

# Peer Group Connection-High School: Helping 9th Graders Transition to High School

The Office of Population Affairs (OPA) funded the development and rigorous evaluation of the Peer Group Connection-High School program to determine if it is an effective approach for preventing teen pregnancy and related high-risk behaviors. This program joins the ranks of Teen Pregnancy Prevention (TPP) programs that have experienced positive outcomes when evaluated for effectiveness. OPA's TPP Tier 2 grantees develop, replicate, refine, and rigorously evaluate additional models and innovative strategies to reduce teen pregnancy. The TPP programs that experience favorable impacts are then considered evidence-based and become eligible to replicate in communities across the country.

## Program Overview

Peer Group Connection-High School (PGC-HS) is a cross-age, peer-to-peer group mentoring program for 9th grade students designed to facilitate the transition from middle school into high school and to develop social and emotional learning (SEL) skills (for example, decision making, relationship, and goal-setting skills), student engagement, and educational outcomes. The program taps into the power of older students to create a nurturing environment for incoming 9th graders.

PGC-HS integrates into the school day by tapping into existing school resources, such as school staff, student leaders, and the course schedule. Once per week, pairs of 11th and/or 12th grade peer leaders meet with small groups of 9th grade students for outreach sessions designed to strengthen relationships across grades. The 18 weekly 45-minute outreach sessions can be spread out over the course of a semester or the full year. Outreach sessions occur during regularly scheduled classes (participants are pulled from their classes to attend or sessions are integrated into an existing course); they include hands-on activities, simulations, and discussions intended to build group cohesion and improve the SEL skills of group members. Peer leaders are trained through a daily, for-credit leadership course taught by school faculty during regular school hours.

The sessions are designed to build relationship skills and peer connectedness, explore identities, and cover the importance of showing up to class, navigating challenges, learning effective decision-making and communication skills, and how to set and effectively reach goals. Although PGC-HS is not explicitly a sexual health or teen pregnancy prevention program, the belief is that by engaging 9th-grade students in school, building connectedness among peers, and building students' decision making and goal-setting skills, PGC-HS will encourage students to make healthier decisions, including reducing sexual risk-taking and increasing protective behaviors.

### Program/Intervention Name

Peer Group Connection-High School

### Program Overview

Peer Group Connection-High School is a cross-age peer-to-peer group mentoring program designed to facilitate 9th grade students' transition into high school.

### Setting

High schools

### Population

9th grade students, economically disadvantaged students in communities with high teen birth rates

### Type/Mode

Peer-led curriculum-based intervention

### Length/Duration

A minimum of 18 weekly 45-minute group outreach sessions



## Evaluation Study Design and Results

The program was evaluated with an individual randomized controlled trial in which eligible 9th grade students with parental consent were randomly assigned to either the intervention or control groups at a one-to-one ratio. Students assigned to the treatment group were offered the opportunity to participate in PGC-HS, whereas students in the comparison group attended their regularly scheduled classes and activities.

Youth in the treatment and control groups received a baseline questionnaire during the fall of their 9th-grade year, prior to the offer of PGC-HS programming; follow-up data collection occurred during the fall of their 10th-grade year.

Peer Group Connection-High School was found to be an effective program and reduced sexual risk behaviors over one year. At the beginning of 10th grade, compared to youth in the control group, youth receiving the intervention were less likely to ever have had vaginal sex, and had improved decision-making skills and connections with peers. Youth across groups also had similar numbers of sexual partners and a similar number of times having any type of sex.

### Grantee Contact Information

Center for Supportive Schools  
Sherry Barr, Psy.D., Project Director  
[sbarr@supportiveschools.org](mailto:sbarr@supportiveschools.org)  
<https://www.supportiveschools.org/peer-group-connection/>

### Evaluation Contact Information

The Policy & Research Group  
Eric Jenner, Ph.D., Lead Evaluator  
[ejenner@policyandresearch.com](mailto:ejenner@policyandresearch.com)  
<https://policyandresearch.com/>