

ACCESS Initiative 2009-2010 Summary: Conflict Resolution and Violence Prevention at Garcia Middle School

SS/HS Focus Area: *Student behavioral, social, and emotional supports*

ACCESS Goal: *Decrease discipline referrals*

Cost (2009-2010): \$58,961

Program Overview

Through the work of a violence prevention coordinator, ACCESS supports two interventions designed to target aggressive and other disruptive behavior at Garcia Middle School: Responding in Peaceful and Positive Ways (RiPP) and peer mediation.

RiPP is a violence prevention curriculum targeted at middle school students.¹ The program focuses on developing and practicing social/cognitive problem-solving skills to help students respond to potential conflict, as the program title suggests, in peaceful and positive ways. The curriculum is designed to be incorporated into existing classes as a series of 16 sessions at each grade level. During the 2009–2010 school year, the program was delivered to 6th- and 7th-grade students as a component of the social studies curriculum.

The developers of RiPP encourage school staff to simultaneously implement a peer mediation program. At Garcia, the peer mediation program selected was Peers Making Peace.² At the core of the mediation program is a group of volunteer peer mediators who, along with the facilitator, work with students to voluntarily resolve interpersonal conflicts.

Program Implementation

In January 2009, the ACCESS grant funded the hiring of a campus-based violence prevention coordinator to work with students at Garcia Middle School. Since its opening a year earlier, a high level

What is ACCESS?

Funded through a 4-year federal Safe Schools/Health Students grant, the Austin Community Collaboration to Enhance Student Success (ACCESS) is an AISD-led community collaboration of public and nonprofit agencies working together to address the emotional, behavioral, and social needs of students.

¹ RiPP is listed on the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (NREPP) (<http://nrepp.samhsa.gov/>). Additional information about the program can be found at the developer's website(http://preventionopportunities.com/programs_ripp.html).

² Peers Making Peace was identified as a promising program by the U. S. Department of Education's Safe, Disciplined, and Drug-Free Schools Expert Panel (<http://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/exemplary01/exemplary01.pdf>).



of disciplinary referrals had been experienced at Garcia, and the ACCESS staff believed the school would benefit from a multi-faceted conflict resolution and violence prevention initiative.

First Year (2008–2009)

Immediately after being hired, the violence prevention coordinator received training about delivering the RiPP curriculum. During the first year, the 6th-grade component of the program was delivered to 6th-grade students in their world cultures social studies course. The RiPP sessions began in February and concluded in May. Due to conflicts with the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) testing schedule, it was possible to deliver only 13 of the 16 lessons. During the spring of 2009, the violence prevention coordinator also developed and implemented an after-school program focused on violence in the media. The program exposed students to the origin and development of rap and hip-hop music, focused on their impact on both youth and their communities. Students also learned the basics of music production; they wrote and recorded original compositions with a positive, nonviolent message. A total of 25 students participated throughout the semester.³

RiPP Problem Solving Steps - SCIDDLE -

- Stop
- Calm down
- Identify the problem and your feelings about it
- Decide among your options (resolve, avoid, ignore, or diffuse)
- Do it!
- Look back
- Evaluate

In preparation for the rollout of a formal peer mediation program during the following school year, the coordinator received training that led to certification as a mediator through the AISD professional development program. In addition to receiving this training, the coordinator participated in several mediations involving students, often in collaboration with other campus staff. The coordinator also led a series of five workshops for school staff that explored the positive and negative influences of media on students. The sessions, conducted with 7th-grade science teachers, provided classroom-appropriate media clips as future teaching resources and engaged the participants in reflective exercises on the media and its impact.

Second Year (2009–2010)

During the 2009–2010 school year, RiPP was again delivered to 6th-grade students during their world cultures social studies course. The 6th grade students received one RiPP lesson each week, starting in September and finishing in March. RiPP was expanded to include 7th-grade students, who received two lessons in a single period every other week during their Texas geography and history course. Each group of students received the full set of 16 lessons appropriate for their grade level.

Sixty percent of peer mediations focused on responding to the spreading of rumors.

³ The after-school program was delivered by the violence prevention coordinator as a United Way-funded after-school program.



At the start of the school year, the violence prevention coordinator worked with school staff to identify potential peer mediators. A group of 17 students (three 6th-, seven 7th-, and seven 8th-grade students) received formal training in November, and mediations began after the Thanksgiving break.⁴ Requests for peer mediation were submitted in writing and reviewed by the coordinator for appropriateness. The coordinator then contacted the other party involved in the conflict to explain the process and determine his or her willingness to participate. Often, the individual who did not submit the request was initially unwilling or hesitant to participate. However, after the coordinator explained the potential benefits of mediation (e.g., a way of avoiding future disciplinary action), most students agreed to the process.⁵ After both parties agreed to the mediation process, the coordinator identified a pair of peer mediators and scheduled a time for the mediation. Mediation sessions were held in the coordinator's office and typically lasted 15 to 20 minutes. Each participant worked with a peer mediator to express his or her perspective on the conflict and move toward a resolution. In most cases participants were able to reach a resolution, which took the form of either a verbal or written agreement. If the participants could not reach agreement, campus staff retained the option to put into effect an enforceable district stay-away agreement for situations in which serious concerns about the well-being or safety of one or more of the participants remained.⁶

*"I made up my mind...
I'm living for Love...
I'm living for Joy...
I'm living for Peace..."*

*Faith is my Power
Words are my sword
Peace is what I'm fighting
What I'm fighting for
Victory is in my sights and I know I'm
gonna win
Violence is the enemy that has to end"*

Jasmine Patterson,
Positive Media Project Participant
Garcia Middle School

During the 2009–2010 school year, the after-school program organized by the violence prevention coordinator expanded in size and scope. Approximately 40 students participated in the Positive Media Project on Tuesdays and Fridays throughout the year and continued work on producing a compilation of original nonviolent rap and hip-hop music.

Program Outcomes

Methodology

Program outcomes were assessed through two primary methods: a survey of 6th-grade students' attitudes toward conflict and discipline rates for aggressive behavior.

A sample of 6th-grade students was surveyed at the beginning and end of the RiPP curriculum during the 2008–2009 and 2009–2010 school years. The survey, adapted from a tool made available by

⁴ Twelve of the 17 students trained as mediators participated as mediators during the year. The majority of the time, they worked with students at the same grade level.

⁵ Of the 58 requests for mediation submitted during the school year, 10 (17%) did not result in a mediation being held because one party was unwilling.

⁶ During the 2009–2010 school year, seven stay-away agreements were issued as part of the mediation process.



the developers of RiPP, assessed the extent to which students viewed conflict negatively and believed they would react positively when confronted with a disagreement. Surveys were distributed in four classes during 2008–2009 and in four classes during 2009–2010. The survey responses for both years were combined and analyzed together. Valid responses were received from 158 pre-tests (2008–2009: 70; 2009–2010: 88) and 159 post-tests (2008–2009: 67; 2009–2010: 92).

The discipline rate for aggressive behavior was calculated by dividing the number of disciplinary referrals that resulted in a removal (i.e. in-school suspension, home suspension, or placement at the Alternative Learning Center) for aggressive behavior (e.g., physical aggression, verbal aggression, etc.), by the typical daily enrollment at Garcia Middle School.^{7,8} Referral rates were calculated by grade and year to allow assessment of change over time.

Results

The combined pre-test survey data for both groups of 6th-grade students showed, on average, moderately positive responses regarding their attitudes toward and likely response to conflict. The post-test survey, conducted at the conclusion of the 6th-grade RiPP sessions, showed no significant change in either attitudes or responses when the results were compared to the pre-test.

Figure 1 shows the rate of removals for aggressive behavior for several cohorts (peer groups) as they transitioned from elementary school (5th grade) to middle school. The first group of 6th-grade students to enter Garcia (when it opened in 2007) is represented by the blue line in the figure. In 6th grade, their rate of removal for aggressive behavior was .47, or approximately five removals for every 10 students. This rate increased in 7th grade (.71) and decreased in 8th grade (.57). The red line represents the group of 7th-grade students who entered Garcia in 2007. The levels of discipline for this group while they were in 7th and 8th grade at Garcia were similar to those of the original 6th-grade group as they progressed to the later grades. The orange circle represents the cohort of 8th-grade students who entered Garcia in 2007. The rate of removal for this group was approximately double that of the cohorts who followed, and may reflect increased conflict as students brought together from multiple middle schools established themselves in the highest grade at the school. In any event, the discipline rate for the first group of 8th-grade students does not seem to fit the overall pattern shown in the figure.

- Cost per RiPP student (6th- and 7th-grade): \$131
- Cost per Garcia student (all grades): \$85
- Estimated cost per 7th grade aggressive behavior removal avoided: \$893-\$1,134

The first group of students to participate in RiPP is represented by the green line (i.e., 6th grade in 2008). This group was exposed to the RiPP program in February through May, and their aggressive behavior removal rate was almost identical to that of the prior year's 6th-grade students (blue line) who did not receive RiPP. However, when this group reached 7th grade the following year (2009), their discipline rate showed strong improvement when compared with the rates of the prior two cohorts of 7th-grade students (blue and red lines). The difference between the RiPP 7th-grade students (green) and

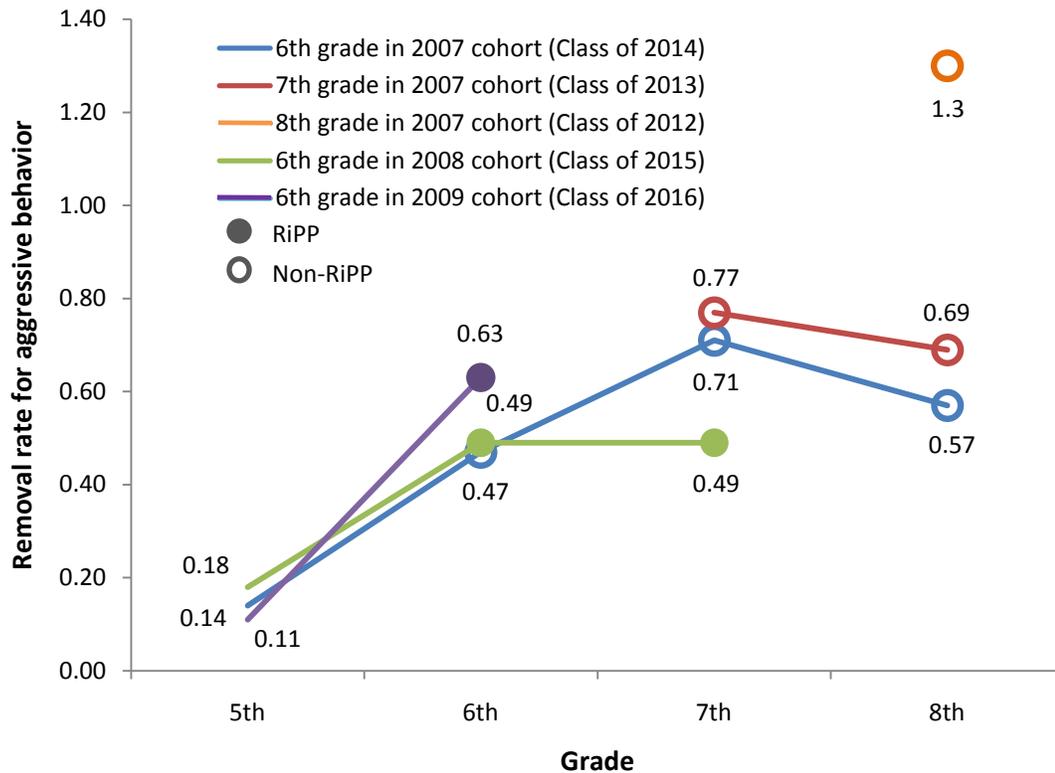
⁷ The full list of offenses included as aggressive behavior is included as a footnote to the Appendix.

⁸ Enrollment was determined using the fall PEIMS snapshot data.



the non-RiPP 7th-grade students (blue and red) translates into an estimated 52 to 66 fewer removals for aggressive behavior, based on the change in rate, than would otherwise have been expected.

Figure 1. Removal Rate for Aggressive Behavior at Garcia Middle School, by Cohort



Source. AISD Discipline Data (ADIS, 2006–2009)

Note. 5th-grade data represent the removal rate for aggressive behavior at feeder elementary schools (Jordan, Norman, Overton, and Sims) for the 5th-grade year preceding a cohort's entry into 6th grade at Garcia Middle School.

The similarity of the first RiPP cohort to the baseline in 6th grade, followed by an improvement in 7th grade, suggests that either the 6th-grade RiPP curriculum did not result in a change in behavior or that change may take time to develop. To better understand the process at work, the RiPP 7th-grade students were divided into two groups: those who had been at Garcia in 6th grade (75%) and those who had not (i.e., transfer students) (25%).⁹ Students who had participated in RiPP in 6th grade as well as 7th grade had a lower rate of removal for aggressive behavior (.45) than did those students who participated in RiPP in 7th grade but had not been at Garcia to participate in 6th grade (.59). This finding strongly suggests that the 6th-grade RiPP curriculum is important either in terms of a lagged impact on students or as preparation for the 7th-grade curriculum.

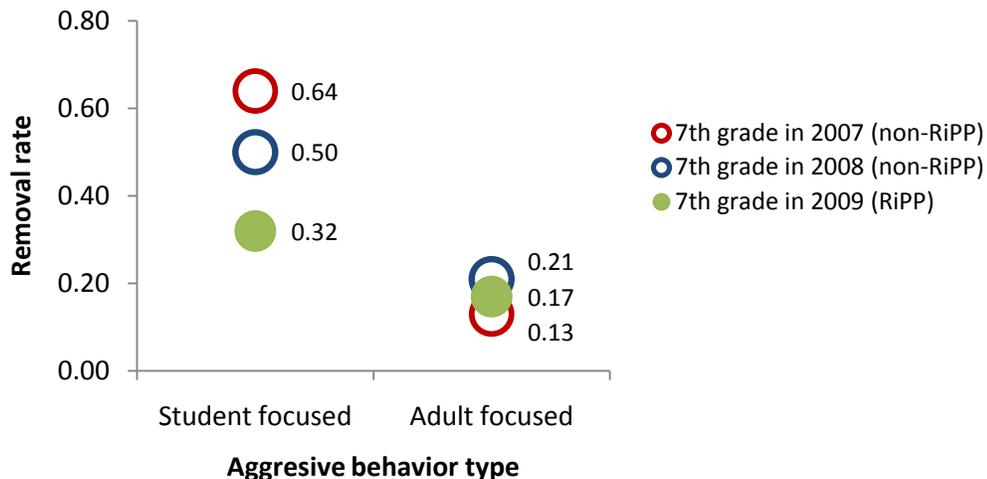
⁹ Of the students present during the PEIMS Fall 2009 snapshot, 75% had attended 6th grade at Garcia the prior year.



The purple line in Figure 1 represents the second cohort of 6th-grade students to participate in RiPP. Their removal rate for aggressive behavior (.63) was found to be higher than that of the baseline group (.47) or the first cohort of RiPP 6th-grade students (.49), despite starting the program early in the school year. Given the lack of a 6th-grade effect for the prior RiPP cohort, a stronger test of a program effect for this group will be to see if the removal rate of this group increases, as did that of the baseline groups, or levels off during their 7th-grade year (2010–2011), as did that of the first RiPP cohort.

Although the RiPP curriculum is focused broadly on managing conflict experienced by young people, we explored whether the program may be more successful in reducing certain types of conflict than others. Student removals for aggressive behavior were separated into those involving other students and those involving staff. An exploratory analysis was conducted to see if RiPP had the same impact on both student-to-student and student-to-staff conflict.

Figure 2. Removal Rate for Aggressive Behavior for RiPP and Non-RiPP 7th-Grade Students, by Focus of Aggressive Behavior



Source. AISD Discipline Data (ADIS, 2007–2009)

As Figure 2 shows, the rate of removal for adult-focused aggressive behavior was similar for the RiPP and non-RiPP 7th-grade cohorts, with the RiPP rate falling between that of the two other groups. However, the rate of removals for student-focused aggressive behavior was substantially lower for the RiPP than for the non-RiPP 7th-grade cohorts. The rate of .32 removals per student for the RiPP group was 50% lower than for the 7th-grade group in 2007 and 36% lower than for the 2008 group of 7th-grade students. These results strongly suggest that the impact of RiPP on the rate of referrals for aggressive behavior is primarily a function of its impact on student-focused conflict.

Discussion and Conclusions

The RiPP program, in conjunction with peer mediation, has shown promise as a strategy for reducing student aggressive behavior at Garcia Middle School. Evaluation results from the 2009–2010 school year suggest that these activities have decreased the number of removals for aggressive behavior



by 7th-grade students by between 52 and 66 instances, based on the change in rates. A closer examination of the results suggests that the program was more effective at reducing aggressive behavior focused on students than at reducing aggressive behavior focused on campus staff. Results from the 2010–2011 school year will show whether the effects seen among 2009–2010 7th-grade students are replicated, as well as whether the program has an impact among 8th-grade students.

Recommendations

- Explore whether the effectiveness of RiPP in the 6th-grade population can be increased through exposure to the program at the end of 5th grade.
- Explore whether staff training in RiPP principles may better help staff to engage students in deescalating adult-focused aggressive behaviors.
- Explore whether staff training in RiPP principles may help staff to de-escalate disagreements between students before they become disciplinary issues.



Appendix: Data Table

Grade	Measure	School year		
		2007-2008	2008-2009	2009-2010
6 th	Enrollment	233	223	214
	Gender			
	Male	52.4%	54.7%	56.5%
	Female	47.6%	45.3%	43.5%
	Removals ^{a,b}			
	All offenses (#)	211	193	386
	All offenses (rate)	0.91	0.87	1.80
	Aggressive (#) Aggressive (rate)	110 0.47	110 0.49	135 0.63
7 th	Enrollment	185	251	236
	Gender			
	Male	54.1%	52.6%	55.9%
	Female	45.9%	47.4%	44.1%
	Removals ^{a,b}			
	All offenses (#)	367	421	347
	All offenses (rate)	1.98	1.68	1.47
	Aggressive (#) Aggressive (rate)	142 0.77	177 0.71	115 0.49
8 th	Enrollment	194	182	243
	Gender			
	Male	51.0%	54.4%	50.2%
	Female	49.0%	45.6%	49.8%
	Removals ^{a,b}			
	All offenses (#)	521	327	360
	All offenses (rate)	2.69	1.80	1.58
	Aggressive (#) Aggressive (rate)	252 1.30	125 0.69	139 0.57

Sources. AISD Disciplinary (ADIS 2007–2009) and enrollment data (PEIMS SUB110, 2007–2009)

Notes. Enrollment data represent a point-in-time estimate of the student population. The total number of unique students will be greater due to transfers in and out of the school over time. For 2007-2008, 2008-2009, and 2009-2010, the total number of students ever enrolled exceeded the cross-sectional estimate by 20.4%, 15.2%, and 17.0%, respectively.

^a Removals are defined as in-school suspension, home suspension, or placement at the Alternative Learning Center.

^b All offenses include all potential disciplinary offenses. Aggressive offenses (i.e., abusive conduct toward other students or adults) are defined by the following behavior categories and codes: *Inappropriate language or gestures to student (005)*, *harassment/intimidation/threat of student (010)*, *physical aggression against students (015)*, *fighting/mutual combat (020)*, *assault with injury against a student (025)*, *aggravated assault against a student (030)*, *making a false report (035)*, *gang related activity (037)*, *school-related gang violence (040)*, *Inappropriate language or gestures to adult (045)*, *harassment/intimidation/threat of adult (050)*, *physical aggression against adults (055)*, *assault with injury against an adult (060)*, *aggravated assault against an adult (065)*, and *retaliation against school employee (070)*



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