

The Nora Project 2018-2019 Impact Assessment



THE NORA PROJECT

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“We're overwhelmed by the outcomes of the 2018-2019 school year. To hear from teachers, students, and parents alike about the transformative impact of The Nora Project is heartwarming and affirming. It goes to show that when we teach students to be curious about instead of fearful of differences, and give them the skills they need to make connections and allow them to hone and practice those skills, it elevates classroom culture and makes everyone feel like everyone belongs. Inclusion is truly the rising tide that lifts all boats. We're thrilled that our data proves that to the world.”

- Lauren Schrero, Executive Director



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Executive Summary

The Nora Project is an education-based nonprofit founded in 2016. Its yearlong flagship program teaches empathy and strengthens inclusive educational environments by encouraging friendships between students and their peers with disabilities. Free of charge, the program centers on a curriculum that is adaptable to almost any teaching schedule and style. It includes a multi-phase implementation structure and sample lesson plans allowing teachers to embed the project into daily classroom instruction. The Nora Project trains participating teachers (and other school staff, including counselors and social workers) on the curriculum and encourages educators to use their own creativity to bring the project to life. Training, professional development, and program support is provided throughout the school year, as well as all materials, resources, and technology.

The Nora Project strongly believes in data collection, analysis and publication of results. Below are key evaluations questions followed by highlights of significant outcomes within each for the 2018-2019 school year:

1. How have participating students' knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs changed because of their participation in The Nora Project?
2. How have these changes influenced student behaviors?
3. Has participation in The Nora Project improved classroom culture and the way students relate to and interact with one another?

To answer these questions, separate measures targeting participating students of all abilities, teachers, and parents of students with disabilities were collected. A mixed-methods evaluation, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative data, was used to evaluate The Nora Project on participating students' knowledge, attitude, and behavior change, as well as acquisition of new skills.

Overall evaluation findings to the question **“How have participating students' knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs changed because of their participation in The Nora Project?”** generated valuable information on promising outcomes for students of all abilities.¹ Analyses of survey data showed that:

- Typically-developing students reported being more accepting of others, more open to starting friendships with students with disabilities, and kinder to their fellow classmates in general.
- When asked what the most important thing they learned from their mixed-ability friendships was, 33% of students answered that “people are more alike than different,” while the 26% answered that they learned “to be kind,” 19% answered that “no one is normal,” 17% answered “be accepting of all people,” and 5% answered that they learned to be patient.
- Ninety-seven percent (97%) of students with disabilities agreed with the statement: The Nora Project made me feel proud of who I am.

¹ Complete data and citations follow in the body of the report, below.



- When asked what matters most to them, getting good grades, feeling happy most of the time, or caring for others, by the end of the school year, almost 70% of Nora Project students reported that caring for others was most important to them—a 26% increase over the beginning of the school year. Harvard researchers have found this answer correlates with higher empathy levels and lower incidences of disrespect, dishonesty, and bullying.
- While adolescent boys tend to decline in empathy, boys of that age who participated in The Nora Project showed marked increases in cognitive empathy, affective empathy, and prosocial motivation.

Overall evaluation findings to the question **“How have these changes influenced student behaviors?”** generated valuable information on promising outcomes for students of all abilities. Analyses of survey data showed that:

- 80% of student respondents reported a positive change in the way they interacted with their peers with and without disabilities.
- Changes seen in typically-developing students were increased leadership skills in developing activities for visits, more empathic interactions between all students, and an increased willingness to work together.
- Teachers who teach students with disabilities also reported changes they saw in their students, such as increased confidence, increased ability to socialize with their peers on their own, and an increased comfort with social engagement broadly.
- Parents and teachers reported that many students who were initially shy or uncomfortable coming to participating classrooms became comfortable, assertive and forged friendships with their typically-developing peers.

Overall evaluation findings to the question **“Has participation in The Nora Project improved classroom culture and the way students relate to and interact with one another?”** generated valuable information on promising outcomes for students of all abilities. Analyses of survey data showed that:

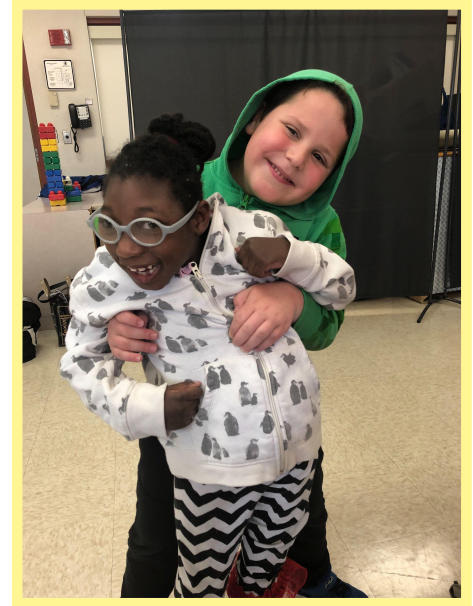
- A consistent theme in teachers’ comments about their classroom culture was that The Nora Project helped to foster community and teamwork among classmates.
- Teachers overwhelmingly reported that The Nora Project fostered a sense of community in classrooms, which translated to students being kinder and more caring toward their fellow classmates.
- Parents reported that their children felt included, welcome, and respected in their assigned classrooms.

For more on The Nora Project evaluation, program outcomes, and next steps for program delivery and implementation, please refer to the full report.



Program Overview

The Nora Project is an education-based nonprofit founded in 2016. Its flagship program, a yearlong class project, teaches empathy and strengthens inclusive educational environments by encouraging friendships between students and their peers with disabilities. The project centers on a curriculum that is adaptable to almost any teaching schedule and style. It includes a multi-phase implementation structure and sample lesson plans allowing teachers to embed the project into their current units of instruction. The Nora Project trains participating teachers (and other school staff, including counselors and social workers) on the curriculum and encourages educators to use their own creativity to bring the project to life. They provide training, professional development, and program support throughout the school year, as well as all materials, resources, and technology teachers needed to carry out the project from beginning to end.



Forest Road School, LaGrange Park, IL

The curriculum centers around three essential questions:

1. Why is there no such thing as “normal”?
2. What does it mean to be a good friend?
3. Why do we share our stories?

In addition to exploring these questions academically and through classroom discussion, students in participating classrooms have the opportunity to engage their peers with disabilities in fun, inclusive activities and to learn more about them by interviewing their family members, teachers, doctors, therapists, and caretakers. Students conclude the project by screening original documentaries they create as a capstone, which share their stories and lessons learned about friendship. By creating these real-world opportunities in the context of the project’s essential questions, The Nora Project normalizes difference, demystifies disability, and encourages meaningful connections between the students and their peers with disabilities.

Over the past three years, The Nora Project has experienced an overwhelming amount of interest from the educational community. Their small group of dedicated staff has worked hard to support that interest by growing the program while maintaining (and improving) its quality. The Next Steps section in this report covers changes to program implementation made to support the rapid scaling-up of The Nora Project.



Evaluation Design and Methodology

A mixed-methods approach, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative data, was taken to evaluate The Nora Project on participating students' knowledge, attitude, and behavior change, as well as acquisition of new skills. The evaluation presented here utilized survey data collected from students, teachers and parents of students with disabilities from August 2018 to June 2019 to inform the outcome evaluation. In order to explore areas of program impact and individual outcomes that the closed-question surveys did not cover, open-ended survey questions were utilized, and a qualitative study was conducted. The mixed-method study aimed to answer the following evaluation questions:

1. How have participating students' knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs changed because of their participation in The Nora Project?
2. How have these changes influenced student behaviors?
3. Has participation in The Nora Project improved classroom culture and the way students relate to and interact with one another?



Jackson Elementary School, Elmhurst, IL

Evaluation Measures and Program Participants

Four measures were utilized to capture program outcomes: (1) the Student Impact Survey; (2) the Nora Friend Survey (for students with disabilities); (3) the Teacher Survey; and (4) the Nora Friend Parent Survey.

The Student Impact Survey was revised to include a research-validated empathy measure called the Empathy Questionnaire for Children and Adolescents (EmQue-CA)². In addition to questions exploring empathy, questions about students' inclusive beliefs and behaviors were kept from previous versions of the survey. Open-ended questions covering the three essential questions that drive The Nora Project instruction and questions that explore program impact were also kept from previous versions of the survey.³

For the 2018-19 school year, a survey was created to evaluate the outcomes for students with disabilities (the "Nora Friend" survey³). The survey was designed for either students to complete alone or with an adult's assistance. The survey consists of 11 sentences about how students experienced the program. Students rate each sentence as true or false. Open ended questions asked students to share what they liked about the program, what they would change about the program, and what they learned from participating in the program.

² Reiffe, Carolien, (2015) Empathy Questionnaire for Children and Adolescents - EmQue-CA English. Available at https://www.focusonemotions.nl/images/EmQue-CA_UK.pdf

³ The Nora Project 2017-2018 Evaluation Report Available at: bit.ly/tnpimpactreport



A Teacher Survey was collected at the end of the school year and asked a combination of program-related satisfaction questions and questions that explored program impact.

The Nora Friend Parent Survey asked parents of students with disabilities to rate their children’s experience with core program components and explored program impact in open-ended questions. In addition to the survey, six interviews with Nora Friend parents further explored themes from survey data to inform program implementation improvements. The table below shows the number of respondents for each survey and the data collection timeframe.

Survey Name	Respondent Type	Number of Respondents	Data Collection Timeframe
Student Assessment	Typically Developing Students	1155 (pre), 917 (post 1), 777 (post 2)	8/18-6/19
Developmentally Different Students’ Survey	Differently Developing Students	29	5/19-6/19
Teacher Survey	Teachers Implementing the Program	35	5/19-6/19
Parent/Caretaker Survey	Parents/Caretakers	58	12/18-1/19
Parent/Caretaker Interviews	Parents/Caretakers	6	4/19-5/19

Descriptions of how the survey data were analyzed and findings from the survey data are included in the sections that follow.

Data Analyses

As mentioned above, a mixed-methods approach was employed for this evaluation. Students, teachers, and parents of students with disabilities completed surveys via Google Forms. The evaluation consultant downloaded and cleaned each dataset (i.e. checked for and removed any errors in data entry, such as duplicate responses), and conducted descriptive analyses (e.g. frequencies, percentages, mean responses) of individual survey items pertinent to the evaluation questions.

The Evaluation Consultant developed an iterative process for coding open-ended survey questions from each of the four survey types and interviews, which resulted in two cycles of analyses: (1) pattern, and (2) conceptual model building. A categorized inventory of the open-ended survey questions’ content was conducted and set the groundwork for thematic analysis. Pattern coding was used to organize thematic patterns that describe phenomena in the qualitative data that relate to specific evaluation questions. Following pattern coding, the evaluation consultant developed conceptual models by linking themes and emergent codes generated from the first cycle of analysis to create a higher-level understanding about the impact of The Nora Project.





Evaluation Findings

Overall, the outcome evaluation findings generated valuable information on promising outcomes for all students that participated in the program - typically-developing students and students with disabilities alike. Analyses of survey data from all students, teachers, and parents of students with disabilities show that the program is fulfilling a need for an inclusive environment for students of all abilities to socialize, while learning what it means to practice empathy and be a good friend. Findings also reveal areas that merit further examination to truly determine the impact The Nora Project has on individual students and the larger school community. Future research and evaluation activities will be discussed in the Next Steps section at the end of the report. The sections below cover evaluation findings from the 2018-19 school year for each evaluation measure.

Student Impact Survey Data

Quantitative Findings

Students in participating classrooms were given a survey that measures key project outcomes three times during the school year: (1) At the beginning of the program before any instruction had taken place; (2) Before participating students met their Nora Friends for the first time; and (3) At the end of the program, after students had screened their documentaries at the conclusion of the school year. The survey data below shows promising signs of program impact on participating students with regards to cultivating and practicing empathy and building inclusive friendships with children with disabilities.

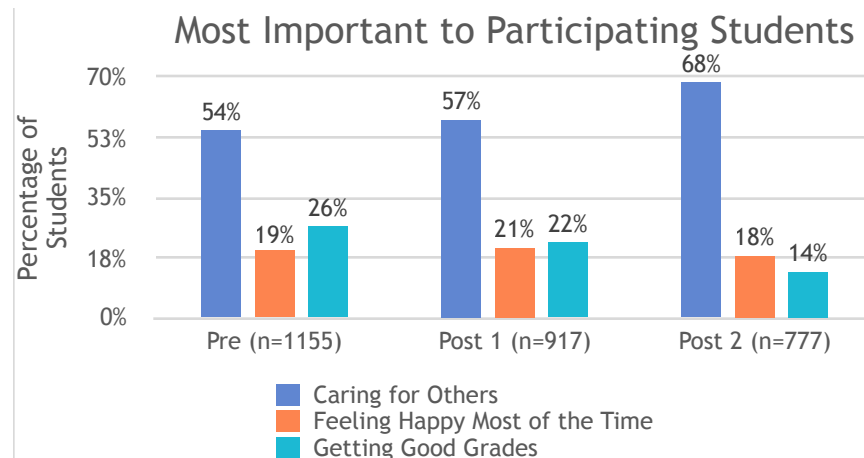
The question represented in the graph below: "Of the options below, which is most important to you?" was added to the student survey this year. This question was used in the Making Caring Common project through Harvard University, in which ten thousand students were polled on what they valued most. As in the Making Caring Common study, the options Nora Project students could choose from were (a) Caring for Others, (b) Feeling Happy Most of the Time, or (c) Getting Good Grades. In the Harvard study, only 20% of respondents chose 'caring for others' as the option most important to them. Harvard reported that students who gave caring low priority also tended to score low on a scale for empathy. They noted that research shows that when children and teens rank achievement over caring, they are more likely to develop harmful behavior such as disrespect, dishonesty and bullying.⁴ The Making Caring

⁴ *The Children We Mean to Raise: Making Caring Common Research Report* (2014) Harvard University School of Education. retrieved from http://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/files/gse-mcc/files/mcc-research-report.pdf?m=14480_57487.



Common study was one of many showing a trend among youth of declining empathy and rising narcissism.⁵

The Nora Project data on this question is more optimistic. In contrast to the students in the Harvard Study, nearly seventy percent (68%) of students who completed the Nora Project program valued caring for others above personal happiness and achievement. This was a 26% increase from pre-program to post-program. This data suggests that The Nora Project may be a powerful tool to combating the trend of declining empathy among youth.



One of the main goals of The Nora Project is to teach empathy. This is done through empathy lessons taught throughout the school year as well as experiential learning opportunities when students have a chance to plan activities for and engage their peers with disabilities. In order to measure empathy, a research-validated questionnaire called EmQue-CA was added to the student impact survey. The EmQue-CA contains 18 statements and students select from 3 responses - Not True, Sometimes True, or Always True about how they feel for each statement. The EmQue-CA has three domains that measure three kinds of empathy:

- Affective Empathy - A scale that measures the extent to which the child/adolescent feels for the emotional state of the suffering person,
- Cognitive Empathy - A scale that measures the extent to which the child/adolescent understands why the other person is in distress,
- Prosocial Motivation - A scale that measures the extent to which the child/adolescent is inclined to actually help or support the suffering person.⁶

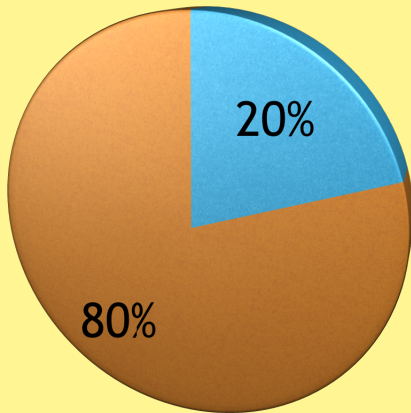
⁵ See J. Twenge, S. Konrath, J. Foster, W.K. Campbell, and B. Bushman, "Egos Inflating Over Time: A Cross-Temporal Meta-Analysis of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory, 2008," *Journal of Personality* 76, no. 4 (August 2008): 875-901; S. Konrath, "The Empathy Paradox: Increasing Disconnection in the Age of Increasing Connection," in *Handbook of Research on Technoself: Identity in a Technological Society*, Rocci Luppigini, ed. (Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2012): 204-28; "Empathy: College Students Don't Have as Much as They Used To, Study Finds," *Science Daily*, (May 29, 2010).

⁶ Overgaauw, S., Rieffe, C., Broekhof, E., Crone, E. A., & Güroğlu, B. (2017). Assessing Empathy across Childhood and Adolescence: Validation of the Empathy Questionnaire for Children and Adolescents (EmQue-CA). *Frontiers in psychology*, 8, 870.

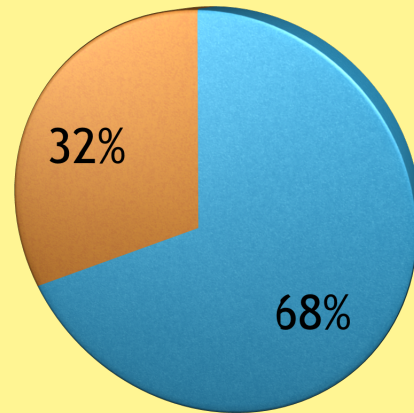




Are we raising caring kids?

Harvard Study



The Nora Project Survey Data

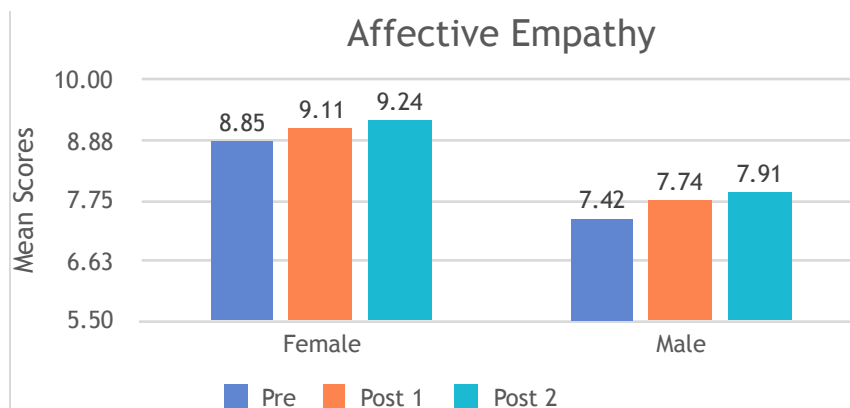


-  Caring for others is most important
-  Personal success is most important



Research has shown that children and adolescents who score high on Affective Empathy bully less and have better friendship qualities.^{7,8} The graphs below show student mean scores on the Affective Empathy, Cognitive Empathy and Prosocial Motivation domains comparing girls and boys. When comparing analyses on the student impact survey for the EmQue-CA 3 domains, students made the most gains in Affective Empathy Scores.

Studies show that as boys move from childhood into middle adolescence, their Affective Empathy scores decrease, while girls' scores increase.^{9,10} However, for Nora Project participants, boys made more gains in Affective Empathy Scores than girls from pre-program to post.



Both boys and girls scored high on Cognitive Empathy initially, while boys continued to make gains in Cognitive Empathy from pre-program to post.



Harper School, Wilmette, IL



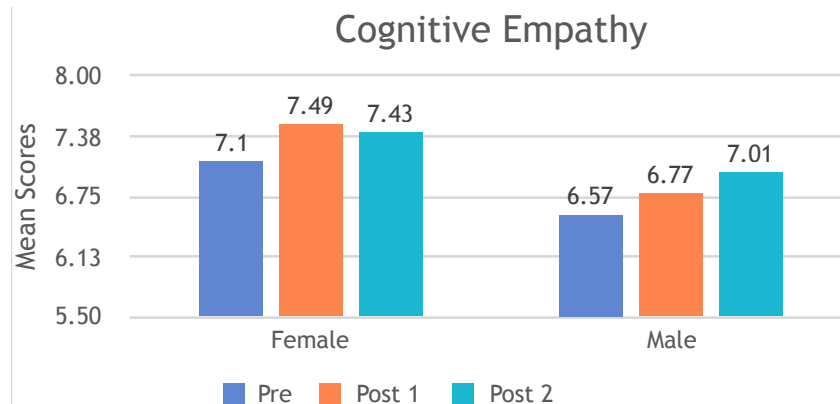
Arcado Elementary School, Lilburn, GA

⁷ Stavrinides P., Georgiou S., Theofanous V. (2010). Bullying and empathy: a short-term longitudinal investigation. *Educ. Psychol.* 30 793-802. 10.

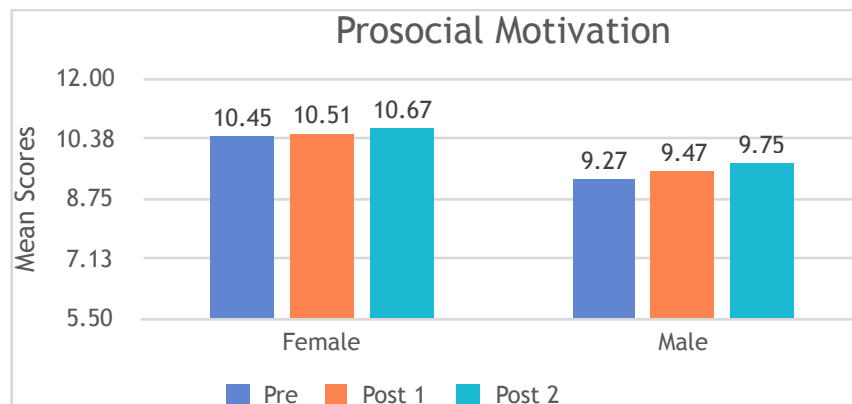
⁸ Berndt T. J. (2002). Friendship quality and social development. *Curr. Dir. Psychol. Sci.* 11 7-10.

⁹ Van der Graaff J., Branje S., De Wied M., Hawk S., Van Lier P., Meeus W. (2014). Perspective taking and empathic concern in adolescence: gender differences in developmental changes. *Dev. Psychol.* 50 881-888.

¹⁰ Taylor S. J., Barker L. A., Heavey L., McHale S. (2013). The typical developmental trajectory of social and executive functions in late adolescence and early adulthood. *Dev. Psychol.* 49 1253-1265.



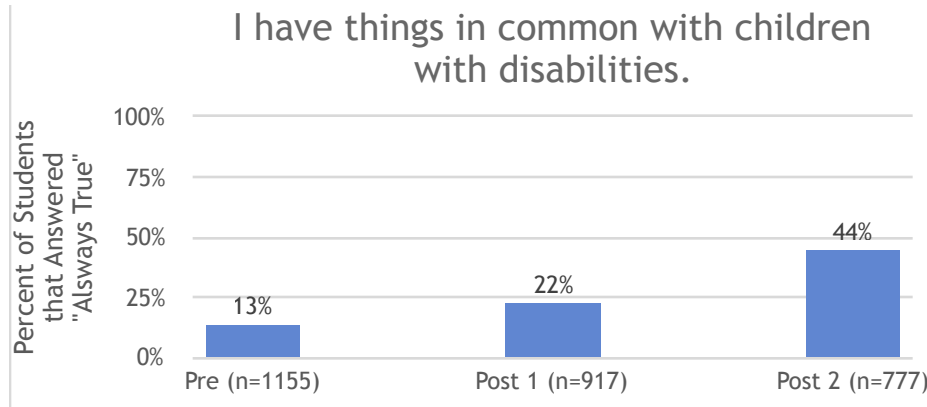
Students scored the highest in Prosocial Motivation. Girls tended to maintain their scores overtime, while boys made gains.



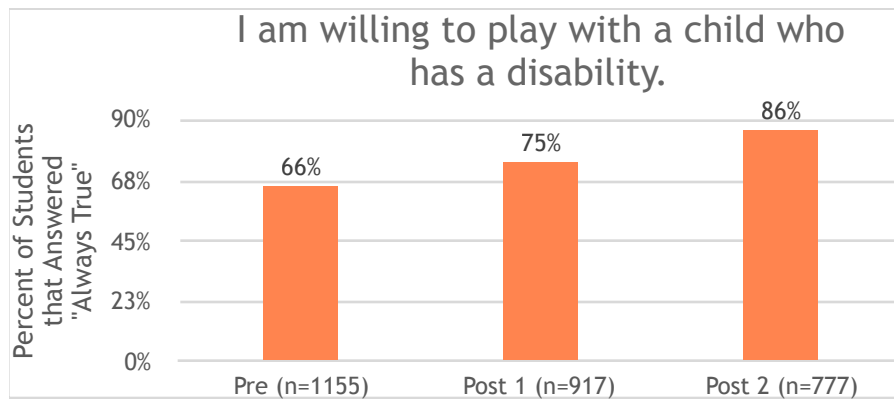
As the graphs above show, students made gains from pre to post on all domains of the EmQue-CA. Research has shown that higher scores on all domains of the EmQue-CA correlate to lower levels of bullying behavior and higher levels of friendship quality. More data collection is needed to show if the student empathy scores in Nora Project classrooms correlates with reduced bullying and increased friendship quality in those classrooms. The preliminary qualitative data from teachers, detailed below, is suggestive that it does.

In addition to teaching empathy, The Nora Project aims to impact students' attitudes about disability and inclusion. The graphs below represent students' feelings on these issues over the course of the school year. Students made the most gains with respect to the first question, "I have things in common with kids with disabilities." While only 13% of typically-developing students stated that they felt it was "Always True" that they had things in common with their peers with disabilities at the beginning of the program, by the end of the program 44% of students felt this way. This is a 238% increase! Exposure to instruction in disability awareness and best practices for inclusion coupled with opportunities to interact with peers with a disability had a significant impact on students' attitudes toward their peers with disabilities.

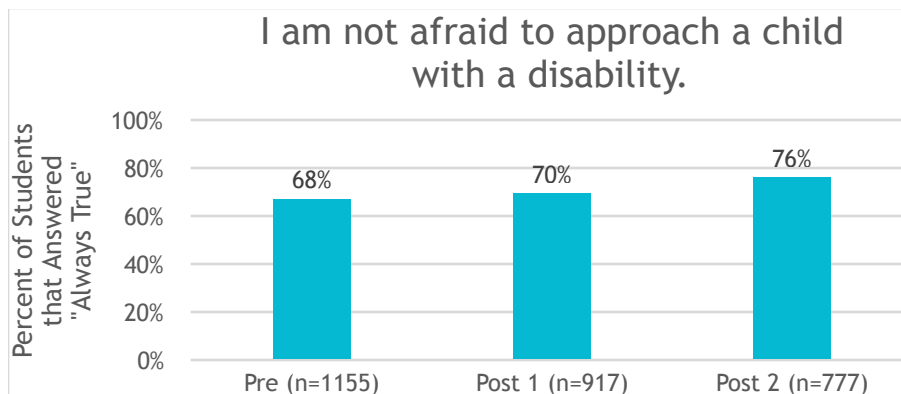
While only 13% of typically-developing students stated that they felt it was “Always True” that they had things in common with their peers with disabilities at the beginning of the program, by the end of the program 44% of students felt this way. This is a 238% increase!



66% of students stated they felt it was “Always True” that they would play with a child who has a disability at the start of the program. By the end of the program that number had increased to 86%--a 30% increase.



Students were also asked to rate the statement “I am afraid to approach a child with a disability.” For the purpose of analyses, the statement and the corresponding survey scoring were changed to address the positive. Nearly seventy percent (68%) of student answered “Always True” to “I am not afraid to approach a child with a disability” at the start of the program and by the end the percent had increased to 76%--a 12% increase.

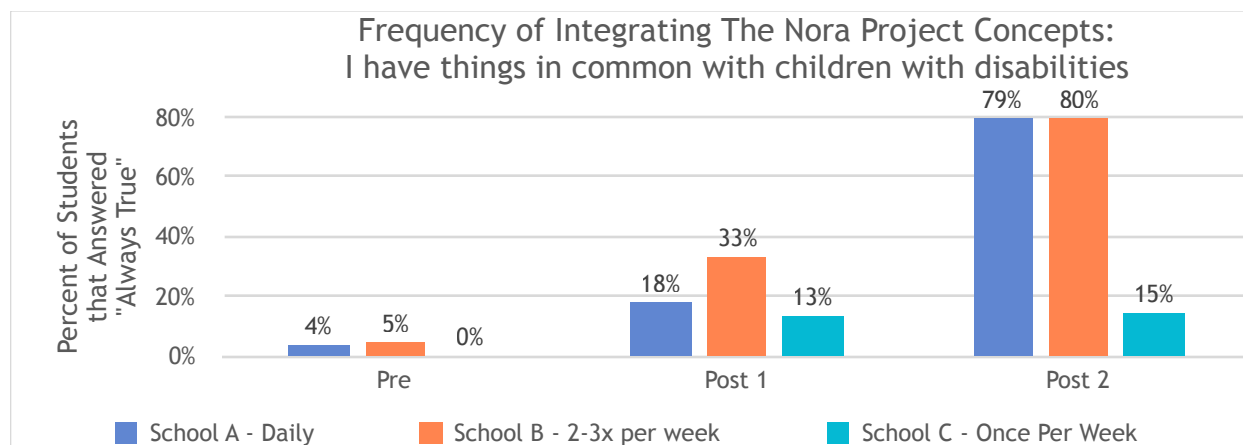


A newly added question to the Teacher Survey explored to what extent the frequency of addressing and integrating The Nora Project concepts into existing instruction related to students’ perceptions of peers with disabilities. The question, “How often did you discuss The



Nora Project or related themes in your classroom?” was added to the Teacher Survey. Teachers were provided a dropdown of options from which to choose. Since the Teacher Survey allowed teachers the option to remain anonymous, not all teachers’ answers were matched with their corresponding students’ data. Moreover, aggregate analyses were not completed due to the small number of teachers identifying themselves.

Therefore, the external evaluator conducted comparisons on three classrooms: one that discussed The Nora Project daily, one that discussed it 2-3 times per week, and one that discussed it once per week. Student Impact Data was analyzed for these three classrooms. Empathy domain scores and individual item scores on inclusion questions were examined. While empathy domain scores and most of the individual item scores on inclusion questions were similar across classrooms, one piece of data stood out. There was a stark contrast between students’ data from classrooms that taught The Nora Project at least 2-3 times per week and the classroom that only discussed The Nora Project once per week as to the statement “I have things in common with children with disabilities.” By the end of the program, classrooms that discussed the program’s themes at least 2-3 times per week had nearly all students reporting that the statement “I have things in common with children with disabilities” was always true for them, while only 15% of students felt it was always true in the classroom that discussed The Nora Project once per week as the graph below shows.



Frequency of integrating The Nora Project concepts into current instruction and its impact on typically-developing students’ perception of their peers with disabilities therefore merits further exploration. For the 2019-20 school year, teachers will be asked to report on the frequency of teaching The Nora Project in their classrooms on a regular basis rather than at the end of the school year, which will help to develop a more accurate measurement of this data point. What is more, this reporting will not be anonymous and therefore easier to map to student outcomes.

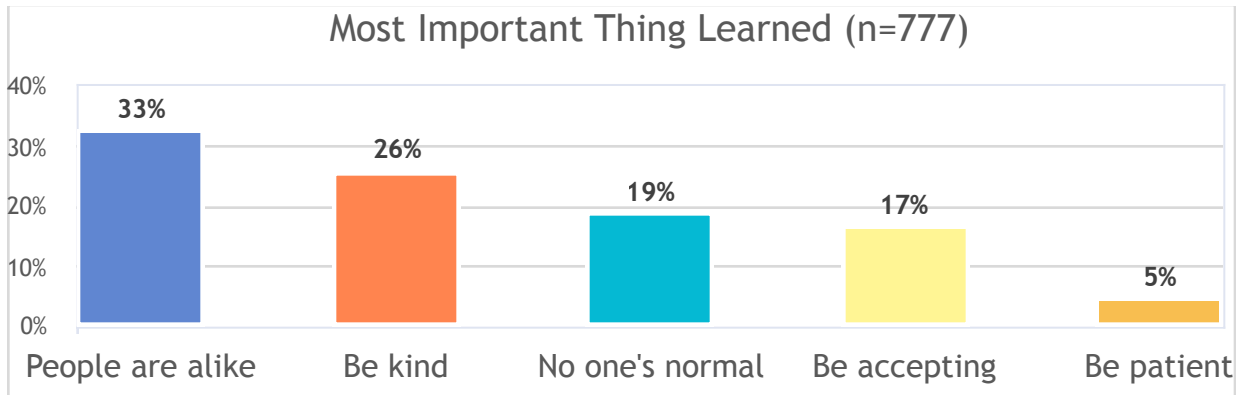
The Student Impact Survey data illustrated in the graphs above are promising evidence that the project impacts typically-developing students’ thoughts about and behaviors toward their peers with disabilities. The next section focuses on student responses to open-ended survey questions that support the quantitative findings.

By the end of the program, classrooms that discussed the program's themes at least 2-3 times per week had nearly all students reporting that the statement "I have things in common with children with disabilities" was always true for them.

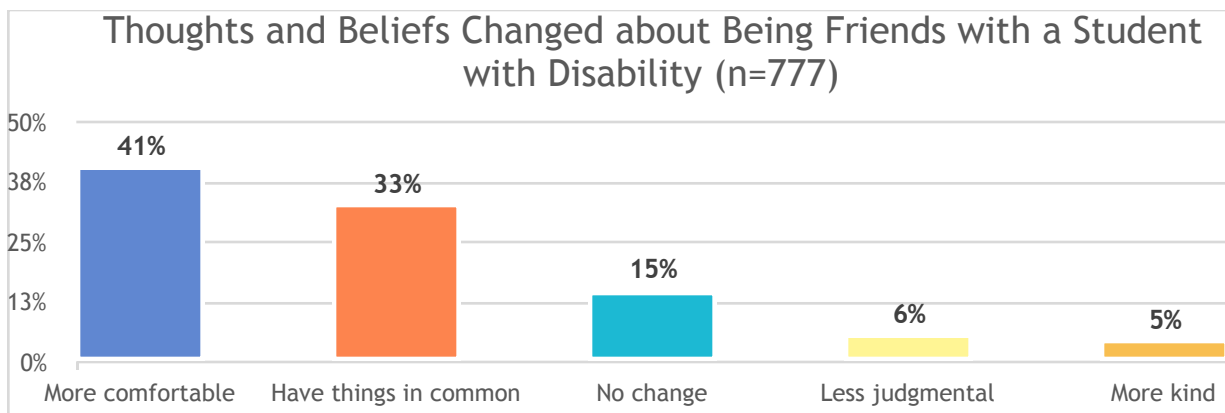


Qualitative Findings

Students were asked a series of open-ended questions at the end of the final student survey. Their responses were analyzed using pattern coding in which statements were grouped by general themes. Due to the large number of responses, pattern codes are displayed in the tables below with the corresponding percentage of student responses per theme. The table below shows student responses to the open-ended question: “What is the most important thing you learned from your Nora Friend?”

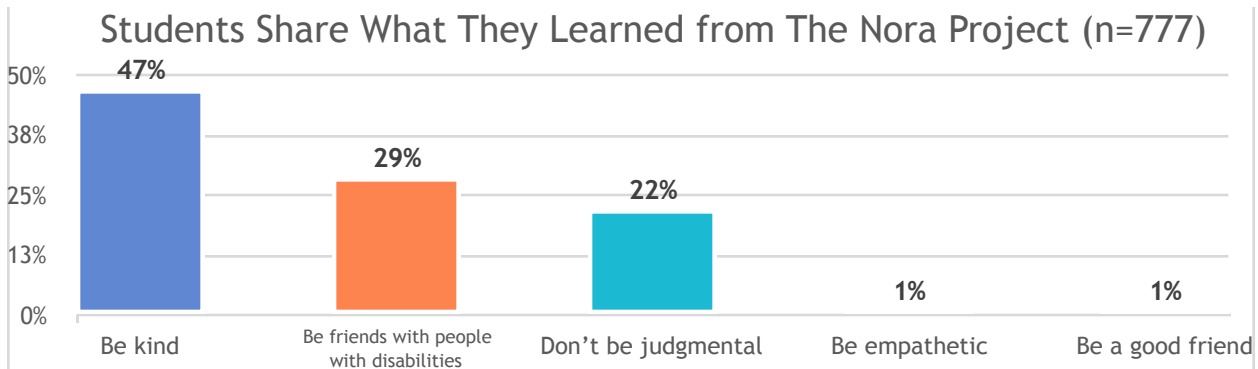


Students reported a number of ways their thoughts and beliefs changed about being friends with a person with disabilities (see table below). The two themes that were the most prevalent in student responses were that The Nora Project made them more comfortable approaching and interacting with children with disabilities and they recognized they had a lot in common with children with disabilities.

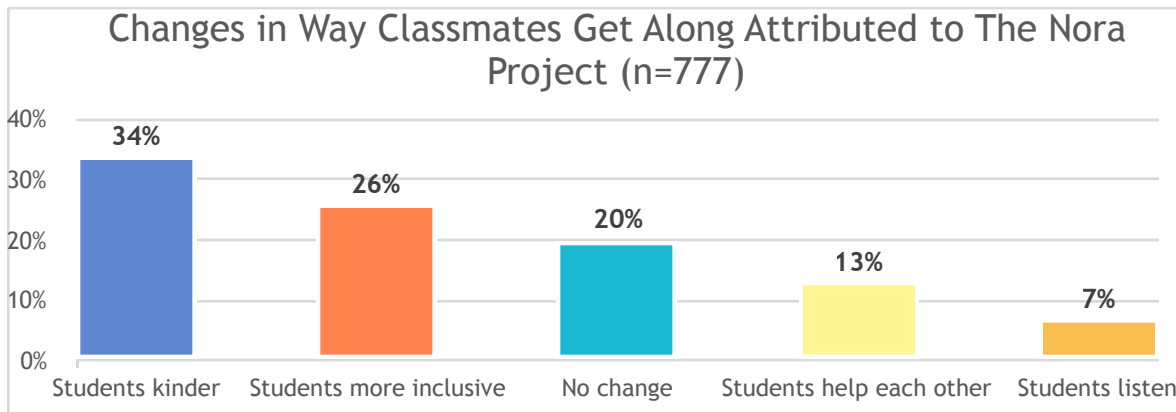




Students also described ways in which they will use what they learned from The Nora Project after the end of the program. Themes of kindness, being friends with people with disabilities, and not judging people were described the most in student responses.



Students also answered a question about how The Nora Project impacted the way their class got along. Though some students did not report a major change, 80% of students mentioned some way that The Nora Project influenced their interactions, such as being kinder to each other, including classmates in activities more often, helping each other more, or listening more.



In conclusion, the qualitative student survey data shows that students' thoughts and feelings about their peers with disabilities changed because of The Nora Project, and that students reported being more accepting of others generally, more open to starting friendships with children with disabilities, and kinder to their fellow classmates. The results were best in classrooms where the themes of The Nora Project were raised at least two-three times per week.

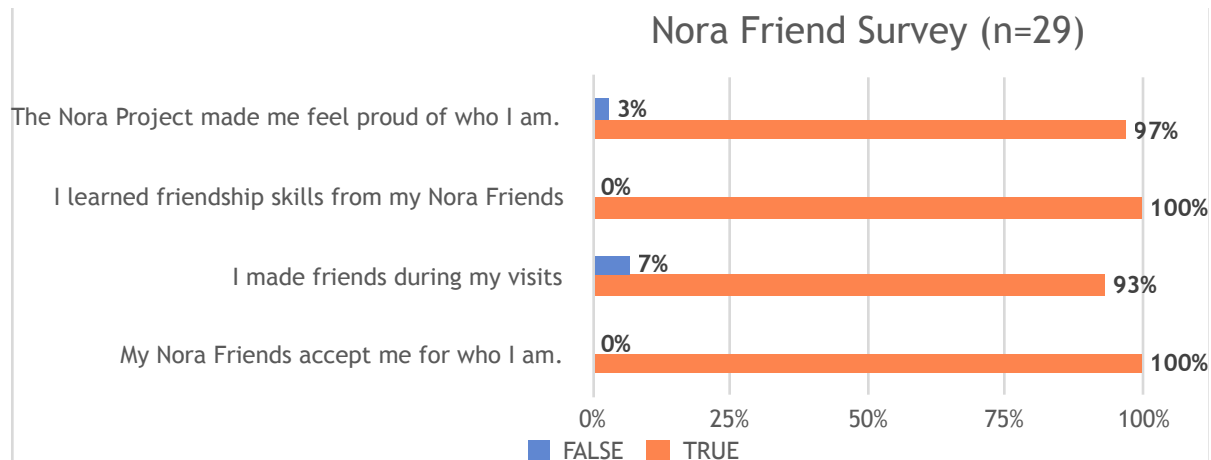
Students with disabilities felt accepted by their peers and were able to make friends and improve social skills.

Nora Friend Impact Survey Data

For the 2018-2019 school year, a new survey was created targeting the impact of the program on students with disabilities. The survey consisted of fifteen true or false statements. An inclusion specialist assisted with drafting the statements and ensuring the survey's usability was inclusive of students of all abilities. Students were given the opportunity to complete the survey themselves or with the assistance of an adult. The survey was collected at the end of the year. Twenty-nine (29) students completed the survey out of 146 students with disabilities who participated in the program, which is a 20% response rate.

Quantitative Findings

Findings show that students with disabilities felt accepted by their peers and were able to make friends and improve social skills. The graph below shows students responses to statements about their experiences with the program. Two findings that merit further examination were that students felt they learned friendship skills and felt proud of who they are as a result of participating in the program. The program's impact on students with disabilities will be further defined by whether the friendships created through the program last beyond the project year and whether the social confidence of students with disabilities continues beyond the project year, as well. Both will be measured in a newly launched longitudinal study.



Qualitative Findings

Students were asked several open-ended questions to elicit more information about their experiences with The Nora Project. The questions were “What is something you liked about The Nora Project?” “What is something you wish was different about The Nora Project?” and “What is something you learned by participating in The Nora Project?”

Representative answers to the question about what they liked about The Nora Project are set forth in the quotes shared below:



“I liked being included in so many fun activities.”

“I loved my friends.”

“That they cared about me.”

When asked what they would change about The Nora Project, more than half of respondents shared they would not change anything. Several respondents shared that they would like more opportunities for social interaction outside the classroom or better ways to keep in touch with their Nora Project peers after the end of the school year.

Students and parents also shared things that they learned from participating in The Nora Project. Students mostly shared things that they learned from activities they did while in the program, while some shared that they gained skills and confidence to socialize with their peers. Parents shared thoughts about their child participating in an inclusive environment and how that can have a positive effect on their child. The quotes below are from parents and students that participated in the program.

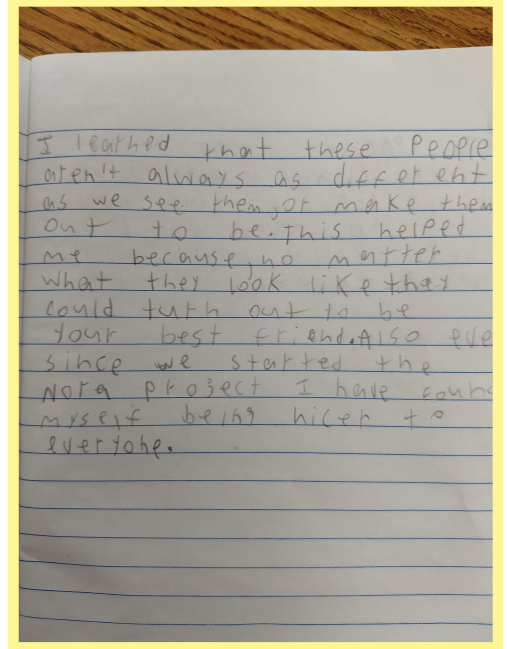
“I learned that I don’t have to be shy around new people. They just want to get to know me.” - Nora Friend

“I made more friends” - Nora Friend

“The kids in the classroom were so proud to be my daughters’ friend and that made the whole family feel great!” - Nora Friend Parent

“We learned that something like this is possible, and that EVERY student in a classroom can be involved and engaged. We learned that our son can be included without his disability being the primary focus--but friendship, instead.” - Nora Friend Parent

Overall students with disabilities shared positive feedback about their experiences with the program as well as some areas for improvement especially around extending social interactions with their peers outside of school. Data from the Nora Friend Survey provided insight into how students with disabilities experience The Nora Project. These data will be used to improve and refine questions on the survey to further measure impact of the program for the 2019-2020 school year.



Student empathy journal reflection

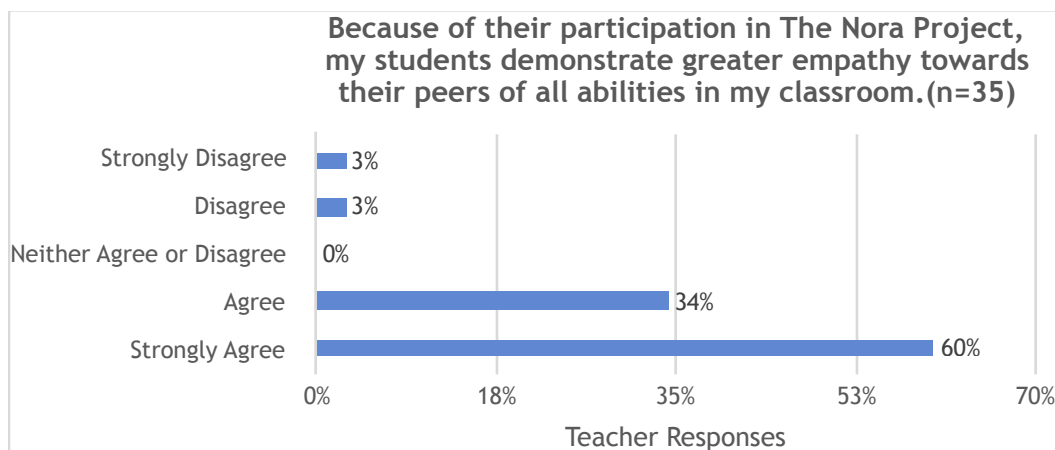
The students learned all about empathy, but more than that they learned how to be inclusive, not only within school, but within life. When talking to the students they no longer see the "differences" between themselves and their Nora Friends. They see opportunities for friendship, learning, and experiencing the best parts of life.



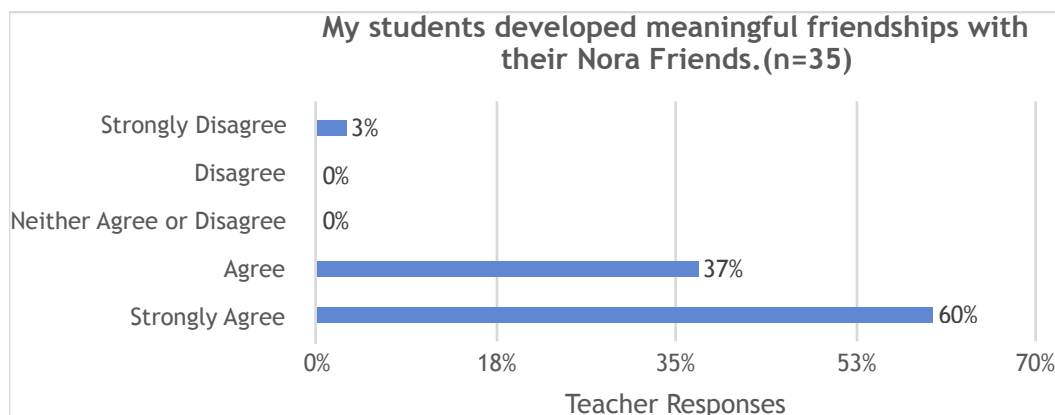
Teacher Survey Data

Teachers were asked to complete a survey at the end of the school year to gather information on their experiences with the program. The survey questions were a mixture of process evaluation questions (measuring to what extent program activities have been implemented as intended) and outcome evaluation questions (measuring program effects to the target population). Most questions on the survey were open-ended. Process evaluation questions were used to target program quality improvement, while outcome evaluation questions explored the impact of the program on students of all abilities. Survey findings set forth below focus on the outcome evaluation questions.

Teachers were asked several questions about their students' experience with the program. Teachers were asked to rate to what extent they agreed with the statement: "Because of their participation in The Nora Project, my students demonstrate greater empathy towards their peers of all abilities." As the graph below shows, almost all teachers (94%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement.



Teachers were also asked to rate their agreement with the statement: "My students developed meaningful friendships with their Nora Friends." Ninety-seven percent (97%) of teachers agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. The data for this question is illustrated in the graph below.





Qualitative findings from each question were analyzed using the same methods as the student data. Pattern codes were developed and themes from the pattern codes were used to develop conceptual models. Given the substantially smaller size of participating teachers versus students (n=35), direct quotes are shared to illustrate themes in the paragraphs below.

In order to gain more insight into the impact of the project on their students' behavior, teachers were asked, "What is the most important thing that your students learned as a result of participating in The Nora Project?" An overwhelming majority shared about their students learning to challenge their beliefs about what it means to be normal and to think more about what they have in common with their peers with disabilities than the disabilities themselves. Themes of accepting others for who they are, finding common ground, and students exhibiting kindness and empathy to fellow classmates emerged over and over in the teacher survey data. The quotes below illustrate these themes.

The students learned all about empathy, but more than that they learned how to be inclusive, not only within school, but within life. When talking to the students they no longer see the "differences" between themselves and their Nora Friends. They see opportunities for friendship, learning, and experiencing the best parts of life.

One teacher shared a comment that a parent emailed that also encapsulates these themes.

Our fourth graders and their Nora Friends feel connected to each other and their school and are taking their heightened understanding of kindness out into the world and applying it to their everyday life. This has been the most impactful and enjoyable lesson my son has ever had at [school].

Teachers also reported changes that they saw in their students that they attributed to The Nora Project. Changes seen in typically-developing students were increased leadership skills, more empathic interactions between all students, and an increased willingness to work together. Teachers also reported that students with disabilities showed increased confidence, increased ability to socialize with their peers on their own, and an increased comfort interacting with students who did not participate in the program. Quotes that illustrate these themes are provided below.

They are confident in their friendships with their Nora Friends and are wanting to become friends with other students in our school who have disabilities. They are willing to put themselves out there with each other, leadership, guidance, asking for help, supporting one another. So awesome to see the transformation.

My students are the Nora Friends, and I have seen their confidence and ability to socialize grow tremendously!

I feel some of my students who feel different than the average students felt more comfortable in their own skin.

Teachers were asked to reflect on the question, "Have you noticed any changes in the culture of your classroom that you attribute to The Nora Project?" Eighty-six percent (30 out of 35) teachers indicated that they had seen positive changes to their classroom culture as a result of participating in The Nora Project. A consistent theme in teachers' comments was that The Nora Project helped foster community and teamwork among classmates. This sense of community translated into students being kinder to classmates overall. Several teachers summed up this phenomenon with the following quotes.



I hear students taking each other's needs into account more than they did before. They are encouraging each other for their strengths and showing care for weaknesses. For example, while working on math, a student from another class might shout out "This is SO easy" and my students are quick to jump in and say "it may be for you but consider other students who struggle, hearing that it's easy will shut them down, Instead offer your help or say something different!"

I've never had a better connection with a class than this one. Being able to bond over a life changing experience is not something that comes along all the time. I pride myself on building a strong classroom community; however, this took it to an ineffable level.

Yes, the best example was when they told other students not to turn around and look at our self-contained students when they were making noises during an assembly.

In addition to the changes noted above, many teachers described students with disabilities becoming more comfortable and outgoing. They also described students as feeling more a part of the school community.

I heard from so many families about how much of a positive impact this had on their sons or daughters. I know that these students feel more included because I see them in the hallways talking with our students and interacting with them regularly. They are near our room looking for their friends and it has been so heartwarming to see.

On our last activity day it was incredibly evident how much it has impacted them. They needed no support from adults in the room. They marched right into the space and started playing with their peers. They played for 40-45 minutes with their friends. These are all students who have IEP goals to attend to any activity for around 3 minutes. For them to engage in an activity for that length of time shows the incredible impact it has had on them.

My students learned how to be in a gen ed setting with gen ed peers. They were able to see students as models and it was extremely beneficial for them.

Teacher survey data show promising outcomes for typically-developing students, which support the student survey data and provide more detail and insight into changes in student behavior. Teachers also reported promising changes in the behavior of students with disabilities, which was echoed in the Nora Friend Survey.

In the final findings section, we report on the experiences of parents of students with disabilities



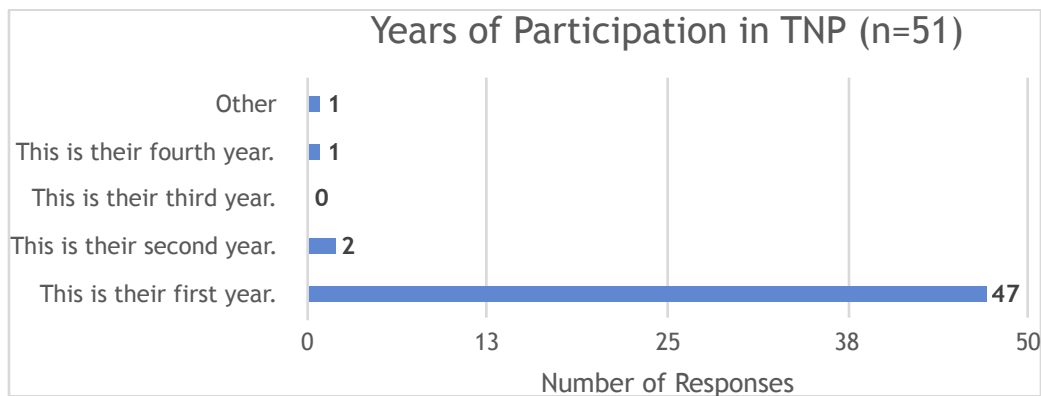
Nora Friend Parent Survey Data

Between December 2018 and January 2019, a survey was sent out to participating and alumni parents of The Nora Project. The purpose of the survey was to answer the following evaluation questions:

1. What do parents expect from participating in the program?
2. What are their concerns about participating in the program?
3. What do they see are the benefits of participating in the program?
4. What supports do they wish to have for themselves and their children in order to feel comfortable participating in the program?
5. Is there additional programming for parents they'd like to see?

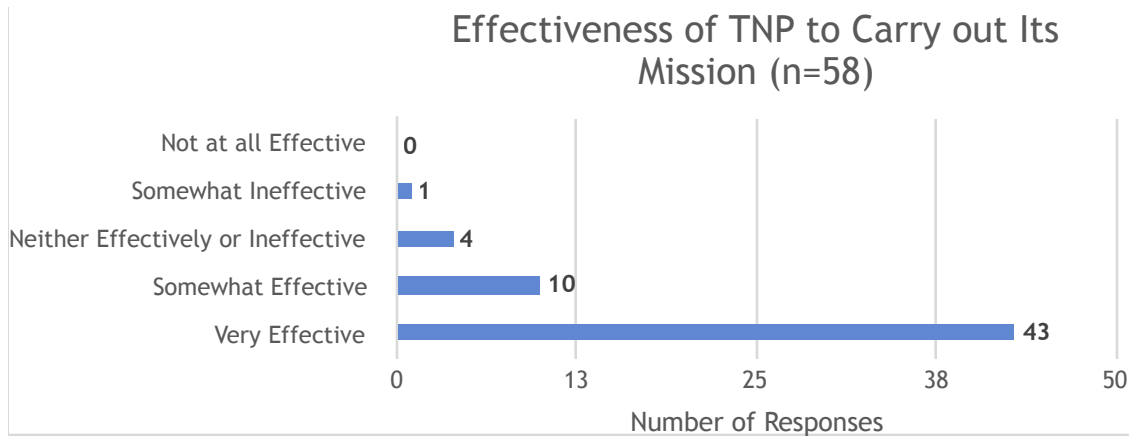
A parent survey was developed in Google Forms and was sent via email in a survey link. Alumni and participating parents (n=207) were emailed the survey link. Eleven email addresses bounced back, and the external evaluator was not able to establish contact, therefore one hundred ninety-six (196) parents received the survey link. Fifty-eight (58) parents completed the survey for a 30% response rate. The results of the survey are provided below.

92% of respondents (n=47) reported that this was their child's first year participating in The Nora Project.



Findings

Respondents were asked to rate the effectiveness of The Nora Project in achieving its mission to teach empathy by sparking friendship between students of all abilities. 91% of respondents reported that The Nora Project is either very effective (n=43) or somewhat effective (n=10) in achieving its mission.



Parents shared why they chose their rating of The Nora Project. While the majority of respondents who chose ratings below “Very Effective” stated it was because the child was new to the program and it was too soon to tell to what extent The Nora Project achieves its mission, some parents shared helpful information that could be used to improve programming. Several parents felt that the frequency of the activity day visits was insufficient to spark any meaningful friendships. Two parents shared that by being paired with older peers, the likelihood of sparking lasting friendships is less than being paired with same age peers. One parent shared that they felt large group settings were difficult for children to develop meaningful friendships and suggested smaller group settings and opportunities for children to interact outside of school. Overall parents felt that The Nora Project was very effective in carrying out its mission, but that the program and school communities could do more to intentionally provide opportunities for social interaction between all students.

Parents were also asked a series of open-ended questions about the meaning of inclusion, their goals for their child regarding having relationships with their peers, and specific questions about ways in which The Nora Project can support children and their families. Responses were analyzed and organized by question and by themes. Results are provided below.

What does inclusion mean to you?

A majority of parents shared that they thought inclusion meant equal access to opportunities for all children. Other themes regarding this question are provided below.

Theme	Percent of Respondents*	Exemplary Quote
Equal Access to Opportunities	50% (29 out of 58)	<i>Inclusion, for me, means creating a safe, comfortable learning environment where every child feels welcomed and a part of the group. It means all students, with disabilities or not, are engaged in classroom activities and are treated with respect and as equals. Inclusion means understanding and appreciating each person's unique gifts, talents, and struggles. Inclusion provides opportunities to learn from one another, and for the opportunity for each child to thrive!</i>



Acceptance in the Community	43% (25 out of 58)	<i>It means feeling a part of a community. I am not hung up on him having to be in the general ed class because I am not sure that is what is best for my son. I just want him to be known, feel accepted and be part of the school community.</i>
Friendships with Peer Group	14% (8 out of 58)	<i>Having a chance to be with my child's peers on a daily basis during the school year</i>

*Total percentage is over 100% due to some answers being coded to more than one theme.

What are your hopes and goals for your child's engagement with peers?

For many survey respondents, learning social skills from peers is a goal that they have for their child. Other goals mentioned by survey respondents are in the table below.

Theme	Percent of Respondents	Exemplary Quote
To learn social skills from their peers	34% (20 out of 58)	<i>I hope for my child to be able to interact more with peers, as she is so used to working with adults that she doesn't understand how to interact with kids.</i>
To be accepted by their peers and learn about acceptance of others	26% (15 out of 58)	<i>Not only for her peers to learn about her and her daily lifestyle but for her to learn about theirs. This is a two-sided experience for everyone. It's spreading awareness, empathy and respect for everyone included. It's beautiful to see how both sides react to one another.</i>
To have meaningful friendships with their peers	26% (15 out of 58)	<i>I want his peers to think that he is as cool as we do. I want him to be invited to birthday parties and play sports if that is what he wants to do.</i>
For typically-developing peers to approach and make friends with their child of their own will	14% (8 out of 58)	<i>This is probably putting too much responsibility on the other children, but I love to see when [name of child] is not only accepted as a peer, but sought out as a friend. I have seen it happen and it warms my heart to know that others feel compelled to watch over her . . . protect her feelings even. I believe this is a direct result of her inclusion in the mainstream classroom</i>

How can The Nora Project help to support your goals for your child?

Parents had many ideas for how the organization can better support their goals for their children.

Theme	Percent of Respondents*	Exemplary Quote
Encourage collaboration between general and special education teachers	31% (18 out of 58)	<i>Goals and activities should be pre-planned and special ed and general ed classes should be working together to build awareness of all disabilities.</i>
Create opportunities to build relationships with peers and for social interaction	28% (16 out of 58)	<i>It allows my child to meet new kids and spend time with them. These experiences help my child learn how to interact with different friends in different scenarios</i>
Teach acceptance of disabilities and differences	24% (14 out of 58)	<i>The Nora Project helped non-disabled students see that my child is a person too and has the same likes/dislikes even though he may have challenges or be "different" than them</i>
Program is fulfilling parent's goals	21% (12 out of 58)	<i>The Nora Project is already helping to support this goal by exposing other children to [our daughter], making them familiar with her disability, and learning to adapt to her limitations while still enjoying her company.</i>

*Total percentage is over 100% due to some answers being coded to more than one theme.

Why did you choose to enroll your child in The Nora Project?

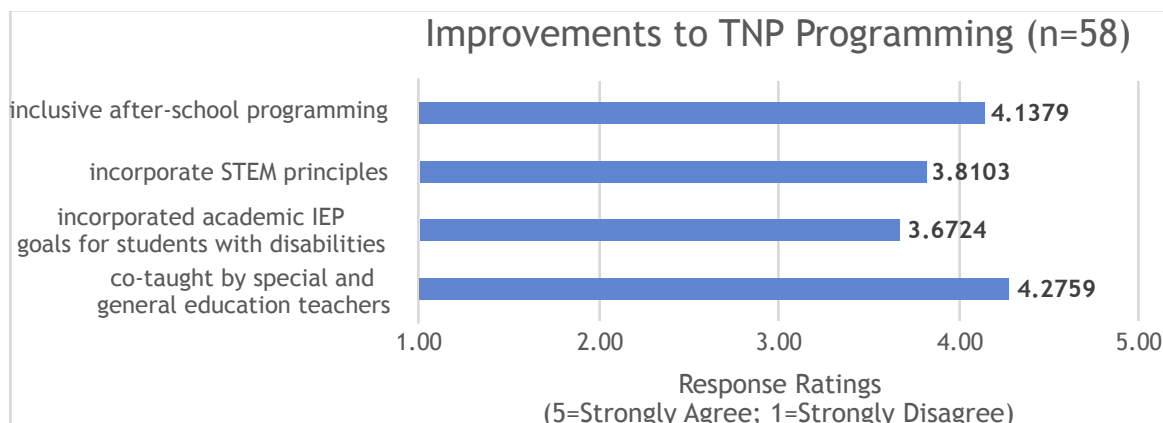
A majority of parents who responded to the survey felt that The Nora Project would benefit their child. Other themes parents shared are provided in the chart that follows.



Theme	Percent of Respondents	Exemplary Quote
Parent felt that the program would benefit their child	50% (29 out of 58)	<i>My son was struggling with inclusion at his school. It felt like most of the time the goal was just to be in the room. Unless there are moments where the activity is designed so that he can participate he ends up off to the side doing his own activity. I wanted to find a place where he could truly interact with his peers so that they could see him as peer</i>
Parent liked the mission of the program	34% (20 out of 58)	<i>Because I love everything about it! Teaching empathy and educating others about developmental differences will help future generations in so many ways.</i>
Parent was asked to participate in the program	9% (5 out of 58)	<i>The participation in the Project came as an invite from school and once we joined we thoroughly enjoyed.</i>
Parent's friend recommended the program	7% (4 out of 58)	<i>I heard lovely things about the program from a friend who had her child in the program last year. My husband and I thought it would be wonderful for [our son] to meet new children in his school building as well as for the older children in his building to get to know him. In our eyes, it was a win-win!</i>

The Nora Project strives for continuous program improvements. To that end, the survey included statements for parents to rate on regarding ways to make the program more inclusive and beneficial for all children of all abilities. Parents were asked to rate their agreement with program design changes on a five-point scale with 1 being Strongly Disagree and 5 being Strongly Agree. Design changes were grouped by topic in the 3 graphs below.

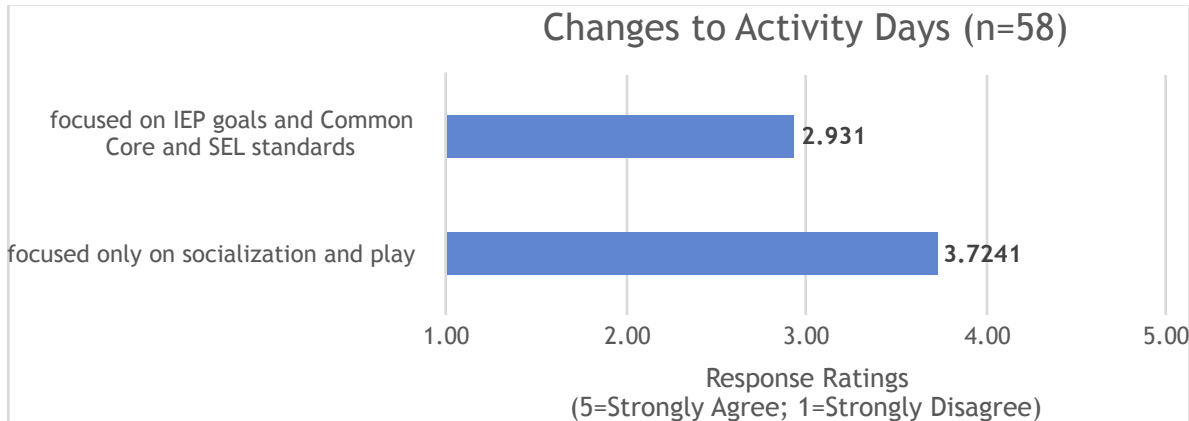
First, parents were asked to what extent they agreed that certain modifications would improve The Nora Project programming.





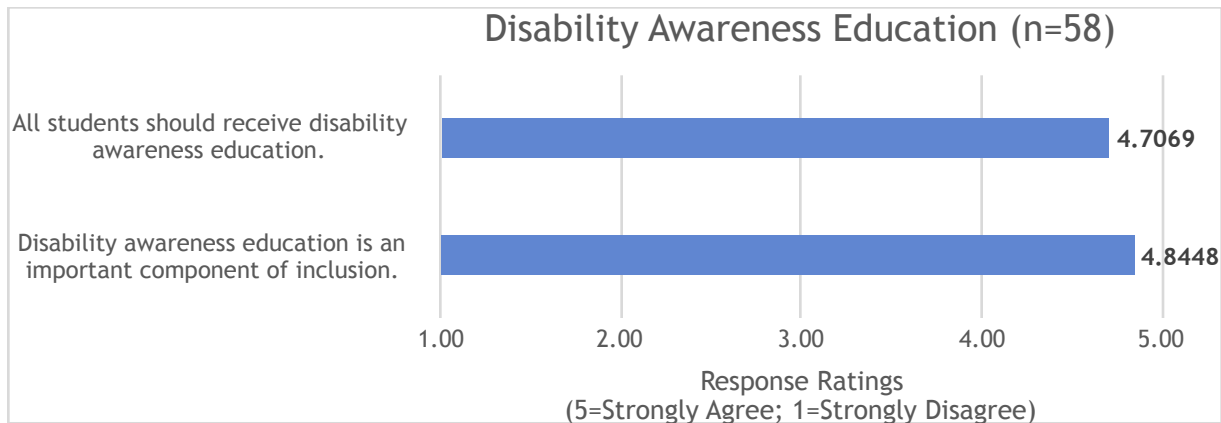
As illustrated by the parent responses in the chart above, parents most strongly agreed that co-taught and after school programming would represent improvements or positive additions to The Nora Project experience. They also showed interest in opportunities for students to think creatively and in different contexts about inclusion. Parents were most ambivalent about the need for Nora Project programming to align to their children’s IEP goals.

Parents were also asked to reflect on the function of “activity days” within the Flagship Program and where the program emphasis should be placed.



As set forth in the chart above, feedback reflects a stronger desire for The Nora Project to bring children together in play during activity days than to have them work during that time toward achieving IEP goals or receiving academic instruction.

Finally, parents were asked to consider to what extent inclusion requires specific instruction about disability.



This data shows that parents of children with disabilities strongly believe that for their children to be truly included and understood, all students, including their own children, benefit from disability awareness education.

The data from these questions informed a number of changes in Nora Project programming.

- (1) **Co-Taught Flagship Program:** Based on the data and the evolving guidance on best practices, The Nora Project created new variation of the Flagship Program. This variation was designed to be taught to an inclusive population of students and co-taught between a general education teacher and special educator with the intention of providing the same learning and social experiences for students of all abilities. Based on parents’ feedback that students of all abilities should receive disability



awareness education, the co-taught version of the program provides explicit instruction in disability awareness and introduces differences as common to all people. Parents' feedback also inspired the requirement that this variation be co-taught by a general education and special education teacher. In this variation, students work together in mixed-ability groups over the course of the school year, sharing their stories and learning peers' stories, spending time with one another in social settings, and creating documentaries that share their friendship stories with the world.

- (2) Lifecycle Programming: Two brand new programs were also added to The Nora Project's suite of programs to ensure that students of all abilities would have multiple exposures to empathy education and disability awareness training over the course of their academic careers. The Primer Pack curriculum, designed for students in preschool through third grade, was designed to provide a foundation in empathy education, friendship skills, emotional literacy, inclusion, and disability awareness. The program is designed to be taught in an inclusive setting to students of all abilities. The Expansion Pack was introduced as an extra-curricular, inclusive, STEM-based club that guides student participants to examine their school through a lens of inclusion and identify opportunities to make their school community more inclusive. Students of all abilities work together to strengthen friendships and share perspectives to improve the inclusivity of their school environments.
- (3) Community Events: Finally, The Nora Project launched an out-of-school community-based program to bring students together in inclusive play environments on the weekends. The program was initially hosted monthly but is looking to increase to bi-weekly community gatherings.

Limitations and Next Steps

Data from the outcome evaluation show that The Nora Project was a success overall. Typically-developing students learned about disability, empathy, and being a good friend. Through their experience meeting and engaging in activities with students with disabilities, typically-developing students challenged their assumptions about what it means to be "normal." Students realized that they had things in common with their peers with disabilities, and as a result were more comfortable approaching other children with disabilities to make friends. Teachers overwhelmingly reported that The Nora Project had an impact on their classroom culture. Teachers reported changes in student behaviors such as students working as a team, problem-solving, adapting, and being empathetic not only to peers with disabilities, but also to their other classmates. Nora Friend parents and teachers reported that many students who were initially shy or uncomfortable coming to activity days became comfortable, assertive and forged friendships with participating students. Overall, The Nora Project has made a unique contribution to social emotional programs aiming to address a decline in empathy by using thoughtful lesson plans and classroom activities along with experiential learning rooted in inclusive practices and play. The Nora Project experience, taken as a whole, teaches skills, values, and beliefs about our common humanity and what it means to live in community and with dignity.



Limitations

While student findings are promising in that many of the outcomes were confirmed through several sources, this evaluation relied heavily on self-reported surveys from children and qualitative methods to confirm trends in quantitative data. It is not known to what extent these outcomes impacted classroom behavior since student behavior data or individual student assessment data were not collected for the evaluation. The limitations mentioned above have been accounted for, and changes to the program and evaluation have been put in place for school year 2019-20. Please see the Next Steps section for more details.

Next Steps

A number of program improvements and data collection strategies were developed in preparation for the next school year as a result of stakeholder feedback.

As referenced above, in response to data captured and longer-term strategic objectives of the organization, The Nora Project Program Team developed a “lifecycle suite” of programs for students in preschool through twelfth grade, providing multiple opportunities throughout a child’s educational journey to learn about empathy, inclusion, and disability. This included two brand new programs, the Primer Pack and Expansion Pack, as well as a new co-taught variation of our Flagship Program. It also included the launch of an out-of-school community program.

Several evaluation changes were also made for the upcoming school year. Descriptions of the changes are provided in the bulleted list below.

- Develop a Theory of Change for all programs within The Nora Project in order to map program outcomes and indicators to the long-term change. Information from the Theory of Change will inform improvements to The Nora Project evaluation tools.
- Conduct a literature review of empathy and inclusion assessments and best practices in teaching empathy and inclusion to children and adolescents to inform refinement of evaluation measures.
- Move all surveys to Survey Monkey and improve individual student codes in the Student Impact Survey so that individual responses from pre to post could be linked across the school year.
- Develop a Nora Friend pre-survey for the 2019-20 school year.
- Implement a research-validated assessment (EmQue - Teachers)¹¹ for The Nora Project Primer Pack for teachers to use to assess a sample of their students.
- Launch a longitudinal study of typically developing students and students with disabilities who have exited the program.
- Pilot an evaluation of The Nora Project Expansion Pack from which evaluation measures will be developed for the 2020-21 school year.

¹¹ Rieffe, C., Ketelaar, L., & Wiefferink, C. H. (2010). Assessing empathy in young children; construction and validation of an empathy questionnaire (EmQue). *Personality and Individual Differences*, 49, 362-367.

Conclusion

This evaluation was designed to measure goals that define The Nora Project's mission. Findings indicated promising outcomes that support the mission, but also revealed changes that needed to be made to the program as well as limitations to the evaluation. Program staff used evaluation data and feedback from key stakeholders to make program changes that will strengthen the project overall. The evaluation measures added for next year address limitations outlined in this report, are more aligned with the mission, and will more effectively track outcomes. The Nora Project is poised to scale up its programming in more schools and demonstrate evidence that it is living up to its mission - teaching empathy and sparking friendship between students and their peers with disabilities.

About the Author

Holly Lewandowski, M.A. is responsible for overall project management, communication with The Nora Project staff, evaluation tool development, logic model development, data collection, analysis and report writing. Holly started her company, Evaluation for Change, Inc. in 2008 and she has worked as an evaluation consultant for the past 11 years on many education evaluations spanning early childhood to post-secondary with institutions such as the Ounce of Prevention Fund, Illinois Education Research Council, City Colleges of Chicago, Westat, and Roosevelt University and University of Illinois at Chicago. Additionally, she has held positions in evaluation and research at both DePaul and Northwestern Universities. She earned her MA in Sociology at DePaul University and BA in Anthropology at Antioch College.