The uKnight Project at Neelsville Middle School:

2021 – 2022 Evaluation Findings

June 2022

SharpInsight

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The uKnight Project at Neelsville Middle School: 2021 – 2022 Evaluation Findings

Project and Evaluation Background

Funded by the Jim and Carol Trawick Foundation, the uKnight Project at Neelsville Middle School (NMS) is a partnership effort designed to improve students' academic skills, develop their social-emotional skills, and engage both in the arts and in the school community overall. To achieve these outcomes, during the 2021-22 school year, NMS has worked with three organizations in Montgomery County, Maryland: Story Tapestries, the National Alliance on Mental Illness Montgomery County (NAMI MC), and Sheppard Pratt. These organizations supported in-school and afterschool arts integration strategies, artist-in-residencies, individual counseling for students, training for teachers on trauma, support groups for parents, and family nights. The uKnight Project at Neelsville Middle School (NMS) includes the following activities for students in grades 6, 7, and/or 8:

- Story Tapestries in Lights, Camera, Literacy class
- Story Tapestries in your World Studies class
- Individual counseling for students through Sheppard Pratt
- Training on trauma for teachers through Sheppard Pratt
- Parent support groups and parent classes through NAMI MC
- Sources of Strength-related Advisory activities

To evaluate the 2021-22 initiative, the uKnight Project partners engaged Sharp Insight, LLC, an independent, third-party evaluator. Together, they refined a mixed-methods evaluation approach first used in 2019-20, including exit surveys of students and staff and discussion groups.

The purpose of the program evaluation is to learn more about the impact of the uKnight Project throughout the Neelsville Middle School community. The main objectives are to better understand how the uKnight Project **impacts students, staff, and the school culture** at Neelsville Middle School. Additionally, the evaluation seeks to understand how the program can **improve its approach** to achieve greater impact in the NMS community.

The following document first provides an overview of evaluation methods and then presents an integration of evaluation findings and key supporting quotes, organized by evaluation objective.

Methods

A mixed-methods evaluation approach, including online exit surveys for students and staff, and in-person discussion groups for staff and students, was implemented for the 2021-22 uKnight project.

The **student exit survey** comprised eight questions, including those about the student's grade level, participation in the uKnight project, impacts of the project, perceptions about NMS and their future, and two open-ended questions about what they liked best and what could be improved about the program.

The **staff exit survey** comprised ten questions, including those about which grade the staff work with, familiarity with the uKnight project, impacts on students, impacts on staff, and four open-ended questions about the impacts on staff and students, and ideas for improvement.

The **discussion group guide** included four key questions regarding the project's impact on staff (asked only of staff), students, the NMS community, and ideas for improvement. Discussion groups were facilitated by uKnight project staff and took up to 60 minutes each.

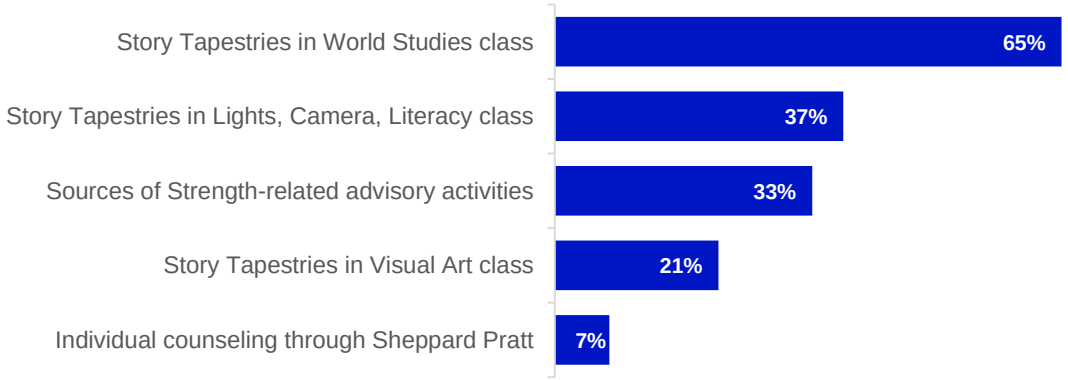
Evaluation and Project Participation

In regard to the surveys, 533 students completed the student exit survey, with a higher percentage coming from 6th and 7th grades. Seventy-seven staff completed the staff exit survey. In addition, eight discussion groups were held with 56 participants. Of these, five groups were with 43 students and three groups with 13 staff total.

Evaluation Tool	Percent of Respondents
	Student exit survey (n=533)
6th grade	36%
7th grade	37%
8th grade	27%
	Staff exit survey[1] (n=77)
6th grade	56%
7th grade	49%
8th grade	71%
	Discussion Groups (n=56)
Students	77%
Staff	23%

[1]*Percentage adds to more than 100% because school staff could select all of the grades that they work with.*

Of those students reporting participation in one of the uKnight activities (n=309), 65% reported taking part in Story Tapestries in World Studies, and a third or more reported participating in Story Tapestries in Lights, Camera, Literacy class (37%) and Sources of Strength-related advisory activities (33%). About a fifth (21%) participated in Story Tapestries in Visual Arts class, and 7% took part in individual counseling.



Analysis and Reporting

Data from the student surveys were downloaded from SurveyMonkey into Excel and converted into SPSS for analysis. Students were divided into two groups: (1) those who reported participation in any program component (n=309; 58%) and (2) those who were not sure if they participated or reported no participation in any program components (n=224; 42%). Independent-samples Mann-Whitney U tests were run to compare Likert scale responses (strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree) for three survey questions. Staff survey and discussion group results were analyzed using Excel. The report also uses key take-aways and quotes provided by the discussion group facilitators.

Study limitations include that evaluators were unable to determine if any duplicate staff or student surveys were completed because no identifying information was obtained. Survey also include self-reported data and a large number of respondents reported they were unsure around a number of questions. In regard to the discussion groups, because these are led by program staff, respondents may have been less likely to raise negative comments.

This report integrates findings from the student and staff exit surveys and the discussion groups. Within each section, student perspectives are offered first, if available for that objective, followed by staff perspectives. Data summaries in Excel have been provided to uKnight Project leadership separately for the student and staff surveys, including descriptive analyses of closed-ended questions and raw open-ended data.

Objective 1: Impact on Students

Student Perspectives – Connections and Involvement

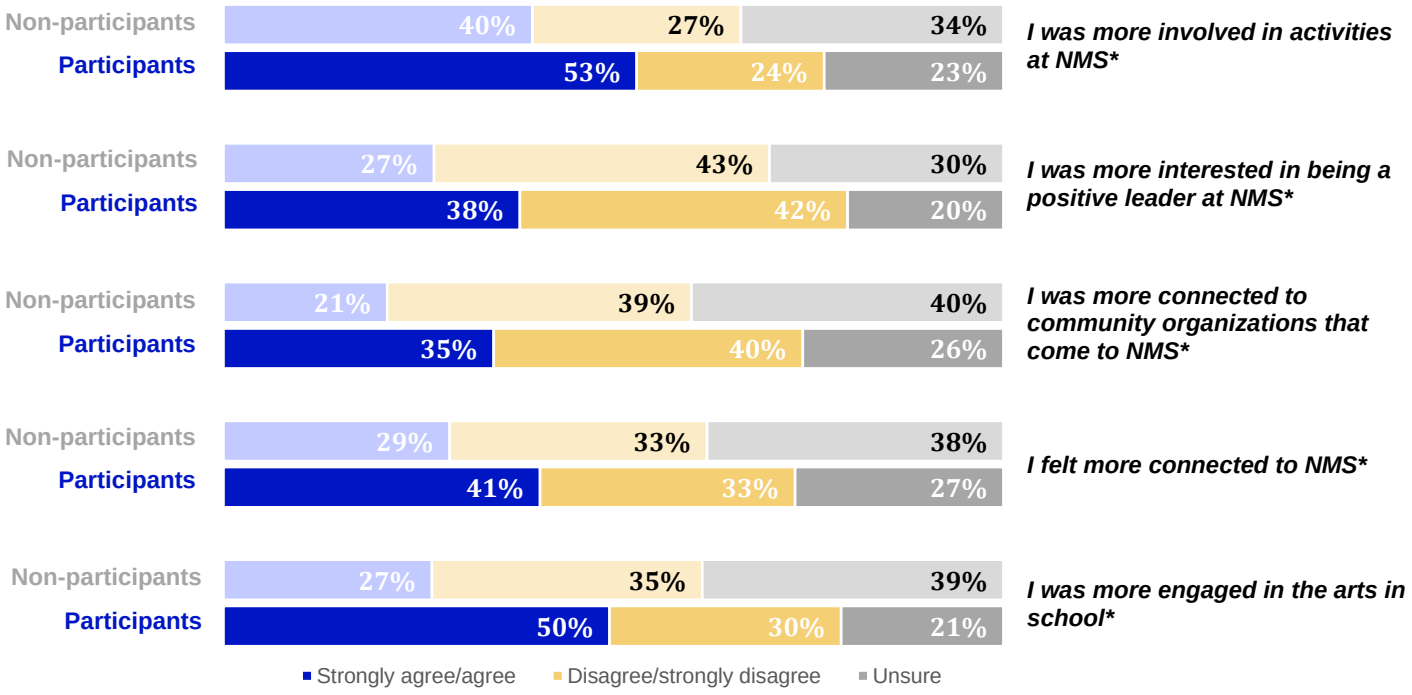
In the five discussion groups, students were asked, "What comes to mind when you think of the uKnight Project?" The word "community" was raised by seven of the 43 students in the groups, "teamwork" by five, "unite" or "uniting" and "together" or "togetherness" by four and "people" by three. Other words that came up were clearly related to the project, including SEL lessons, Family Night, performance, and creativity.

On the student exit survey, students rated their agreement with five statements about involvement and connectedness to NMS because of the uKnight Project. Responses were compared for those who reported participating in project activities and those who were unsure or did not participate. For ease of presentation, the categories "strongly agree" and "agree" and "strongly disagree" and "disagree" are collapsed in the figure below.

In each of the five statements, an independent-samples Mann-Whitney U test showed statistically significant differences (indicated with an asterisk, $P < .05$) between participants and non-participants, with participants consistently reporting "strongly agree" and "agree" in higher proportions than non-participants (See Figure 1).

Regarding each statement, half or more of participants strongly agreed or agreed that they were more engaged in arts in the school (53%) because of the uKnight project or were more involved in activities at NMS (50%). The difference between participants and non-participants who strongly agreed/agreed with each statement ranged from 11%-23%. There was also a high level of participants and non-participants who responded with "unsure," ranging from 20%-40% over the five statements.

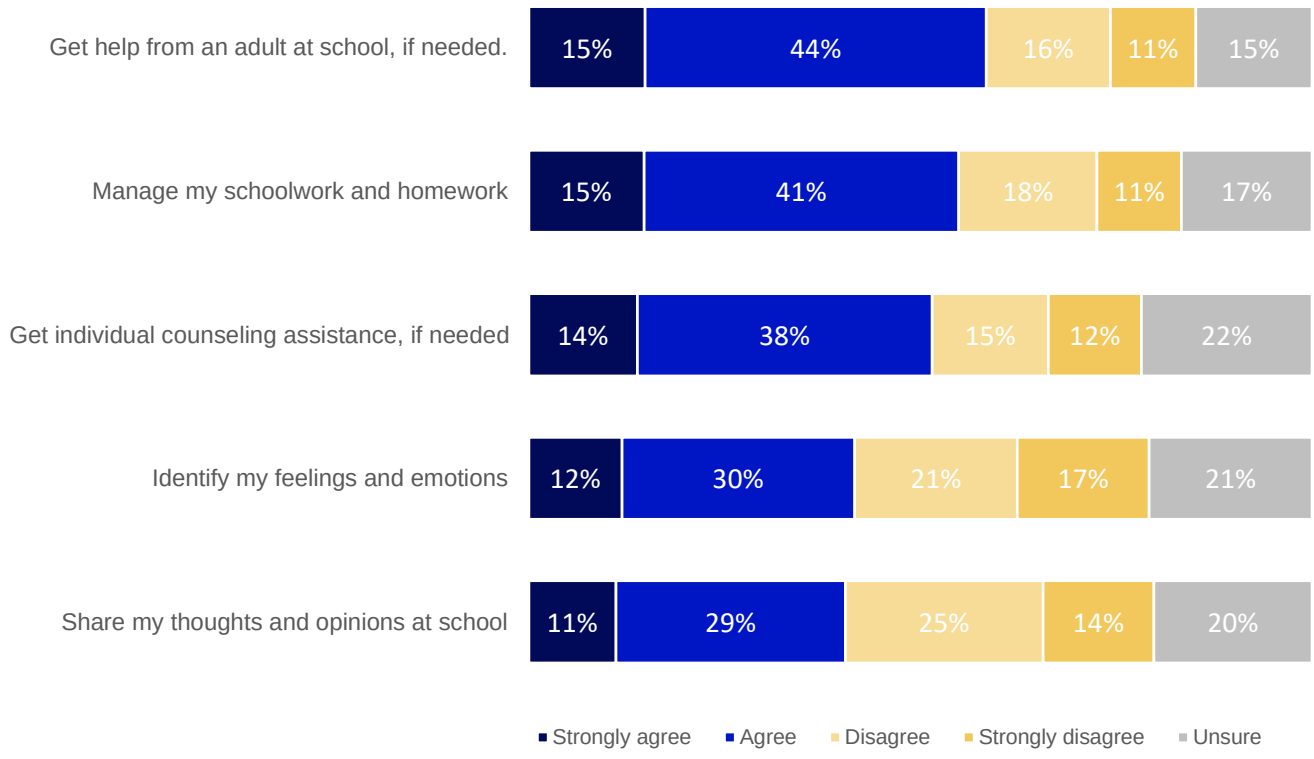
Figure 1: Because of the uKnight Project.... (n=309 for participants, 224 for non-participants)



Student Perspective – Change in Confidence

Students were asked whether they felt more confident about a number of aspects because of the uKnight project (Figure 2). More than half of those who participated in the program (n=309) strongly agreed or agreed that, because of the project, they felt more confident in their ability to get help from an adult at school, if needed (59%), manage their schoolwork and homework (56%), or get individual counseling assistance, if needed (52%). Between 15% and 22% were unsure of how they felt about the five statements.

Figure 2: Because of the uKnight Project, I feel more CONFIDENT in my ability to... (n=309)



Student Perspective – How the uKnight Project has made a difference to NMS students

In the five student discussion groups, students were asked an open-ended question, “How has the uKnight Project made a difference to NMS students?”

Overall, the comments about the uKnight Project’s impact were quite positive in nature. Students expressed that they learned some new things and enjoyed learning a new way to express themselves. They also shared they liked the process and result of making something for their school. Others noted that uKnight was an opportunity to make new friends and acquire skills to be more comfortable with using their voice. They were clear about the socio-emotional and therapeutic impacts of the uKnight program and thought that these types of programs should happen at the school on a regular basis. The students shared enthusiasm and appreciation for the program, acknowledging that they truly felt like they learned something valuable and wanted to have more opportunities to work with artists.

While still positive in tone, participants shared that they were less familiar with NAMI and ASPIRE, but more familiar with Story Tapestries and requested that Story Tapestries be at their school more often. Participants in 8th grader were less enthusiastic about the impact of uKnight, as compared to 6th and 7th grade participants; however, the 8th graders still reported liking the program overall and looking forward to the artists coming to their classes.

“It gave me an opportunity to act and to share poetry.”

“[I am] *comfortable taking more risk and being creative.”*

“I learned skills I can use in life.”

“Learned to take my time and how to share more without being uncomfortable.”

“It was a nice experience It was easy to imagine it in my head and I enjoyed it. I looked forward to the day that the artists came.”

“I did not know [storytelling] was a job. I got to be creative.”

“The program helped me find ways to be closer to my friends.”

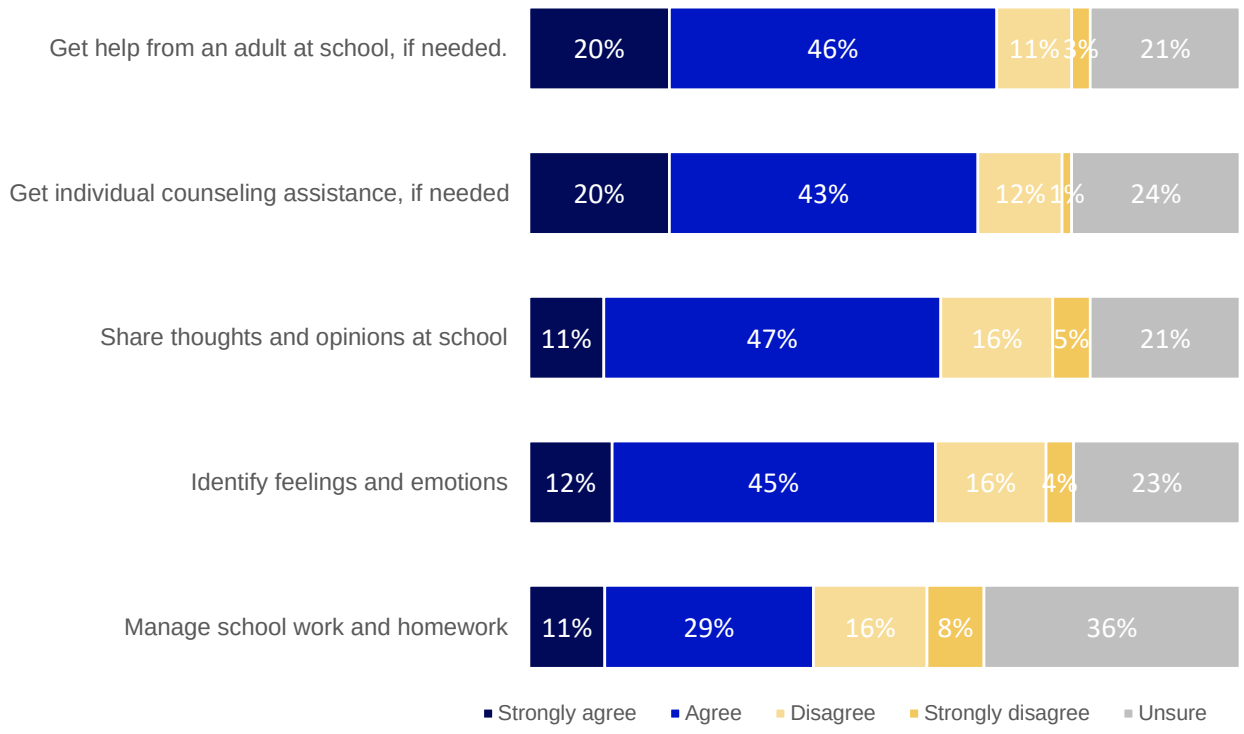
“I learned how to control my emotions and be a stronger person.”

“I worked on my first mural. It was therapeutic to create a mural and making something to beautify the school. I learned how to think outside the box.”

Staff Perspective – Student Abilities

Staff were asked to rate their agreement with statements about student voice and connection as a result of the uKnight Project (Figure 3). More than half "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that the uKnight project helped students get help from an adult at school, if needed (67%), get individual counseling assistance, if needed (63%), share thoughts and opinions at school (58%), identify feelings and emotions (57%). Between 21-36% were unsure for each item. Staff reporting they were "unsure" about these statements were high, ranging from 21%-36%.

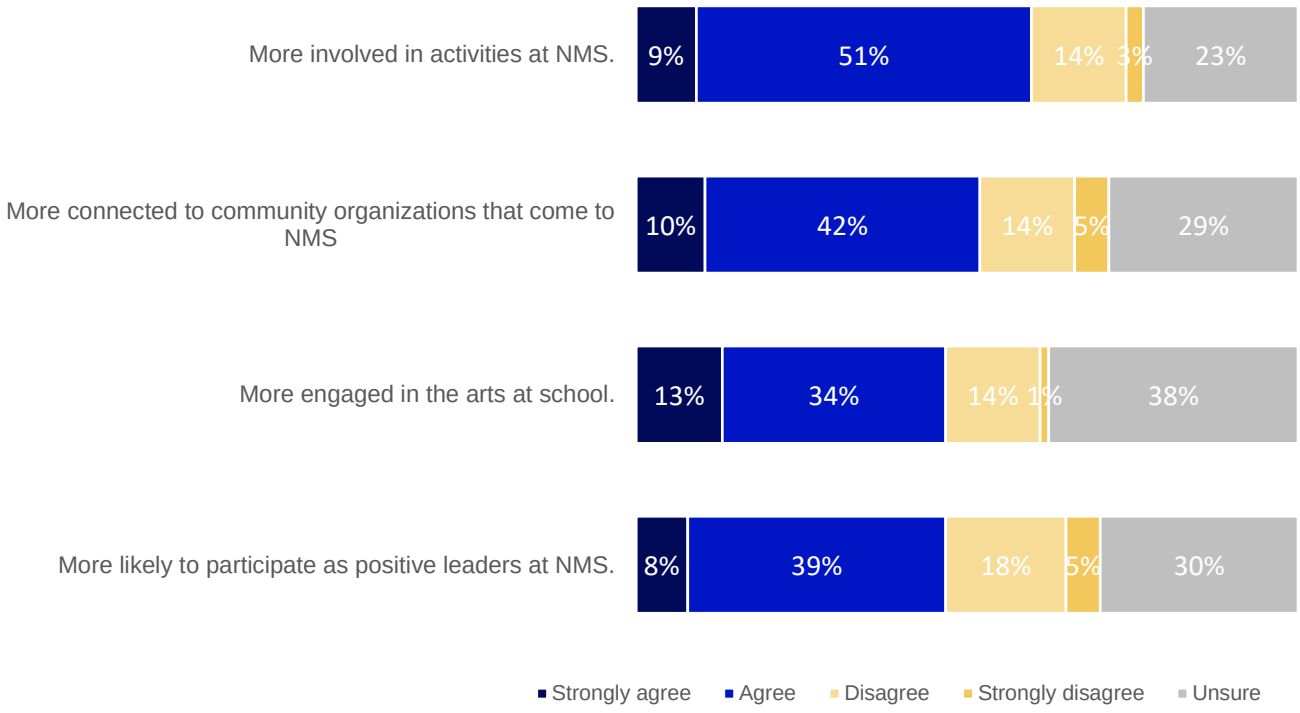
Figure 3: Because of the uKnight Project, students have increased abilities to... (n=75-77).



Staff Perspective – Student Engagement

Staff rated their agreement with statements related to whether the uKnight project affected engagement at the school. More than half “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that students are more involved in activities at NMS (60%) and more connected to community organizations that come to NMS (52%). Close to half also said the same about students being more engaged in arts at the school (47%) and more likely to participate as positive leaders at NMS (47%). However, over a third were unsure about whether students were more engaged in arts in the school and the other statements had between 23% and 30% reporting they were unsure.

Figure 4: Because of the uKnight Project, students are... (n=77).



Staff Perspective– How the uKnight Project has made a difference to NMS students

In the three staff discussion groups, NMS staff were asked "How has the uKnight Project made a difference to NMS students?" Most comments from staff were positive about the program and outcomes. Key themes provided by the facilitators in the discussion groups are reported here, followed by positive and negative comments. Teachers reported the students benefited from the advisory lessons, especially the ones with activities (less discussion-based) and especially earlier in the year. Teachers noted that 6th graders were more open and responsive than the 7th and 8th graders; they suggested tailoring the topics/activities by grade level. Teachers conveyed that the mural was a successful project in that it had students creating and feeling ownership over something at their school. They related that uKnight provided opportunities for students to collaborate together in new and different settings and offered opportunities for students to meet new people outside of the building. This was especially important after a long period of virtual learning. Finally, teachers reported that student participation in activities increased for some teachers.

"As an adult, we don't realize how some of those skills and things that we need, such as self-management/self-awareness/anxiety/stress, need to be talked about. Excellent for students to start to hear those words/terms even if they don't understand."

[I] "saw students came out of their shells and participate."

"Spanish pieces were great and helped participation Spanish speakers were a lot more comfortable presenting in front of the class."

"The ones that had an activity - lots of buy in. Kids enjoyed these. The ones where it was "this is the source of strength" and you had more discussion - those were harder for classes."

"Parent night with Story Tapestries - really cool, don't know a lot about how Story Tapestries works, but it looks really cool and a good opportunity for students."

"Meeting new friends, kids met and worked with other students they wouldn't have necessarily hung out with (Sources of Strength)."

"Gaining coping skills [through therapy] and how to cope with what life throws at you."

Early on in the year, teachers reported there was more buy in, but that students get tired in the second half. Teachers also noted that changing classes throughout the year made relationship building and connections/comfort levels difficult.

[There was] "inconsistency in the artists."

"Would have been more impactful if he had been working with a class that wasn't already a performing class (more helpful to work with a non-drama class). Arts integration was not as impactful when he's already working with an arts class."

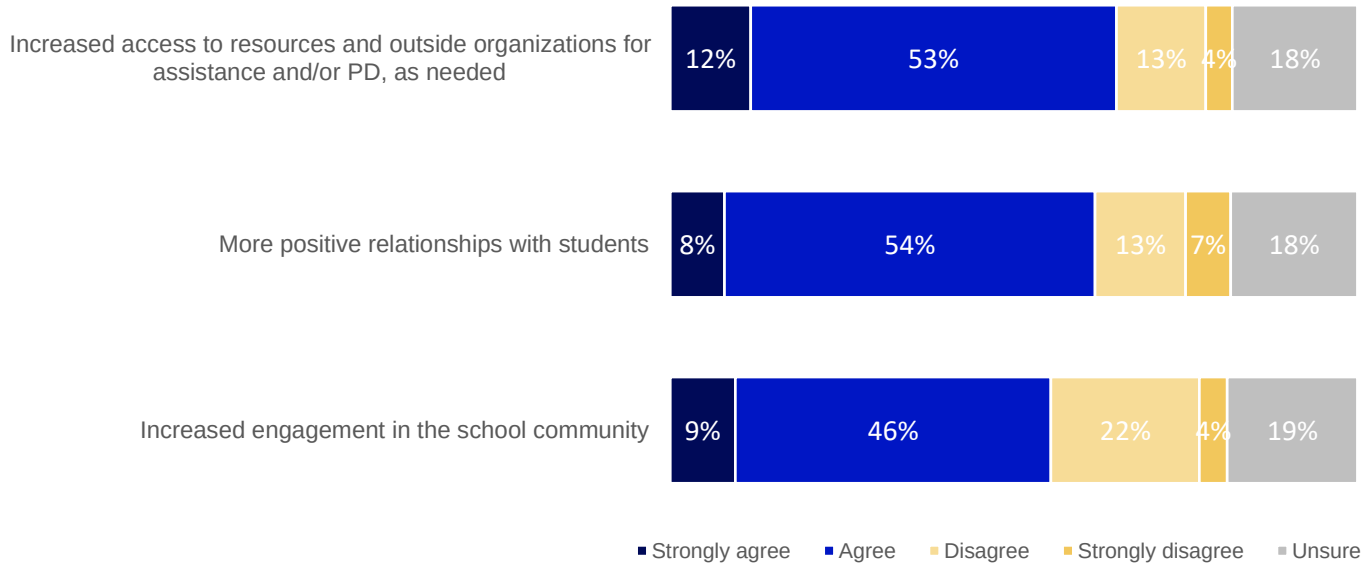
"Some students shied away like it wasn't reaching them."

"Challenging for 8th graders to get them to open up about it. Probably mix of the age and getting them halfway through the year. Hard to start the [bonding] process over and over again."

Objective 2: Staff Perspective of Impact on NMS Staff

Only NMS staff members were asked about the impact of the project on teachers and staff (Figure 5). Most staff members "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that the uKnight Project led to increased access to resources and outside organizations for assistance (67%), more positive relationships with students (62%), and increased engagement in the school community (55%). However, close to a fifth (18-19%) were unsure of the project's impact on NMS staff.

Figure 5: Because of the uKnight Project, NMS staff have members…. (n=74-77).



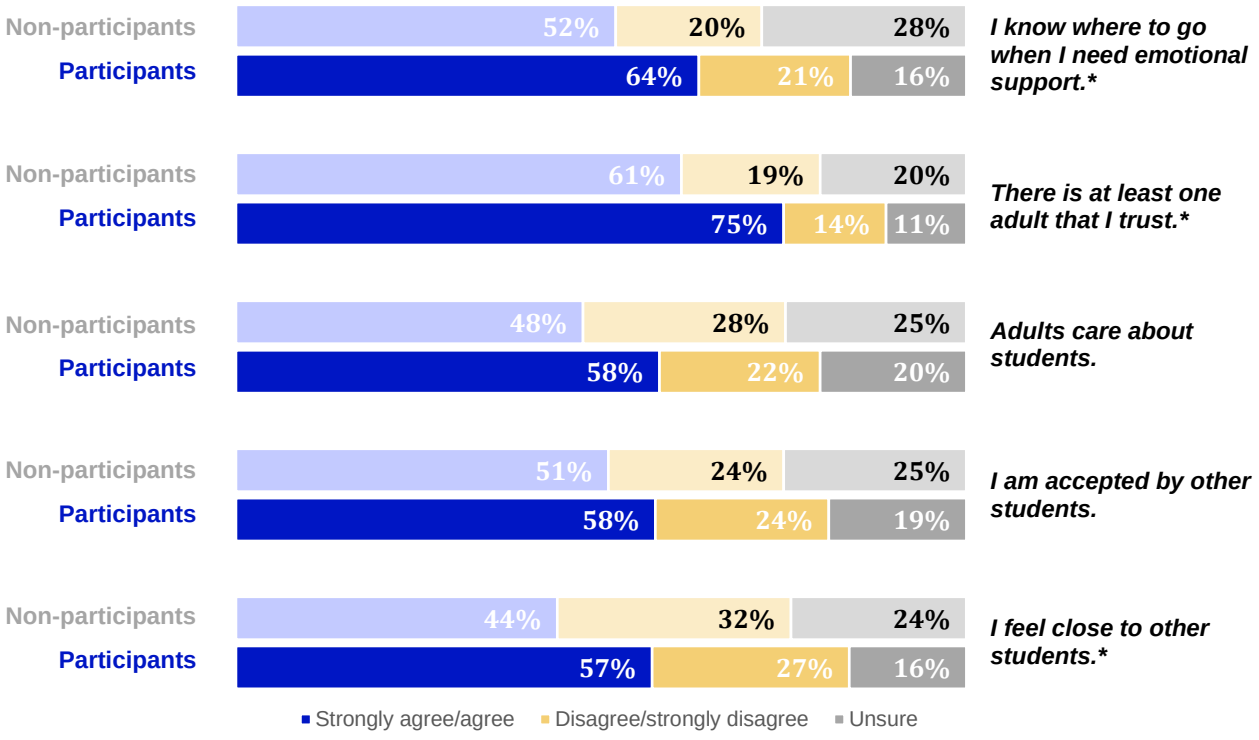
In the three staff discussion groups, NMS staff were asked "How has the uKnight Project made a difference to NMS staff?" Overall, most of the comments were positive, with staff highlighting ways they have learned new approaches or benefited from the program. Key take-aways provided by the discussion group facilitators included that staff enjoyed the pre-planned, structured advisory lessons and gained insights personally and with their students. uKnight helped teachers see and practice new and different approaches to teaching by incorporating the arts. They learned that they can incorporate storytelling into their lessons without having to be professional storytellers and helped encourage follow through with some arts-related activities and lessons. Some teachers were not fully comfortable sharing arts-based activities with students/coworkers, but they reported there was still value in the activities. Staff reported that they directly benefit from the trauma training. Teachers felt that the mural project, once displayed, will help both students and staff feel pride in their school. In addition, teachers conveyed they appreciated the instructional breaks and professional development and that they indirectly benefit from students gaining skills that help them relate to each other better. Overall, staff seem to be more patient with kids and more aware of the outside issues that impact kids in the classroom.

Objective 3: Impact on NMS Culture

Impact on NMS Culture – Student Perspective

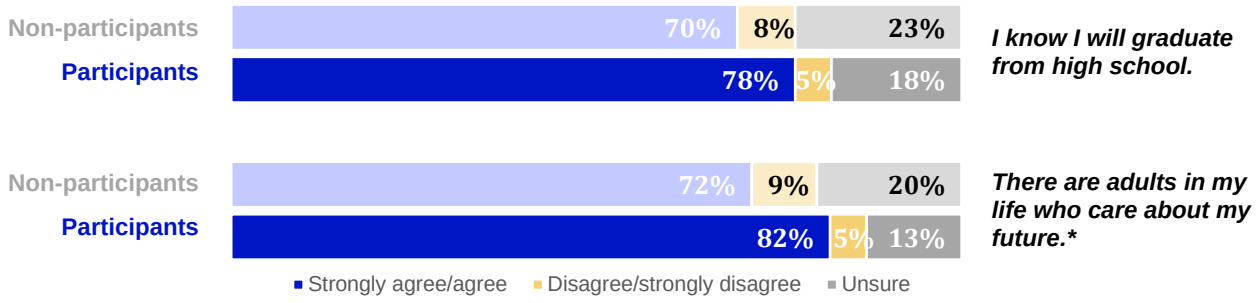
Students rated their agreement with five statements regarding he NMS community, and these are compared below (Figure 6) for those who reported participating in project activities and those who were unsure or did not participate. In three of the five statements, an independent-samples Mann-Whitney U test showed statistically significant differences (indicated with an asterisk, P < .05) between participants and non-participants, with participants consistently reporting "strongly agree" and "agree" in higher proportions than non-participants in these three statements. These statements included feeling close to other students, having at least one adult that the student can trust, and knowing where to go when in need of emotional support. Regardless of participation level, over half of the students agreed with each of the five statements. The difference between participants and non-participants who strongly agreed/agreed with each statement ranged from 7%-14%. As with previous questions, there were high "unsure" responses, ranging from 11%-28%.

Figure 6: Thinking about Neelsville Middle School....
(n=309 for participants, 224 for non-participants)



Statements about the students' future were the focus of a final survey question that asked about the likelihood of graduation and support for the students' future. Responses to these two questions are compared below in Figure 7 for those who reported participating in project activities and those who were unsure or did not participate. For the statement, "There are adults in my life who care about my future," an independent-samples Mann-Whitney U test showed statistically significant differences (indicated with an asterisk, P < .05) between participants and non-participants, with participants consistently reporting strongly agree/agree in higher proportions (82%) than non-participants (72%). Most participants (78%) and non-participants (70%) also agreed to the statement "I know I will graduate from high school."

Figure 7: Thinking about my future....
(n=309 for participants, 224 for non-participants)



In the five discussion groups, NMS students were asked how the uKnight project made a difference to the NMS community. Four out of five groups mentioned that the day was more enjoyable when uKnight was there, and that they looked forward to school when they had arts programming. One group noted that students felt heard, valued, and important. They saw that their peers were more engaged and excited about learning when the uKnight program was a part of the day.

"[There is] no drama in the community when programming happens."

"Stories were interesting. I liked school more when the artists were there."

"More people are opened up to being creative. Everyone felt better. They learned ways to be creative and to be a better friend."

[The mural] "makes the school look better and not so much like the prison on the hill. The murals adds something to the school to be proud of, something accomplished."

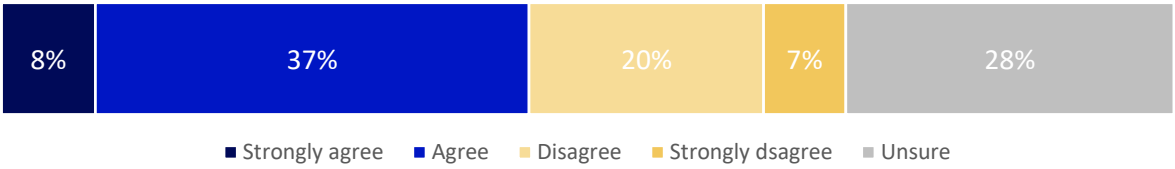
"It feels like someone realizes that this small middle school exists and they want to come to talk to us. The Artist Regie Cabico, listened to all of our ideas. It felt like our ideas were good, valued, and valuable."

"The programs allows you to focus on something else for the day other than Regular school. It gives your mind a break. You get to have fun with art. Good thing to do for your stress level."

Impact on NMS Culture – Staff Perspective

Staff rated their agreement with a statement about whether the school culture/climate has improved as a result of the uKnight Project (Figure 8). While the largest percentage "strongly agreed" or "agreed" (45%), 27% "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed" and 28% were unsure.

Figure 8: Because of the uKnight Project, the NMS culture/climate has improved. (n=75).



During the three staff discussion groups, NMS staff were asked an open-ended question about how the uKnight project has made a difference in the community this year. While comments were mostly positive, one of the groups noted the high potential of uKnight to make an impact on the community as a whole, but that Covid-19 hampered this year's impact.

Advisory lessons were noted as a major source of community-building and changing opportunities. Teachers suggested establishing it going forward with the current 6th graders can make the lessons more successful and build upon each other and relationships. Teachers in the discussion groups noted that the uKnight after-school drama club was great and opened the door for many students who wouldn't usually do that. The discussion group with counselors focused on the importance and impact of having in-school therapy appointments available and how this ultimately helps student attendance. They also noted that the school offers important resources that help expose students to experiences and opportunities they may not have had otherwise.

"These are extra supports students need, and we're able to offer them especially during the school day. It's hard to get counseling outside of school, especially in the evening and with limited transportation. It's great to have it during the day while students are here. The in-school therapy and in-school programs helps overall with attendance - kids don't have to miss school for outside therapist appointments. The school is able to keep kids there a lot more than otherwise, like if students left for outside appointments."

Objective 4: Improving the uKnight Program

Improving the uKnight Program – Student Perspectives

In the five discussion groups with students, many students could not think of any improvements to make. However, of those that did, facilitators provided the following key improvements suggested by the students, followed by quotes from the discussion groups. Students suggested more advertisement/marketing for programs and more interesting advisory sessions that are more relevant to the school community. The students also would like more in-person family engagement activities. Students want to see more opportunities like the uKnight project offered in school and after school. Facilitators felt that the 8th graders were "simply done" with school. They wanted more programs, but they hated school. Students also expressed that they want to have access to the activities. They thought it was not fair that some students did the play and the mural, whereas others did not.

"Change the anti-racism book used during advisory -- maybe not putting the students on the spot regarding race."

"I want more storytelling. I want more fun opportunities, like field trips and visitors."

"They did not come to my class. I was disappointed."

"More people to get a chance to experience everything."

"It would great to have [the arts program-Story Tapestries] during the Advisory. The teaching artists could work with students on the hard issues. There are issues of racism and bullying that still exists. It needs to be elevated."

Improving the uKnight Program – Staff Perspectives

On the staff exit survey, NMS staff were asked in an open-ended question, “How would you improve or change the uKnight Project at NMS?” Twenty-eight staff provided valid responses to this question. A number of respondents noted the need for additional collaboration or discussion among NMS and project staff. All of the comments are provided in the table below.

Improvement Comments from Survey (n=28)
By creating ways to incorporate the same concepts into small groups or less students that the entire classroom setting.
Create more meetings about incorporating arts into core subjects.
Develop a better way of using the program, it was beneficial two years ago, but right now I think it has lost a lot of the connectiveness we used to have, not the fault of the leader just the times we are in presently.
Expand the access to counseling Arts performances - we have a stage - USE IT
Funding for teachers/and provide more opportunities for staff to participate with financial incentives.
Have more chances to talk (Mentioned twice)
I think that it should have more activities, to engage the students.
I think the structure of the visiting artists lessons could be tweaked. More prior involvement and planning between the teacher and the artists. I think also giving students more leadership opportunities and activities/events such as dinners, breakfasts, and assemblies.
I would like to see activities which include students and staff that use collaboration to increase rapport and respect.
I'm not very familiar with many of the uKnight projects, so maybe spreading out the work more.
Inclusion of MYP
Increase positive interactions between administration and staff
Introduce more programs and involve staff
Less activities that don't attend to the actual issues that our school has.
More access to trauma therapists for students
More counseling available
More involvement in 8th grade
More planning time and collaboration prior to residencies
More socialization of the program
More student grouped activities. Return to some of the Pre-Covid projects that we used to do.
Not worrying about drama.
The advisory lessons are hard to manage. As a teacher who has never done the activities it’s hard to facilitate them on a dime.
Training for teachers. ALL teachers.
Vetting presenters lessons, seeing it in the grander context of the school
We need more information and data on how it has been impacting the students, staff and community.
World studies presentations need to be more engaging and technology forward.

Facilitators of the three staff discussion groups provided key take-away from the groups and these are provided below. Many comments mirror the suggestions from the survey in the table above, especially the need for more collaboration and communication among NMS and uKnight project staff. Specially, staff suggested more preparation and review time with the in-class artist. Teachers felt that some of the resources and activities were inaccessible to their students, and if they were able to review the artist's lessons beforehand, they could have offered feedback and different, more accessible resources. They suggested having two prep meetings instead of one: one initial and one for tweaks/feedback so that it can be the most impactful for students. Staff would also like uKnight's involvement in future school community-building activities that are not based solely on involving students academically, such as food nights and International Night.

In regard to activities, staff suggested having artists also work with non-arts-based classes such as science or math. Staff conveyed that more student leadership opportunities need to be made available and worked back in (noted that Sources of Strength Peer Leaders gained a lot and were missed). They also suggested that the next mural project should be smaller and allow for more teacher/artist collaboration times before jumping right in.

The discussion group with counselors noted a desire for more trauma therapists. Counselors also suggested bringing in more artists to work with the classes and mentioned improving communication about programs.

Evaluation Summary and Future Considerations

This report provided a summary of evaluation findings from the 2021-2022 uKnight Project programming at Neelsville Middle School. This section highlights some of the key findings and future considerations that might be useful for future programming:

- ✓ **Participating students reported greater benefits.** The data indicated that not all students and teachers participated to the same degree. In fact, only 65% of students reported taking part in a uKnight activity. The impact of that participation was evident in the survey results. When data were analyzed to compare the students who reported participation to those who did not participate or who were not sure if they participated, students who participated strongly agreed/agreed with numerous statements regarding connection to the school, voice, and impacts on the school culture in higher numbers than those who did not participate.

- ✓ **Students reported that the school day was more enjoyable when they had arts programming.** Students felt heard, valued and important, and could see that their peers were more engaged and excited about learning when the uKnight program was part of their day.

- ✓ **Many staff members felt that the program gave them tools to better support and connect with students.** The majority of staff agreed that the project increased access to resources, provided more positive relationships with students, and increased engagement in the school community. NMS staff also reported appreciating the structured lessons and learning new approaches to teaching by incorporating the arts. In addition, the counseling/therapy portion of the project was seen as very important for student attendance and their social-emotional well-being.

- ✓ **High rates of "don't know" responses to survey questions suggest an opportunity to increase awareness.** A focused effort on increasing awareness of the uKnight Project at NMS may help increase staff and student awareness of the program.

- ✓ **Students and staff offered numerous ideas for improvement.** Both students and staff felt that the program could be better marketed and requested additional activities. Both groups also noted that they want the project staff to be more engaged in non-academic events, such as food nights and international night. A number of NMS staff, in both the discussion groups and survey, reported wanting more prep time, collaboration, and communication with uKnight staff.