



*Improving Educational Outcomes in Low-Income
Rural High Schools in North Carolina through a High School Transition and
Cross-Age Peer Mentoring Model*

Abstract

The Center for Supportive Schools (CSS) is applying for a Development Grant in response to *Absolute Priority 5 (Rural Communities)*; *Absolute Priority 4(Non-Cognitive Factors)*; and the *Competitive Preference Priority: Supporting Novice i3 Applicants*. This 5-year project will investigate the efficacy of a school-based, high school transition and cross-age peer mentoring program for 9th grade students designed to improve non-cognitive abilities and enhance student engagement to support academic and other school-related outcomes, known as Peer Group Connection (PGC). Goals are to: increase non-cognitive abilities and student engagement; improve academic achievement (decreased dropout rates, improved on-time promotion rates to the next grade level, improved 4-year cohort graduation rates); and evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of key components of the PGC model. This project seeks to build upon the results from a single randomized control trial that show improved educational outcomes for low-income students. The project will serve high-need freshmen in six low-income rural North Carolina high schools. CSS and The Policy & Research Group will conduct an experimental study to measure program impacts on non-cognitive abilities and student engagement (e.g. perceptions of peer support for doing well in school; sense of connectedness to peers; educational aspirations; valuing education; goal-setting skills) and examine the extent to which these impacts translate into increased on-time promotion rates, improved academic achievement, and higher 4-year cohort graduation rates. In each of six schools and in each of two successive cohorts, incoming 9th grade students will be randomly assigned to either a treatment (PGC) or control group. Approximately 125 students in each school and cohort will be assigned to these two study groups, resulting in a total sample of approximately 1,500 students.