%20are%20the%20norm)

LRSs and the HAL Coordinator. The activity in each station is co-planned by the LRSs and HAL Coordinator and changes every three weeks.

- ❖ ***Evaluation data demonstrate awareness of the MDB stations and general rotation structure but were mixed in terms of awareness of how the activities planned for each embody Smart, Strong, and Kind respectively.*** Most 4th and 5th graders we spoke with were able to identify all three stations and their foci (e.g., the Strong station is for exercise and teamwork, the Kind station is for free play), though with less clarity on the organizing principle of the Smart station (e.g., as nutrition or healthy choice focused).
- ❖ ***MDB serves as a needed and developmentally appropriate energy release, recharge, and social opportunity for students. It is recognized as an opportunity to have fun and for movement that enhances health and focus.***
 - ◇ In focus groups, 4th and 5th grade students described the purpose of MDB using phrases such as “an energy release”, “a break for kids to free their mind”, “stretch and have healthy minds” and just a general chance to play and have fun with their friends after working hard in school.
 - ◇ MDB is seen as a unique and positive innovation to the school day, the benefits of which are amplified by the fact that prior to the partnership, recess had been eliminated. Evaluation data from adults across stakeholder groups identified MDB as one of the most dramatic changes resulting from the partnership, and widely endorsed its value from a developmental and learning perspective.

The studies out there show they need that decompression time, they need it. Got to release all of that pent up energy, you know, they've been keeping it together every day or in the morning for reading or for math or for science. And they need that just to get it out. And when they don't have that, I think that's where we see more of like the aggression. Because, again, they're not always sure how to articulate, I'm angry. And this is why I'm anxious. And this is why. And I think that really helps balance them out.

- Upper Elementary Teacher

They need that time to get some energy out and just be kids. I think for a long time, we didn't let them be kids. They need that time to be children.

- Upper Elementary Teacher

- ❖ **Management of MDB by the HAL Coordinator and LRSs also affords a benefit for teachers in that it offers more breathing room within the school day for them to refuel and recharge themselves, reinforcing that the Smart-Strong-Kind values apply to everyone in the building, not just students.**

[Students] definitely need that time to run around outside like crazy and to let us regroup and get things done because we as well are human and sometimes get overwhelmed. We may have things happen in our personal lives and things happening at work, and you just need a minute to take a deep breath, relax, breathe. I definitely would hate to see MDB taken away because it's beneficial for staff and for kids for sure.

– Primary Teacher

Our motto [Smart-Strong-Kind] here at United not only serves the purpose for our kids, but it's also supporting our teachers. They get a mid-day block themselves...allowing them to recharge, regroup and have that energy they need to get through the second half of the day, I think our model encompasses not only our students, but our teachers and our community.

– United Administrative Team Member

- ❖ **Teachers whose students switch from MDB directly back to class (as opposed to having lunch in between) report ongoing transition issues, particularly rowdiness and spillover of social conflict from MDB into the classroom.** This theme echoed across staff interviews and focus groups. Reassigning specific grades to MDB before or after lunch has resulted in the same challenges being observed, simply from the new set of teachers assigned to the less desirable sequence of lunch to MDB to class. Notably, this challenge did not diminish their overall endorsement of MDB as a key component of the school model to sustain.
- ❖ **Fourth (4th) and 5th grade students expressed frustration that sometimes individuals or a small group of students engage in behavior that results in punishment of their entire class (e.g., being sent to "the zone" or losing the opportunity to participate in MDB activities.)** In one focus group, a 5th grader hypothesized that perhaps the goal is to “teach the students a lesson by raising the group bar so they have to have high standards among themselves.” Even when understanding this rationale, the student and his classmates questioned the fairness of this approach, as did students in other focus groups in which the issue was raised.

DEVELOPMENTAL INSIGHTS AND CONSIDERATIONS

- ⇒ *While not dampening enthusiasm for MDB, the perceived benefits for students and staff are partially offset by spillover conflict and behaviors in those classes of students who return directly from MDB. How might the transition from MDB to class be adapted to systematically reduce spillover conflict and heightened physical energy? It may be useful to accelerate nascent plans for incorporating cool-down exercise or mindfulness activities to help students transition directly from MDB back to class. The effect of such modifications could be monitored and evaluated using incidence data and check-ins with affected teachers.*
- ⇒ *Preserving MDB’s core function as a space for energy release and recharge is key as the partnership continues to develop its HAL curriculum. How else might explicit moments to learn and practice HAL skills – particularly nutrition and healthy choices – be infused in the model *outside* of MDB to avoid over structuring MDB time and diminishing that benefit? Emergent experiences and clubs (e.g., Step team, *The Lion King* musical) also align with the HAL pillar’s promotion of movement, teamwork, and caring for one’s community; might these responsive and “bottom-up” efforts be incorporated into the overall HAL strategy?*
- ⇒ *Students reported that frequent use of collective sanctions during MDB feels unjust; it might be constructive for the United team to explore the extent to which this may work against the culture of respect and trust the model is otherwise strengthening and supporting through restorative practices and the Smart-Strong-Kind framework.*

IMPLEMENTATION QUESTION: IS THE MODEL DOING WHAT IT SAID IT WOULD DO WITH REGARDS TO WRAP-AROUND SUPPORTS? WHAT ADAPTATIONS ARE BEING MADE, WHY, AND TO WHAT EFFECT?

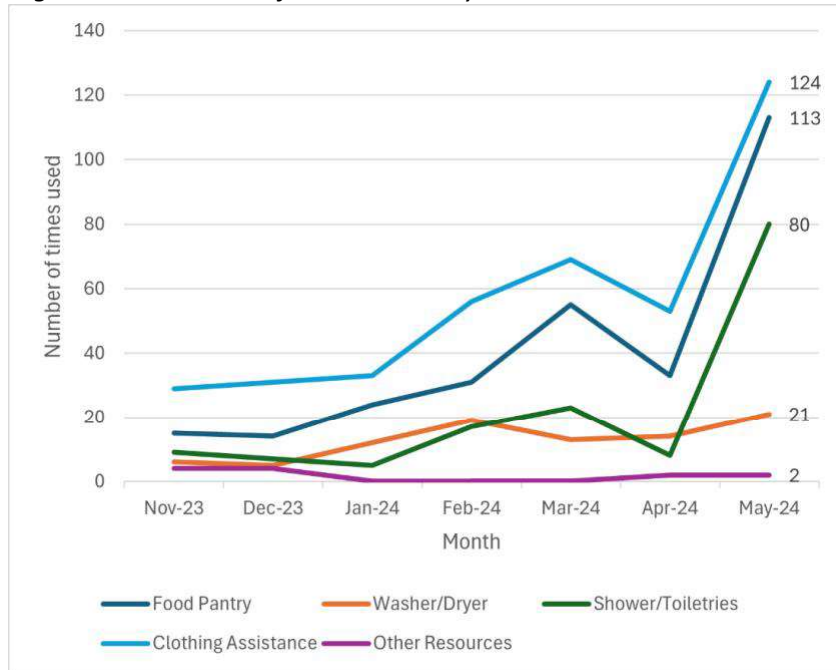
The partnership's co-design process identified the availability of on-site resources to serve both immediate and longer-term needs as a vital component of the model. Over the first two years of model implementation, this has evolved into a school-facing side, known as the Tiger's Den, and a community-facing facility known as the United at McKeesport Community Center (referred to as "the Center" in this section).

FINDINGS

- ❖ ***The Tiger's Den is being utilized for small but essential needs that make a big difference, with LRSs serving as the main conduit as intended.*** Throughout the day, LRSs work with individual students to understand root causes of difficult feelings or problem behaviors. This may include one-on-one conversations, a walk around the hallways, or a visit to the Tiger's Den, where they can access resources such as on-site showers, laundry, snacks, and clothing. These trips often enable students to return to class ready to engage in learning more fully (see Value section). Other members of the United administration team also frequently engage in these kinds of interactions with students.
- ❖ ***The United at McKeesport Community Center is established with a menu of services and resources, including the "store" where visitors can take up to two clothing or school supply items at no cost, a food pantry, and laundry facilities.*** The Center can be accessed by staff and students through the school, and there is a separate secured entrance so that community visitors not affiliated with the school do not go through the school building. This is an implementation milestone that offers a foundation for future growth.
- ❖ ***Usage of the Center increased over the year, and the scope of partnership, services, and events expanded significantly.*** April was an exception due to the Center's closure for spring break and PSSA testing. Figures 5 and 6 reflect data from the Center's internal tracking system which demonstrate the increased use by MASD students and McKeesport members.

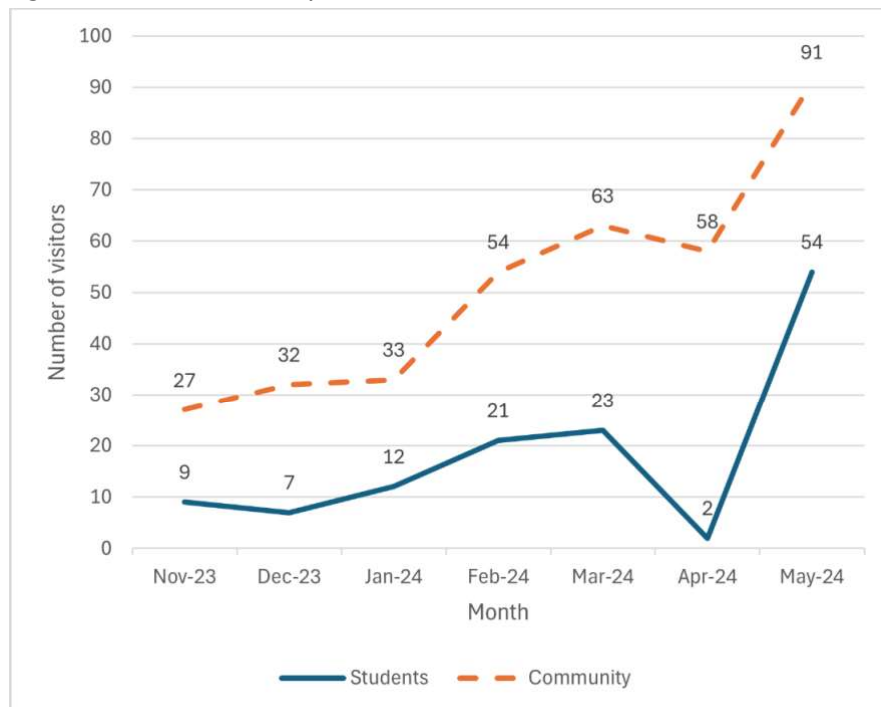
United at Twin Rivers Evaluation
 Annual Evaluation Report – Evaluation Year 1, July 2024

Figure 5. Center rate of resource use by month*



*This does not include just-in-time use of these resources by LRSs for Tiger’s Den visits

Figure 6. Center visitors by month*



*This only reflects students and community members who made an appointment

- ❖ **Networking, public messaging, and word of mouth are contributing to higher use by the MASD community.** Advertising via school and personal Facebook pages, as well as student-created TikTok videos, have been identified as high-visibility formats for MASD families.
- ❖ **The most effective strategies to promote the Center tend to be taking advantage of school and Center events to showcase available resources, and hosting tours so visitors can experience first-hand what is available.** United administrative team members, DSGF personnel, teachers, and members of the Center advisory council all speak to the power of physically coming to the Center to build awareness, understanding, and buy-in.
- ❖ **Outreach and relationship-building with district attendance officers by the Family & Community Advocate who manages the Center has resulted in MASD middle and high school students' making appointments to pick up food and shop in the store.** Demand has become such that a few mornings are identified each month during which a bus brings a group of students to the Center and returns them to their respective school. This is a powerful mechanism to enable more equitable access to resources by MASD students.
- ❖ **Strategies are emerging to manage increased access to the Center by individuals not directly affiliated with the school.** Students at the district's middle and high schools can use a QR code posted at their school to confidentially make an appointment, and a sign-in system has been put in place to enable visitors to be buzzed in through the community member entrance.
- ❖ **The partnership has formed a Center advisory council composed of United family members who act as a critical sounding board and brainstorming group that strengthens Center practices; these individuals also serve as influential ambassadors and connectors to the broader MASD and McKeesport community.**
- ❖ **Outside of the United administration team, LRSs, there is not universal staff awareness of the breadth of resources and services available to students and their families through the Center.** While staff interviewees cite a fall tour of the newly opened Center as helpful, they also describe feeling under-informed about its current status beyond its use for students who are taken there by LRSs during the school day. This subsequently diminishes their ability to inform their students' families about how they may be able to take advantage of the Center in other ways.

DEVELOPMENTAL INSIGHTS AND CONSIDERATIONS

- ⇒ *As Center use increases, staff capacity and infrastructure constraints will necessitate prioritizing certain programming, activities, and types of access over others.* Articulating intended audiences and volume might enable the partnership to better anticipate infrastructure needs, enable strategic outreach, and identify measures of success. Questions to consider in such a reflective process include:
- Who are the target audiences, and what is the intended use of the Center by each?
 - What is the sequence of steps which must be taken by a community member who wants to access the Center? Are these practices sustainable in the face of increased volume?
 - Once a strategic vision for Center growth is articulated, what staffing and routines are needed to ensure that a fully scaled community center can operate smoothly (e.g., sign-in procedures, scheduling, hours of operations)?
- ⇒ *Current advisory council members are enthusiastic about the United model and well-informed about Center resources.* How might they be engaged in deeper strategic planning to support future development?
- ⇒ *All partners – school staff, administrative team members, Board members, community advocates, families, DSGF – can better champion the availability of the resources at the Center if the targets and access processes are clear.* Strategic planning and communication about the Center’s scope and intended beneficiaries may also help these individuals further spread the word in ways that help the Center reach its goals.
- ⇒ *School staff – especially teachers – can be more effective emissaries to family members if they are familiarized and periodically updated on Center resources, processes, and events.* What strategies might be implemented to connect staff more regularly with the Center?
- ⇒ *Center growth and reach can be better understood if internal data collection efforts differentiate among “community members” (e.g., United students, United family members, United alumni, other MASD family members, students from other MASD schools, McKeesport community members who do not have students in MASD).* The current system does not allow for usage reports along these dimensions, which limits the ability to inform data-driven improvement and targeted outreach.

EVALUATION INQUIRY AREA: VALUE OF THE UNITED MODEL

This inquiry area considers data related to outcomes that matter to the partnership and its stakeholders. We collect data to understand the benefits of the model for students and families, the extent to which staff are thriving within this model, and the extent to which the school is viewed as a community asset.

Insight into the impact the model is having can help the partnership test and refine its guiding theory of change. The first year of evaluation activities centered on collecting early evidence of value to students, families, and United staff which the partnership aims to achieve during the first three years of implementation. These activities also sought to discern how specific model components may be impacting these findings.

NOTE ON AVAILABLE DATA: Student records regarding enrollment, attendance, and discipline were not available for analysis by the evaluation team in time for the writing of this report; as these serve as a critical data source for assessing the impact of the model on students, we have noted where claims are tentative pending corroboration with district data. A supplemental report will be prepared that incorporates learning from those data sources.

VALUE QUESTION: IN WHAT WAYS, AND TO WHAT EXTENT, DOES THIS MODEL BENEFIT STUDENTS IN TERMS OF BASIC NEEDS, HOLISTIC WELL-BEING, AND ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT?

According to the United Theory of Change (Appendix A), the first three years of implementation are strongly focused on achieving the conditions believed necessary to ensure students' readiness to learn. Therefore, in this section we focus on essential needs and holistic well-being; outcomes related to students' academic development will be incorporated into future annual reports, pending availability of academic growth and performance data.

FINDINGS

- ❖ ***There is a widespread sense that the partnership has enabled United staff members to support their students' well-being formally and consistently through the provision of resources they need to thrive during the school day.*** Evaluation data shows consensus across stakeholders – United administrative team members, teachers, families, and students – that critical supports are readily and reliably available to boost students' well-being throughout the day. United staff and family members both point to the impact of these supports.

United at Twin Rivers Evaluation
Annual Evaluation Report – Evaluation Year 1, July 2024

We have quite a few students where hygiene [is] an issue. Having access to the showers, to the washers and the dryers, you [can] see a confidence shift in the kids. We didn't have that resource before. And now they feel like they're ready to learn. They feel like they're okay to be amongst their peers.

- Upper Elementary Teacher

There's a lot of kids who can't get bookbags or clean clothes. I just feel, even if it's not my children, that it has helped the district overall...My kids love the fact that there's a store at the school that kids can get food from if they don't have food at home. They talk about that. 'If they don't have shoes, kids can get shoes!'

- United Family Member

- ❖ ***The model has elevated and mobilized the existing environment of caring adults to deliver systematic and intentional support to students.*** Evaluation data suggest that it is not a new practice for United staff and leadership to try to address or provide for students' basic needs (e.g., prior to partnership, teachers would purchase supplies out of pocket or offer snacks to students throughout the day and outside organizations provided donations). However, the partnership has created a dedicated pool of staff and resources which can be strategically deployed to meet students' essential material, physical, and emotional needs, equipping staff with tools to act more quickly and systematically.

There was already a good staff there, but I think the resources have helped them to do things that were already in their heart to do anyways...having resources that are backing them to do what they've already been doing. It strengthens what is in their hearts to do.

- United Family Member

- ❖ ***School transformation efforts have emphasized relationship building at all levels, resulting in students' ready access to adults who care and the development of trusting relationships across the school ecosystem.*** This may be the biggest early victory of the model and is perhaps the strongest theme echoed in data collection across stakeholders and data sources. One illustrative quote captures this common sentiment:

*[Teachers] are different because – we see all the kids; we know the kids – but there will be random kids I'll see that will stop **any** adult. And that wouldn't happen before. Like, you wouldn't have found that any adult is a safe person in the building, that they know that the majority of the adults in here are.*

- Upper Elementary Teacher

Importantly, student data affirm adults' perceptions of the efficacy of their efforts to cultivate strong caring relationships with students. Most students participating in focus groups characterized the school as a place where they feel cared about by adults – a safe space where they know things will be okay, even if

United at Twin Rivers Evaluation
Annual Evaluation Report – Evaluation Year 1, July 2024

things are not okay at home. For example, they describe the purpose of the emotion check-in routine as coming from a place of care on the part of adults in the building who want to help them.

They do [the emotion check-in] because they care about their students. Adults know their emotions in the morning and know how they're doing and at the end of the day, they know if it changes.

- 4th Grade Student

If you're angry or sad coming in to school, there's people that can help you out. Some people go on breaks and stuff to get any anxiety out [or] are taken for walks to get stress out and calm down.

- 4th Grade Student⁴

Family members interviewed overwhelmingly corroborate the model's emphasis on relationship building and its resulting benefits. Ninety-two percent (92%) of families interviewed describe their children as enthusiastic about going to school, with half attributing this to their children's affection for their teachers and friends. A majority also identified at least one adult at United (e.g., a member of the United administrative team, a teacher, counselor, DSGF partnership personnel, school nurse, or security officer) with whom their child(ren) has a strong relationship. Some described the existence of not only an open-door policy as the foundation of these relationships but also one that is proactive and responsive – a place where students seek counsel, support, or comfort on an as-needed basis.

They feel very comfortable with [the Environmental Coordinator and the HAL Coordinator] and they feel supported with if they go to them with anything, they feel like something is done or that they are listened to and heard ... it's been proven to them that they could trust them every time they go to them.

- United Family Member

If there ever is an incident that arises, it's handled very quickly and promptly and professionally...At one point this year, they were outside on the playground, and [my daughter] felt like kind of bullied a little bit...When I picked her up from the after-school program, she got in the car and was upset. I didn't even pull out of the lot, and everything was addressed and handled, like instantly. They're very clear with communicating anything that's going on, any questions that I have are answered. If a meeting needs to be had, that is scheduled and done fast. Everyone that I have had an interaction with the last two years there, the outcome has always been amazing. Even if it started off as a situation...everything was clarified. Just very upfront, transparent conversations are important, and the staff seem to do an awesome job with that as well. Some conversations are hard to have, but they're still needed.

- United Family Member

⁴ This student went on to list three different LRSs, the principal, the counselor, and the security guard as people whom they could go to if they were feeling bad.

United at Twin Rivers Evaluation
Annual Evaluation Report – Evaluation Year 1, July 2024

To know that your child is being treated as if they're someone else's own child, that is the best way I can put it. That is the environment that has been created there and DICK'S has been supportive of that.

– United Family Member

Family members also point to the role familiarity plays in student-staff relationships, describing how students know United adults in contexts beyond those confined to the school walls (e.g., as coaches, neighbors, and relatives). A subset of interviewees made a point to say that they value how the partnership has capitalized on leadership and staff from within the McKeesport community, especially those with whom students may identify based on race and gender.

- ❖ **Components of the model play a key role in relationship building.** Across data sources, school staff perceive model components as improving student-staff relationships. School staff across a range of roles specifically credit the RTL approach with institutionalizing intentionality around building relationships and classroom community, as well as greater awareness and empathy for each other as individuals.

They put their emoji and say how they're feeling, we do a circle time, [and] we check in to see how everybody's feeling. Every day they get a question, just so that everybody gets a voice. We take turns and talk about whatever we want to talk about and just create that community within the classroom. The kids know this is a safe space...[Before]...there was no time for just building community, building your classroom culture, getting to know your kids, because it was a crunch ... But now there are specific things in place and times so that those interactions are happening and taking place.

- Primary Teacher

There's such a focus on just making the students' minds and bodies right in order to be able to learn. I think we have always thought about that, but I don't know that we applied it and, put it into practice every day."

- Upper Elementary Teacher

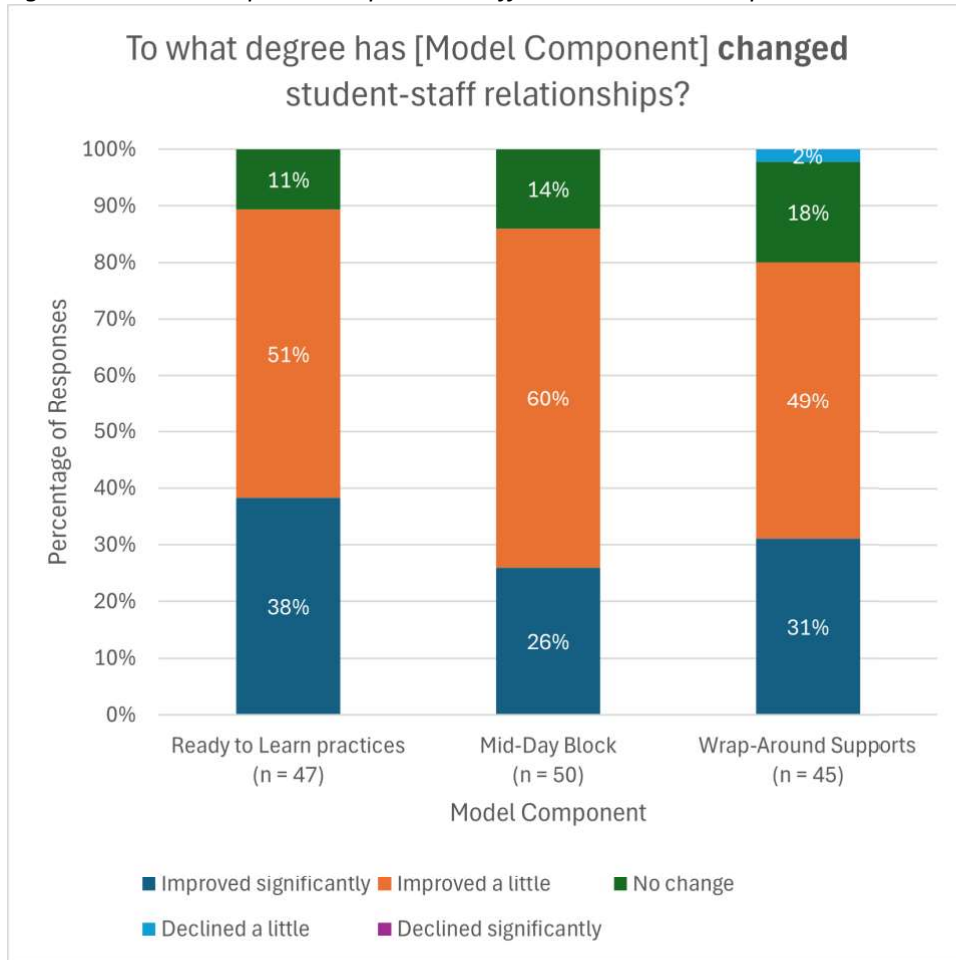
[The Wellness Welcome routines] are a part of us now...It took a while to become that like, but now I can't imagine starting the day without it because it's so needed. We've seen how much it transforms their day. Because sometimes they're coming in, they're not ready to learn, [and there are] several reasons that could be so...It has really made me realize the little things that their teachers say and do are so big to them. Like the teachers and their little interaction that you don't think is a big deal is so huge ... I think in everybody's minds, it's done what it's supposed to, because it's transformed the way we interact with our kids."

– Upper Elementary Teacher

Figure 7 offers a snapshot of survey data reflecting this trend, in which 80% or more staff survey respondents agreed that each of the three main components has improved student-staff relationships (either "significantly" or "a little"), with RTL practices receiving the highest proportion of "Improved significantly") responses.

United at Twin Rivers Evaluation
 Annual Evaluation Report – Evaluation Year 1, July 2024

Figure 7. Model component impact on staff-student relationships



❖ **Evaluation data also reflect a global sense that student attitudes towards school and in-school behavior have improved on account of the United model.** Interview, focus group, and survey data from family members and school staff converge around this finding. Figures 8-10 show supporting staff survey data in which respondents rate model components’ influence on student attitudes toward school, student behavior, and student-student-relationships. All reflect a perception that model components have had a positive influence in these dimensions of student well-being and healthy environment.

United at Twin Rivers Evaluation
 Annual Evaluation Report – Evaluation Year 1, July 2024

Figure 8. Model component impacts on students' attitudes

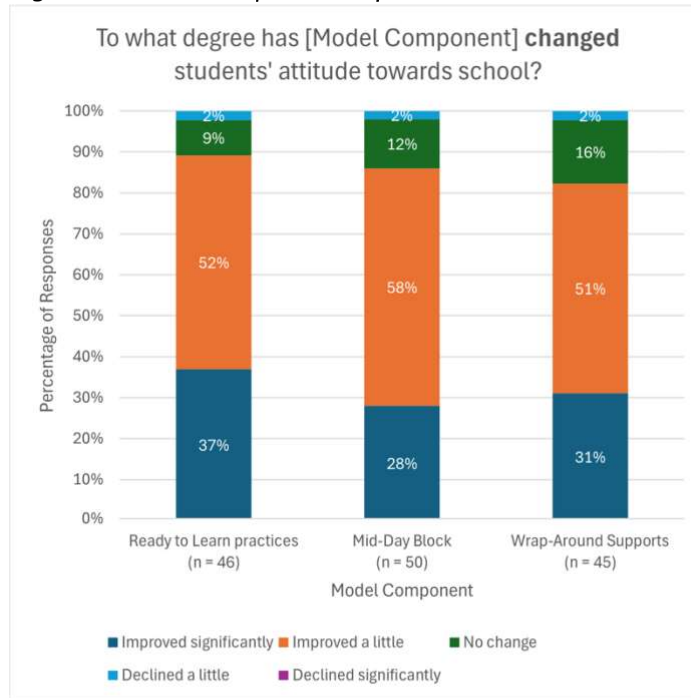
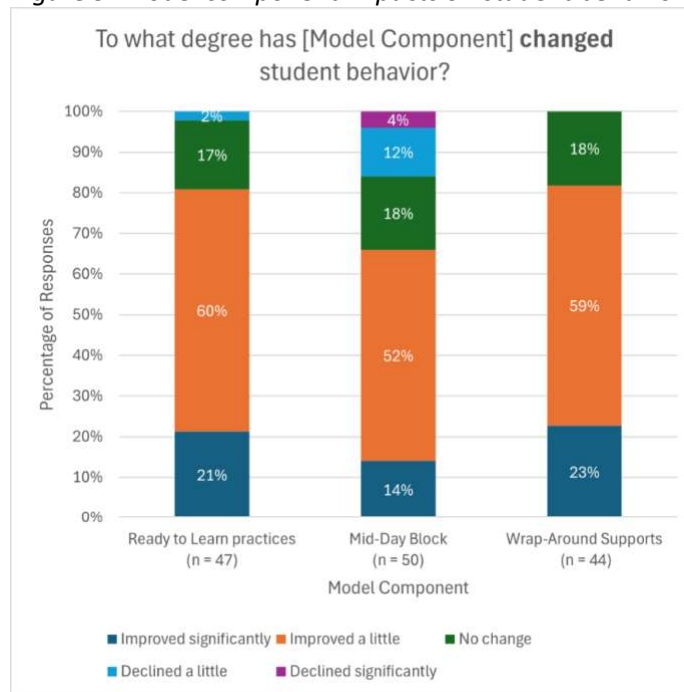
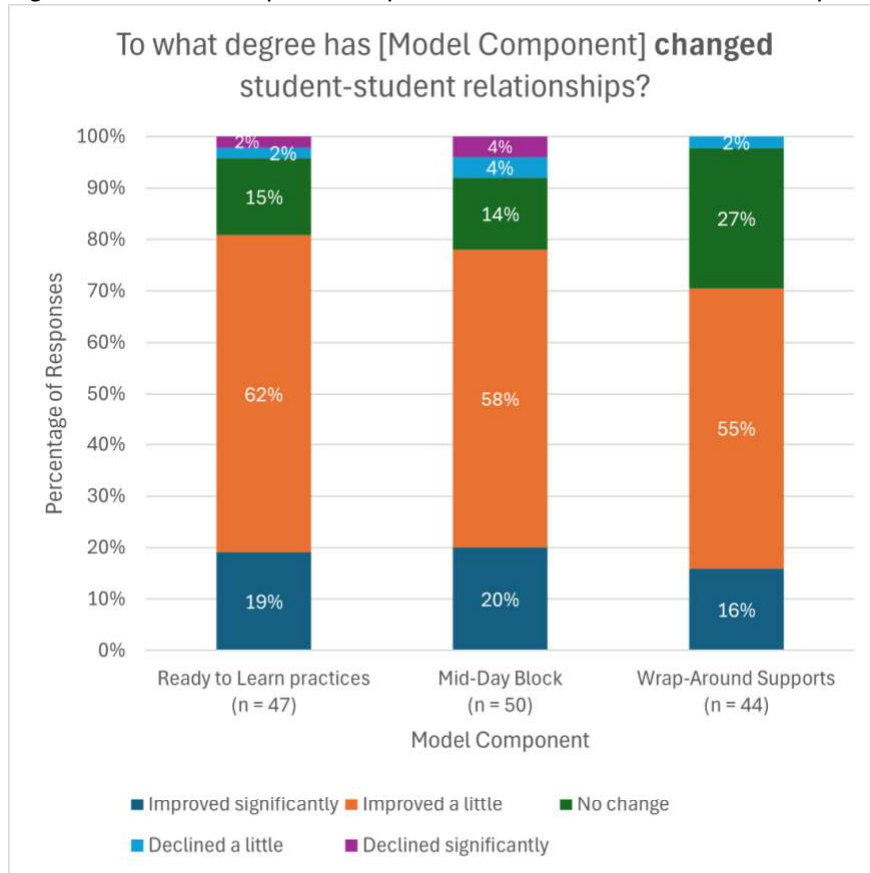


Figure 9. Model component impacts on student behavior



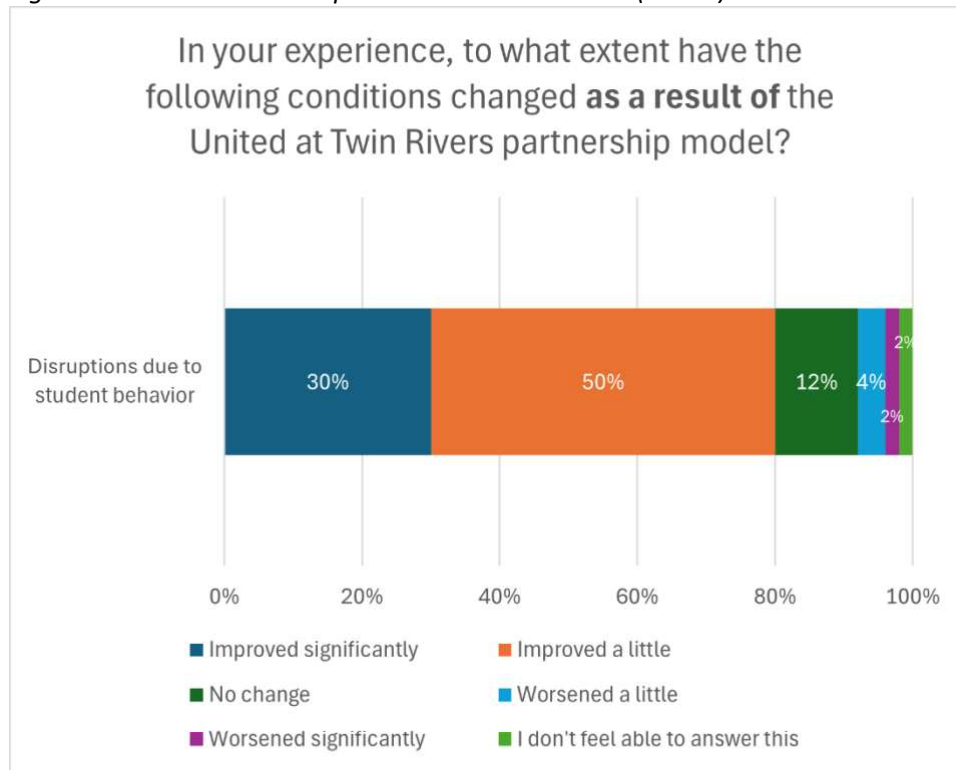
United at Twin Rivers Evaluation
 Annual Evaluation Report – Evaluation Year 1, July 2024

Figure 10. Model component impacts on student-student relationships



Finally, evidence from a range of staff members reflect a belief that the model *overall* has had a positive effect on challenging and disruptive student behaviors; Figure 11 reflects this trend as manifested in staff survey data. We do not yet have disciplinary and incident data from the district with which to triangulate these claims of positive changes in student behavior since the partnership’s inception, but we will evaluate the scope and degree of these changes once these data are made available to the evaluation team.

Figure 11. Model overall impact on student behavior (n = 50)



❖ **The Smart-Strong-Kind framework is visible in the school culture and as a code of conduct.** There is strong evidence that students and staff are internalizing the school slogan their behaviors and actions. In focus groups, many students use the words, "Smart," "Strong," or "Kind," to describe United. Others exhibited productive and respectful ways of engaging and communicating with their peers as they shared their insights with the evaluation team. Teachers shared their observations of students interacting kindly with one another, and school staff, DSGF partnership personnel, and family members frequently referred to the Smart-Strong-Kind framework as a living reality within the school.

[Students] know there's people here that love them. And all teachers love their kids, you know, but I just think they know that there's not just one person. I think the redesign has shown kids that there is more to learning in the classroom than, you know, just math and science. It's more how to be a friend, how to show up each day, how to make smart, strong, kind decisions, how to socialize...And all the staff here is designed to help them further that along.

- Upper Elementary Teacher

United at Twin Rivers Evaluation
Annual Evaluation Report – Evaluation Year 1, July 2024

I think the Ready to Learn aspect really makes it more like a community. Whereas before, it was just like, students, teacher, and then the little cliques within the kids, I feel it's more like, 'Okay, this is our homeroom.' [That's] a lot better because I feel like there's less negativity...they're not mean to each other as much as I've seen before. They check each other or say, 'Hey, we're not supposed to do that. That's not being kind or that's not being smart, or you're not being strong or not making strong choices.' Being able to hear a fifth grader who's 10, 11 years old able to say that – that is something that they're going to be able to use for the rest of their life.

- Upper Elementary Teacher

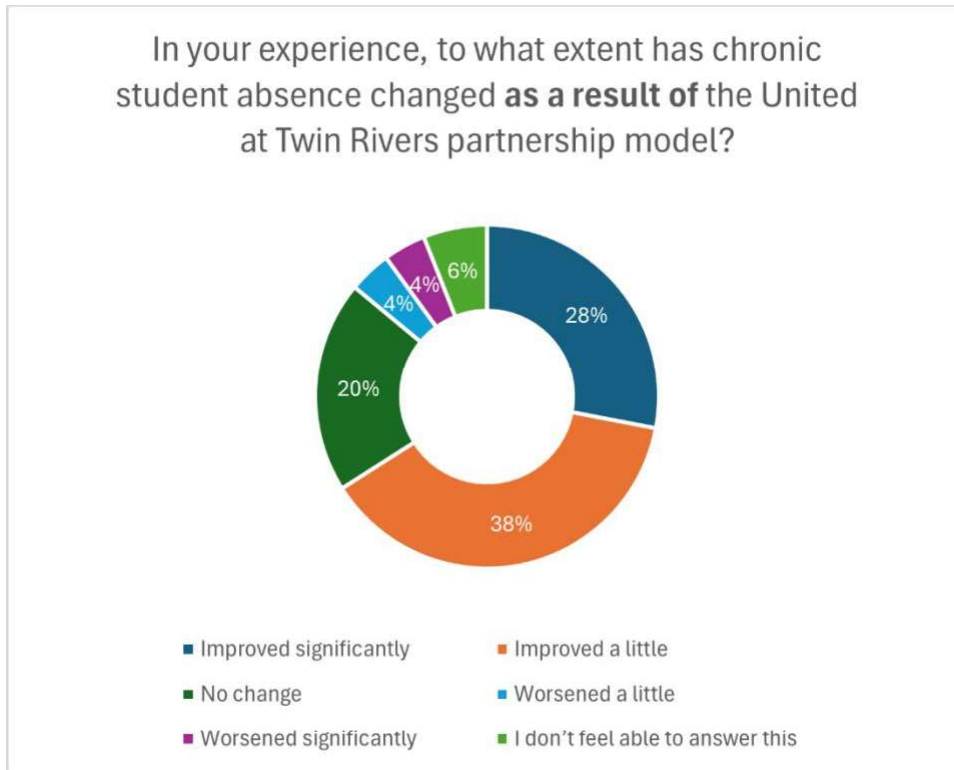
My daughter will come home and randomly, she will say - they have a thing that they say in the mornings⁵- 'We show up, ready and ready to learn,' I don't know the full thing, but she does. And the girl walks around the house, and she will just say it. Whatever they're doing, it's sticking with the kids.

- United Family Member

- ❖ **Although evaluation data points to improvements in the school environment and peer relationships, fights and bullying continue to surface as an area of concern for students and family members.** Students and staff describe the propensity for fights and conflicts originating on the bus to spill over into the school day; students and teachers raise this same issue with MDB. Inter-grade tensions and perceived bullying behavior by older students were raised in 4th grade focus groups. These students also commented on blind spots on the playground that are conducive to problematic behaviors which go unobserved by supervising adults. Again, disciplinary and behavior data will help triangulate and nuance these findings.
- ❖ **Student attendance is perceived by the United administrative team and staff to have improved due to the partnership's influence.** Educators credit this to the model's emphasis on building relationship and its systematic approach to addressing students' needs and well-being. Family members' reports that their students are excited and enthusiastic to go to school aligns with school staff attributions of positive attitudes contributing to this trend. On the staff survey administered in spring 2024, 66% of respondents report a positive model impact on attendance (whether "a little" or "significant").

⁵ This parent was referring to the school pledge that is recited during morning announcements: *We show up every day ready to believe in ourselves and ready to believe in each other, because together we are SMART, we are STRONG, we are KIND. We are UNITED.*

Figure 12. Model impact on attendance (n = 50)



District attendance data will enable corroboration of this trend as well as deeper exploration of the extent of model influence on confirmed patterns of improvement.

- ❖ **While attendance may be improving, chronic absenteeism also persists as a significant barrier for students' ability to thrive, even in a highly resourced environment.** Absenteeism negatively influences students' readiness to learn by reducing their instructional time and teachers' ability to assess their learning. The latter can also result in lost opportunities for student referrals for needed services. While evaluation data suggest that model components are contributing to improvements in attendance, there remains a significant segment of the student population for whom missing school is a chronic challenge. Out of 34 teacher respondents on the staff survey, absenteeism and tardiness are the third most mentioned challenge among educators (13%), after student behavior (27%) and parent engagement (19%). Chronic absence was also raised as a significant challenge in half of the teacher focus groups, prompting some to push back on the model's expectation of "compassion with rigor," with one teacher reflecting:

How can we challenge students if they are not in school, or their absenteeism causes much of their time spent on getting caught up with subject matter missed while they were out of school?

- Primary Teacher

DEVELOPMENTAL INSIGHTS AND CONSIDERATIONS

- ⇒ *While there is evidence that an internalized and reinforced Smart-Strong-Kind mindset has helped build positive culture within classrooms and contributed to a decline in disruptive or unhealthy behaviors, the continued prevalence of student-reported bullying behaviors is a barrier to greater progress.*
- Exploring more deeply what students perceived as bullying might point toward targeted strategies. Do they use it as a general term to refer to instances of mean or unkind behavior, or is it consistent with criteria of bullying as “a form of aggressive behavior in which someone **intentionally** and **repeatedly** causes another person injury or discomfort”⁶?
 - How might the Smart, Kind, Strong framework be activated to make unkind, mean, and/or bullying behaviors more visible to adults?
- ❖ *Although student attendance may be improving at United, a root cause analysis of student absenteeism might contribute to the partnership’s understanding of how best to leverage model components to tackle this persistent issue. Moreover, despite the implementation of RTL components, a larger “ready to learn” barrier undermining student attendance rates may need to be addressed. This is particularly relevant given that many challenges preventing students from attending are often beyond a student’s control.*
- ❖ *Absenteeism has implications for equity in instructional approaches that involve frequent homework assignments. In focus groups, teachers in multiple grades remarked that absenteeism and difficulty with homework completion are compounding with a segment of students, particularly those whose caregivers may not be positioned to consistently ensure work is completed outside of school. Examining current practices around homework and make-up work within and across grade levels might reveal innovative strategies that support learning for all students, but especially those who are chronically absent. Utilizing the PLC space for this endeavor might facilitate meaningful dialogue around best practices*

⁶ American Psychological Association. <https://www.apa.org/topics/bullying>.

VALUE QUESTION: IN WHAT WAYS, AND TO WHAT EXTENT, DOES THIS MODEL BENEFIT UNITED FAMILIES?

FINDINGS

- ❖ ***The segment of United families represented in evaluation data overwhelmingly perceive the school as a welcoming place***⁷. A large contribution to feeling "welcomed" by the school involves feeling known by United administrative team members, support staff and teachers, who know their names and can connect them with their children. One family member describes the sense of welcome and respect as the feeling that comes from being a valued member of a community.

Whether at morning drop off or any other school visits, family members highlight the simple act of being greeted by name as demonstrating respect and building trust, an authentic expression of care they see as part of the school's culture. Other elements of the school environment which make interviewees feel like welcomed partners in their students' education included proactive and responsive teachers who facilitate ongoing communication (largely through Class DoJo), a strong rapport with the school principal, attending parent-teacher conferences, IEP meetings, and participation in Family Night events.

[My son] started struggling. Immediately they sent me home different little pamphlets and stuff for me to call...We got right on it. He got his therapist; everything was just in order. They didn't dismiss me.

- United Family Member

He was struggling...he had to get help with ELA and the ELA teacher there, I did not know her. But I went to a parent teacher conference. And the excitement that she brought when she began to describe my son and what he was doing – and she described him to a tee – and what he needed and how he responded to certain things and where he struggled, and how she can help him and how he is developing. I wish that that could happen for every student.

- United Family Member

⁷ An important caveat in relation to findings from family member interview data is that the pool of family members who volunteered to participate in interviews most likely represents those who are connected to and engaged with the school, likely to a greater degree than the average United family member. Thus, a cautionary note that the themes emerging from this group may not necessarily be representative of the larger family member population of United.

- ❖ **Family members view the partnership as a community asset as opposed to simply a school building.** Most families interviewed (77%) articulated at least one concrete impact of the partnership. These impacts take a variety of forms, including:
 - Resources made available to themselves and their children through the Tiger’s Den and United at McKeesport Community Center;
 - After-school and summer camp programming that support working families in need of additional child-care access and positively influences their children's attitudes and engagement in school; and
 - School-sponsored activities which enhance community, promote greater engagement with the school, and encourage socialization amongst United families.

- ❖ **There is strong endorsement and enthusiasm for resources that fall under the Wrap-around Supports pillar of the model, though extent of utilization of the Tiger’s Den and United at McKeesport Community Center by United family members is unclear.** Current usage data does not capture the “just-in-time” volume and nature of use of the Tiger’s Den by students who visit as needed during the school day, and appointment-based data does not distinguish between United family members and other MASD or McKeesport community members. A family member survey may help approximate this number in the future, as well. Though only five family members (out of 26) shared that they used the Center for laundry, clothing, and/or food at the time of the interview, nearly all were aware of the availability of these supports and praised the partnership’s efforts to support those in need.

DEVELOPMENTAL INSIGHTS AND CONSIDERATIONS

- ⇒ *While we have compelling evidence of families feeling welcomed and supported at United, this finding represents the voices of family members who are already engaged. Continuing efforts to support all United families will help widen the circle of engagement.*

- ⇒ *Tracking and analyzing participation rates in student-parent conferences, school-sponsored events, and utilization rates of wrap-around services may offer a helpful lens through which to examine and unpack family engagement levels.*

VALUE QUESTION: IN WHAT WAYS, AND TO WHAT EXTENT, DOES THIS MODEL CULTIVATE **STAFF** EMPOWERMENT AND EFFICACY?

FINDINGS

- ❖ **United staff members feel respected and supported by the United team administrative team.** Evaluation activities evidenced high approval ratings for the United administrative team’s interactions with school staff, particularly in supporting their efforts around implementation of the United model. Two recurring, tangible examples of this support take the form of additional protected time for educators to plan and coordinate with each other, and an open-door policy that is responsive to both staff concerns and ideas (e.g., the school’s production of the student musical *Lion King* originated as a creative inspiration and interest of a United staff member). Actions like these have enabled leadership to achieve strong levels of trust and credibility among school stakeholders.

I think if there are any issues that arise in my classroom, I feel like I can go and talk to admin about hey, I need some order. I think they will be supportive. Whatever we need.

- Primary Teacher

If something goes awry, it's not, 'Oh, my God, what do we do?', It's 'How can we fix it?' It's that positive mindset instead of the negative mindset.

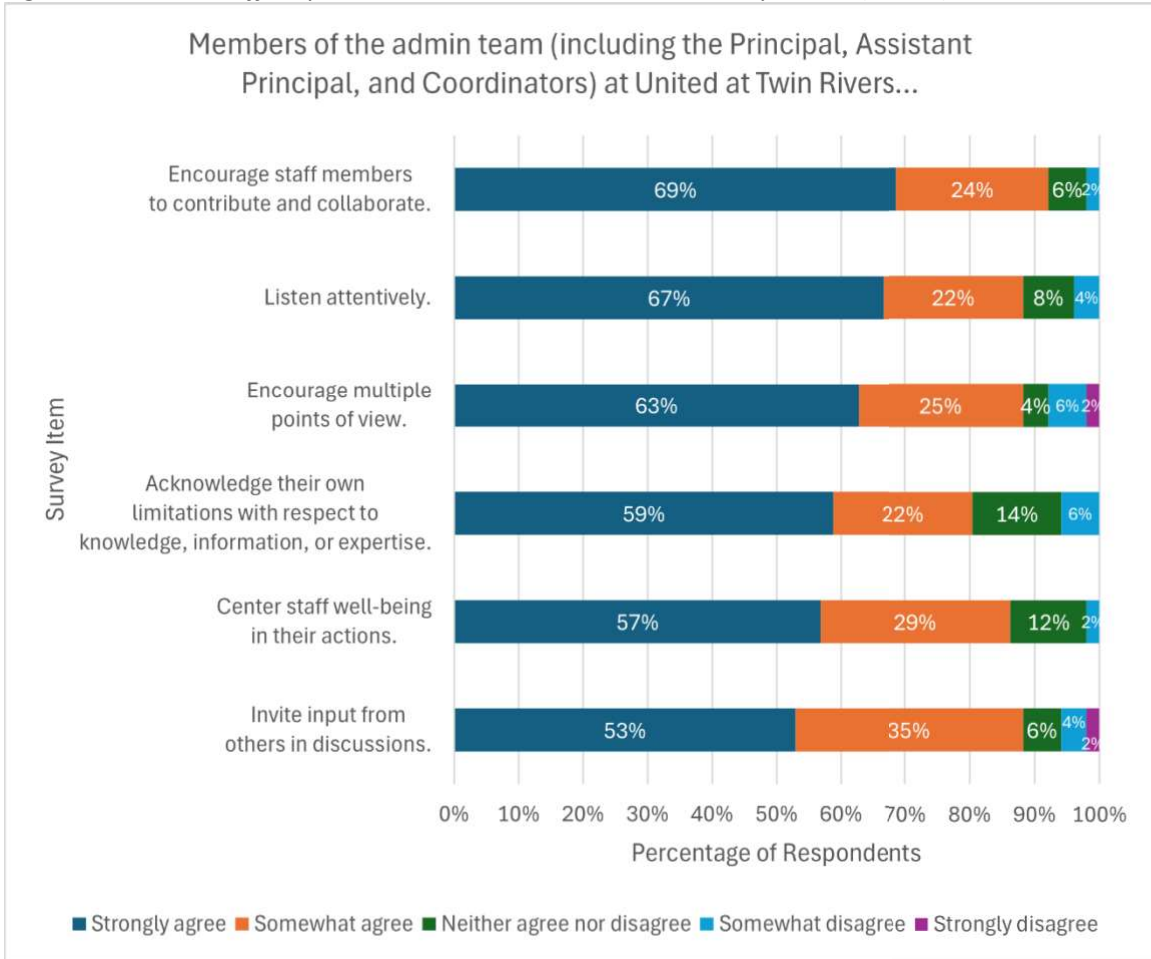
- Primary Teacher

I think what made it really positive and everyone on board is that from the jump, we felt included, they were always asking us to share our ideas. We didn't feel like we were being told to do something. We felt like we were being a part of what we were doing.

- Upper Elementary Teacher

Robust evidence of staff esteem for the United administrative team also emerged from a staff survey item (United administrative team members were excluded from responding to this item). Figure 13 reflects this trend through the lens of how United administrative team members engage with staff, offering insight into the model’s cultivation of trust between school leadership and staff.

Figure 13. School staff response to United Administrative team qualities (n = 51)



- ❖ **The United’s administrative team embodies the United Theory of Change conditions they seek to create within the school.** Administrative team culture and leadership actively drive model implementation. The administrative team’s daily practices and actions reinforce shared beliefs about student behavior and humanizing relationship-building at all levels (e.g., staff-students, staff-staff, student-student). Guided by a strong shared belief in student potential, team members actively engage families, staff, and students in working toward the broad goal of ensuring that students are ready to learn.
- ❖ **Modelling and support by school leadership, combined with integrity of implementation consistent with the core pillars of the model, is resulting in higher adoption of beliefs about student behavior identified in the United Theory of Change.** Figure 14 depicts staff survey respondents’ assessment of their

United at Twin Rivers Evaluation
 Annual Evaluation Report – Evaluation Year 1, July 2024

colleagues’ beliefs, which reflects a high level of shared understanding consistent with other data attesting to a strong student-centered school culture in place prior to the partnership. Figure 15 illuminates staff members’ assessments *on how the United model is impacting* these same beliefs, suggesting that even though they are starting from a strong foundation, the model is increasing alignment between staff beliefs and theory of change conditions centered on the importance of relationships and understanding behavior through the lens of communication.

Figure 14. School staff assessment of colleagues’ beliefs (n = 55)

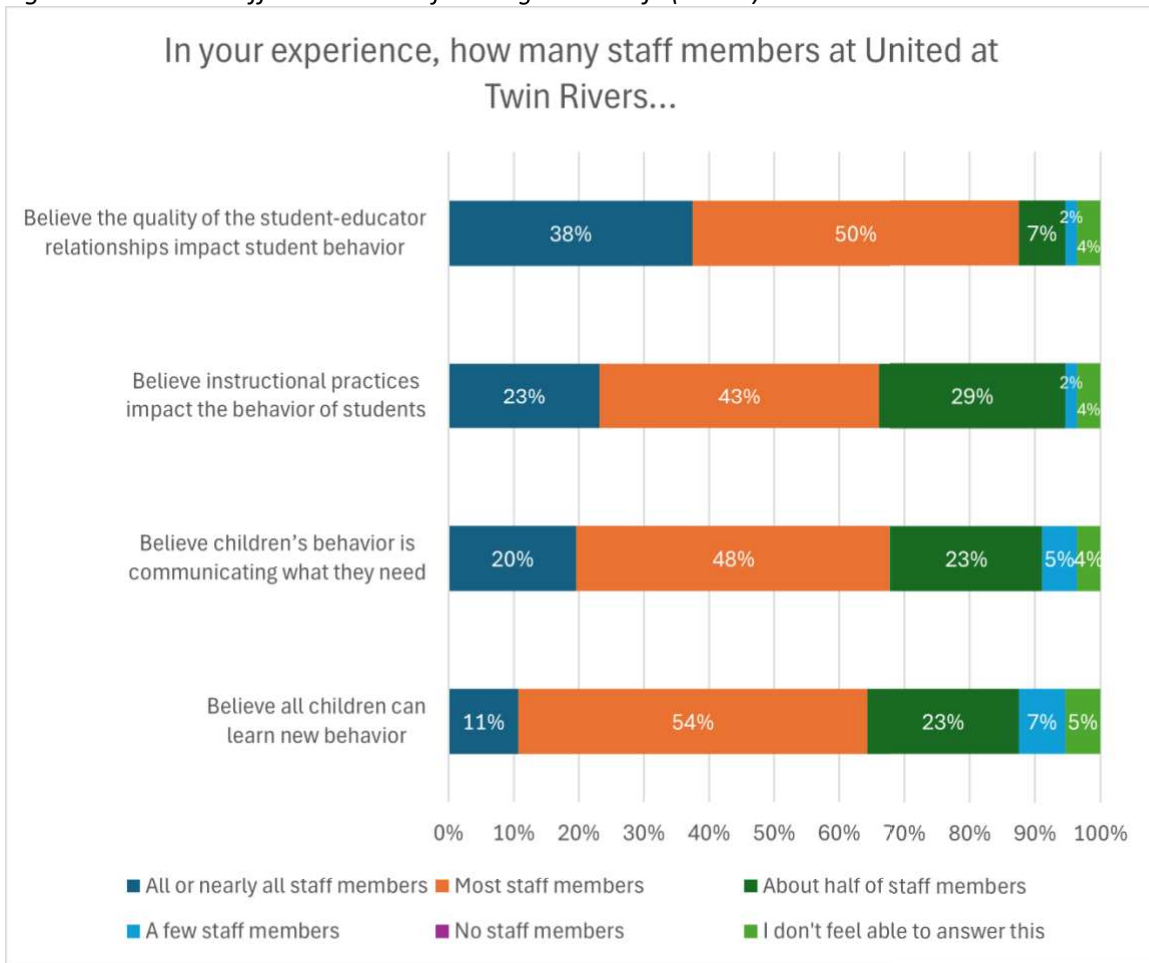
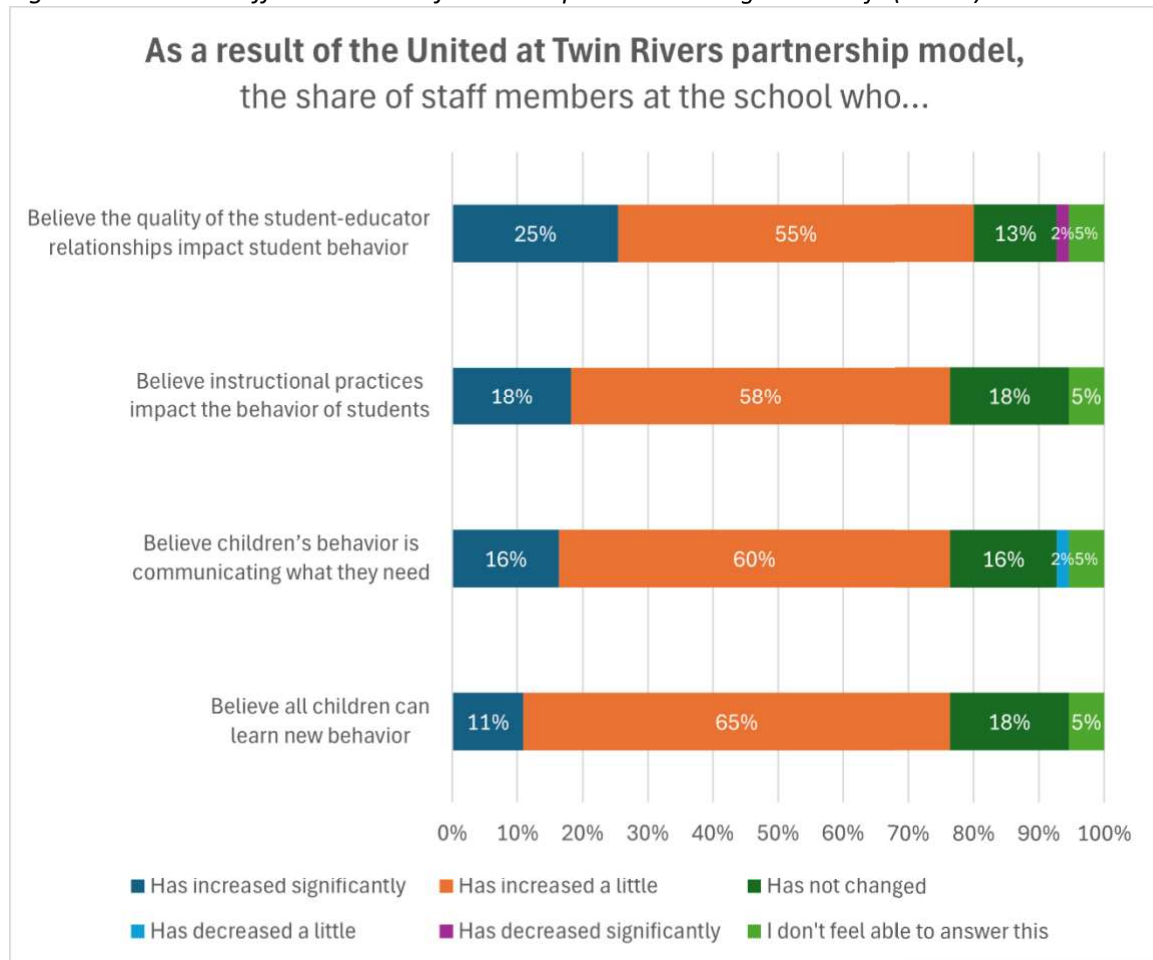


Figure 15. School staff assessment of model impacts on colleagues' beliefs (n = 55)



❖ **Model components contribute to staff members' sense of individual and collective efficacy around their ability to deliver classroom instruction and support students' holistic needs.** Evaluation data suggest that practices supported by the partnership and modelled by the administrative team have provided staff with a new lens from which to view and respond to student behavior. With the availability of material support and ongoing delivery mechanisms afforded by the partnership, teachers express confidence in their abilities to address and respond to their students' social and emotional needs. Specific model components are perceived by staff members as enabling high-quality instruction (see Figure 16) and their ability to provide their students with essential support (see Figure 17).

United at Twin Rivers Evaluation
 Annual Evaluation Report – Evaluation Year 1, July 2024

Figure 16. Model impact on high quality instruction

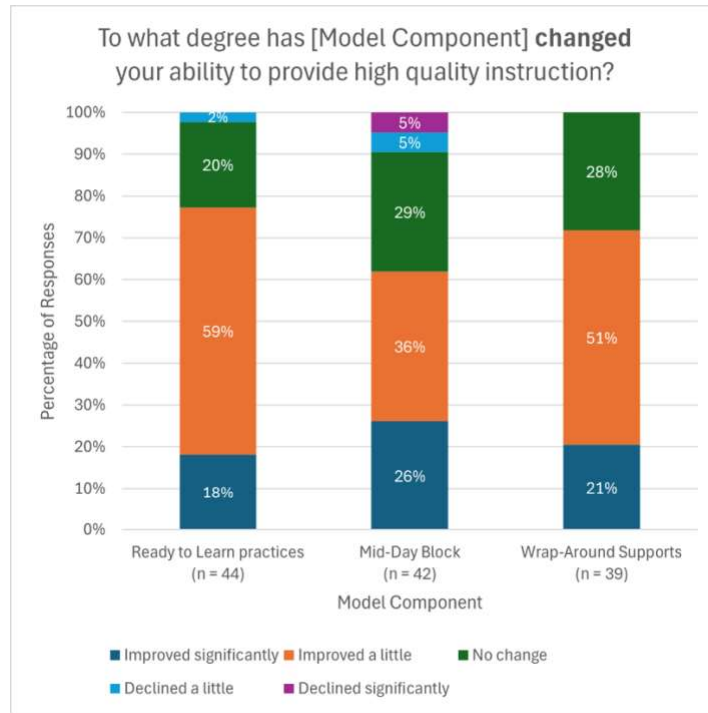
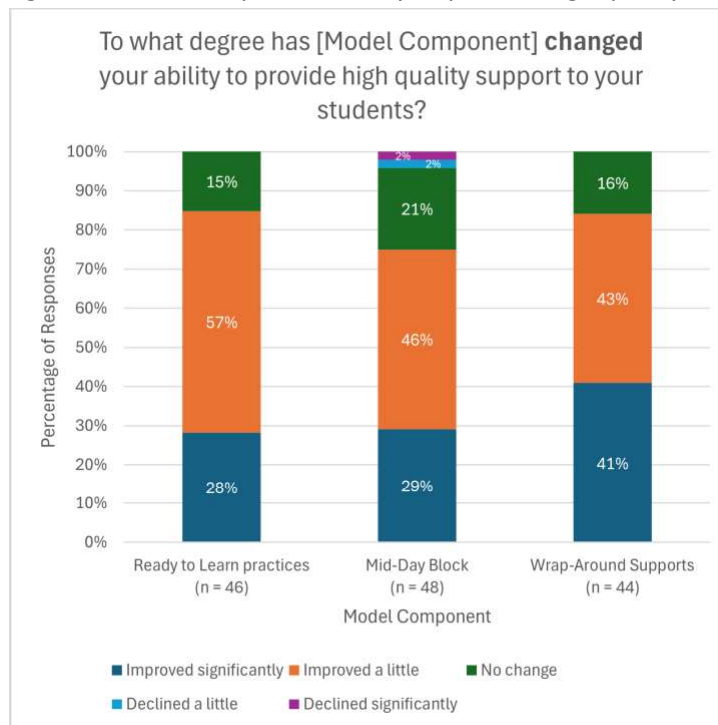


Figure 17. Model impact on ability to provide high quality support



- ❖ ***Alongside shifts in educator beliefs about student behavior and their own efficacy since the partnership began, there is a sense of eagerness among teachers to move towards more targeted work on supporting students' academic growth.*** Reading and Math proficiency among students remain challenges that teachers are eager to address. Teachers, coaches, and resource specialists express enthusiasm about new platforms for monitoring formative math and literacy data, and hopefulness that a new district reading curriculum will help United move the needle in literacy gains.

DEVELOPMENTAL INSIGHTS AND CONSIDERATIONS

- ⇒ *Strengthened staff confidence and efficacy for supporting the students' social and emotional well-being afforded by the model are critical to efforts to build and sustain academic rigor.* As the partnership moves toward a greater focus on the Rigorous Academics pillar, it may be useful for United staff to examine how social-emotional learning (SEL), and academic achievement intersect within their daily practices and identify areas that warrant additional support and professional development. Drawing attention to how these concepts interact might further contribute to understandings that these commitments can co-exist in the classroom without sacrificing one for the other.

VALUE QUESTION: WHAT IS THE ADDED VALUE OF THIS MODEL TO COMMUNITY MEMBERS, AND THE COMMUNITY AS A WHOLE?

This year's evaluation activity has centered on the model's influence on students, families, and staff. Future evaluation activity (e.g., survey of broader community stakeholders) will begin to explore the model's value to the larger community and dimensions of potential impact in greater depth. Below we briefly highlight considerations for the partnership in defining community and identifying targeted impacts.

DEVELOPMENTAL INSIGHTS AND CONSIDERATIONS

⇒ *As the model enters its third year of implementation at United, the partnership continues to define more specifically who "the community" is and to develop its vision for community impact. While stakeholders most proximate to the school report benefits of the partnership to the larger McKeesport community, these same stakeholders see a need for clearer articulation of these benefits and communication to all MASD stakeholders and community residents. Questions related to communication of future plans and intended impact to the broader community might entail:*

- *What conditions will trigger movement to the next phase of scaling? Will the rationale for this timeline be made available to the public?*
- *What messages need to go to each stakeholder group, and from whom?*
- *How might concerns about United students' experiences transitioning to Founder's Hall be addressed and communicated?*

⇒ *Over the past year, the partnership has honed its language around the intended beneficiaries of the Center, from serving all of McKeesport (community) to serving all of MASD (district-focused). Given this development, it may be beneficial for the partnership to reflect on the role the Center plays in the success of the United model (e.g., What is the underlying theory connecting the two?) The partnership may find it useful to articulate a Center-specific theory of change that outlines the conditions it is striving to create, for whom, and along what timeline.*

EVALUATION INQUIRY AREA: MODEL-BUILDING AND SUSTAINABILITY

This inquiry area uses data to understand which aspects of the model are highest leverage, the relationship among different components, conditions for sustainability, and how the model might be most effectively scaled. While analyses comparing relative strengths and interdependencies of the model fall outside of this year's evaluation focus, below we report on early insights regarding the model's theory of change, which will be further explored in the second and third years of the evaluation.

MODEL-BUILDING QUESTION: HOW DO DIFFERENT COMPONENTS OF THE MODEL CONTRIBUTE TO VALUED OUTCOMES, AND WHY?

In this section, we connect findings from the first year of evaluation activities to select conditions in the model's working theory of change. This includes affirming relationships between the theory of change conditions, questioning a relationship, and/or identifying places where the evidence suggests that the theory may be underdeveloped. In keeping with the goals of developmental evaluation, these insights are intended to help the partnership identify high leverage components and refine its theory of change to guide adjustments to model implementation that may increase and accelerate its impact.

DEVELOPMENTAL INSIGHTS AND CONSIDERATIONS



Theory of change condition: Students develop trusting relationships with adults across the school ecosystem.

A foundational bet on the importance of relationships appears to have paid off, with the RTL routines as a critical component for activating this commitment. A disciplined approach to building relationships and a shared culture – for example, institutionalizing the RTL approach, PLCs, and MDB before attempting major instructional or curricular changes – has likely led to more initial success regarding buy-in, culture change, and trust with staff and students alike. Importantly, United staff are aware that this has been the intention and can articulate the rationale, even if they are eager to make more progress on academic proficiency and growth.

Also critical to achieving this condition is a mindset shift around the attribution of student behavior and performance; rather than being viewed as defiance or individual deficit, problem behavior and disengagement is increasingly seen as communication of an underlying need that must be addressed for the learner to thrive. As staff respond to student behavior through this lens, students are more likely receive those responses as caring, creating a positive feedback loop of staff-student relationships.



Theory of change condition: Students come to school

While success in supporting a culture of care, welcome, respect, and strong student-staff relationships likely makes a difference for absenteeism in terms of factors such as trust, motivation, excitement, and willingness to go to school, the theory is underdeveloped in terms of addressing reasons for absenteeism unrelated to student choice. Addressing the root causes of chronic absenteeism may require adjustment to the theory (i.e., it is not enough that students want to come to school where they are supported by caring staff and peers because barriers exist that are often beyond a student's control).



Theory of change condition: Students are ready to learn

Evaluation data points to success in building supportive, learning-friendly peer communities within classrooms, yet other aspects may be underdeveloped in model theory and implementation when it comes to peer culture across classes and grades. Where do preventative and restorative practices live within the theory of change to systematically address unkind or bullying behavior? How might the Smart-Strong-Kind framework further reinforce restorative practices and center mental health and social and emotional well-being as the key ingredients of students' readiness to learn?

United's achievements in creating a culture wherein family members feel welcome and respected may be a necessary but insufficient condition that does not necessarily translate to greater engagement of family members as educational partners in their child's learning. How do the day-to-day realities that compete with families' ability to meaningfully engage with the school play into the model's theory of change? What implications do these realities have for engaging family members as educational partners in their students' education? These considerations may open new possibilities for practices and policies surrounding student attendance, make-up work and homework that can meet the needs of students and families not yet being reached by the partnership model.

SUSTAINABILITY QUESTION: WHAT WILL IT TAKE TO SUSTAIN COMPONENTS OF THE MODEL BEYOND THE INITIAL PERIOD OF PARTNERSHIP SUPPORT, AND WHY?

While sustainability of the model’s distinct pillars and components is not a focus of this year’s evaluation activities, here the evaluation team offers reflective questions for the partnership to consider as it enters a new phase of expansion.

DEVELOPMENTAL INSIGHTS AND CONSIDERATIONS

⇒ *What resources and strategies are needed to continue to support and invest in emerging talented leaders, especially those from within the community? How does the partnership continue to attract and retain this talent as the partnership matures?* These questions are critical given the catalyzing and cohering role the administrative team plays in creating and sustaining an ethos of support and care, and the value stakeholders attach to the presence of Black leaders on the United administrative team.

⇒ *What guardrails will ensure continuation of model components that have been effectively implemented and routinized as attention turns to improvement in other focal areas? Are there periodic check-ins/data review processes which can ensure that any “backsliding” is quickly observed so that critical routines and strategies continue to be implemented with quality?*

⇒ *How can the partnership institutionalize each component of the model to protect future progress? What structures and routines might be institutionalized to compel new leadership and staff to maintain and sustain critical components of the model? Identifying those model components that are non-negotiable and ensuring that these are cemented in daily practices and culture of the school and are routinely monitored can safeguard the model from being easily displaced in the face of leadership and staff turnover.*

For example, internal communication processes have emerged to track and respond to student needs and behaviors. Increased transparency of the United administrative team’s responsive decision tree may heighten staff understanding of roles, priorities, and expectations of those charged with responding. Moreover, formally documenting the steps underlying the process – even if flexible – could increase the ability of these routines to be seamlessly replicated by new team members.

⇒ *Continued evaluation capacity-building by the partnership will ensure the model remains rooted in its core values and makes data-driven decisions in service of healthy minds, healthy bodies, and healthy*

United at Twin Rivers Evaluation
Annual Evaluation Report – Evaluation Year 1, July 2024

relationships for all students. Efforts are underway to institutionalize progress monitoring touch points that are both manageable and meaningful, which will be critical for allowing the partnership to continuously and routinely gauge progress and engage in continuous improvement.

- Partners are working on developing and committing to a small set of Key Progress Indicators (KPIs) which can be used as the basis for continuous improvement discussions and strategy. The ability to populate and routinely update a KPI dashboard will be central to ensuring that the partnership goals continue to be pursued with rigor even in the face of personnel turnover.
- At the school level, YouHue reporting capabilities could be used to identify student and class-level patterns, helping staff better understand the barriers to students' readiness to learn.
- Google Form referral data could be similarly used to detect times of day, activities, or conditions that see spikes in behavior, and to subsequently monitor the effect of efforts to address trouble spots.

⇒ *How will expansion to McClure Elementary School affect model implementation at United at Twin Rivers?* Because implementation is still in an early stage, it will be important for staff to continue offering the same level of responsive support and high-quality implementation at United to ensure early progress is not stunted. This suggests careful attention to staff capacities and priorities within both sites.

⇒ *How might the integrity of the co-design process carry over as the model scales to account for and be responsive to different school assets and needs?* For example, as Rigorous Academics pillar activities begin to delve more deeply into instructional practice at United, what co-design approaches will be used to maintain the culture of trust and buy-in that was earned through the early co-design process? As implementation begins at McClure, what is the role of co-design in transferring strategies developed by participants focused on the Twin Rivers' context?

APPENDIX A – UNITED THEORY OF CHANGE



UNITED

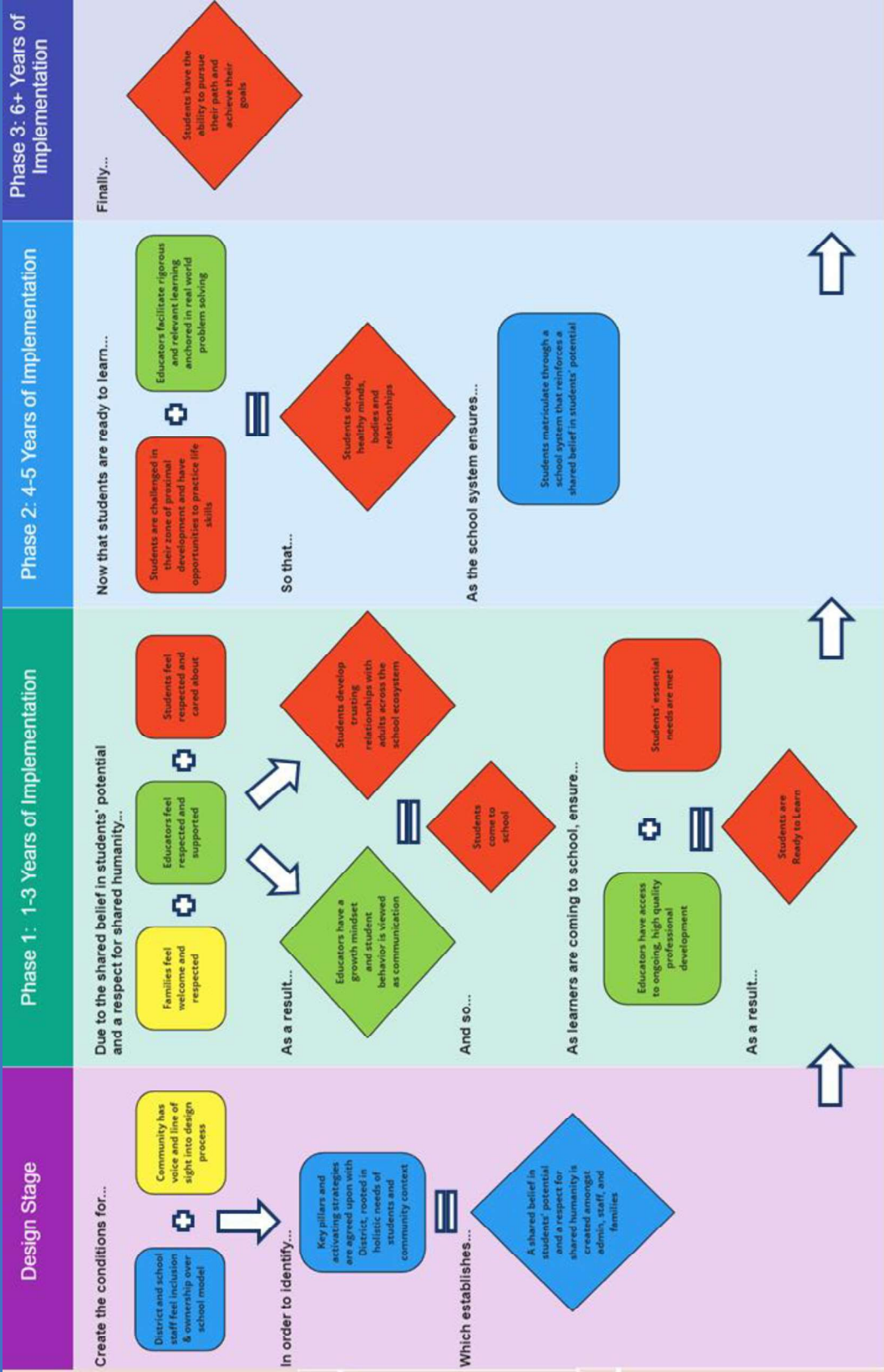
Theory of Change

Color Key

-  School System
-  Families / Community
-  Educators
-  Learners

Shape Key

-  On-going input or condition
-  Non-negotiable go / no go point



APPENDIX B – BREAKDOWN OF DATA COLLECTION ACTIVITIES BY DATA SOURCE

Table 1a. Interview participant breakdown

Group/Role	Subgroup/Role	Number of Interviews
Teachers		20
	<i>Grade-level (see Table 1b for breakdown)</i>	<i>17</i>
	<i>Special Education</i>	<i>1</i>
	<i>Academic Coaches</i>	<i>2</i>
Counselors		2
Social Worker		1
United Administrative Team		6
	<i>Principal</i>	<i>1</i>
	<i>Assistant Principal</i>	<i>1</i>
	<i>Coordinators (HAL, Environmental, Student & Family Mental Health)</i>	<i>4*</i>
DSGF Personnel	<i>(Corporate & Community Relations Specialist, Family & Community Advocate)</i>	3*
Superintendent		1
School Board Member		1
Family Members		24**
	Total	58

*Indicates a member of this group was interviewed twice.

**Indicates one or more interviews in this group had more than one interviewee (e.g., parents interviewed together).

United at Twin Rivers Evaluation
Annual Evaluation Report – Evaluation Year 1, July 2024

Table 1b. Distribution of teacher interviews by grade

Grade Level	Number of Interviewees
Kindergarten	4
1 st Grade	3
2 nd Grade	3
3 rd Grade	3
4 th Grade	1
5 th Grade	3
Total	17

Table 1c. Distribution of grade-levels among interviewed family members

Children’s Grade Level	Number of Children
Kindergarten	4
1 st Grade	7
2 nd Grade	4
3 rd Grade	8
4 th Grade	8
5 th Grade	9
Total	40

United at Twin Rivers Evaluation
Annual Evaluation Report – Evaluation Year 1, July 2024

Table 2. May 2023 – June 2024 focus group breakdown

Focus Groups	# of Focus Groups (# of Participants)
Community Members	1 (14)
Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)	6 (34)
Community Center Advisory Group	1 (6)
4 th Grade Students	6 (47)
5 th Grade Students	4 (31)
4 th and 5 th Grade Students (Combined)	1 (11)
United Partnership Leaders (Principal, Superintendent, DSGF Associate Executive Director of Education, DSGF Vice President, Outside Angle Vice President)	1 (5)
Learning and Relationship Specialists	1 (5)
United Staff (cross-roles)	1 (10)
Total	22 (130*)

*Does not represent unique participants

*Table 3. Staff survey response distribution**

Role Group	Number of Respondents
Homeroom teachers	33
Specials teacher or other teachers	8
Academic Coach	3
United Administrative Team	3
Counselor or Social Worker	3
LRS	6
Support Staff	3
Total	58

*72.5% overall response rate