

Social Programs That Work Review

Evidence Summary for Check and Connect

HIGHLIGHTS:

- **PROGRAM:** A dropout prevention program for high school students with learning, emotional, and/or behavioral disabilities.
- **EVALUATION METHODS:** Two randomized controlled trials (RCTs) with a combined sample of 300 9th grade students.
- **KEY FINDINGS:** RCTs show a sizable decrease in students' dropout rates, and increase in attendance and academic credits earned.

I. Evidence rating: **SUGGESTIVE TIER**

The standard for Suggestive Tier is:

Programs that have been evaluated in one or more well-conducted RCTs (or studies that closely approximate random assignment) and found to produce sizable positive effects, but whose evidence is limited by only short-term follow-up, effects that fall short of statistical significance, or other factors. Such evidence suggests the program may be an especially strong candidate for further research, but does not yet provide confidence that the program would produce important effects if implemented in new settings.

II. Description of the Program:

Check and Connect is a dropout prevention program for high school students with learning, emotional, and/or behavioral disabilities. Students typically enter the program in 9th grade, and are assigned a “monitor” (e.g., a graduate student, special education teacher, or community member with experience in human services), who works with them year-round as a mentor, advisor, and service coordinator.

Monitors work on a daily basis with school personnel to track and document students' attendance, behavior, and academic performance. The monitors meet at least monthly, and often weekly, with students to give them feedback on these measures of school engagement. During these meetings, monitors talk with students about how certain life choices might stand in the way of their graduating (e.g., engaging in crime or substance use, having a child); convey a strong message about the importance of persisting in school; teach them effective problem-solving strategies and conflict-resolution skills; and help them develop a plan for making responsible life choices. Monitors also help students find

productive extracurricular activities both during the school year and summer, and encourage students' parents to stay actively involved in their child's education (e.g., by communicating frequently with their child's teachers).

Monitors typically carry an average caseload of approximately 35 students. They work with students for at least two years, wherever possible staying with the same students throughout high school even when they change schools within the school district.

The program is overseen at the school level by a program coordinator (e.g., special education coordinator or school psychologist), who provides monitors with regular advice and feedback. Check and Connect costs approximately \$1,955 per student per year to implement, in 2017 dollars.

[Click here for Check and Connect's website.](#)

III. Evidence of Effectiveness:

This program was evaluated in two randomized controlled trials. The following summarizes the program's effects on the main outcomes measured in each study, including any such outcomes for which no or adverse effects were found.¹

STUDY 1

Randomized controlled trial of 206 ninth-grade students, who were receiving special education services for emotional or behavioral disabilities in seven high schools in a large, high-poverty urban school district. Students (or in a few cases, sibling pairs) were randomly assigned to a group that was invited to participate in the Check and Connect program, or a control group that was not.

84% of students were male, 64% were African American, and 70% were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

Effects of Check and Connect at the four-year follow-up — i.e. end of 12th grade (versus the control group):

- 42% increase in the percentage of students who had completed high school via diploma or GED, or were still enrolled (61% of Check and Connect group completed school or were still enrolled vs. 43% of the control group). This increase was driven by an increase in the percentage still enrolled, rather than by an increase in the percentage already completing high school.
- 37% increase in the rate of persistent attendance—i.e. no long periods of unexcused absences during the fourth year of the follow-up (41% vs. 30%).

¹ We do not summarize the effects backed by suggestive, but not strong evidence (e.g., effects on outcomes for which there was high sample attrition).

Discussion of Study Quality:

- The study had a long-term follow-up (i.e., 4 years).
- This was a relatively large study conducted in typical high-poverty public schools, thus providing evidence of Check and Connect’s effectiveness in real-world public school settings.
- The study measured outcomes for all students assigned to the Check and Connect group, regardless of whether or how long they actually participated in the program (i.e., the study used an "intention-to-treat" analysis).
- Prior to the program, the Check and Connect and control groups were highly similar in their demographic characteristics and in their teachers’ ratings of behavior and social/academic competence.
- **Study Limitations:**
 - › The study had moderate sample attrition – specifically, attendance, enrollment, and graduation data were obtained for 70% of students at the four-year follow-up. The follow-up rates were similar for the Check and Connect and control groups, suggesting that attrition was not influenced by group assignment; and statistical tests show that the attrition did not create differences between the two groups in their observable characteristics. It is conceivable, however, that attrition caused *unobservable* differences between the two groups, possibly leading to inaccurate estimates of the program's effects.
 - › Outcome data for both groups were collected by the monitors, based on school records supplemented by parent, teacher, and student reports. Data collection by an independent party would have been desirable to rule out the possibility that monitors' biases (e.g., as proponents of the program) could have consciously or unconsciously influenced their measurements

STUDY 2

Randomized controlled trial of 94 ninth-grade students with learning or emotional/behavioral disabilities, in a northern Midwest, high-poverty urban school district. All 94 students had participated in Check and Connect in 7th and 8th grades; upon entering high school, they were randomly assigned to a group that continued in Check and Connect in 9th grade, or to a control group that did not.

68% of the students were male, 59% were African American, and 71% were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

Effects of Check and Connect at the end of 9th grade (versus the control group):

- 29% increase in the percentage of students still enrolled in school (91% of Check and Connect students were still enrolled vs. 70% of control group students).

- 83% increase in average number of credits earned (12.1 vs. 6.6), and more than double the rate of students whose earned credits put them on pace to graduate on time (46% vs. 20%).
- 33% increase in the rate of persistent attendance—i.e. no long periods of unexcused absences during 9th grade (85% vs. 64%).

Description of Study Quality:

- The study had virtually no attrition: Attendance and enrollment status data were collected for 100% of the sample, and data on academic credits earned were collected for 98% of the sample.
- The study was conducted in typical high-poverty public schools, thus providing evidence of Check and Connect’s effectiveness in real-world public school settings.
- Prior to the program, the Check and Connect and control groups were highly similar in their demographic characteristics and type of disability.
- The study measured attendance, enrollment, and credits earned using official school records rather than student self-reports.
- Study Limitation: This was a very well conducted randomized controlled trial, but it was fairly small and had only a one school-year follow up. Importantly, however, its results are corroborated by Study 1, which had a larger sample and a four-year follow-up.

V. References:

Sinclair, Mary F., Sandra L. Christenson, and Martha L. Thurow. “Promoting School Completion of Urban Secondary Youth With Emotional or Behavioral Disabilities.” *Exceptional Children*. Vol. 71, No. 4, 2005, pp. 465-482.

Sinclair, Mary F., Sandra L. Christenson, David L. Evelo, and Christine M. Hurley. “Dropout Prevention for Youth with Disabilities: Efficacy of a Sustained School Engagement Procedure.” *Exceptional Children*. Vol. 65, No. 1, 1998, pp. 7-21.