Equipping older students to help 9th graders make a successful transition to high school
HOW PGC WORKS

Equipping older students to help 9th graders make a successful transition to high school.

Peer Group Connection-High School (PGC-HS) is an evidence-based and school-based program that supports and eases students’ transition from middle to high school. This program taps into the power of older students to create a nurturing environment for incoming 9th graders.

PGC-HS includes a year-long, credit-bearing leadership course for high school juniors and/or seniors that meets daily and is taught by school faculty. Through their leadership course, these juniors and/or seniors become trained peer leaders who meet once per week with 9th graders in outreach sessions designed to strengthen relationships among students across grades.

“PGC shows students they are not alone. It doesn’t let kids fall through the cracks – all students have a story to tell and we all have the capacity to lead and change lives. With the spread of PGC, we can change even more lives.”

- PGC Peer Leader
PGC-HS’s launch begins with the assembly of a Stakeholder Team of administrators, faculty, parents, and community members who receive the training, tools, and resources necessary to implement and sustain PGC-HS effectively year after year.

Carefully selected faculty members participate in an 11-day intensive train-the-trainer course over a 1½-year period to learn how to run the program and teach the daily leadership course.

As part of their regular school schedule, carefully selected juniors and/or seniors are trained in the daily leadership development class to become peer leaders and serve as positive role models, discussion leaders, and mentors for 9th graders.

These peer-leaders work in pairs to co-lead groups of 10-14 9th graders in outreach sessions once each grade. During outreach, 9th graders participate in engaging, hands-on activities and simulations in supportive environments that enable them to practice essential academic, social, and emotional skills, such as critical thinking, goal setting, decision-making, time management, teamwork, and communication.

During the second half of the school year, 9th graders utilize their newly acquired skills to plan and execute a community service project, while continuing to participate in weekly outreach sessions.

PGC-HS also includes a parent and caregiver involvement component. Peer leaders organize and facilitate Family Night events for 9th graders and their parents/guardians.

Beginning in year two, schools have an option to support 10th grade students who participated in PGC-HS as 9th graders through booster activities led by junior and/or senior peer leaders.

“PGC has helped me realize that teachers and students around the school care, and that’s what really matters.”

- PGC Peer Leader
Coming out of the pandemic, many students are struggling with social connection and in need of greater supports, often putting a strain on the limited mental health and counseling resources schools can provide. Students in historically minoritized communities are especially vulnerable to health and education challenges and benefit from access to effective interventions that help overcome barriers and leverage assets.

Through PGC, schools can leverage existing resources and harness the power of peer relationships for student support. PGC also strengthens the supportive networks and relationships that surround all young people, simultaneously increasing the accessibility of educational achievement and improving educational equity.
8 - 10 school administrators, faculty, counselors, students, and caregivers work together to support the implementation of PGC.

STAKEHOLDER TEAM

Faculty Advisor Team
2 faculty advisors co-facilitate the daily leadership course

Stakeholder Team Coordinator
Supports the successful implementation of PGC.

16-18 junior and/or senior students trained to serve as Peer Leaders

DAILY LEADERSHIP COURSE
CO-LED BY FACULTY ADVISORS

2 Peer Leaders co-lead weekly outreach sessions for 10-14 9th graders

WEEKLY OUTREACH CLASSES
CO-LED BY PEER LEADERS
EVIDENCE-BASED RELATIONSHIP-DRIVEN

Through comprehensive evaluations, PGC peer leaders and outreach participants, when compared to non-program participants, were found to have:

- Greater school engagement and peer connectedness
- Higher rates of attendance (while enrolled and after program completion)
- Reduced likelihood of a suspension or disciplinary referral
- Higher rates of high school completion
- Stronger decision-making skills
- Fewer self-reports of engaging in high-risk behaviors
- Higher educational expectations and GPAs

"PGC was one of the most enriching experiences of my life, and it continues to positively influence my leadership style and relationships twelve years later. I learned the importance of active listening, empathy, and effective communication, which have proven invaluable in both personal and professional relationships. The program also taught me the value of taking ownership of my actions and decisions and the consequences of those actions on others."

PGC Peer Leader Alum
Endorsements and Data from Sources You Trust

High School Graduation

Recognized by the National Dropout Prevention Center as a Model Program demonstrating “Strong Evidence of Effectiveness,” its highest effectiveness rating.

Attendance & Performance

Widely researched across various school districts and by various research bodies, and has proven to have a significant impact on attendance, graduation rates, student engagement, and academic outcomes.

Pregnancy Prevention

Designated by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Office of Population Affairs (OPA) as an effective innovative approach for teen pregnancy prevention.

Identified by the Teen Pregnancy Prevention Evidence Review (TPPER) as a highly effective program. The TPPER is a systematic review of programs designed to reduce teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, and associated sexual risk behaviors.

Social Emotional Learning

Designated by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) as a SELect Program in CASEL’s Guide to Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs, its highest program rating. The CASEL Program Guide is designed to help educators and school administrators select an evidence-based SEL program that best meets the needs of their community.

“Peers are the greatest influence in an adolescent’s life. As a PGC peer leader, I was able to help my peers deal with the challenges of high school. That experience ignited my passion for education. As a PGC advisor, I love watching my PGC students support their peers and seeing the incredible impact the PGC experience can have on young people.”

Jada Davis
PGC Peer Leader Alum, PGC Faculty Advisor
Washington, D.C.
STUDY: Peer Group Connection—High School Improves School Engagement and Other School-Related Outcomes

In January 2016, the Center for Supportive Schools (CSS) received a 5-year, $2 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education (#U411C150048), with additional funding provided by the Einhorn Family Charitable Trust, to further develop and evaluate the effectiveness of CSS’s high school transition and peer mentoring model, PGC-HS, in improving school engagement, social and emotional learning (SEL) skills, and educational and other school-related outcomes in rural communities in North Carolina.

STUDY SAMPLE & DESIGN

The study enrolled 1,351 ninth-grade students from five public high schools located in rural communities in North Carolina.

The Policy & Research Group (independent evaluator) utilized an individual randomized controlled trial (RCT) to assess the impact of PGC-HS on school engagement, SEL, and educational outcomes.

RESULTS

Students randomly assigned to the PGC-HS group as compared to a control group:

- Were less likely to be suspended or receive disciplinary referrals
- Demonstrated higher scores on a measure of school engagement
- Demonstrated higher education expectations

Among schools that implemented the program with fidelity, students who were randomly assigned to PGC-HS as compared to students in the control group:

- Achieved significantly higher weighted GPAs
- Demonstrated higher scores on a measure of decision-making skills
- Demonstrated higher scores on a measure of perceived support from peers for achieving academically

STUDY: Peer Group Connection-High School Improves Sexual Health Outcomes

In July 2015, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services awarded the Center for Supportive Schools (CSS) a five-year, $4.8 million grant (#TP2AH0037) to evaluate the effectiveness of a high school transition and peer mentoring model known as Peer Group Connection-High School (PGC-HS) in reducing teen pregnancy among youth in high-need communities across North Carolina (rural communities) and NYC (urban communities).

STUDY BACKGROUND, SAMPLE & DESIGN

Research shows that young people who feel connected to school are more likely to engage in healthy behaviors and less likely to engage in sexual risk-taking.

The study enrolled a total of 1,523 9th grade students attending high schools in rural North Carolina and urban New York City that serve large populations of economically disadvantaged students in communities with high teen pregnancy rates.

The Policy & Research Group (independent evaluator) utilized an individual randomized controlled trial (RCT) to assess the impact of PGC-HS on sexual health, social, and educational outcomes.

RESULTS

Students randomly assigned to the PGC-HS group as compared to a control group:

- Were less likely to report ever having vaginal sex
- Demonstrated higher scores on a measure of decision-making skills
- Demonstrated higher scores on a measure of peer connectedness

Findings suggest that improved decision-making skills and greater feelings of connection to peers are pathways for influencing sexual risk behavior:

- Participation in PGC-HS
- Improved decision-making skills
- Delayed initiation of vaginal sex
- Reduced teen pregnancy

Matthew Mazzaroppi
District Superintendent, Bronx, NY
Former Principal, Morris Academy for Collaborative Studies

PGC is the single most transformational initiative we have implemented in our school.

The training facilitated by CSS for this program was the best training I have been to as an educator. Not only did I learn, practice, and internalize several of the skills needed to make the program successful, but I also found that it relit my passion to walk into the everyday wind a principal faces for the sake of empowering students.”
THE PGC CURRICULUM

All PGC-HS outreach sessions are aligned to these program objectives:

- **Connectedness:** Increase students’ sense of connectedness and attachment to school
- **Communication:** Improve students’ skills in communicating effectively with peers and adults
- **Social Emotional Learning:** Increase students’ skills in help-seeking, goal-setting, and decision-making
- **Positive School Experiences:** Support/improve students’ positive school-related behavior
- **High School Completion:** Increase students’ motivation to complete high school and post-secondary education
- **Post-Secondary Preparation:** Improve students’ preparedness for college and/or the world of work

The evidence-based PGC-HS curriculum is made up of two volumes: the Advisor Handbook and the Outreach Handbook. School teams receive in-depth training on how to use the curriculum to support successful program implementation.

The **PGC-HS Advisor Handbook** serves as the instructors’ manual to the Peer Group Connection-High School course for credit for older students. The 14-unit handbook provides important guidelines for program fidelity as well as curriculum utilized exclusively for the peer leadership class.

The **PGC-HS Outreach Handbook** serves as the curriculum for outreach sessions, which are conducted by older peer leaders. During their own leadership class, peer leaders experience this content with their faculty advisors, and lead it with their peer groups during the weekly outreach sessions.

“PGC has helped me become a leader and has given me a voice to speak to the sixth graders, and it has helped me build my confidence and my self-esteem.”

PGC Peer Leader
Guiding the Peer Leadership Class and program fidelity are these 14 units:

1. Peer Leader Selection Process
2. Establishing 9th Grade Outreach Groups
3. Coursework and Assessment
4. Peer Leaders’ 3-Day Retreat
5. The First Four Weeks
6. Check-Ins
7. Preparing for Outreach
8. Debriefing the Outreach Experience
9. Teambuilders & Energizers
10. Skillbuilders
11. Structures for Group Dialogue & Group Challenges
12. Preparing to Conduct Special Outreaches
13. Mid-Program Retreat
14. Closure Activities
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outreach Title</th>
<th>Outreach Learning Objectives</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Outreach 1. 9th Grade Orientation: An Introduction to PGC-HS</td>
<td>• Learn what Peer Group Connection-High School (PGC-HS) is all about</td>
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<td>• Gain clarity about what to expect from the PGC experience</td>
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<td>• Be introduced to peer leaders and peer groups</td>
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<td>Outreach 2. Activity Day</td>
<td>• Get to know peer group members better</td>
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<td>• Learn more about how PGC will work</td>
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<td>• Establish group ground rules as a peer group</td>
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<td>Outreach 3. Pieces of Me</td>
<td>• Select and share game cards to describe personality traits and preferences that help define who each person is</td>
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<td>• Gain insight to group members’ personalities to better understand what to expect from peer group members</td>
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<td>• Get to know group members, build acceptance, and strengthen the team</td>
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<td>Outreach 4. Two Facts and a Fiction</td>
<td>• Play a game of rhythm and concentration to help reinforce learning and pronouncing group members’ names</td>
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<td>• Share facts about themselves</td>
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<td>• Learn new things about peers</td>
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<td>Outreach 5. Pass the Question</td>
<td>• Share pieces of their personal lives with one another</td>
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<td>• Hold space for group members to authentically share and develop understanding and empathy</td>
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<td>Outreach 6. Me as a Tree</td>
<td>• Explore personal identities using trees as inspiration</td>
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<td>• Reflect on who we are, how we are supported, and what our dreams are</td>
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<td>• Learn more about one another by sharing aspects of ourselves</td>
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<td>Outreach 7. Creating a Caring Community</td>
<td>• Experience how what you say and do contributes to how others feel</td>
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<td>• Explore how certain choices in behavior can contribute to the creation of a more caring community</td>
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<td>Outreach 8. I Am…</td>
<td>• Express personal stories and honor the stories of others</td>
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<td>• Appreciate and acknowledge others within the group through listening closely</td>
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<td>• Embrace the opportunity to examine the views we hold about ourselves and others</td>
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<td>Outreach 9. Safety First</td>
<td>• Explore different types of safety, both physical and emotional</td>
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<td>• Consider different perspectives about how safe we feel in different scenarios</td>
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<td>• Consider how safety might differ for different members in the group</td>
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<td>• Examine the importance of safety in our lives</td>
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<td>Outreach 10. Pockets</td>
<td>• Get to know each other better by sharing stories about our everyday objects</td>
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<td>• Consider ways in which we are similar to and unique from one another</td>
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<td>Outreach 11. My Toughest Class Right Now - Part 1</td>
<td>• Define for ourselves what “doing well” in a class could look like</td>
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<td>• Discover and celebrate the skills, actions, and traits we bring as learners</td>
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<td>• Affirm our capability and worth as people and as learners</td>
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<tr>
<td>Outreach Title</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| Outreach 12. My Toughest Class Right Now - Part 2 | - Think about what skills, actions, and traits are the strengths we bring to our tough classes  
- Share stories about the toughest classes we are taking right now  
- Determine strategies to help navigate tough classes                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Outreach 13. Identity Stories                     | - Explore what it has been like, so far, to live with some of the identities that help to make us who we are  
- Articulate and share aspects of our identities  
- Come to better understand each other                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Outreach 14. Goals to Goals-Part 1                | - Explore a simple strategy for setting goals in a fun way  
- Consider how identifying simple actions in support of our goals can help us reach them                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Outreach 15. Goals to Goals-Part 2                | - Think about goals we have right now  
- Practice a strategy for setting goals  
- Think about the value of setting and sharing small goals in our lives                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Outreach 16. Ripple Effects                        | - Examine how our decisions and actions affect both ourselves and others  
- Explore how considering the impact we’ll have on others can help us to make decisions                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Outreach 17. Pass the Problem                     | - Collect anonymous input to support problems we are facing  
- Think about different ways we can look at facing an issue  
- Consider how our diverse ways of thinking are a strength when it comes to supporting each other with challenges                                                                                                                                                             |
| Outreach 18. The Power of We                       | - Explore the importance of communication and collaboration when working as a team toward a specific goal  
- Consider how group strategizing can strengthen the power youth groups hold  
- Build trust as a group                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Outreach 19. Decisions, Decisions                 | - Consider why people may react differently to a given scenario  
- Learn a new way to approach decision-making  
- Think about how relying on a structured approach could help with thinking through the decisions we make                                                                                                                                                      |
| Outreach 20. Communication - Part 1               | - Learn about 3 specific communication skills: negotiation, refusal, and real talk  
- Explore the ways in which these communication strategies can help us make good decisions and build healthy relationships                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Outreach 21. Communication - Part 1               | - Practice modeling effective communication skills  
- Better understand how effective communication can help us make healthy decisions, even when we’re in difficult situations                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Outreach 22. Think Before You Click               | - Apply skills we’ve built around decision-making to technology-based scenarios  
- Consider how thinking through the many possible consequences of our actions can affect the decisions we make  
- Continue to build decision-making skills so we can positively impact the choices we make with technology                                                                                                                                                           |
## Outreach Handbook

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outreach Title</th>
<th>Outreach Learning Objectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Outreach 23. If I Could...</td>
<td>• Discover new things that we have in common&lt;br&gt; • Have fun while imagining how our futures might play out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outreach 24. Looking Back</td>
<td>• Reflect on the year in PGC&lt;br&gt; • Say farewell in two different ways&lt;br&gt; • Think about what we will take with us from this experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ritual Outreach Appreciation Day</td>
<td>• Participate in a ritual that will occur many times throughout the year to celebrate and express appreciation for 2 members of our group each time&lt;br&gt; • Share our appreciation for one another and for our peer group</td>
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<tr>
<td>Special Outreach Faculty Outreach</td>
<td>• This special outreach creates an opportunity for faculty and staff to learn about PGC-HS and experience part of an outreach that focuses on creating a caring community in the school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Special Outreach Family Night</td>
<td>• This 2 ½-hour special outreach for students and their family members is ideally held at about the midpoint of the course and aims to help adults and teens understand each other’s experiences and perspectives, improve their communication, and support 9th graders’ transition into high school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Outreach Activity Day 2</td>
<td>• Following the peer leaders’ mid-program retreat, this special outreach reenergizes outreach groups midway through PGC, with different design options that meet the needs of each school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Outreach Service - Option 1: Day of Service</td>
<td>• This special outreach, held as a series of 3 outreach sessions half-way into the course, enables students to prepare for and engage in a Day of Service.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Special Outreach Service - Option 2: Showing Up for Next Year’s 9th Graders</td>
<td>• This special outreach, held as a series of 3 outreach sessions 3/4 of the way into the course, enables current 9th graders to reflect on experiences this year in order to create welcoming messages for next year’s 9th grade class.</td>
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</tbody>
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“Peer Group Connection has shown me the importance of building strong, supportive relationships with my peers and has taught me how to communicate effectively and resolve conflicts within a group. In college and in my future career, I know that I'll need to work collaboratively with others, and the Peer Group Connection program has given me a head start in developing those abilities.”

PGC Peer Leader
Since 1979, CSS has partnered with school communities to train and mobilize students to be lifelong leaders who make schools better for themselves, their peers, and younger students. As a result:

- Students become strongly connected to each other and to caring adults and further develop essential academic, social, and emotional skills.
- Faculty become even more passionate about their students’ success and better equipped to deepen the rigor and impact of instruction.
- Schools become safer and more supportive, engaging, and inspiring.

CSS is among the national leaders in developing resources within schools and communities. CSS brings out the leadership in everyone, and has proven methods for building skills and effectiveness. There is no organization that I admire more, or trust more, than CSS when it comes to working with the social-emotional needs of schools, parents, and youth.”

Dr. Maurice Elias
Director, Rutgers Social-Emotional and Character Development Lab

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