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Positive Connection Leads to Student Success

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Positive Connection Leads to Student Success

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

University of Southern Maine, Lewiston/Auburn Campus

Masters Degree in Leadership Studies

By

Diane C. Leavitt

2010

FINAL APPROVAL FORM

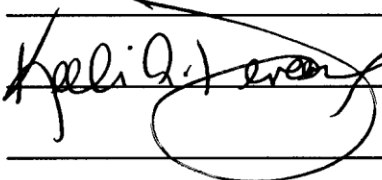University of Southern Maine

Master of Arts Degree in Leadership Studies

August 2010

We hereby recommend that the thesis of Diane C. Leavitt entitled Positive Connection

Leads to Student Success be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of Master of Arts in Leadership Studies.

_____Advisor, Professor Tara Grey Coste, Ph.D.

_____First Reader, Professor Betty D. Robinson, Ph.D.

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Accepted

_____

Dean of Lewiston Auburn College

Abstract

This study focuses on the impact of positive adult connections on high school students' success. The data is from of one southern Maine high school with a population of 1,050 students. The data includes overall school-wide results of student connectedness, as well as in-depth results from nine student interviews. The researcher's intent was to demonstrate the need for continued mentoring efforts for high school students. It does appear from this study that adult mentoring programs have a positive effect on student success. The study also indicates that further research regarding the impact of student mentoring programs in high schools is warranted and could be used to help refine or strengthen such programs. The Windham High School administration team is interested in bettering the current advisory program. The data from this study will help inform such improvements.

Dedication

This report is dedicated to two inspirational teachers: Sister Orontia and Ruth Manghue. Sister Orontia was my 4th grade math teacher. Sister Orontia taught me many life-long lessons such as determination. She taught me to be persistent and to look at every angle to find answers. Thank you, Sister Orontia, for your encouragement to succeed and be different and for the inspiration to become a teacher. From you I learned that we can all learn; it may be different from the norm but it is possible.

To Ruth Manghue, my student teacher advisor: Ruth, you are an amazing woman with so much knowledge. You were always so caring and respectful. Thank you for taking the time to take me under your wing and develop my teaching style. You allowed me to be who I am and taught me to teach from the heart, a most valuable lesson.

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

This report focuses on the impact on student success when students make positive or negative (or little or no) adult connections in their learning environment. The research is of one non-urban, non-rural Maine high school, Windham High School (WHS) and focuses on the homeroom advisory program. The homeroom advisory program at WHS was designed to provide every student with an advisor over their four-years of high school. The goal was to assure that every student had at least one adult with whom they could turn to for guidance. In part, the program was started as a result of the Columbine shootings. At the time of these shootings, 1999, there was speculation that the Columbine shooters did not have any focused and continuous adult connections at Columbine High School. It was also believed that the shooters were targeted by bullies. Windham High School's administration and faculty felt that there were students in our school who, at the time, did not have a positive connection with any adult at WHS. Windham High School's goal was simple: to assure that every student had a focused and continuous adult that they made a positive connection with. The thought was to provide our students with at least one adult they can turn to in times of trouble.

Windham High School's homeroom advisory program has been in existence since the fall of 1999. At first, teachers met with their advisees four times per semester to review goals, progress reports, report cards and occasionally some form of bonding exercise to help adults and students form ties. The program has since evolved into four 10-minute sessions per week. The homeroom advisory setting is informal with no specific objective other than to get to know our advisees, distribute announcements, progress and grade reports as well as behavioral reports. Additionally, the groups meet

for longer periods as needed for such events as pep rallies, course planning, PSAT and SAT test administration, as well as other all-school or all-grade activities. The homeroom advisory groups are of the same grade level, varied gender, ethnic, academic, social, and economic levels. This study shows the impact that a positive adult connection has for our high school students.

The Importance of the Study

The importance of this study is to better the existing homeroom advisory program at Windham High School. It demonstrates the level of importance for our teachers to continue (or to start) to develop positive connections with our advisees. The study will be shared with the Windham High School faculty and staff to offer a focused view of students who feel they have benefited from the homeroom advisory program. Further, the results suggest the need for further research on a student-to-student mentoring program because the goal to have every WHS student have a positive adult connection was not evident in the findings.

Research to compare students who feel they have made positive connections with students who feel they have made negative, or no, connections is limited in the literature that the researcher reviewed. This study compared both sets of students, although the small sample made such a comparison difficult. The hypothesis is that there are positive outcomes for positive connections and negative outcomes for negative, or no, connections.

Review of the Literature

<u>Mentoring—Positive Adult Connections</u>

The subject of mentoring has been extensively researched. There is tremendous support suggesting mentoring improves success of the mentee. Additionally, much of the research supports student mentoring programs at the high school level for at-risk students (Holt, L. J., Bry, B. H. & Johnson, V. L., 2008 and Dappen and Isernhagen 2005). Some of the research compares mentoring programs with the status quo of no mentoring programs (Harris & Nakkula, 2003b and Broussard, 2006). The present study focused on a teacher-student mentoring program at the high school level. The study compared students who claim to have made a positive connection with their advisor to students who have had little, no, or a negative connection with their advisor. Additionally, there have been mentoring programs focused on literacy in an attempt to improve students' reading skills. Although the current study was not focused on literacy, this research adds support to the hypothesis that mentoring improves student engagement in school.

It is important to acknowledge the research that supports student-to-student mentoring programs as also improving student engagement for both the mentor and mentee (Karcher, 2009). This study recommends further review of student-to-student mentoring programs as a viable method to achieve a higher rate of students with positive connections in high school.

<u>Mentoring At-Risk Students</u>

What happens to student learning when students make positive connections with teachers or staff at school? There have been many studies regarding student learning, and many of these have focused on the students and their connection with their learning

environment. The Holt et al. (2008) study investigated a school-based adult-mentoring

intervention program for low-income urban minority high school students to determine if

the program could positively impact their school engagement.

Participants were surveyed at the pre- (first semester, freshman year), post- (at the

end of freshman year), and follow-up (first semester, sophomore year). The study

highlighted the extent to which a student is cognitively, behaviorally, and emotionally

involved in his/her learning. Mentees' perceptions of teacher support remained largely

the same from pretest to posttest but the group with no mentoring, the control group,

demonstrated a decline in their perception of teacher support (Holt et al., 2008). Further

research of the controls might explain the shift in these perceptions. There was a

decrease in discipline referrals from pretest to posttest for the mentees, but with no

significant improvement of positive behaviors. Discipline issues may have been

influenced while mentoring was taking place.

In the Holt et al. (2008) study, mentors were surveyed regarding relationship

quality. When compared with the "Harris and Nakkula (2003a) study, similar mentors'

results of closeness, distance, academic support-seeking, non-academic support-seeking,

satisfaction, risk compatibility, and logistical problems were found. The mentees'

relationship results were slightly higher than the Harris and Nakkula (2003a) results for

relational satisfaction, instrumental satisfaction, availability to support, dissatisfaction

and dependability" (Holt et al., 2008).

Holt et al.'s (2008) study should only be generalized with caution, because it

involved primarily African American and Latino youth in an urban setting. The strengths

of the study included promising results for a school-based adult-mentoring program. One

of the weaknesses of the study included the small size and short duration of the study.

This study faces similar weaknesses. The setting for the current research is non-urban,

non-rural, non-income based, and of a relatively short duration.

There were 10 mentors selected for the Holt et al. (2008) program, and they

consisted of eight teachers and two guidance counselors. The mentors were pre-screened

to assure the time commitment could be fulfilled. It is unclear what other qualifying

questions were asked at the application stage. Seventy percent of the mentors were

female, five were African-American, three were Caucasian, one was Latino, and one was

Asian American (Holt et al., 2008). Each mentor was able to select two students during

the initial training, contacted the students by the third week of the second semester, and

began mentoring, utilizing the program manual (Holt et al., 2008). Each mentor received

a stipend, training and professional development hours for their participation in the

program. The students selected for the program were considered at-risk.

Alternative education is often geared toward the at-risk student. Youth

Connections is an Ohio public high school serving 160 students from 32 school districts.

Youth Connections was established in 2001 and tailored to at-risk students. Byrne (2004)

states, "Our goal at Youth Connections is to be a model for providing a high-quality

education for all children, not just those deemed at-risk" (p. 47). The Youth Connections

students requested teacher mentors to achieve their academic goals. The mentors work

with a group of 10-12 students one hour a week plus office hours as appropriate. The

mentoring program includes weekly updates to both the student and their parent(s) or

guardian(s).

One key trigger that identifies an at-risk student is truancy. DeSocio (2007) states, "It was hypothesized that students who participated in the intervention would realize enhanced school engagement manifested by a greater probability of remaining in school and improved attendance and grades, as compared to students in the control group" (p. 4). The intervention included two components as described by DeSocio (2007), "…enrollment of truant students in a school-based health center for health screening and services, and … use of teachers from within the school to engage students in mentored relationships" (p. 4).

DeSocio (2004) explains, "…non-significant differences between students in the intervention, unable-to-enroll, and control groups on measures of attendance and grades prior to intervention… …post intervention combined the intervention and unable-to-enroll students into an intent-to-treat group… The findings of the analyses provided partial support for study hypotheses" (pp. 7-8). DeSocio (2004) concludes, "For those students who did participate in the intervention, the advocacy and encouragement of adult mentors within their school helped forge connections that counteracted social disincentives and feelings of hopelessness and kept them engaged in school" (p. 10).

A student's sense of connectedness is an important factor in school success. Martin and Martin and Dowson (2009) state, "…there are many in-school and out-of-school programs in which students engage that not only enhance academic outcomes and prevent maladaptive outcomes but also offer scope for personal growth and development…" (p. 339). Martin and Dowson conclude, "Theory and research support the proposition that positive relationships with significant others are cornerstones of

young people's capacity to function effectively in social, affective, and academic

domains" (p. 351).

<div align="center">Mentoring through Literacy</div>

Julie Bader Salcedo's (2009) article, *Inviting Students and Teachers to Connect,*

reiterates the concept that connecting with students is an important aspect of learning.

Salcedo (2009) shares students' journal entries with her journal entry responses back to

the students. Salcedo (2009) saw first-hand the importance of the give and take of

connecting with students. It is only fair that if we expect our students to share their

innermost thoughts, we need to model this behavior for our students.

The mentors at Windham High School did not receive training, stipends or

professional development hours. This research study did not offer incentives to the

student participants or to the advisors. The study included willing participants from each

grade level who indicated a positive connection with their advisor as well as participants

from each grade level who indicated little, no or a negative connection with their advisor.

This comparison within the same high school adds value and support for the existing

studies on positive adult and/or student connections.

<div align="center">Youth Mentors</div>

Karcher's (2009) study focused on students mentoring students. Karcher (2009)

states, "mentees have demonstrated or reported improvements in attitudes toward and

connectedness to school" (p. 292). This study offered additional data in support of the

belief that a positive connection made with a student increases the chances of improved

student learning.

Motivation is a key component of a successful learner. Martin and Dowson (2009) state, "relatedness is linked to key psychological needs in a way that fosters achievement motivation" (p. 330). This study assessed a student's motivation level by reviewing the level of success that the student felt they experienced in high school.

Sharon Levin's (2005) article focuses on mentoring freshmen and sophomores by the seniors and juniors. Although this is not part of the proposed research, this is an area requiring additional research which could offer a comparison of adult mentoring versus student mentoring with the assumption that both mentors are positive. The hypothesis is that any positive connection will increase a student's engagement level which will increase a student's overall academic success.

<u>Connecting with Students, Their Families and Community</u>

Theresa Philips' (2009) article, *Teaching is Like a Box of Chocolates*, highlights the importance that connecting with our students involves the whole student. Educators who can make these extended connections will experience a broader view of the student which is hypothesized to increase student motivation. Students have varying home lives. Our students are not living in a silo. We must see the whole student which includes their family and sometimes their extended family.

<u>Areas of Interest</u>

Similar to the Holt et al. (2008) study, this study was based on the principles of social cognitive theory.

Social cognitive theory accounts for academic achievement, engagement, and learning by way of a triadic reciprocally, or a reciprocal interaction

between personal (i.e., cognitive, affective, biological), behavioral, and

environmental influences. (Holt et al., 2008).

Holt et al. (2008) state, "…adults in the school setting have the potential to shape

students' academic trajectories" (p. 300). If adults have this potential, it is important to

understand the logic that positive connections will lead to a positive, upward trajectory,

while negative connections will conversely lead to a downward trajectory.

<div align="center">Summary</div>

Research to compare students who feel they have made positive connections with

students who feel they have made negative, or no, connections is limited. Further

research of this population would help highlight the impact a negative connection has on

a student's overall success and engagement in high school.

This research study will help schools better understand the importance of student

mentoring using such programs as the WHS advisory program.

In particular, there is much research regarding at-risk students. The current study

compared random students who feel they have made a positive connection with an adult

and those who felt they did not make any adult positive connections. By focusing on

random students, the researcher hoped to demonstrate the need for mentors for all

students.

Methods of Data Collection & Analysis

The present study was of an exploratory nature completed on behalf of Windham

High School, Windham, Maine. The Windham/Raymond School District supported this

project as indicated by Superintendent Sanford Prince's letter dated, March 26, 2010 (see

Appendix A). Additionally, the Windham High School administration team fully

supported this project.

       The researcher hypothesized that the WHS advisory program had a positive effect

on the Windham High School community. There were early, informal conversations with

various WHS students, faculty and staff to hear their various viewpoints on the study's

focus. These conversations were instrumental in preparing the survey (see Appendix B)

and oral questions (see Appendix C) to gather relevant data. A case study approach was

used in order to gather data for the purpose of learning more about the impact of the

advisory program at WHS (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p. 108). Included are quotes to

represent the voices of the students of Windham High School.

       The study reviews several learning level indicators such as class grades,

Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) test results, Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude

Test (PSAT) and Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores. Additionally, attendance and

behavior reports were reviewed. Student's administrative files were reviewed to

categorize each student's behavior and attendance data. Extracurricular activities are also

categorized and included in the results. Each of these indicators was examined to see if

they either reflected any differences among the students or added to the researcher's

understanding of the students' situations.

       The final report outlines the number of students who completed the initial survey

(see Appendix B for survey), the number who indicated a positive connection with their

homeroom advisor, the number who indicated a positive connection with another adult,

and the number who indicated a negative, or no, connection with an adult at WHS. These

results are aggregate.

The results of the survey are filtered into two groups: a) those who feel they have made a positive adult connection and b) those who feel they have not made a positive adult connection (or have made a negative connection). These two groups are compared to demonstrate the percentage of students who made a positive or negative, or no connection with their advisor compared with a positive or negative, or no connection with a WHS adult. A random selection was made from the group who indicated a willingness to participate in the survey. Permissions were gathered from these students and/or their parents. There were nine one-on-one interviews. Students were asked to define "positive adult connection" and "success." This was done through one-on-one interviews with the researcher. The results are reported as a case-study. Real student names are not used in this report.

Survey Results

A total of 744 students participated in a survey to determine the level of positive adult connections currently in Windham High School (Appendix B). Gender was roughly balanced at 53% for male and 47% for female respondents. There were 126 students willing to participate in a one-on-one interview with the researcher. Eight were randomly selected for a one-on-one interview. Through this process, the researcher was not able to find a student who felt they made no, or a negative connection, with their advisor. The researcher then accepted a student volunteer to be part of this study who indicated s/he had a negative connection with his/her advisor. The results from the school-wide survey are outlined below.

Total Respondents by Grade Level

The total number of students who participated in the survey was 744 which

represents 71% of the total WHS student population. The following table demonstrates

the total number of students per grade level who participated the survey.

Data	# who took survey	Total in class	% of total per grade who took survey	# yes per grade level who agreed to be interviewed	% yes per grade level who agreed to be interviewed
Grade 9	191	252	76%	29 (m=15, f=14)	23%
Grade 10	230	292	79%	46 (m=22, f=24)	37%
Grade 11	179	260	69%	26 (m=13, f=12)	21%
Grade 12	144	266	54%	25 (m=12, f=12)	20%
TOTALS	744	1070		126	

m=male respondents, f=female respondents

Table 1

Total Respondents

Responses to the statement: *"I have made a positive connection with my advisor"*

19% (141) *strongly agree,* a positive connection
35% (258) *agree,* a positive connection
18% (134) *somewhat* of a positive connection
18% (133) a *little bit* of a positive connection
10% (78) *no* positive connection
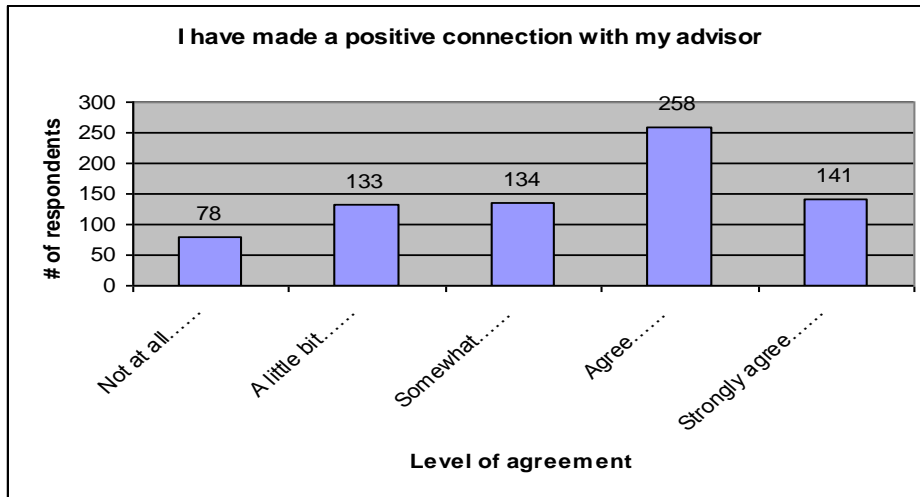
Figure 1: I have made a positive connection with my advisor

Responses to the statement: *"I have made a positive connection with <u>an adult</u> at WHS"*

32% (235) *strongly agree,* a positive connection
40% (296) *agree,* a positive connection
13% (94) *somewhat* of a positive connection
9% (65) a *little bit* of a positive connection
7% (54) *no* positive connection
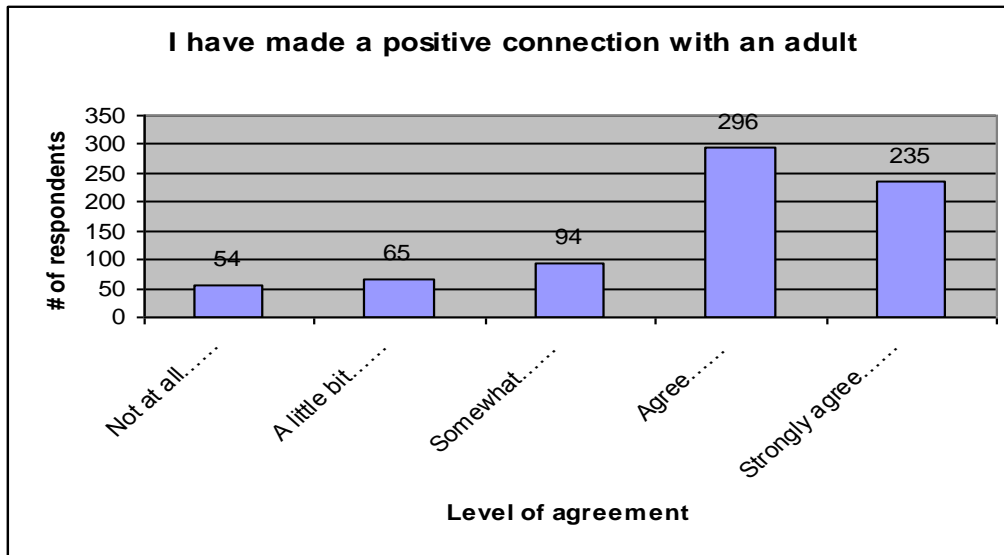
Figure 2: I have made a positive connection with an adult at WHS

The data reveals 72% of the WHS student body feel that they have made a

positive connection with their advisor by answering "somewhat agree, agree, or strongly

agree" to this question and 85% of the WHS student body feel that they have made a

positive connection with an adult. From this comparison of positive connections with

advisors as compared with positive connections with an adult, the researcher estimates

that 13% of the total number of respondents has made positive connection with an adult

other than advisor. The total percentage of students who agreed a "little" through

"strongly agree" with the statement that they made a positive connection with an adult is

94% of all survey participants. Although the researcher feels this is a significant number

of students with positive connections with an adult, it does not meet the goal for every

student to have a positive connection with an adult at WHS. A review of the 6% of

students who have not made any positive connection at WHS is suggested in order to

reach the 100% goal. Further, it is suggested that Windham High School evaluate student

mentoring programs as a secondary venue to foster positive connections in high school

(Broussard, 2006, Converse, 2009, Karcher, 2009).

Data is not available for student connections prior to the implementation of the

advisory program. This information would have shown the change in positive

connections at Windham High School since 1999 which would have been a valuable

component had it been available.

General

126 students agreed to be interviewed by the researcher. The researcher randomly

selected two students from each grade level, unaware of the level of connectedness for

these students. Each student was asked to meet with the researcher during their study hall

or after school. Although interviews were scheduled with eight random students, only

two students came during their scheduled appointment and were interviewed. The

researcher randomly chose six additional students to replace the initial six. There were

eight one-on-one interviews from this process. The researcher was not able to find a

student in the selected group who had no or a negative connection with their advisor. A

student who overheard this statement volunteered to be interviewed because this student

had a negative connection with his/her advisor and a positive connection with other

adults at WHS. His/her interview was added to the data to provide a different experience

and view. (See Appendix C for the oral survey questions.)

Before the interview began, each student submitted a written consent form (signed

by parent if under 18) (Appendix D). The student confirmed permission for the

researcher to check their grades, test scores, behavior records, and extracurricular

activities. The student confirmed permission to be video recorded.

The interview results are categorized into six major sections: level of

connectedness, behavior, tests (NWEA, PSAT, SAT), cumulative grade point average

(GPA), attendance, extracurricular.

Level of Connectedness

Responses of the 744 <u>survey participants</u> when answering the statement, *"I have*

made a positive connection with my advisor," are listed below:

> ➢ 141 said that they *strongly* agreed with the statement (19%)

> ➢ 258 *agreed* with the statement (35%)

> ➢ 134 indicated *somewhat* for a response (18%)

> ➢ 133 felt a *little bit* of a connection (18%)

> ➢ 78 had a *negative, or no,* connection (10%)

Responses of the <u>nine students interviewed</u> when answering the statement, *"I*

have made a positive connection with my advisor," are listed below:

> ➢ 5 said that they *strongly* agreed with the statement (56%)

> ➢ 2 *agreed* with the statement (22%)

> ➢ 0 indicated *somewhat* for a response (0%)

> ➢ 1 felt a *little bit* of a connection(11%)

> ➢ 1 had a *negative* connection (11%).

72% of the 744 survey participants when answering the statement, "**I have made**

a positive connection with my advisor," responded: "somewhat to strongly agree" with

this statement, compared with 78% of the interviewed respondents. Although the nine

interviewed students were chosen randomly, this data exhibits a rough parallel with the total participants and the interviewed group using the data for this question.

For the students who felt they have made a "little or no (or negative)" connection with their advisor, there is a 6% difference between the total survey participants and those interviewed: 28% for the total respondents and 22% for those interviewed. Again, there is a rough parallel that the interviewed group is a good representation of the total surveyed participants. Table 1 reflects this data.

Responses of the 744 <u>surveyed students</u> when answering the statement, *"I have made a positive connection with an <u>adult</u> at WHS,"* are listed below:

➢ 235 said that they *strongly* agreed with the statement (32%)

➢ 296 *agreed* with the statement (40%)

➢ 94 indicated *somewhat* for a response (13%)

➢ 65 felt a *little bit* of a connection (9%)

➢ 54 had a *negative* connection (7%)

Responses of the <u>nine students interviewed</u> when answering the statement, *"I have made a positive connection with an <u>adult</u> at WHS,"* are listed below:

➢ 7 said that they *strongly* agreed with the statement (78%)

➢ 0 *agreed* with the statement (0%)

➢ 1 indicated *somewhat* for a response (11%)

➢ 0 felt a *little bit* of a connection (0%)

➢ 0 had a *negative* connection (0%)

➢ 1 did not respond (11%)

Referring to the statement, *"I have made a positive connection with an adult at WHS,"* 85% of the total respondents answered: "somewhat to strongly agree" with the statement. This is significantly similar to the interviewed respondents of 89%.

For the students who felt that they have made a "little or no (or negative)" connection with an adult at WHS, there is a 5% difference between the total and those interviewed: 16% for the total respondents and 11% for those interviewed, which also appears to be similar. Table 1 reflects this data.

Level of connectedness	w/Advisor: TOTAL respondents	w/Advisor: INTERVIEWEES	w/Adult: TOTAL respondents	w/Adult: INTERVIEWEES
Strongly agree	19%	56%	32%	78%
Agree	72% 35%	78% 22%	85% 40%	89% 0%
Somewhat	18%	0%	13%	11%
Little bit	28% 18%	22% 11%	16% 9%	11% 0%
None	10%	11%	7%	0%
Not answered	n/a	n/a	n/a	11%

Table 2

Success

At the one-on-one interview, students were asked what their definition of success was. The answers ranged from good grades, to reducing the number of behavior issues, to the way the student interacted with teachers and fellow students. Others cited accomplishing particular goals as an indicator of success.

There was one student who found a positive adult connection at WHS only during senior year who stated, "I have a lot more to learn and I feel like with different teachers I could have learned a lot more at WHS, but overall I think it's a success…I'm graduating high school and moving on to college…getting ready to start my life, so I'd say so [high school has been successful]." This open and honest response points clearly to the need for students to find some positive connection with an adult throughout all four years of

high school. These connections can be through an advisory program or through

classroom teachers taking the time to connect with their students.

Behavior Issues

Upon review of the behavior records for the nine interviewed students, the

researcher found one student with an extensive behavior record. The offenses included

cutting class to insubordination, with three in-school suspensions, and no other

suspensions or expulsions. This student explained that his/her advisor for the first three

years at WHS was someone s/he did not get along with. Due to this negative connection,

the student did not want to go to homeroom. Fortunately, a positive connection was

created between the student and one of his/her other classroom teachers. As a result of

this bond, the classroom teacher requested this student be assigned to their homeroom

his/her senior year.

The same student identified one particular teacher who s/he couldn't get along

with and, as a result, s/he would cut this class rather than have a confrontation with the

teacher. Of the 15 cut classes senior year, the conflict with-teacher class accounted for

six of the cut classes. The remaining nine cuts were varied. There were no more than

two repeat cuts for all other classes.

All other interviewed students had a combined total of three class cuts with no

other behavior issues.

This information supports one aspect of a student's level of success and

motivation. As students increase connections and engagement levels, success levels

increase similarly. The student who struggled to connect with one particular teacher

chose to sit in a three-hour after-school detention rather than to attend this teacher's class.

These types of negative connections are counterproductive to a student's overall success in high school. The student avoids the teacher which leads to not only a three-hour detention but a loss of learning time in the missed class. Conversely, the student's positive connection senior year led to successful outcomes.

Test (PSAT, SAT & NWEA) Results

The PSAT results for the nine interviewed students showed that two students did not meet the national average in all three categories: critical reading, mathematics, and writing skills. These two students struggled in connecting with their advisor, although one eventually did connect with a new advisor senior year and the other had other adult connections all of his/her three years.

For the remaining seven students, the test scores for critical reading demonstrated that one student did not meet the national average. This student stated in the interview that s/he had a tough freshman year. The student cited a few examples of the struggles faced as a freshman, such as making new friends and not being involved with any extracurricular activities. The student indicated awareness of an intentional goal to get more involved and connect with teachers because his/her advisor recommended this.

The scores for mathematics demonstrated that all but two of the seven interviewees met the national average. One student was two points below the national average—likely an insignificant difference. The other student shared in the interview that they had a personal crisis in freshman and sophomore years. It is possible that the personal crisis was a factor.

Three students did not meet the national average for writing skills. Each of these three student's scores were within a two-point difference of the national average. Again, little could be gleaned from this data.

Next, the nine interviewees' SAT scores were compared with the national average of approximately 500 (this study used a base score of 480 for comparison). To date, three of the students have not taken SATs. Of the remaining six students, two reached or exceeded a score of 480 in all three categories: critical reading, mathematics, and writing skills. Two of the four students reached the national average for two of the three categories and were in the 430+ range for the third category. One met one of the national averages and was in the 450+ range for the other two categories. One did not meet any of the national averages for any category.

The one student who did not meet the national standards admitted to struggles his/her first three years of high school. This student had a negative connection with his/her advisor for these same three years. The student found a connection in senior year that very likely helped him/her to finish high school. S/he states, "If he [an adult at WHS] wasn't there for me, I wouldn't be graduating." This is a powerful statement for an 18-year old high school student to deliver about his/her experiences with a positive adult connection.

GPA (Grade Point Average)

Of the nine students interviewed, eight maintained a cumulative GPA average of 89 or higher. The ninth student's average was 79. This student is the student who struggled to find a connection while in high school. It is interesting to note that this student passed all 8.25 credits carried in senior year, which is the year there was a

positive connection with an advisor. The student's freshmen through junior years were

not as successful as shown below and depicted in the chart that follows:
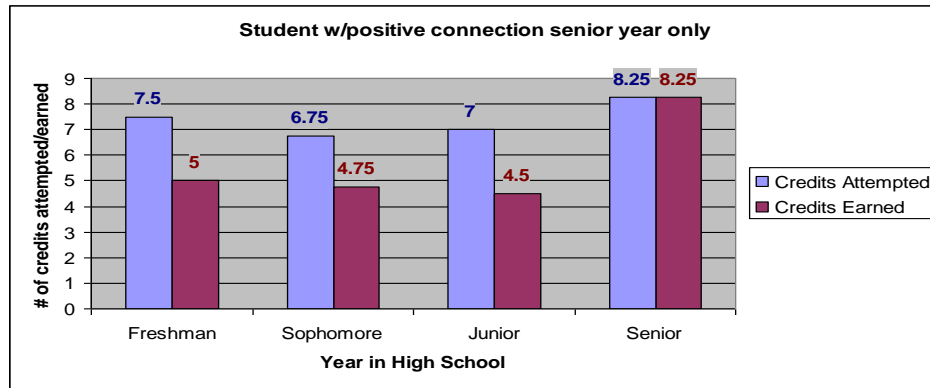
Figure 3: Credits attempted vs. credits earned for student with positive connection senior year only

freshman year the student carried 7.5 credits, but was only successful with 5

credits

sophomore year the student carried 6.75 credits, but was only successful with 4.75

credits

junior year the student carried 7 credits, but was only successful with 4.5 credits

Attendance

It is interesting to note that of the nine students interviewed, the student who did

not connect with his/her advisor the first three years of high school had the most number

of absences: 33.5 days absent from high school. Another student who did not connect

with his/her advisor but did report positive connections with other WHS adults had few

absences.

The researcher reviewed more deeply the records for the student who did not have

a positive adult connection within the first three years of high school. This student's

absences were as follows: 9th grade=6 days absent, 10th grade=9 days absent, 11th

grade=14 days absent and 12th grade=4.5 days absent. This data supports the hypothesis

that there are positive outcomes for positive connections and negative outcomes for

negative (or no) connections. The positive impact of a positive connection yielded an

increased outcome for attendance for this student.

Absences of student w/positive connection senior year only
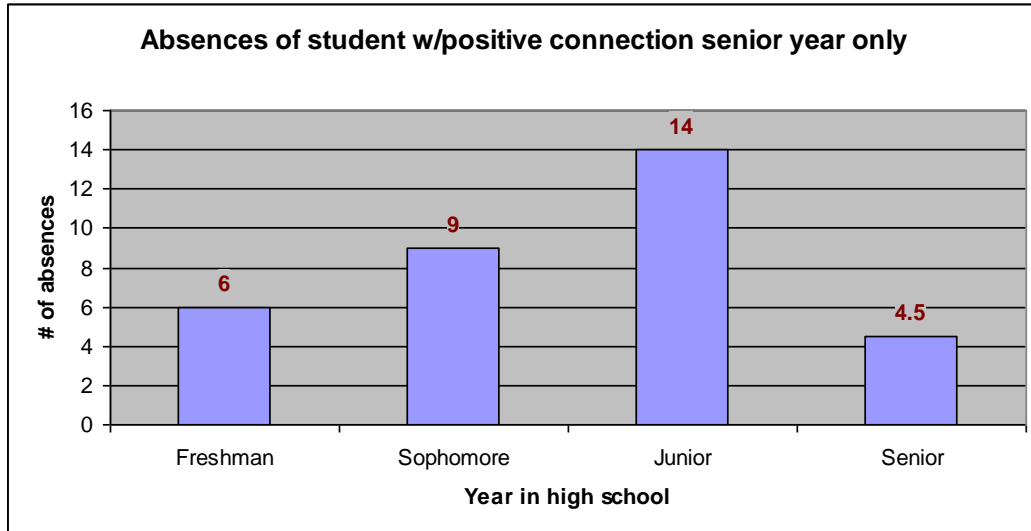
Figure 4: Absences of student with positive connection senior year only

Extracurricular Activities

Six of the nine students interviewed participated in extracurricular activities such

as sports, clubs and school plays. Five of these students also indicated a positive

connection to an adult while at WHS. One student had no positive connection until

senior year. These extracurricular activities are another avenue for students to reach out

to adults who can help shape their young minds in a positive manner and for the adults to

reach out to the students.

Discussion

Although the present study was conducted only locally and with a small sample,

several findings appear to confirm both the literature and the researcher's expectations.

This study supports other research in the area of positive student connections in high

school. The students who had a positive connection with their advisor consistently did

well and/or improved their academic success. One student stated, "She [her advisor] had a great deal to do with his/her success in high school. She always made time for me." The student with no adult connection the first three years of high school improved in many categories senior year, the year in which a positive adult connection was made. Both the present research and that reviewed in the literature above indicate that if the positive connection started freshman year, the student would have been more successful earlier in the high school experience.

Each of the students interviewed felt that there is value to maintaining the existing advisory program at WHS. One student said, "You get to know a teacher. You have the same group of people, friends, that you go in [to advisory] and see changes." Many indicated that it is a place they can go to and feel safe, feel that someone is watching out for them. It is also an avenue to seek advice, such as when applying to college or for jobs. Although these concepts are in some of the WHS curricula, these are two concerns that students cited as important in the advisory program. The researcher agrees that the more people students can discuss options and strategies with, the more confident students will feel when applying to college or for employment.

Additionally, the interviewees felt that the lack of structure of the advisory program was a positive aspect of the program. It allowed the students to discuss a variety of topics from job interviews, to the school play, to time management, to name a few. The researcher personally witnessed this during her time as advisor to a group of seniors who graduated in 2009. In this instance there were positive connections with all 13 of the advisees. During the senior year with this advisory group, two of the advisees approached the advisor seeking advice regarding a personal dilemma they were faced

with. The two individuals were both in the top 10% of their class, involved with several

extracurricular activities and had never expressed dilemmas prior to senior year. They

had other adult connections at WHS but chose to speak with the advisor about this

dilemma. This scenario is relevant in that mentoring should be a critical component of

the high school experience for all students, not just the at-risk and not just the top ten

percent of the student population.

     The current study will be shared with the faculty and staff of Windham High

School. Emphasis will be placed on the major points the nine interviewed students felt

were critical to a successful advisory program. Following are their suggestions.

     Students recommend that advisors chat with their advisees, make the rounds and

be sure to chat with each of the advisees over a period of time rather than focusing on a

small sub-population of the advisory group. Keep the structure of the advisory program

informal for more flexibility.

     Students also had some basic suggestions to advisors, such as make sure to read

announcements every day. Students feel more connected to their school if they are aware

of the happenings in the WHS community.

     As needed and appropriate, allow students the ability to change homeroom

advisors. The researcher recommends a formal process for this suggestion to assure it

occurs for the right reasons. For example, the process to change a homeroom advisor

should not be designed to accommodate a change of advisor simply because a student

wants to be with certain friends. The student who only had one year of a positive

connection with their advisor recommended there be a survey which would better match

student with teacher. This is an interesting angle and will be shared with the WHS administrative team.

Allow students time to meet with another teacher. This suggestion may not be a viable option due to the fact that it would interrupt that other teacher's advisee time. As an aside, the researcher's current advisory group is going into their sophomore year this coming school year, 2010-11. Last year, their freshmen year, in order to maintain an atmosphere of bonding, there was a "closed" door policy during the advisory block. This meant that my advisees had my full attention. The researcher explained to other students who wanted to "drop in" during advisory time that bonding was taking place and it was not to be disrupted. These non-advisory students understood and respected our practice and the advisees felt special.

When asked what teachers could do to improve the advisory time, students shared various ideas. The most prevalent idea was a recommendation that advisors take a chance and get to know their advisees; find out about their everyday life. Trust your advisees until you have reason not to. A few students mentioned that if an advisor doesn't get along with a student, the advisor should speak with the student and ask if they want to be assigned to someone who they can relate with. As was witnessed in this project, the change can be done successfully.

There were additional themes surrounding bonding activities. Students asked that advisors consider implementing teambuilding activities. For example, one student stated that the ACES Day (All Children Exercising Simultaneously) was an especially memorable bonding experience. Others suggested field trips or game playing with their advisees to facilitate bonding.

There was general consensus that advisors could keep it simple by just "hanging out" with their advisees. Students enjoyed conversations about out-of-school issues with their advisor. Advisors could bring in food to share. Students requested advisors do more than take attendance and read the paper or work on grades, etc. Students recommended advisors make special effort with those students who are not motivated or who are shy. Additionally, several students requested all advisors to consistently read the daily school announcements.

Students suggest advisors be aware of their advisees' needs and help them out with their struggles. For example, advising them to go see someone else for help and thinking the job is done was not helpful. It is important for the advisor to actually bring their advisee to the other person to assure it is followed through. There is a strong reason the student is reaching out; advisors must hear this and take it seriously. One student commented, "Don't ignore your advisees…it's their time with you…make an effort."

Another common theme students recommended was a suggestion that advisors be flexible in the advisory block. Students feel it is unfair if they get a three-hour detention for not attending homeroom if there was a valid reason for them to be with another teacher.

Students had various viewpoints regarding the importance of developing a positive connection with an adult at WHS. One student said, "I reached out for help. I felt really close to her [one of their teachers]. I could open up to her. She helped me get professional help for some of my personal issues." Some students indicated that it is important to connect with an adult to help with college recommendations, appraisals and references. Others felt that these connections help to motivate the student because they

know they have someone there for support. These comments can be instructional to the

entire WHS community.

One student, who has a negative connection with his/her advisor, indicated that

the advisory program was not important to him/her. This student indicated s/he

experienced very little problems in life. However, the student recognized the importance

of a connection with an adult at WHS, especially in the event of a crisis. This student

also stated that there are other adults at WHS that would help this student through such an

ordeal.

When asked what has changed for you since freshman year, the student who did

not have positive connections the first three years of high school, stated, "I've grown

from a punk teenager to a mature young man."

In conclusion, this study offers promise for the Windham High School advisory

program. There are positive experiences taking place with a large percentage of the

student population. Although this is commendable, there is room for improvement. As

one student who had a "little bit of a positive connection" with his/her advisory teacher

and stronger connections with some of his/her academic teachers sadly stated, "I have

seen a lot of kids hit it off with their homeroom teachers…I wish I had it with mine."

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Appendix A—Letter of Support from RSU #14, Superintendent Sanford Prince

WINDHAM RAYMOND SCHOOL DISTRICT
Regional School Unit #14

228 Windham Center Road
Windham, Maine 04062
(207) 892-1800   Fax (207) 892-1805
http://www.windhamraymondschools.org

SUPERINTENDENT
Sanford J. Prince IV
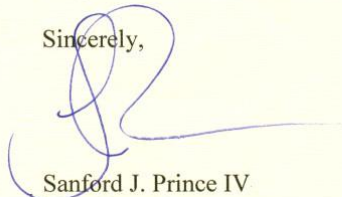
Assistant Superintendent
Donn S. Davis

March 26, 2010

Dear Members of the University of Maine Institutional Review Board:

It is a pleasure to write a letter of support on behalf of Diane Leavitt, a teacher at Windham High School. A review of Diane's Master Thesis Proposal, "A Positive Connection Leads to Student Success," establishes Diane's panoramic view of the Advisory Program. This will not only be a new learning for her, but an opportunity to strategically navigate accordingly based on her findings. This is a wise and practical study as everything we attempt to do, whether it is induction training of existing staff or building positive connections with students, is fundamental to teaching and learning.

I truly see the data from this thesis as a source that can be brought into the work that Windham High School is dong with large-school improvement. We all know an informed practitioner can be an influential force to any transformation of change within our school communities. And let me take this a step further. By all accounts Diane has by far exceeded the standards for educational revolution here in the Windham Raymond School District (RSU # 14). She brings to the forefront her knack for rendering complex problems with the exploration of brilliant pathways to change the way we teach our students.

Diane Leavitt will wholeheartedly prevail with this study and will blaze the way with our Advisory Program to move our students to success.

Sincerely,

Sanford J. Prince IV
Superintendent

Appendix B

SURVEY—TABLE 1

TO: WHS Students   ***   **FROM:** Ms. Leavitt   ***   **DATE:**

Thank you for taking time to help me with my graduate studies research project. I

am trying to determine what happens to a student's learning experience when they make

a positive or negative, or no, connection with an adult at WHS. I would like to speak

with students from both categories from all grade levels. Please be open and honest with

this survey. I will not use your name in the final report. I will not use your identity with

any WHS staff.

All material collected will remain in my password-protected computer or my

locked file cabinets at Windham High School.

There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with participation in this

study. You do not have to do this survey. You may click "No Thanks" at the end of the

survey to end the session. If you decide to help with this project but then change your

mind, you can stop helping at any time. There is no penalty to clicking "No Thanks."

There is no penalty to changing your mind later. There are no direct or indirect benefits

to participating in this study.

Your participation is voluntary. If you choose not to participate, it will not affect

your current or future relations with Windham High School. Participation, or non-

participation, does not jeopardize grades nor risk loss of present or future

faculty/staff/school/WHS relationships.

You may be dismissed from the study if the study is terminated for any reason.

Student Name**: _____

(*required only if you want to participate in a face-to-face interview with Ms. Leavitt).

Student's Homeroom Advisor: _____Student's Grade Level: _____

On a scale of 1-5, 1 equals **not at all**, 5 equals **strongly agree**, please rate the following

statements. Place a checkmark in the appropriate box:

Statement	1—not at all	2—a little bit	3—some-what	4—agree	5—Strongly agree
1. I have made a positive connection with my advisor					
2. I have made a positive connection with an adult at WHS.					
If you answered yes to question #2, please identify that adult's name or role.	Mentor's role (or name if you prefer): _____ _____				
3. Are you interested in participating in this study as described below?	Yes ☐		No ☐		
4. **No Thanks.** I do not wish to participate in this survey.					

*Brief Description of the Study

I want to know if you have made any connection with an adult at WHS. The

connection can be positive or negative, or no, connection. Then I will want to know how

that connection has changed things like grades or attendance while you are a student at WHS. Some things you should know about the study:

1. This electronic survey is the first part of the study. Once data is gathered, the online survey will be deleted from the system.

2. The next part of the study will be a recorded interview with Ms. Leavitt. This recording will be erased at the end of the study. We will meet in a conference room setting.

   a. I will ask you questions about how you think you have succeeded at WHS.

   b. I will ask you about the positive, negative (or no) connection you have made with a WHS adult.

   c. I will ask your opinion of the advisory program.

3. I will try to schedule the first interview during your study hall period. If you do not have a study hall, we will arrange a time that is convenient for an after-school interview.

4. The first interview will last no more than 45 minutes.

5. There will be more interviews scheduled that will last approximately 10 minutes.

6. The study will be over the period of one month.

7. I need your informed consent (or, if under 18 years old, your assent and informed consent of your parents) to review your grades, attendance, behavior record, extracurricular activities (like sports and clubs), NWEA, and SAT scores. It is possible that this information will be included in the final report but I will not use your real name in the final report.

8. I will interview two to four students from each grade level.

9. From each grade level, I will interview two students who feel they have made a positive connection with an adult at WHS and two students who feel they have a negative (or no) connection with an adult at WHS.

Results of this study will remain in my password-protected computer or my locked file cabinet at Windham High School. Your real name will not be used in any the final report. WHS staff will not have access to the details of this research. The final, anonymous, report will be shared with the WHS Staff.

Appendix C

Oral Interview Questions

1. What level of connectedness do you have with your advisor or another adult?

   a. Define positive or negative/

2. Have you felt successful here at WHS?

   a. What does successful mean to you?

   b. If so, when did this begin (i.e. freshmen year, etc.)

   c. If not, why do you think this is so?

3. Can you remember back to 9th grade, 10th grade, 11th grade. Were there any significant/important revelations in the sense of improving your high school experience?

4. What are your thoughts on the advisory program?

   a. Do you feel there has been an impact on your success as a result of the advisory program?

   b. What are your thoughts on the structure, or lack of structure, of the advisory program?

   c. What would you change?

   d. What would you keep?

5. Is there merit to connecting with an adult while in high school?

   a. If yes, why?

   b. If not, why not?

6. What would you say to teachers to improve their advisory time?

7. SENIORS: what are your plans next year?

8.   Underclassmen: do you have plans for after high school?

Appendix D

Consent Form

Notice to the student and parents (if under 18 years old).

I am conducting a research project for my Graduate Program in Leadership Studies.   I would like permission to survey your student at Windham High School. With Ms. McAfee's approval, I'm seeking to learn how we can better help students succeed at Windham HS. Below is a brief description of the study.

Brief Description of the Study

I want to know if your student has made any connection with an adult at WHS. The connection can be positive or negative (or no). Then I will want to know how that connection has changed things like grades or attendance while your student is at WHS. Some things you should know about the study:

1. An electronic survey is the first part of the study (see Table 1). Once data is gathered, the online survey will be deleted from the system.

2. The second part of the study will be a recorded interview with Ms. Leavitt. This recording will be erased at the end of the study. I will meet with your student in a conference room setting. Only students who have assented, or consented (if over 18), will be a part of this part of the study. From these willing participants a random selection process will be utilized to interview 8-16 students

   a. I will ask your student questions about how they think they have succeeded at WHS.

   b. I will ask your student about the positive, negative (or no) connection your student has made with a WHS adult.

      c. I will ask your student's opinion of the advisory program.

3. I will try to schedule the first interview during your student's study hall period. If your student does not have a study hall, we will arrange a time that is convenient for an after-school interview.

4. The first interview will last no more than 45 minutes.

5. There will be more interviews scheduled that will last approximately 10 minutes. It is expected there will be fewer than five additional interviews.

6. The study will be over a one-month period.

7. I need your consent if your student is under 18 years old to review grades, attendance, behavior record, extracurricular activities (like sports and clubs), NWEA, and SAT scores. It is likely that this information will be included in the final report but I will not use your student's real name in the final report.

8. I expect to interview two to four students from each grade level.

9. I expect to interview two students who feel they have made a positive connection with an adult at WHS and two students who feel they have a negative (or no) connection with an adult at WHS.

10. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with participation in this study.

11. There are no direct or indirect benefits to participating in the study.

12. Access to the records will be limited to the researcher; however, please note that University of Southern Maine's Institutional Review Board may review the research records.

Contacts and Questions:

- The researcher conducting this study is Diane Leavitt. The USM faculty mentor is Betty Robinson, USM/LAC. For questions or more information concerning this research, you may contact Diane Leavitt at 207-892-1810 x 202, dleavitt@windhamraymondschools.org or Professor Betty Robinson at 207-753-6550, brobinso@usm.maine.edu.

- If you believe you may have suffered a research related injury, contact Diane Leavitt at 207-892-1810 x 202, dleavitt@windhamraymondschools.org or Professor Betty Robinson at 207-753-6550, brobinso@usm.maine.edu who will give you further instructions.

- If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, the study itself, or any research-related injuries, you may contact: Director, Office of Research Compliance, USM at (207)780-4268, or usmirb@usm.maine.edu, or TTY (207)780-5646.

I have read (or have had read to me) the contents of this consent form and have been encouraged to ask questions. I have received answers to my questions. I give my consent to participate in this study; OR I give my consent for my child who is under the age of 18 to participate in this study. I have received (or will receive) a copy of this form.

Study Participant Name:_____(printed)

If 18, student signature:_____(signed)   **OR**

If under 18,   Parent Name:_____(printed)

Parent Signature:_____(signed)