

Development and Evaluation of a Parent-Engagement Curriculum to Connect Latino Families and Schools

Abstract

Parent-school engagement is a contributor to student achievement, but few relevant programs exist for immigrant Latino families. This article describes the design, pilot implementation, and evaluation of a parent-engagement Extension program, developed and implemented in Spanish. The purpose of the program is to help parents develop and/or strengthen their relationships with school staff and teachers, build skills in navigating the U.S. school system, and increase their self-efficacy for supporting their children's success in school. Development of the program curriculum comprised a participatory approach that involved input from cultural guides and focus group sessions conducted in Spanish. Evaluation results indicate positive changes related to most program goals and increased parent-school engagement.

Keywords: [parent-school engagement](#), [parenting practices](#), [Latino families](#), [achievement gap](#)

Ghaffar A. Hurtado
Assistant Professor
and Extension
Specialist
Family Science, School
of Public Health
University of Maryland
College Park,
Maryland
ahurtado@umd.edu

Kathleen A. Olson
Program Director
Extension Center for
Family Development
University of
Minnesota
Saint Paul, Minnesota
kaolson@umn.edu

**Silvia Alvarez de
Davila**
Extension Educator
Extension Center for
Family Development
University of
Minnesota
Saint Paul, Minnesota
salvarez@umn.edu

**Victoria
Campoverde**
Cultural Liaison
Columbia Heights
Public School
Columbia Heights,
Minnesota
CampoveV@colheights.k12.mn.us

Background

Growing diversity in the midwestern United States, fueled by immigration, has transformed communities in many positive ways. Latinos comprise a young and growing population that has shown the desire to move forward just as other immigrant populations have (Gouveia & Saenz, 2000; Lowenthal & Baron, 2014). Latino immigrant families are resilient, with parents who are adept at overcoming contextual differences and renegotiating their parenting practices to raise their children in unfamiliar contexts (Gonzales, Deardorff, Formoso, Barr, & Barrera, 2006).

Despite the fact that immigrant parents place a high value on education and hope their children move up the social ladder (Hill & Torres, 2010), they face social inequity that affects their relationships with schools and, in turn, diminishes students' outcomes (Tienda, 2006). Latino immigrant families in the United States face cultural barriers that limit their opportunities, such as limited English-speaking skills (Hobbs, 2004; Laderchi, Saith, & Stewart, 2003). While adapting to a new culture, immigrant families are presented with conflicting views on the respective roles of parents and schools in children's education, and they face challenges navigating the U.S.

school system (Martinez, McClure, Eddy, & Wilson, 2011), especially because only 47% of Latino immigrants aged 25 or older completed high school (Pew Hispanic Center, 2013). Additionally, immigrants cope with an anti-immigrant climate and employment insecurity (Conchas, 2001; Kohler & Lazarin, 2007; Rosenbloom & Way, 2004).

Encountering social inequities, segregation, cultural barriers, and lack of guidance at school (Kuperminc, Wilkins, Roche, & Alvarez-Jimenez, 2009; Tienda, 2006), Latino youths face unique barriers to academic success, and a widening school achievement gap exists between Latino youths and their non-Latino White peers (Kuperminc et al., 2009; Tienda, 2006). Whereas enrollment rates are similar to those for other racial and ethnic groups in early years of schooling, Latino youth enrollment after middle school decreases, leading to a growing dropout rate that contributes to a cycle of employment challenges and lower earnings (Rivera-Batiz, 2008).

A study has indicated that only 57% of Latino eighth graders in Minnesota passed the state's Basic Skills Test in reading, compared with 89% of White eighth graders (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009). Additionally, whereas 90% of all Minnesota adults have a high school diploma (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009), the state ranks 40th in Latino high school graduation rates for the nation's largest metropolitan areas (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009; Sohmer & Jackson, 2005).

Although many factors contribute to the student achievement gap, evidence has suggested that parent-school engagement can have a positive impact on Latino student achievement (Adams & Christenson, 1998; Barnard, 2004; Herrold & O'Donnell, 2008). With the aim of narrowing the achievement gap, a team of University of Minnesota Extension personnel and community collaborators, which we represent, developed a program titled *Educación: Nuestra Mejor Herencia* (Education: Our Best Legacy), referred to hereafter as *Educación*. *Educación* is a family education program centered on strengthening positive parenting practices to increase school engagement and youth academic achievement.

The purposes of this article are to describe the program curriculum development and to explore implementation feasibility and the potential for efficacy. The focus of *Educación* is informed by the recognition that educational disparities in communities can be partially addressed through increased family involvement and improved connection between families and schools. Social and economic factors, such as discrimination, poverty, and quality of schooling, are determinants of inequalities but were beyond of the scope of our project.

Curriculum Development

For the development of the *Educación* curriculum, we followed principles of community-based participatory research (CBPR) by engaging the university and the community as equal partners in the curriculum's design, implementation, and evaluation (Wallerstein & Duran, 2008). In the formative stage, Extension educators and Latino cultural guides identified key community educational issues and worked closely to identify strategies and interpret cultural values and contextual factors that were foundational to curriculum development. The cultural guides were bilingual Latinos working within a school system, were college educated, and had extensive experience leading school programs involving families. Additionally, the curriculum development team reviewed existing literature to support focus group planning.

Our team of Extension educators, cultural guides, and research staff conducted four focus group sessions, with 37 Latino parents in total; three focus groups were in urban settings, and one was in rural Minnesota. Participants were recruited through fliers posted at Latino events and Extension programs, word-of-mouth referrals from cultural guides, and existing collaboration with Latino-serving agencies (social services and health educators).

Our objective for the focus group research was to gather input to strengthen the core areas around which the curriculum would be organized. The focus group sessions were conducted in Spanish and were led by two bilingual trained social sciences research staff using a semistructured interview guide. Questions were about (a) parents' expectations of their children and relationships with their children's school, (b) parents' definitions of school success, (c) support parents needed from the school, and (d) parents' knowledge and use of existing communication channels with school staff and teachers. Participants provided written consent. Focus group sessions were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed in Spanish.

Focus groups participants felt that the following six factors referred to in the literature were very important for school success: expectations, structure, learning, support, relationships, and modeling (Carlson & Christenson, 2005; Christenson, Rounds, & Gorney, 1992). In addition, three overall concerns emerged: (a) how to navigate the U.S. school system in order to advocate for their children, (b) how to help their children graduate from high school and seek higher education, and (c) how to increase their own self-efficacy in helping their children succeed in school and building their trust in the school system.

Our team incorporated into our work a socioecological model and social cognitive theories suggesting that learning occurs in a social context, with the assumption that personal, behavioral, and environmental factors influence one another and that the ongoing function is a product of a continuous interaction among those factors (Bandura, 1989; Bronfenbrenner, 1986). We based the curriculum on the previously mentioned six factors that contribute to school success, with an emphasis on the three concerns identified by the parent focus groups. Content for each session, including learning objectives and key activities, was developed in Spanish by the core curriculum team; later all sessions were elaborated fully by the educator and cultural guides. The content was then translated into English for edits and back translated into Spanish. The final curriculum includes seven 2-hr interactive sessions designed to be delivered in Spanish. The topics of the seven sessions of Educación are

1. parenting values/hopes and dreams,
2. expectations and structure,
3. learning and support,
4. relationships and modeling,
5. navigating the school system,
6. planning for the future, and
7. review/action plans.

Each session includes a detailed lesson plan that follows an experiential learning approach (Kolb, 1984; Kolb, Boyatzis, & Mainemelis, 2001). Lesson activities include discussion, lecture, role playing, small-group work, individual reflections, and skill-building activities conducted during the session and practiced later at home. Additionally, participants are encouraged at the beginning of each session to discuss what they learned in the preceding session.

Curriculum Delivery

A partnership between the University of Minnesota and a suburban middle school in the Minneapolis–Saint Paul metro area began at an event organized by the Minnesota Department of Education and coalesced due to a shared interest in involving parents in education and reducing the achievement gap. Soon thereafter, discussions began about the implementation of Educación. The curriculum was implemented on a pilot basis on five occasions with families of students attending the school: spring 2009 ($n = 16$), fall 2009 ($n = 26$), spring 2011 ($n = 32$), winter 2012 ($n = 14$), and winter 2013 ($n = 28$). Staggered implementation allowed more parents to participate and provided opportunities to evaluate feasibility at different times during the school year. The program was delivered in Spanish, by an Extension educator and school–parent liaison, both with extensive experience in parent education. Participants ($n = 116$) were recruited through the use of a convenience sample strategy. Recruitment strategies included the use of fliers, personal invitations, and school newsletters. Immigrant families were invited to attend if they spoke Spanish and had school-aged children, particularly middle-school youths. Meals and child care were provided. All participants provided written informed consent in Spanish. The University of Minnesota Institutional Review Board approved the evaluation protocol.

The core curriculum components remained the same across the delivery times. However, on the basis of continuous feedback, we modified or adapted some curriculum elements (e.g., activities) in later implementations. For example, in the first two pilot implementations of the program, the curriculum covered parenting practices but touched only lightly on the school component, in part because of the trainers' backgrounds in parent education. In succeeding versions, school-related examples and activities in the materials were strengthened.

Curriculum Evaluation

We gathered demographic data on participants and conducted an evaluation of the pilot implementation of the curriculum. Demographic data collected included age, gender, years in the United States, years of formal education, family income, country of origin, and number, genders, and ages of minor children (18 or younger) in the household. For the evaluation of the pilot implementation of the curriculum, we used a mixed-methods (quantitative–qualitative) approach.

As part of the quantitative data collection process, we used pretest and posttest surveys to assess program outcomes. As indicated in Table 1, the quantitative evaluation measures we used had established reliability and validity in Spanish and were appropriate for low-literacy groups. The evaluation questions were read aloud in Spanish to the group by an evaluation team member immediately before the first session and immediately after the last (seventh) session. At posttest, we included two additional scales—one that measured *school navigation* (three items addressing parental connection to school and community supports) and one that measured *learning* (three items addressing parental knowledge and awareness of the school system). Also, a one-page evaluation survey was administered at the end of each of the seven sessions. This survey consisted of four items (assessing participant interest, perceived relevance, comfort level, and satisfaction) to which participants responded using a 4-point scale (0 to 3).

Table 1.

Program Outcome Measures

Construct	Measurement description	Citation
Parental acceptance	Eight-item scale capturing parental warmth and	Schaefer,

	openness with their children	1965
Parent personal involvement	Five-item scale measuring parents' efforts to acquire information about their children's daily activities and children's willingness to disclose such information	Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Stattin & Kerr, 2000
Parenting educational support efficacy	Five-item scale assessing the degree to which a parent perceives his or her capability of practicing behaviors to support children's school performance	Dumka, Gonzales, Wheeler, & Millsap, 2010
Parent trust in self	Six-item scale assessing parent's trust in self to foster the education of his or her children	Adams & Christenson, 2000
Parent trust in school	Six-item scale assessing parent's trust in a child's school	Adams & Christenson, 2000
PSI home discussion ^a	Four-item subscale representing frequency of a parent's communication at home about school-related subjects, including communication with the children and with the other parent	Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996
PSI home supervision ^a	Four-item subscale representing parents' knowledge of children's whereabouts and school activities	Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996
PSI school communication: school-to-parent and parent-to-school contact ^a	Six-item subscale assessing frequency of communication between the school and parents about academic progress and children's behavior	Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996

^aFrom Parent-School Involvement (PSI), a 14-item scale involving three subscales that capture relevant parenting practices.

Finally, the evaluation included data from the "tree of knowledge" reflection activity that occurred at the beginning of each session. The tree of knowledge is a graphic poster depicting a tree with bare branches; each week, parents added "leaves" with reflection statements based on their experiences practicing what they had learned during the previous session. This activity provided a visible and systematic record of parents' progress through the sessions. Although it was originally designed as a learning activity, it also provided valuable additional qualitative data for evaluation. The reflections on the leaves were analyzed in Spanish according to content analysis procedures (Saldaña, 2012), and selected quotes were translated into English for inclusion in this article.

Means and standard deviations were calculated for the quantitative measures. To assess curriculum effects, after testing for normality assumption, we conducted paired *t*-tests to determine change from baseline (pretest to posttest) for all outcomes. Data were analyzed with SPSS (Version 21.0), and a significance level (alpha) of 0.05 was used for all tests. For the items related to school navigation and learning, we analyzed responses using crosstabs, calculating percentages for the items in each of the two constructs. We analyzed the after-session evaluation data by averaging participant responses across the seven sessions (or the number of sessions attended) for each of the four evaluation items (interest, relevance, comfort level, and satisfaction).

Results

Participants in the pilot sessions ($n = 116$) were primarily mothers (64%) and had a mean age of 36.3 years. Most (66%) had immigrated to the United States from Mexico, with the next highest proportion (10%) having come from Ecuador. Remaining immigrants (20%) were from several Central and South American countries. Only 4% of participants had been born in the United States. Immigrant participants had lived in the United States for an average of 13 years. The majority of participants (67%) had completed secondary education or less. Most participants (74%) reported a monthly household income of \$2,000 or less, and a majority of households (53%) included four or more family members.

Outcomes and End-of-Session Survey Results

Results of the paired *t*-tests (pretest and posttest) indicated significant positive changes in the expected direction for seven of the eight constructs listed in Table 1. Statistically significant changes were evident for parental acceptance ($p < .001$), parent personal involvement ($p < .01$), parent trust in self ($p < .05$), parent trust in school ($p < .01$), home discussion ($p < .05$), home supervision ($p < .01$), and school communication ($p < .01$). Nonsignificant changes were seen for parenting educational support efficacy ($p = .77$). Results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2.
Comparison of Pretest and Posttest Outcomes by Construct

Construct	Pretest		Posttest		Range	α	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>				
Parental acceptance	4.06	0.54	4.37	0.47	1–5	0.89	51	3.78***
Parent personal involvement	3.99	0.84	4.28	0.55	1–5	0.80	48	2.52**
Parenting educational support efficacy	4.22	0.64	4.25	0.51	1–5	0.86	52	1.20
Parent trust in self	3.44	0.37	3.56	0.38	1–4	0.73	48	2.09*
Parent trust in school	3.40	0.44	3.60	0.38	1–4	0.86	48	3.14**
PSI home discussion	1.61	0.43	1.74	0.29	0–2	0.73	48	2.03*
PSI home supervision	2.35	0.55	2.60	0.52	0–3	0.82	35	3.26**
PSI school communication	0.85	0.54	1.27	0.78	0–3	0.84	35	3.11**

Note. PSI refers to the Parent-School Involvement scale.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

For the *school navigation* and *learning* constructs, most participants (94%) responded to the associated items with ratings of 3 or 4 (on a 4-point scale), with 3 meaning "I learned a lot about this topic, given that I knew very little about this topic" and 4 meaning "Everything I know about this topic, I learned in these sessions."

As previously noted, for the end-of-session evaluation surveys, respondents rated each of four elements on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 to 3. The results indicated overall high levels of participant interest 2.94 ($SD = .21$), perceived relevance 2.93 ($SD = .25$), comfort level 2.9 ($SD = .45$), and satisfaction 2.9 ($SD = .26$).

Qualitative Analysis

Responses to the tree of knowledge activity were coded and analyzed (through the use of Nvivo 10 qualitative analysis software) for emerging themes for the purpose of exploring participant behavior, knowledge, and attitudes. Participant quotes from the activity were analyzed relative to the previously identified six factors for school success and are listed in English and Spanish in Table 3. Following are summaries of the analyses for the six factors:

1. *Expectations.* Parents reported sharing their expectations for their children with their children, as well as their hopes and dreams for the future.
2. *Structure.* Most parents acknowledged the importance of providing structure for their children even though they had been raised to be more spontaneous and less concerned about time use and planning.
3. *Learning.* Initially, parents reported choosing to participate in the curriculum because they wanted to learn how to support their children in school. As sessions progressed, parents recognized that what children learn outside of school helps them learn in school.
4. *Support.* Parents talked about working on homework with their children and helping them understand difficult concepts. Participants frequently referenced a desire to support their children's learning and provided specific examples.
5. *Relationships.* Parents reported improved relationships with their children as early as the second session. This situation may have occurred because parents were encouraged to immediately practice what they had learned between sessions, including spending more time with their children and talking to them more to make them feel safe and accepted.
6. *Modeling.* Parents saw themselves as role models and examples for their children, with role modeling taking the form of supporting their children's learning.

In addition to contributing statements to the tree of knowledge that were reflective of the six factors for school success, parents' statements indicated that during the sessions they had learned to (a) navigate the educational system, (b) provide support that would help their children graduate from high school and continue into higher education, and (c) increase their senses of self-efficacy and trust in the school.

Table 3.

Parents' Comments on Factors Contributing to School Success

Factor	Quotation in English	Citas en Español
Expectations	"What we have done differently is talk about the goals they [the children] want to achieve. Our time is healthier [quality time] by reading together and not watching TV."	"Lo que hemos hecho diferente es hablar de las metas que ellos quieren lograr, que nuestro tiempo sea más saludable como leer juntos y no ver tele."
	"[I] spoke with my daughter about her education, and I tried to be patient. She understood that I and her father want the best for her, and she and I felt calmer in our speech than [at] times of anger and shouting."	"Hablé con mi hija acerca de su educación e intento ser paciente y ella entiende que yo y su padre queremos lo mejor para ella, y ella y yo nos sentimos más calmadas en nuestras conversaciones que en tiempos de rabia y gritos."
	"I spoke with my sons about what they want to be when they are older and they said that they want to be police or engineers . . . I told them that they have to study a lot to achieve their dreams."	"Hablé con mis hijos de lo que quieren ser cuando sean mayores y ellos dijeron que querían ser policías o ingenieros. . .Yo les dije que ellos tenían que estudiar mucho para alcanzar sus sueños."
Structure	"We [mother and daughters] practiced reading in Spanish and [then] they became very happy in reading in English and interpreting in Spanish. It was also a very nice week because we received the scores of my two daughters."	"Practicamos el español leyendo juntas [con] mis hijas y se pusieron muy contentas de leer inglés e interpretar al español. También fue una semana muy bonita porque recibimos calificaciones de mis 2 hijas."
	"I organized all of [my son's] materials for school and [advised] him to do his homework in one place [and in one sitting]."	"Le organicé todos sus materiales de la escuela y de que haga su tarea en un mismo lugar."
Learning	"I asked my girl what she had learned every day (and) corrected her on certain things."	"Le pregunte a mi niña lo que había aprendido cada día (y) a corregirla de algunas cosas."
	"We worked with numbers [math] a lot, and I realized that if you support [the youth] it can be	"Trabajamos en los números muchas veces y descubrí que, si los apoyamos, se puede."

	done."	
	"I recognized [learned about] priorities. [One] can set aside personal matters a bit and dedicate more time for homework."	"Reconocí prioridades. Si se puede dejar a un lado un poco las cosas personales y dedicar más tiempo a las tareas."
Support	"We [both parents] have improved support [for doing] homework and looked for activities that [help learning]."	"Hemos mejorado el apoyo en tareas y mirado actividades que nos hagan practicar el aprendizaje en la escuela."
	"My daughters have always been important to me, but every day they need some special time to share, to learn and strengthen [their] education, and this program motivates [us] to continue."	"Mis hijas siempre han sido importantes para mí, pero cada día necesitan un tiempo especial para compartir, para aprender y reforzar la educación, y este programa motiva a continuar."
	"I want to be part of my daughters' success so that they may have better educational opportunities and achieve all of their endeavors."	"Yo quiero ser parte del éxito de mis hijas para que tengan mejores oportunidades educativas y logren lo que se propongan."
Relationships	"Last week I felt happy because I am achieving more communication with my daughters and [am] supporting them in everything [that improves] our family relationship."	"Esta semana que paso me sentí feliz porque estoy logrando con mis hijas más comunicación y apoyarlas en todo – mejorando nuestras relaciones familiares."
	"I am very happy because my son is more obedient and we are communicating much better. I believe this class is benefiting everybody."	"Estoy muy contenta porque mi hijo está más obediente y nos estamos comunicando mucho mejor. Creo que esta clase nos está beneficiando a todos."
	"While I was reading with my son, I told him that I love him very much, and it would please me if he succeeds in his studies. He became very content and hugged me and said that he liked to learn and read with me."	"Mientras leía con mi hijo, le dije que lo amaba muchísimo y que me complacería si es exitoso en sus estudios y él se puso muy contento y me abrazó y dijo que le gustaba aprender y leer conmigo."

Modeling	<p>"I want to be a part of my children's education because I want them to be successful in life because their successes make me proud."</p> <p>"I don't want them to suffer with everything that can be taken away [from them]. [People] may [take away] their cars, homes [or properties], but their education, their studies, nobody can take that away from them. With their studies they can go very far [in life]."</p> <p>"I want to be a part of my children's success because in many ways it is my responsibility as a mother and in my daughters' [achieving] success, I too shall feel success."</p>	<p>"Quiero ser parte de la educación de mis hijos porque quiero que sean exitosos en la vida porque su éxito y sus metas me llenan de orgullo."</p> <p>"Yo no quiero que ellos sufran [con] todo [aquello] que les pueden quitar. [Alguien puede] robar[les] sean carros, casas propiedades, pero el aprendizaje, el estudio, nadie se los puede quitar con el estudio pueden llegar muy lejos."</p> <p>"Yo quiero ser parte del éxito de mis hijos porque en mucha parte es mi responsabilidad como madre y al ser exitosos mis hijas también, yo me sentiré exitosa."</p>
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Discussion

The information gathered for the curriculum development process indicated a clear need for Educación to promote parent–school partnerships. The participatory process used to develop the curriculum was designed to address Latino parents' interests. The literature about participative curriculum development is narrow; our approach followed participatory principles, building on previous research, immigrant Latino parents' perspectives, and the extensive experience of cultural guides, bilingual Extension staff, and researchers.

The development process included discussions to identify learning objectives for each of the seven program sessions and then session components and activities. The back-and-forth team conversation was valuable, and although we highly recommend using a similar process for development of such curricula, we recognize that doing so is not always possible.

The evaluation results show parent gains in knowledge and skills that are known predictors for helping children improve their school performance, graduate from high school, and seek higher education. Moreover, parents appreciated the session on navigating the school system. This session included a panel of teachers and administrators who provided parents with an opportunity to ask questions and learn more about the school system and how it works, the programs and resources that are available to their children, and ways of communicating effectively with the school. For most parents, this experience was among the first times they had met face to face with school staff.

Educación is a curriculum that, when implemented to its maximum potential, offers a safe place for parents to discuss experiences, ask questions, and reflect about their children's education. It contributes to promoting

parents' awareness about the key role they play in their children's educational outcomes and provides tools they can use to build a structured environment for their children. Although other educational interventions for Latino youths exist (Behnke & Kelly, 2011; Gonzales et al., 2012), few were developed following a CBPR approach that builds on families' strengths and considers contextual factors that contribute to program usability.

Implications for Practice

As a result of information gathered during the pilot implementation of the program, we added more activity-based learning, reflection, and interaction among participants to ensure optimum learning and an optimal experience. We found that participants did not have frequent communication or interaction with school staff prior to the sessions, and for many, it was the first time they had heard what expectations the school had.

Supported by another grant, efforts are currently under way to assess program effectiveness in rural areas in Minnesota. These efforts involve work with family education—including parents and youths, family–school partnerships (parents and school staff), and school navigators in the school—and a 3-part model that is being used over a 5-year period to support families and the curriculum.

Additionally, on the basis of this experience, Minnesota Extension is expanding this work to include other cultural groups as the Minneapolis–Saint Paul metro area is becoming increasingly diverse, with families from Somalia and East Asian countries, Native Americans, and others.

Limitations

The curriculum was implemented in a suburban area in Minnesota; thus, the findings cannot be generalized to other Latino populations in other areas of the state and country. Many ecological factors influence academic achievement, including quality of school system, family socioeconomic status, racial issues, family form, and family resources, among others. Although interest in the sessions was high, attrition due to illness, job change, work hours, youth activities, school events, and other factors was higher than expected, leading to smaller numbers of completed and matched data. Moreover, because the sessions were in Minnesota, weather conditions resulted in cancellation that affected attendance.

Because it takes time to practice what is learned in the sessions and build experience, parents need time to practice their skills after the session is completed. There may not have been a parent/teacher conference, an open house, or another involvement opportunity for parents during a session series or during the remainder of a school year following a session series. This circumstance was dependent on the timing of the sessions within a school year. Holding the sessions at the beginning of the school year is recommended so that adequate time exists for practicing the skills that have been learned during the remainder of the school year. It may be wise to conduct a follow-up survey at the end of the school year (about 6 months following the program) to assess longitudinal effects.

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