End of Project Report: Check & Connect

Increasing Graduation Rates for Black and American Indian Students with Disabilities

June 30, 2021

Introduction

The purpose of this final report is to provide a high-level summary and analysis of this project from the perspective of the Check & Connect national office. This summary begins with a background of the project and a description of activities during different stages of implementation. Next, we describe the history of the Check & Connect model and current training, support, and implementation examples across the country. We compare the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) Project to other implementation efforts, discuss implications for sustainability beyond the project, and provide recommendations for continued implementation.

Project Background

Exploration Stage

In 2016, the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) embarked on a project to increase graduation rates for Black and American Indian students with disabilities in Minnesota. This group of students had the lowest graduation rates in the state, according to MDE data. This project combined two MDE initiatives; the State Systemic Improvement Plan (SSIP) and the State Personnel Development Grant (SPDG). MDE selected four partner school districts who had large numbers of the target student population to support this goal: Minneapolis Public Schools, St. Paul Public Schools, Osseo Area Schools, and Duluth Public Schools. MDE guided these districts through the exploration stage of implementation using the *Hexagon Exploration Tool* (Metz & Louison, 2018) to select an appropriate intervention for their use during the five-year grant cycle. The *Hexagon Exploration Tool* helped districts evaluate the fit and feasibility of evidence-based programs for potential use in their district to support the goals of the MDE Project. The tool facilitated discussions of both program indicators and implementing site

indicators for fit and feasibility. Program indicators included: 1) demonstrated evidence of the program, 2) supports for implementation, and 3) usability across various contexts. Implementing site indicators included 1) program alignment with needs of students, 2) district capacity to implement the specific intervention/program, and 3) fit with initiatives currently in place in the district. After completing the Hexagon Tool, all four districts selected Check & Connect (C&C) as the intervention they would use to support the target students in this project.

Installation Stage

After selecting C&C as their intervention, districts moved into the installation stage of implementation. In this phase, districts developed District Implementation Teams (DITs) and Building Implementation Teams (BITs) to guide and lead implementation from the installation phase through full implementation. DITs and BITs supported selecting a district coordinator and mentors at the beginning of the implementation stage. Each district had support from MDE through MDE's State Implementation Team (SIT), in addition to a national Check & Connect trainer to provide training, coaching, and support in implementing C&C with fidelity. Data collection tools and a collection calendar were introduced to DITs, and initial training for DITs and mentors occurred. Districts also worked with their SITs to plan monthly support meetings.

Initial Implementation Stage

In the initial implementation stage, trained mentors began working with students in each district; however, districts differed in the C&C mentor model they selected. Two districts chose to hire dedicated (or full-time) mentors, while the other two districts used existing staff as mentors. Districts also varied in the number of school buildings they initially implemented C&C in, although for this implementation, all districts exclusively worked with high school students in this stage. Throughout initial implementation, training and coaching were provided by the C&C national trainer to the district coordinators in how to administer, interpret, and use the data from the C&C monitoring form, self-assessment, monthly fidelity survey, mentor practice profile, and Student Engagement Instrument (SEI). These data informed the coaching district coordinators provided to their mentors, which occurred at least monthly for all district/building mentors as a group and one-on-one for mentors who needed additional support. Also, in this stage, districts began recognizing which staff were best fit for serving in the C&C mentoring role and what

adjustments to the program were needed to increase fidelity and sustainability of C&C in their district, both during the grant cycle and beyond.

Full Implementation Stage

Once leadership teams were established, and coordinators and mentors were selected and trained, districts entered the full implementation stage. During this stage, district leadership and coordinators gained a more profound understanding of their needs to support C&C across their districts. District-level certified C&C coaches were trained to provide C&C mentor training and received support from the national C&C trainer during their first year of conducting training. As full implementation continued, coordinators and DITs also gained confidence in making decisions for C&C in their district with decreasing reliance on the C&C national trainer. Plans were made in each district to sustain and grow C&C after the grant ended, and mentors started working with middle school students, and in some cases, elementary students. During this stage, a global pandemic occurred, requiring all schools to quickly change from in-person instruction to distance learning. Each district also altered its C&C training and mentoring models so that they could continue to support students who had been in C&C prior to the pandemic, and to bring on new students during distance learning.

Check & Connect Background

Model and Initial Development

Check & Connect is a structured mentoring intervention used with K-12 students who show warning signs of disengagement with school and who are at risk of dropping out. At the core of C&C is a trusting relationship between the student and a caring, trained mentor who both advocates for and challenges the student to keep education salient. Students are selected for participation in C&C when they show warning signs of disengaging from school, such as poor attendance, behavioral issues, and/or low grades.

The initial development of C&C began in 1990 at the University of Minnesota, Institute on Community Integration (ICI). The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs awarded ICI a five-year development grant to address the disproportionate number of students in special education dropping out of high school in comparison to students in general

education. Researchers at ICI worked in partnership with Minneapolis Public Schools to develop the program and study its efficacy through a randomized control trial of two consecutive cohorts of students. This collaborative development of the intervention reflected the realities of real-world implementation, while also being grounded in research.

Ongoing Research

Over the past 30 years, research on C&C has continued including seminal research studies conducted by ICI researchers (Sinclair, Christenson, Evelo, & Hurley, 1998; Sinclair, Christenson, & Thurlow, 2005), additional research on specific contexts for implementation (Heppen, et al., 2018; Lehr, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2004), and influential reviews by the U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse (2006 & 2015). When the What Works Clearinghouse reviewed dropout prevention interventions in 2006 and again in 2015, they identified Check & Connect as the only dropout prevention intervention to show "positive effects" for staying in school, the highest rating available. After the What Works Clearinghouse's initial influential review in 2006, many researchers independent from ICI and the University of Minnesota have conducted replication, efficacy, theory development, adaptation, and evaluation studies to further the development and implementation of C&C (Goulet, et al., 2020; Hartwig & Maynard, 2015; Heppen et al., 2018; Kern et al., 2019: Maynard, Kjellstrand, & Thompson, 2014; Powers, Hagans, & Linn, 2017; Strand & Lovrich, 2014; Tsai & Kern, 2019; Tsai & Kern, 2020).

ICI also continues to further the development and implementation of C&C through its research and demonstration projects. The recent focus of these endeavors includes an adaption of C&C in the post-secondary setting (Qian et al., 2018), use of C&C as a re-entry strategy for youth in juvenile justice settings (Johnson et al., 2017), and the use of technology supports for C&C implementation ([Systematic Supports for Promoting Graduation)](#). Because C&C is an empirically supported intervention, ICI's ongoing research plan aims to strengthen C&C implementation supports and strategies to improve student outcomes and demonstrate, as well as determining the efficacy of specific contexts for implementation.

National Office Training and Support

The Check & Connect national office has a variety of resources to support implementation of C&C including the *Check & Connect: Implementing with Fidelity* manual, as well as many free

resources available on its website. Since 2009, the C&C national office at ICI has conducted C&C implementation training in 49 of the 50 states in the United States, internationally in six countries (Australia, Canada, the Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, New Zealand, and South Africa), and provided training to over 200 local certified C&C trainers in nine states through ICI's train-the-trainer model.

The array of training options has also expanded recently to include a variety of online training and professional development supports. New offerings include two self-paced online (SPO) training options for leadership teams and mentors, as well as four online professional development modules which reinforce the four core components of C&C (mentor, check, connect, and family engagement). From September 2020 through June 2021, 443 people participated in the SPO C&C Preparation & Implementation for leadership teams. In May-June 2021, 154 people participated in SPO Mentor training. The self-paced online options for training has made acquiring the knowledge and skills of implementing C&C attainable for some who not have otherwise been to access training.

Current Implementation

C&C is currently being implemented across the country and in international locations with two primary models of implementation: the dedicated mentor and existing staff as mentor models. Dedicated mentors are typically school district or youth organization employees who have a caseload of 30-40 mentees. In the existing staff as mentor model, teachers and other school personnel serve in the role of C&C mentor for 1-5 students depending on their capacity.

In addition to the two different mentor models of implementation, there are a variety of types of organizations that lead implementation efforts. C&C has been implemented by youth serving organizations (e.g., Communities In Schools, Boys & Girls Clubs), government entities that support youth in foster care, tribal schools, online schools, as well as traditional public schools in rural, suburban, and urban areas. The scale of implementation also ranges from individual small school settings to, district-wide, regional, and state-level support for implementation and scaling up.

Comparison of MDE/C&C Project to Other C&C Implementations

Differences and Unique Aspects

All C&C implementations are unique: student populations served, outcome goals, mentor model, size of school/district, level of administrative support, internal capacity to support students, resources available within the school and community, and fit with other initiatives. All of these factors impact what the C&C implementation looks like at a given site. Individualized aspects of the MDE/C&C project included the specific population being served by C&C (Black and American Indian students with Individual Education Plans), type of school district (large urban/suburban), and the common goal of increasing graduation rates. It is important to note a unique aspect of the MDE/C&C implementation was the intensive involvement and support of SIT composed of MDE personnel. SIT involvement and support provided each district with a team of experts in implementing initiatives using the practices and procedures of implementation science. The goal of this involvement was to ensure successful implementation and develop a plan for sustainability.

As with many other large C&C implementations, MDE required the systematic use of fidelity tools to guide and monitor implementation efforts. The required fidelity tools included: 1) C&C Core Components and Elements Self-Assessment, 2) C&C Monthly Fidelity Survey, and 3) Mentor Practice Profile. SITs and the national C&C trainer assigned to this project worked with BITs and DITs on how to effectively use these measures. While these fidelity tools are available to all sites implementing C&C across the country and internationally, they are not always consistently used in practice. As mentors and coordinators in the MDE/C&C project repeatedly used these tools, they grew to see the value in the data and how it informed their practice. They saw how this ongoing evaluation information led to opportunities for continuous improvement and improved outcomes for students. In addition, SITs guided school district personnel through the District Capacity Assessment (DCA) annually. This process helped each district reflect on their current implementation and assess where they should focus improvement in the areas of leadership, competency, and organization, to improve the overall implementation of the intervention.

This project also allowed for continued professional development, coaching, and support by a national C&C trainer over the five years of the project. This trainer, who was an expert in the C&C intervention, enabled district leadership and coordinators to have a constant "go-to" for advice and support with their specific implementation needs. The trainer provided regular one-on-one coaching for district coordinators as they developed their role within their district.

Similarities and Common Characteristics

While this project has its unique aspects, it also has similarities to other state-level C&C implementations. It prioritized adherence to the core components of C&C (mentor, check, connect, and family engagement) to ensure fidelity of implementation and achievement of implementation goals. Currently, two other state-wide implementations of C&C are funded through a State Personnel Development Grant (SPDG) and are focused on increasing graduation rates for students with disabilities; one in Florida and one in Pennsylvania. Both of these projects have state-level staff who support the implementation of C&C and work closely with districts to onboard and train mentors and coordinators with regular support from a C&C national trainer. Like Minnesota, the Florida leadership team supports districts using the Monthly Fidelity Survey (initially developed by the Florida team), a Florida-specific Mentor Practice Profile, and the C&C Core Components and Essential Elements Self-Assessment. Leadership teams at the state, district, and school levels use these measures to execute data-driven changes to policies and practices to better support students.

All sites trained in C&C by trainers out of the national office at ICI are provided with high-quality professional development, tools, and resources to support successful implementation with fidelity and continued technical assistance.

Influence on C&C Implementation

The implementation of the MDE/C&C project added to the growing body of evidence of the importance of implementation science when guiding new sites in implementing this evidence-based intervention. Based on the successful strategies used by MDE and other large-scale implementation, C&C national gained a deeper understanding of the significance of attending to the unique needs of sites during different stages of implementation, providing guidance for the creation of implementation teams at the building and district level, and promoting the systematic use of fidelity tools to guide and monitor implementation.

Implications for Sustainability: Post Project

Use of Fidelity Measures

All four districts that participated in the MDE/C&C project have chosen to continue implementing C&C into the 2021-2022 school after the project's conclusion. However, districts may alter their current models, such as the mentoring model they use, the students they serve, and the data they collect. To implement C&C with fidelity, the student data that mentors collect and document weekly (attendance, behavior, course performance) is required, but while strongly recommended, fidelity instruments are not. The collective learning from this project illuminated that there will be implications to the success of the intervention should these tools no longer be employed.

For example, should coordinators no longer use the monthly fidelity survey, they will not be able to glean where mentors are not collecting the data that is to be used to determine where their students need support. Coordinators will then be missing the opportunity to provide intentional coaching and support to mentors to build skills, remove barriers, or both, which could improve the outcomes for their students.

The mentor practice profile helps mentors and coordinators have intentional, meaningful conversations about the development of a mentor's skills. While mentors may achieve proficiency in one or all of the essential elements measured with this tool, their proficiency is likely to ebb and flow in each area as they encounter new students and situations. Should districts choose to no longer employ the Mentor Practice Profile, they will, again, be missing out on valuable information. Likewise, coordinators will not have the information to provide the necessary level of support for mentors, impacting the level of service students receive.

Additionally, discontinuing the use of the DCA on an annual basis would likely result in DITs not having essential data to make decisions about program needs, improvement, and support needed to continue improving student outcomes. Finally, like the C&C mentor practice profile, DCA results are likely to ebb and flow as districts continue to grow their C&C implementation, have new staff in mentoring and leadership roles, and set their own goals for implementation.

Strategies for Sustainability

Through the DIT interviews and focus groups over the year, several strategies related to sustainability emerged. Strategies included administrator and stakeholder buy-in, use of existing staff as mentors, more integration with other district initiatives, and using data to demonstrate the power of the program. Several of these strategies are inter-related.

Utilizing existing staff as mentors serve several purposes related to sustainability. If funding for dedicated mentor positions is lost, the use of existing staff as mentors ensures that the program can continue at some capacity. Additionally, as districts train more school staff (e.g., teachers, counselors, social workers) as C&C mentors, the value of the program is more greatly understood and can be supported systemically.

Administrator and stakeholder buy-in is also necessary for sustainability. According to DIT members, C&C teams can achieve this buy-in by demonstrating the student outcomes achieved when implementing C&C with fidelity. Aligning C&C targeted outcomes with school and district strategic plans also leads to more outstanding administrator and stakeholder buy-in.

Recommendations for Continued Implementation

For districts to maintain successful implementation of C&C after the conclusion of this project and with no longer receiving direct support from the state and the C&C national office, the following recommendations are essential for continued implementation:

- Continue to have DITs and BITs who meet regularly to discuss program needs and address action items from the previous year's DCA, including addressing barriers to fidelity discovered by the data obtained in mentor practice profile data.
- Continue to use student measurement and fidelity tools as follows:
    - **Student Engagement Instrument**: administer at least once per year in the same general period (fall or spring) to measure student growth in engagement subtypes and inform mentors of focus/leverage areas when working with students.
    - **Mentor Practice Profile**: mentors and coordinators complete together at a minimum of one time per year for veteran mentors and a minimum of two times per year for new mentors to ensure mentors receive needed support.

- ○ **Monthly Fidelity Survey**: complete each month data are collected and for each mentor at a minimum of three times per year to ensure access to and understanding of data to drive interventions with students.
- ○ **Core Components and Essential Elements Self-Assessment**: complete a sampling of mentors, coordinator(s), administrators, and leadership to determine barriers and areas of support needed across schools and districts.
- ○ **District Capacity Assessment**: administer annually to assess where improvements are needed to support the intervention from a systems level.
- ● Continue to provide intentional, strategic training to all new staff supporting and implementing C&C, including leadership, administrators, and mentors.

Conclusion

The purpose of this project was to increase graduation rates for Black and American Indian students with disabilities in Minnesota by using an evidence-based program (i.e., Check & Connect) in four districts and utilizing a solid implementation science framework. This implementation of C&C had unique features such as the intentional support provided to districts by MDE and extended training and coaching support to districts by ICI. While an important quality of C&C is the flexibility of the implementation of the program in different contexts, core features such as the consistency of adherence to usage of monitoring tools, the use of DITs for communication, training, and buy-in, and planning for sustainability are key to the continued success of the program.

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