K-12 Student Success: Out-of-School Time Initiative

POSITIVE ADULT ROLE MODELS
A Learning Brief

Holly Kipp, Researcher, The Oregon Community Foundation
Caitlin Ruffenach, Researcher, The Oregon Community Foundation
Celeste Janssen, Director, Institute for Youth Success

The K-12 Student Success: Out-of-School Time Initiative is focused on boosting student success among Oregon's middle school students. The Oregon Community Foundation and The Ford Family Foundation are currently funding 21 organizations that provide out-of-school-time (OST) programming (e.g., after school or summer) to rural students, students of color and low-income students. The back cover of this report includes a map and list of all current grantees. Funded programs emphasize academic support, positive adult role models and family engagement. This learning brief summarizes what is known about the importance of positive adult role models from existing research and shares what we're learning about the efforts of the Initiative grantees to build positive youth-adult relationships. We hope that this description of the work of the Initiative grantees helps build understanding of the practices and experiences of OST programs in Oregon.
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WHAT IS A POSITIVE ADULT ROLE MODEL?
What the Literature Says

Positive relationships between youth and adults in an out-of-school time (OST) setting include both formal mentoring relationships in which adults and youth are intentionally matched and regularly meet to build a supportive relationship, as well as less formal relationships that develop between youth and adults including, but not limited to, program staff and teachers.

There are a few different ways that researchers have described these youth-adult relationships. Some youth-adult relationships may fit more than one of these definitions.

- High-quality relationships that are particularly impactful are called developmental relationships. Developmental relationships are relationships in which youth participate in "progressively more complex patterns of reciprocal activity with someone with whom that person has developed a strong and enduring emotional attachment and ... the balance of power gradually shifts in favor of [the youth]" (Li & Julian, 2012).

- Researchers also use the term natural mentoring to describe a mentoring relationship that occurs when a youth creates a meaningful bond with an extended family member, coach, tutor, teacher, neighbor or after school staff. This type of mentoring happens more frequently than formal mentoring and typically lasts longer (Bruce & Bridgeland, 2014).

- Youth-adult partnerships are the practice of multiple youth and multiple adults deliberating and acting together, in a collective (democratic) fashion over a sustained period of time, through shared work intended to promote social justice, strengthen an organization and/or affirmatively address a community issue (Zeldin, Christens, & Powers, 2013).

WHY ARE POSITIVE ADULT ROLE MODELS IMPORTANT?
What the Literature Says

The K-12 Student Success Out-of-School Time Initiative is supporting programs around the state that are providing high-quality OST programming aimed at improving academic success for middle school students. Fostering student success requires the efforts of many, including positive adult role models such as OST program staff, volunteers and mentors. Existing research describes a number of important benefits for youth who have positive adult role models in their lives. These include:

Supportive relationships help youth overcome adversity.
Studies have shown that adverse childhood experiences are connected to lower school achievement, poor health and increased criminal behavior. Developing resilience through supportive relationships, positive experiences and adaptive skill-building can help youth overcome these adverse experiences. Positive adult role models can help youth build skills that help them plan for, monitor and adapt to a changing environment (Shonkoff et al., 2015).

Youth-adult relationships in OST settings can result in positive academic outcomes for youth.

Youth are significantly less likely to skip school when they have supportive adults in their lives (Tierney, Grossman, & Resch, 1995). Moreover, when youth have a positive adult role model, they are more likely to have academic confidence, be engaged in school and show an interest in learning (Tierney, Grossman, & Resch, 1995; Murphey et al., 2013; Wooley & Bowen, 2007). In a national poll of young adults, young people with mentors report setting higher educational goals and are more likely to attend college (Bruce & Bridgeland, 2014).

Positive adult role models can have an impact on the emotional well-being of youth and help youth develop positive identities (Deutsch, 2008).

For some youth, relationships with OST program staff were more strongly linked to self-esteem than were their relationships with closest kin (Hirsch, 2005). Close relationships also help youth avoid risky behavior like using alcohol and drugs, and help them cope with stressors (Tierney, Grossman, & Resch, 1995; Deutsch, 2008; Vandell, Reisner, & Pierce, 2007). Youth with "mentor like" relationships outside the home are less likely to have externalizing and internalizing problems like bullying and depression (Murphey et al., 2013).

Positive adult role models who reflect youths' racial or ethnic background or experience help promote positive racial identity.

Positive adult role models share characteristics like warmth and acceptance regardless of race or ethnicity. Additional benefits may be gained when adults reflect youths' racial or ethnic background and experiences. A study of academically at-risk African-American youth demonstrated that natural mentors may promote positive racial identity by providing teens with social opportunities to explore their identities (Hurd et al., 2012). Specifically, mentees may incorporate the positive feedback from mentors into their identity and may emulate models of positive racial beliefs exhibited by mentors. In this way, mentors may prepare mentees to cope with racism. Positive racial identity developed through relationships with natural mentors can contribute to increased educational attainment and foster more positive attitudes about the importance of academic achievement.

Positive adult role models can have a positive impact on other youth relationships and encourage community involvement.

Youth with mentors are significantly more likely to have positive relationships with peers and parents (Tierney, Grossman, & Resch, 1995; Murphey et al., 2013). Young people with supportive adults in their lives are also more likely to participate in sports, student leadership and volunteerism (Murphey et al., 2013; Deutsch, 2008; Bruce & Bridgeland, 2014).

Despite the beneficial impact of positive adult role models on a number of factors in young people's lives, a national poll conducted by MENTOR found that one in three young people cannot identify a mentor in their life. In addition, "at-risk youth are less likely to have mentors and more likely to want one" (Bruce & Bridgeland, 2014).

HOW CAN POSITIVE ADULT ROLE MODELS DEVELOP SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUTH?

What the Literature Says

Knowledge and understanding develop through relationships, and adults have specific roles in fostering good learning (Halpern, Heckman, & Larson, 2013; Thompson, 2007). The Search Institute (2014) has identified a framework, complemented by other research in the field, for ways in which youth are supported through positive relationships with adults. According to the framework, positive adult role models exhibit the following characteristics:

Express care: Positive adult role models are attentive to youth and show an interest in who they are and what they care about. Adult role models should also invest time and energy in their activities with youth and be dependable. Emotional connection and attachment provide the foundation for sustained engagement (Li & Julian, 2012).

Challenge growth: Adults should encourage youth to continuously improve by inspiring them to set goals for the future. To do so, adults should set expectations for youth to live up to their full potential and push them to stretch their thoughts and abilities. At the same time, adults should set boundaries and enforce appropriate limits.

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Provide Support: Positive adult role models provide encouragement, acknowledge efforts and achievements, and can help students learn by guiding them with assistance and feedback. Li and Julian (2012) suggest that in sustained relationships with frequent activities, adults can gauge the competence and confidence of youth in a particular activity and adjust their support as necessary. Positive adult role models should advocate for students when necessary.

Share Power: Research suggests that having agency (a sense of control or power) is a foundational component of youth development (Nagaoka et al., 2015; Vandell, Reisner, & Pierce, 2007). Adults can promote agency by allowing students to help make decisions. Youth opinions should be incorporated into decision making about OST programming. Positive adult role models should demonstrate respect by treating youth fairly, taking them seriously, and responding to their needs, abilities and interests. Adults can collaborate with youth to help them solve problems and achieve goals.

Expand Possibilities: Adults should connect youth to opportunities and introduce them to people who can help them grow and explore by exposing them to new experiences and ideas. Developmental experiences are a critical avenue through which youth learn and develop. Adults can help youth reflect on these experiences so that they might gain knowledge and meaning from them. Assigning meaning to an experience is necessary for youth to incorporate the experience into their identity and growing sense of self (Nagaoka et al., 2015). Adults can also help youth navigate barriers that prevent them from attaining their goals.

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HOW ARE THE K-12 STUDENT SUCCESS GRANTEES DEVELOPING SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUTH?

What We're Learning in Oregon

The K-12 Student Success grantees engage a variety of positive adult role models who provide programming, mentoring and experiential opportunities for youth. Core program staff include youth development professionals; school teachers, administrators and paraprofessionals; and community elders. College students, business professionals, former program participants, artists, community members and parents are also involved with K-12 grantee programs to mentor youth and provide additional program and project support — often as volunteers. This section uses the Search Institute framework to describe how these adults are building supportive relationships with youth in their programs.

Express care: Many of the program staff at K-12 Student Success grantee organizations know the youth in their programs well and ask students directly about their parents and siblings, sports, hobbies and other activities youth are involved in. For some programs, this is done through regularly scheduled one-on-one time between youth and an assigned staff person. Other programs intentionally incorporate conversations at the beginning or during programming to check in with students, giving them space to share personal updates.

Building Healthy Families — Wallowa Resources

Intentionally checking in with youth helps staff to build positive, trusting relationships by expressing an interest in who youth are outside of school and programming. This is reflected in youth responses to a survey administered as part of the Initiative; a majority of youth responded that they know at least one adult at their program who cares about them and that they believe the adults in their programs take time to get to know them.

Grantee staff explain that participating in program activities directly with youth is critical for developing positive relationships. By enthusiastically participating in activities alongside students, staff at a program in rural Oregon promote a sense that staff and youth are all equal when they are at the program. Consistent presence of program staff is also often cited by grantee organizations as the number- one reason youth continue to attend programming and is described as the foundation for building lasting relationships with the youth in their programs.

Challenge growth: A majority of K-12 Student Success grantees encourage youth to think about their future, and work intentionally to motivate students to be successful in school, graduate from high school and seek employment or pursue post-secondary education. Several grantee programs include formal lessons to help youth set goals and identify the steps necessary to reach those goals, and regularly check in with youth on progress toward their goals. Through this process, staff are able to encourage students and help address any barriers to reaching those goals.

In addition to formal goal setting, grantee staff were observed encouraging students to push through challenges with homework assignments and school projects, to keep brainstorming ideas when they thought there were no more solutions to a problem, to draw on the talents and knowledge they already have, and to listen to their peers for new ideas and approaches to solving a problem.

For most grantee programs, students seem to have a clear understanding of the expectations staff have for them, whether explicit or implicit. Some programs have codes of conduct that students are taught and able to repeat aloud in unison. A shared understanding of expectations between staff and students results in program environments that are respectful. Staff are therefore able to avoid spending much of their time on discipline and instead are able to focus on challenging students to grow and learn.

In one program, a student was challenged by program staff to stretch their thinking about homelessness. Grantee staff recounted a story about a youth who was questioning the purpose of a community service project to prepare meals for individuals who were experiencing homelessness. This particular youth expressed to staff that they saw homelessness as a choice people make. However, by exploring that idea with program staff, the youth was able to make a connection between their own experience as an immigrant to the United States and the sense of not always feeling at home in this country. As a result, the youth had a shift in their thinking and decided to lead a clothing drive to help displaced people in their community.

> **"** I'm just going to let you struggle with this problem a little longer before I help you. **"**
>
> *-Program Volunteer*

OSU Smile

Provide support: A key component of many K-12 Student Success grantee programs is encouraging youth to set goals for their future, to persevere through challenges and to believe in themselves and their abilities. Program staff were observed encouraging students to work through difficult math problems, to draw on what they already knew to help solve a new problem, and to consider how current choices might influence future opportunities.

Celebrating student efforts and achievements is an important way in which grantee programs are providing support for youth. Whether informally — applauding correct answers to a math problem and thanking students for their contributions to group discussions, or more formally — celebrating as a group the number of homework assignments completed in a single program session using incentives, program staff make a point to acknowledge the achievements of the youth in their programs.

Many grantee organizations describe the role that staff play as advocates for students and their families. It is not uncommon for staff to attend parent-teacher conferences at youths' schools, support students in navigating difficult relationships with their school day teachers, connect students and families with needed resources in the community, or talk with parents about issues students are having at the request of the youth. Staff rapport and relationships with students and families places them in a position to assist in myriad ways. A majority of youth expressed that they are comfortable asking adults in their OST programs for help, as reported through a youth survey administered as part of the Initiative.

> " You are exactly correct! Good job! "
>
> *- Program Staff*

Camp Fire Columbia

Building Healthy Families — Wallowa Resources

Share power: K-12 Student Success grantee programs foster agency (a sense of control or power) in youth in many ways. Some programs offer formal opportunities for youth to provide their input on programming and activities, such as through participation on a Youth Advisory Council or by providing feedback through a survey. Other programs offer students choice more informally, by allowing youth to choose from a handful of activities that have already been selected by staff or allowing them to decide how to go about solving a problem rather than prescribing a solution.

Other important examples of sharing power with youth are the ways program staff show respect for students — by following the same set of rules they ask students to follow, by talking with them in a respectful manner, by showing an interest in the things they care about and by asking youth to share their knowledge and thoughts during programming. Through a youth voice project implemented as part of the K-12 Initiative, one youth stated, "at the after school program I feel respected."

Expand possibilities: The majority of grantees offer opportunities for youth to connect with other adults who can help them discover an interest or inspire them to set and reach their goals. Some examples of these opportunities include taking students on field trips to businesses and universities, organizing service learning projects, bringing artists and community members into programs for projects and presentations and connecting students to formal mentors.

OST program staff are also often a main source of support for students who are experiencing something difficult in their personal lives. Staff are able to listen to youth and help them address barriers by connecting them with community resources and services.

SUCCESSES WITH POSITIVE ADULT ROLE MODELS
What We're Learning in Oregon

There are many ways grantees have been successful in their efforts to develop positive relationships between youth and adults. Successes include program staff and other adult role models who are dependable and reflect students and their families; providing one-on-one time between youth and adults; and connecting with students at school during the school day. Grantee staff and students also share examples of academic success as a result of the support offered through their OST programs.

Finding adults who are the "right fit": Grantees underscore the importance of program staff, volunteers and mentors — these adults are essential for engaging and developing successful relationships with youth. Adults who can relate to middle school age youth and those who are positive, empowering and genuinely interested in youth and their families have had the greatest success building positive relationships with youth who attend K-12 grantee programs.

Grantee organizations explain that providing youth with appropriate role models, those who reflect the background and experiences of the youth, is crucial. For example, one grantee described recruiting first-generation and Latino college students as volunteers and professional female engineers as mentors. Many grantee organizations aim to hire program staff who are bilingual and bicultural, reflecting the youth who attend their programs. For other programs, importance is placed on cultural values and traditions by hiring elders from the community to work with youth in culturally appropriate ways.

Consistency of adults and youth: Many grantees have found success in sustaining positive adult role models, especially program staff. Programs that have staff, volunteers and mentors who are consistent, combined with higher rates of youth retention, describe the greatest success in relationships between youth and adults. When youth can depend on the same program staff to show up over and over again, it allows youth and adults to build positive relationships, which grantee organizations explain is foundational for their work.

One-on-one time and connecting at school: While many program staff are able to develop strong relationships with youth in the group setting that is common among K-12 grantee programs, many explain that one-on-one time is especially helpful. Some program staff are able to meet with youth at school during the school day. For others, school day teachers are working directly with youth in the OST setting, which helps students and teachers to see each other in a different light, leading to improved student-teacher interactions in the regular classroom.

Supporting school success: K-12 grantee staff and students alike articulate that making connections and building relationships through OST programs supports school success, especially by encouraging school attendance and homework completion. Grantee organizations and parents also explain that youth see program staff as supportive and as a resource for their academic achievement.

CHALLENGES WITH POSITIVE ADULT ROLE MODELS
What We're Learning in Oregon

K-12 Student Success grantees have identified several challenges related to positive adult role models. In particular, organizations face challenges with finding and retaining experienced youth development professionals, volunteers and mentors as well as with developing policies and practices that truly support shared power with program youth.

Limited availability and retention: While K-12 grantees have described successes in finding positive adult role models who are a good fit to work with youth in their programs, one of the main challenges articulated by organizations is the limited number of available youth development professionals, volunteers and mentors in any given community who have the right experience, who work well with middle school age youth and who reflect the youth and families their programming is reaching. This challenge seems to be particularly prevalent in rural communities. Once programs attract experienced staff, volunteers and mentors, there is the added challenge of high turnover, as some grantees struggle to retain staff over time.

Consistency of adults and youth: Though many grantees have found success with consistency in adult role models, this can also be a challenge for programs. Often, there is high turnover among program staff, mentors and volunteers from year to year, which means youth are having to repeatedly build trust and form relationships with new adults. Another challenge with consistency for some grantee programs is student retention. For programs that struggle to retain youth over extended periods of time, it is difficult for positive adult role models to build strong, lasting relationships with youth.

Sharing power with youth: Building youth voice, choice and agency has surfaced often as something grantees want to work on, but many K-12 grantee programs struggle with how to do so, particularly in formal ways. Program leaders and staff recognize the great importance of providing opportunities for youth to have agency in their OST programs, but most find it challenging to incorporate a formal process for sharing power into existing programming. Another challenge is identifying and providing professional development opportunities for program staff to gain skills in building youth agency.

Wy'east Middle School, Hood River

ABOUT THIS LEARNING BRIEF

The K-12 Student Success: Out-of-School Time Initiative began in late 2013 and is currently ongoing. The goal of the Initiative is to help close the achievement gap for students in Oregon by raising awareness of the importance of supporting students in their middle school years and the valuable role of out-of-school time (OST) programs in supporting student success.

Through the K-12 Student Success: Out-of-School Time Initiative, The Oregon Community Foundation and The Ford Family Foundation are currently funding 21 organizations that provide OST programming (e.g., after school and summer) to rural students, students of color and low-income students. These programs emphasize academic support, positive adult role models and family engagement.

This learning brief summarizes what is known about the importance of positive adult role models through existing research, as well as successes and challenges the Initiative grantees experience in their efforts to develop supportive relationships with youth. Information included in this brief was gathered through Initiative evaluation activities completed to date — these include literature review, interviews with grantee staff and leaders, the Youth Program Quality Assessment process, youth photo voice projects, and focus groups with parents and guardians. This brief is one of several developed and published by the Research Department at The Oregon Community Foundation to share what we're learning during the Initiative with practitioners and other stakeholders in order to build understanding of the practices and experiences of OST programs in Oregon.

Cover Photo: Camp Fire Columbia

2016 K-12 STUDENT SUCCESS INITIATIVE GRANTEES
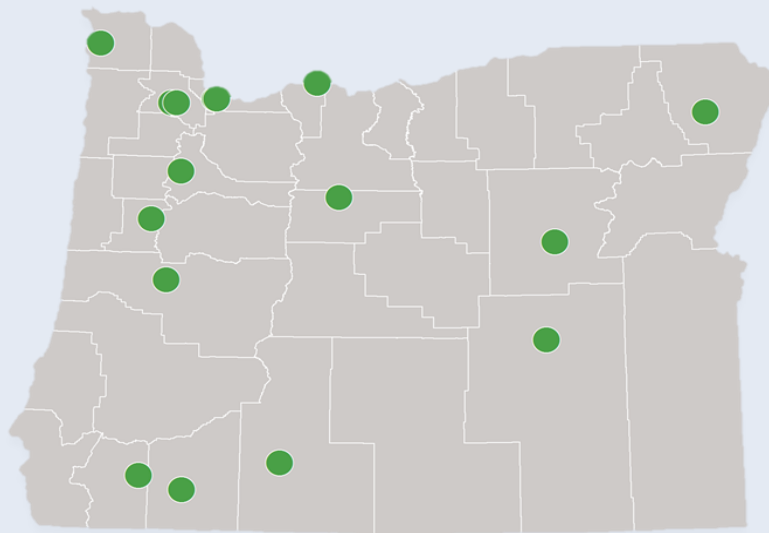
21 Grantees

are currently funded through the K-12 Student Success Initiative.

Adelante Mujeres
Building Healthy Families
Camp Fire Columbia
Centro Cultural
Chiloquin Jr Sr High School
College Dreams
Confederated Tribes of Warm
   Springs

Eugene School District 4J
Grant School District #3
Hacienda CDC
Hood River County SD
Human Solutions, Inc.
I Have a Dream Foundation
Kids Club of Harney County
Kids Unlimited

Latino Network
Open Meadow
Oregon MESA
OSU SMILE
Self Enhancement, Inc.
Sunset Empire Parks and
   Recreation District

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Suggested Resources

Elements of Effective Practice, 4th Edition, MENTOR

A Research Update from the Search Institute: Developmental Relationships, Search Institute

Foundations for Young Adult Success: A Developmental Framework

Building Healthy Families — Wallowa Resources