

# Building Bridges

Tier 2

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The Building Bridges program was designed to identify and assist students transitioning from middle school to high school who are at-risk for dropping out. The long term goal of the project is to improve high school graduation rates and decrease dropout rates for academically capable at-risk students. The immediate goal is to help incoming freshmen succeed in their first year of high school by increasing student engagement, motivation, and achievement. Interventions include individual counseling, group counseling, tutoring, and parent outreach. This program has utilized graduate students in a counseling psychology program to work as counselors with freshmen students in two high schools in Lincoln, NE. The program uses “the assets and orientation of counseling psychologists in schools to work with students who are in danger in danger of dropping out” (Scheel, Madabhushi, & Backhaus, 2009, p. 1152). As a result the program provides practical experiences for counselors in training as well as serving the high school students. The program has borrowed and combined elements from two other dropout prevention programs: Check and Connect (Sinclair, Christenson, Evelo, & Hurley, 1998) and Tools for Tomorrow (Kenny, Bower, Perry, Blustein, & Amtzis, 2000). The Building Bridges model includes five components: fostering caring relationships, identifying and enhancing personal strengths, developing purposes for school, monitoring progress, and connecting with home and the classroom.

Tier 2  
Intervention

### Fostering Caring Relationships

The Building Bridges program is a strength-oriented approach that assumes that positive change will occur when students have supportive relationships with invested adults. Counselors meet with individual students on a weekly basis. Counseling can take place in an office, in an empty classroom, walking down the halls, or even shooting baskets on an outside basketball court. Many at-risk students have not had consistent relationships with supportive and engaged adults. Counseling affords them the opportunity to try out new ways of interacting with adults. The counselors utilize humanistic counseling and solution-focused therapy methods to develop strong relationship, help the student problem solve when they face challenges, to advocate for the student, and to improve self-efficacy by offering encouragement, focusing on strengths and promoting positive learning experiences. Counselors can also help students with their school work or assist them in asking for additional help from teachers or tutors.

## Identifying and Enhancing Personal Strengths

Solution-focused therapy is used with all the students in the program. Solution-focused therapy, as the name implies, focuses on what clients want to achieve rather than on reducing or eliminating problems (De Jon & Berg, 2002; Murphy, 1997). It is present and future oriented. The approach uses interventions to help the client identify strengths and to form short term goals and action plans based on their long term goals. Humanistic approaches in counseling are inherently process-oriented and committed to open-ended goals. The focus of this work is on the clients' autonomy, and consequently therapists in this approach strive for transparency, and emphasize that client's must take responsibility for their decisions. Humanistic approaches generally strive to foster a safe, comfortable, non-judgmental counseling environment that focuses on demonstrating congruence, empathy, and unconditional positive regard for the client.

## Developing Purposes for School

Building Bridges uses the group structure of the *Tools for Tomorrow* program. A trained graduate student counselor and teacher work together to deliver the psychoeducational curriculum in small groups of 4-5 students in weekly group sessions. The curriculum is constructed to teach three modules: 1) Who am I? 2) Connecting School to Career, and 3) Identifying Resources and Barriers. The program is designed to help students "internalize the connection between school, work, and life" (Solberg et al., 2002, p. 716).

## Monitoring Progress

Teachers and counselors work collaboratively to monitor academic progress. Strategies to facilitate collaboration include: weekly progress reports provided by teachers to counselors, classroom observations by counselors, and regular consultation to develop personalized teaching and learning strategies to address individual learning problems.

## Connecting With Home and Classroom

Maintaining a connection between schools and parents is critical in student's success, particularly for students who are at risk for drop out. In order to facilitate this connection, Building Bridges utilizes a family check-in intervention (Dishion, & McMahon, 1998; Dishion & Stormshak, 2007). This check-in helps inform parents and family of school requirements and expectations and seeks to encourage parents to monitor their student's academic progress. Building Bridges counselors offer the Helping Your Child be Successful parenting workshop in order to teach parents helpful strategies to work with their children (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). Building Bridges has also used a family night to bring students, families, teachers, administrators, and counselors together for dinner and to discuss progress in the program.



## Research on the Effectiveness of Building Bridges

Empirical research support for Building Bridges is limited, but on-going. Scheel et al. (2009) conducted a qualitative study in 2009 that captured 20 interviews from students in the Building Bridges program. Researchers identified six themes from 172 significant statements regarding academic motivation: self-efficacy, purpose of school, family influences, relationships at school, counselor influence, and school structures and activities. Further research on the effectiveness of each of these components and/or themes of the program may be beneficial. At this time there is no data about the success of the Building Bridges program in preventing student dropout.

## Funding and Implementation

In order to implement Building Bridges a school will need to have a method for identifying incoming freshmen who are at-risk for dropout. A school will need a project coordinator to match students with counselors and plan parent-student events. The school will also need counselors who can meet with students one time each week as well as the cooperation of teachers and administrators. A school could conceivably implement the Building Bridges program with current school staff, without using outside resources if the appropriate staff and staff time availability were sufficient to permit the program to be implemented, and the number of at risk students matched the available resources. However, the Building Bridges program in Lincoln was funded in part by a two-year \$100,000 grant from the Woods Charitable Fund of Lincoln, Nebraska. Other communities could seek local foundation or other community service agency's financial support to or in kind donations of staff time to supplement school resources to implement a program similar to Building Bridges.

## Conclusion

The Building Bridges program is not research based program, and little research has been conducted on its effectiveness at meeting its goals. Nevertheless some of the primary components of the program do have research which supports their value in providing support to students who are at risk of dropping out (e.g., developing caring relationships; monitoring student progress, and developing student connections with family and school). In addition some elements of other research based programs (e.g. Check and Connect) are borrowed in the Building Bridges program. The Building Bridges may require more resources than would be typically available in school settings without outside support.



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