

The uNight Project at Neelsville Middle School

2022 – 2023 Evaluation Findings

June 2023

Table of Contents

Project and Evaluation Background....2
Methods....3
Objective 1: Impact on Students....5
Objective 2: Staff Perspective of Impact on NMS Staff....11
Objective 3: Impact on NMS Culture....12
Evaluation Summary and Future Considerations....18

This report was prepared by Sharp Insight, LLC on behalf of Story Tapestries.
June 2023

Project and Evaluation Background

The uNight 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 2022-23 school year, NMS has worked with three organizations in Montgomery County, Maryland: Story Tapestries, Conflict Resolution Center of Montgomery County, and 480 Cares. These organizations supported in-school and afterschool arts integration strategies, artist-in-residencies, conflict mediation and resolution, student success coach session, SEL lessons, training for teachers on trauma, and family nights. The uNight Project at Neelsville Middle School (NMS) includes the following activities for students in grades 6, 7, and/or 8:

- Story Tapestries Visiting Artists in Lights, Camera, Literacy class
- Story Tapestries Visiting Artists in World Studies class
- Story Tapestries Visiting Artists in Visual Arts Class
- Lunch Time SEL Program
- 480 Cares Success Coaching

To evaluate the 2022-23 initiative, the uNight 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 student and staff exit surveys and discussion groups.

The purpose of the program evaluation is to learn more about the impact of the uNight Project throughout the Neelsville Middle School community. The main objectives are to better understand how the uNight 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 and in-person discussion groups for staff and students, was implemented for the 2022-23 uNight project.

The **student exit survey** comprised eight questions, including those about the student's grade level, participation in the uNight 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 with which grade the staff worked, familiarity with the uNight 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 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 uNight project staff and took up to 60 minutes each.

Evaluation and Project Participation

In regard to the surveys, 406 students completed the student exit survey, with over three-quarters coming from 6th and 7th grades. Thirty-six staff completed the staff exit survey. In addition, 11 discussion groups were held with 106 participants. Of these, eight groups were with 91 students and three groups with 15 staff total.

Evaluation Tool	Percent of Respondents	Number of Respondents
	Student exit survey (n=406)	
6th grade	40%	162
7th grade	37%	148
8th grade	24%	96
	Staff exit survey[1] (n=36)	
6th grade	72%	26
7th grade	61%	22
8th grade	50%	18
	Discussion Groups (n=106)	
Students	86%	91
Staff	14%	15

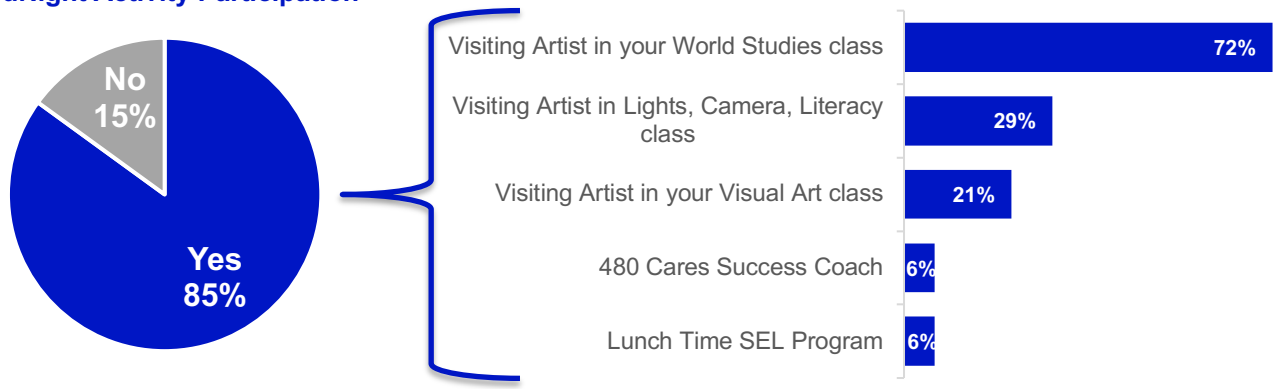
[1]*Percentage adds to more than 100% because school staff could select all of the grades that they work with.*

Most (85%) student survey respondents reported participating in at least one uNight activity. Of those who did (n=344), 72% reported taking part in Story Tapestries in World Studies, 29% in Story

Tapestries in Lights, Camera, Literacy class, and 21% in Story Tapestries in Visual Arts class. Less than one in ten (6% each) took part in the 480 Cares Success Coaching and Lunch Time SEL Group.

Among the 85% of student survey respondents who self-reported participation in at least one uNight activity, most (72%) indicated having a Visiting Artist in their World Studies class.

uNight Activity Participation



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=344, 85%) and (2) those who reported no participation in any program components (n=62; 15%). 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. The surveys also included self-reported data and a large number of respondents reported they were unsure around a number of questions. The number of staff exit surveys received this year was substantially lower than in years past and may have affected the results.

Regarding the discussion groups, because these were 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 uNight project leadership separately for the student and staff surveys, including descriptive statistics for closed-ended questions and raw open-ended data.

Objective 1: Impact on Students

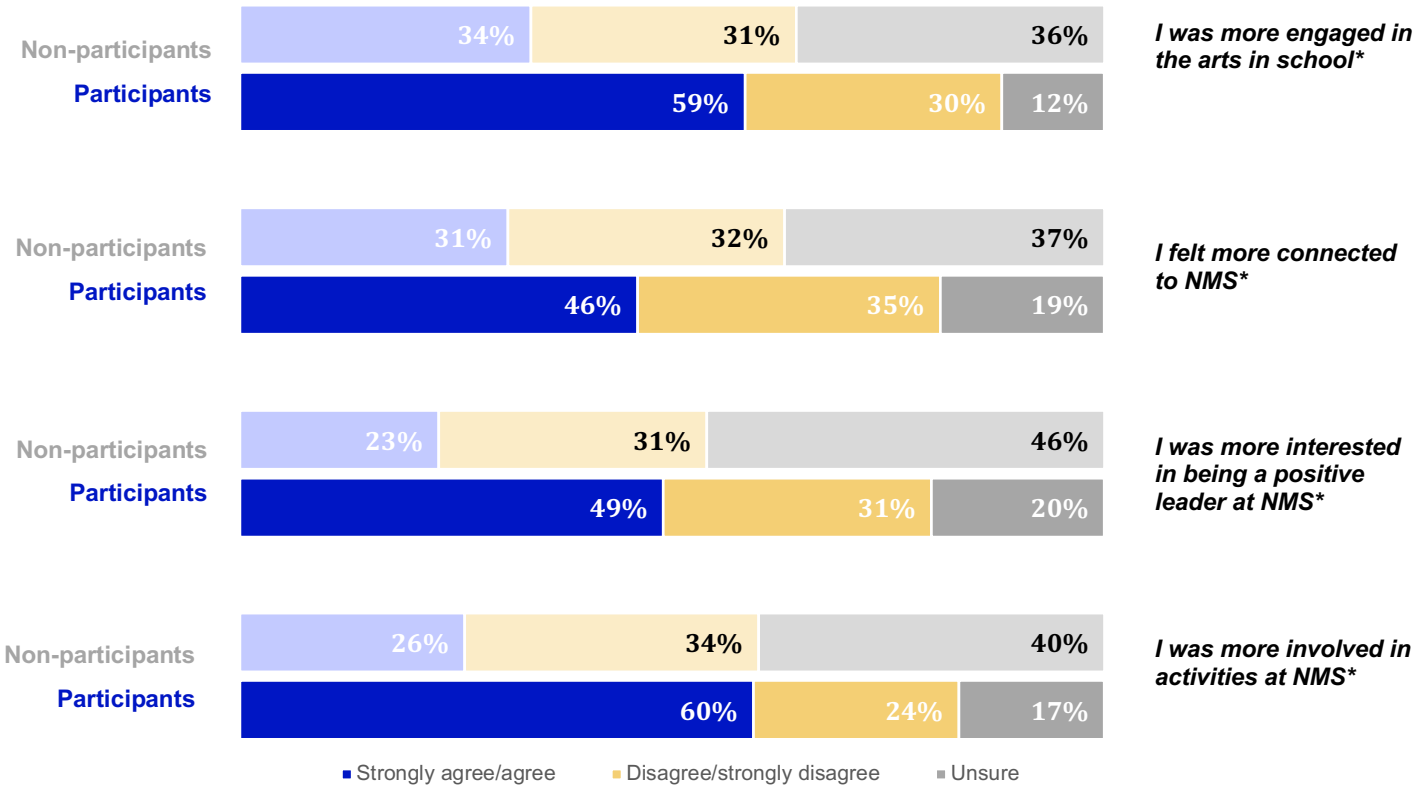
Student Perspectives – Connections and Involvement

On the student exit survey, students rated their agreement with four statements about involvement and connectedness to NMS because of the uNight 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.

For each of the four statements, an independent-samples Mann-Whitney U test showed statistically significant differences ($P < .05$) 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 involved in activities at NMS (60%) and more engaged in the arts at school (59%). The difference between participants and non-participants who strongly agreed/agreed with each statement ranged from 15% to 34%. Not surprisingly, there was also a high level of non-participants who responded with “unsure,” ranging from 36% to 40% over the four statements.

Figure 1: Because of the uKnight Project.... (n=330-342 for participants, 54-57 for non-participants)

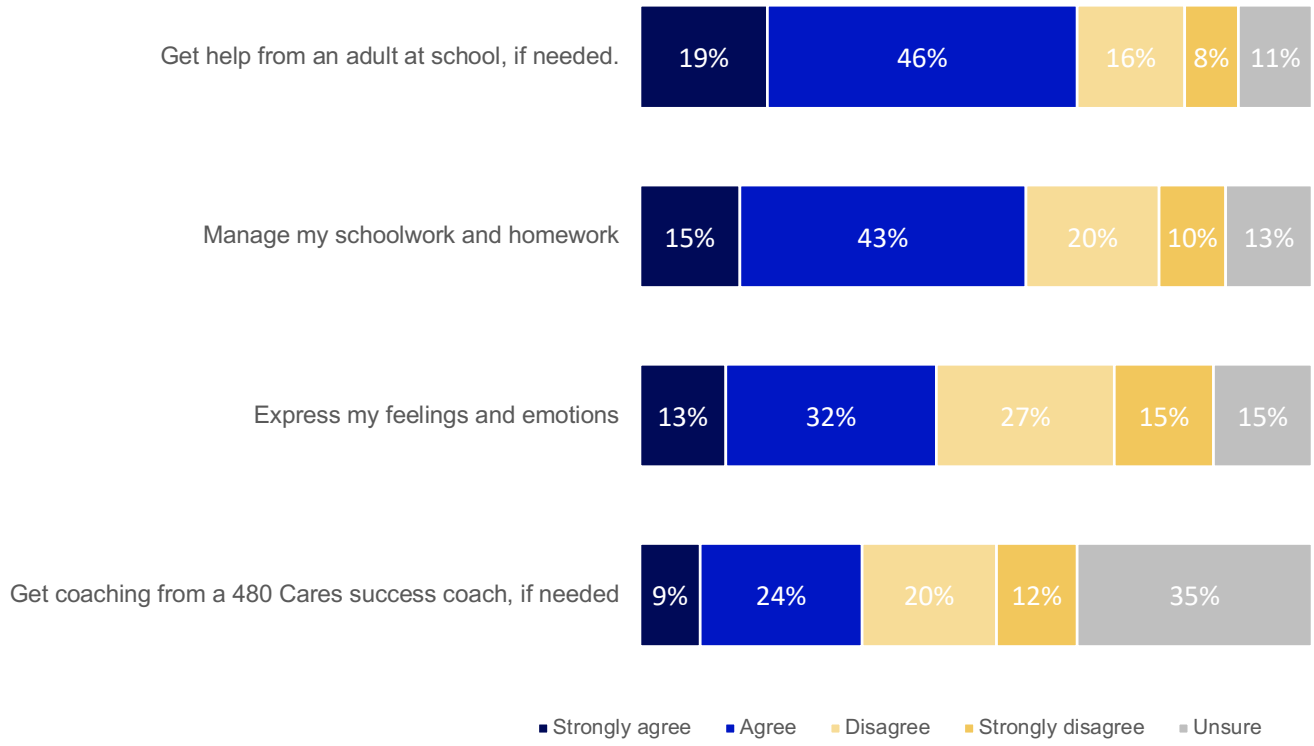


** ($p < 0.05$)*

Student Perspective – Change in Confidence

Students were asked whether they felt more confident about a number of aspects because of the uNight project (Figure 2). More than half of those who participated in the program (n=330-336) 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 (65%) and manage their schoolwork and homework (58%). Almost half (45%) also agreed or strongly agreed they felt more confident in their ability to express their feelings and emotions. One in three (33%) noted the same about getting coaching from a 480 Cares success coach, with another one in three (35%) unsure.

Figure 2: Because of the uNight Project, I feel more CONFIDENT in my ability to... (n=320-336)



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

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

Overall, the comments about the uNight 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 and communicate. Students spoke positively about learning how to be good listeners and collaborators. They also shared they liked the process and result of making something for their school. Others noted that uNight gave them the confidence to make new friends and play their part in group projects. The students reported enjoying the program and clearly expressed their appreciation for the non-traditional approach to learning.

Comments slightly varied between grade levels. Sixth grade students tended to discuss how much they enjoyed the activities, giving specific mention of the murals. Seventh grade students were not as vocal, and some 7th graders stated the program did not change anything or make a difference in the school. Eighth grade students generally expressed that the program was very engaging and they were happy to learn and try new things.



“Connections were made with people who I never connected with before.”

“In history class, we liked participating and actually doing the activities, showing what we learned, not just writing.”

“I think the organization is good because it can motivate people who have specific talents connected with uNight. For example, for the comic art or for storytelling, people can see possibilities of ways to use their talents in their work.”

"… learning how to take initiative.”

“I have learned the skills to collaborate with others and better communicate with my friends.”

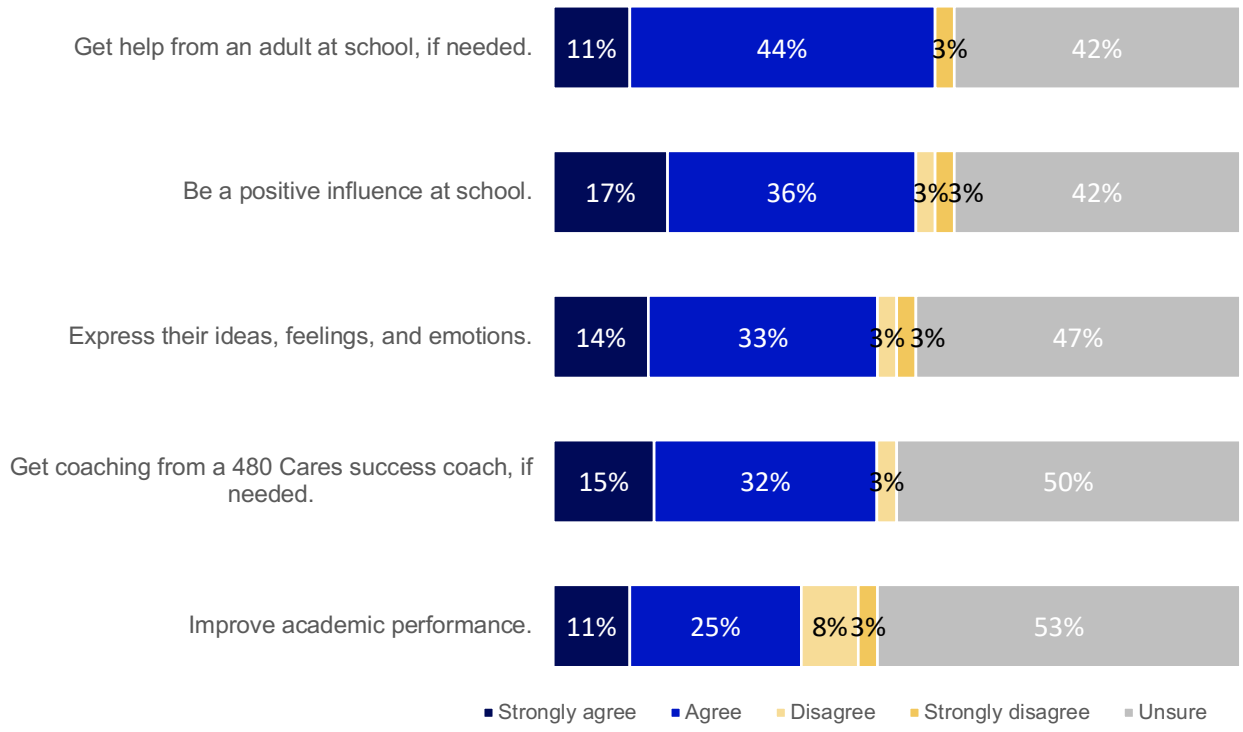
“ [We] learned how to be listeners.”

“ [I] think the program is really creative. A lot of projects we get in school aren’t creative–they’re just learning and taking a test. But things like drawing and making an instrument out of clay are really creative.”

Staff Perspective – Student Abilities

Staff were asked to rate their agreement with statements about student voice, academic performance, and getting help as a result of the uNight Project (Figure 3). More than half "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that the uNight project helped students get help from an adult at school if needed (55%) and be a positive influence at school (53%). Close to half also reported that students increased their abilities to express their ideas, feelings and emotions (47%) and get coaching from a 480 Cares success coach if needed (47%). Fewer reported that students increased their ability to improve academic performance (36%). The number of staff reporting they were "unsure" about these statements was high, ranging from 42-53%.

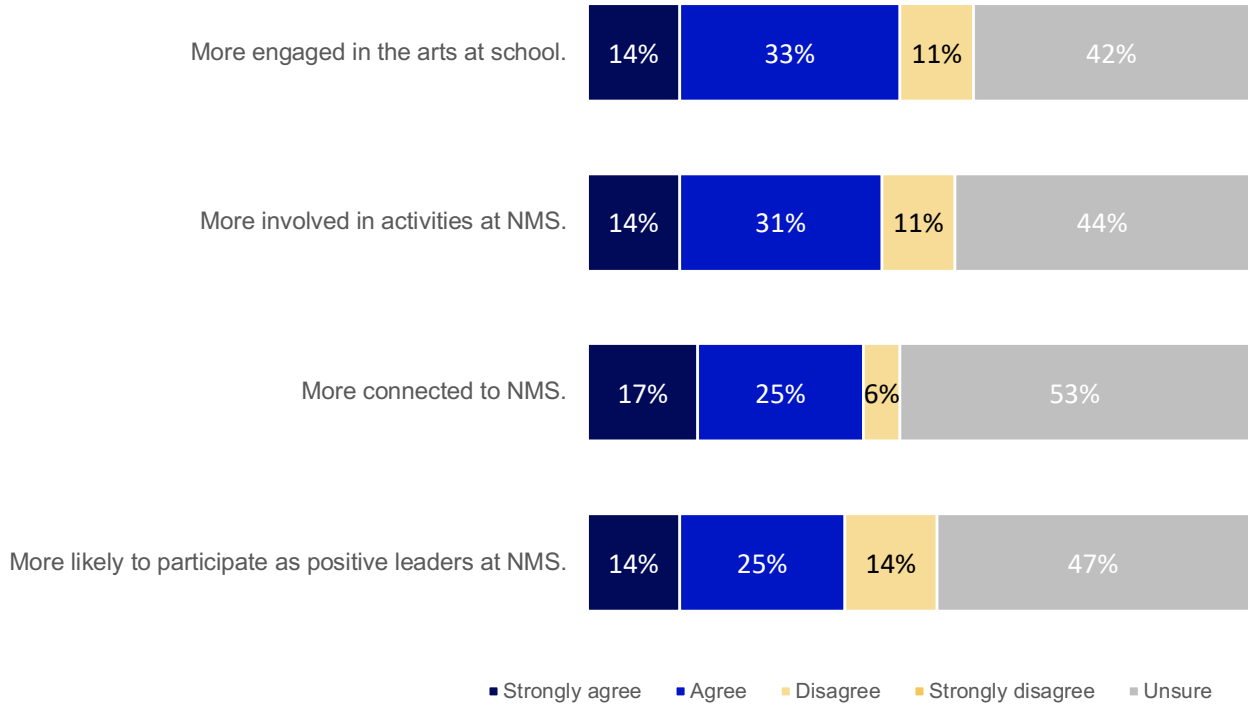
Figure 3: Because of the uNight Project, students have increased abilities to... (n=34-36).



Staff Perspective – Student Engagement

Staff rated their agreement with statements related to whether the uNight project affected student engagement at the school (Figure 4). Close to half "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that students are more engaged in the arts at school (47%), more involved in activities at NMS (45%), and more connected to NMS (42%). About one in three agreed that students are more likely to participate as positive leaders at NMS (39%). However, all the statements had a high number of staff reporting "unsure," ranging from 42-53%.

Figure 4: Because of the uNight Project, students are... (n=36).



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

In the three staff discussion groups, NMS staff were asked, “How has the uNight Project made a difference to NMS students?” Comments from staff were generally positive as they discussed that the program yielded positive results. For instance, staff reported that some students are exhibiting noticeable improvements in their behavior, and that students are benefitting from having a safe space to release their stress. In addition, staff reported seeing a change in how students advocate for themselves and prioritize their own needs. However, staff also mentioned that there was a need to have more female and male mentors to provide support for students. Finally, staff mentioned that residency provided an enjoyable break after the testing period.



“Enjoyed and appreciated the break from the regular curriculum content and testing.”

“It's possible to overlook some individuals who appear to have perfect behavior but are actually highly stressed and focused solely on achieving good grades. These individuals may benefit significantly from participating in art therapy sessions which can help them learn to prioritize their own needs and advocate for themselves. Overall, the program is well-suited for this purpose.”

“[I] noticed some of the students who normally aren't active, are now more engaged after participating.”

“More engagement from the kids.”

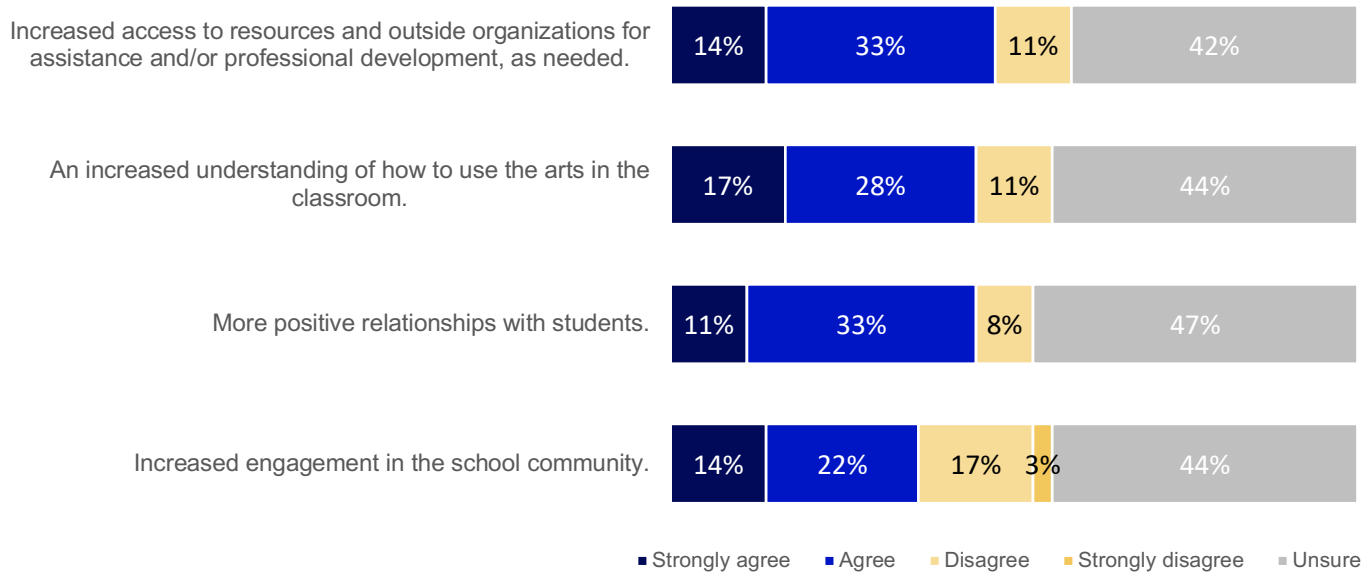
“I have observed that some of my students benefit from having a safe space where they can be themselves and openly discuss any traumatic experiences they may have had. This allows them to release their stress and improve their performance in class, particularly during lunch breaks. As a result, they are better able to concentrate and listen attentively.”

“Students were able to use creativity to master the context of the lesson.”

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). Close to half of the staff members "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that the uNight Project led to increased access to resources and outside organizations for assistance and/or professional development (47%), an increased understanding of how to use the arts in the classroom (45%), and more positive relationships with students (44%). A little over a third agreed or strongly agreed that the project increased engagement in the school community (36%). However, close to half of the respondents (42-47% over all four questions) were unsure of the project's impact on NMS staff.

Figure 5: Because of the uNight Project, NMS staff have members…. (n=36).



In the three staff discussion groups, NMS staff were asked, "How has the uNight Project made a difference to NMS staff?" Overall, comments were positive with staff, and with counselors particularly, highlighting that the school's partnership with uNight provides extra support and contributes to the success of students in the school. Teachers reported that they and the students enjoyed breaking away from traditional lesson plans, as well as how the guest artists brought new ways of learning into the classroom. The incorporation of music in lessons was specifically mentioned as a way to give teachers the opportunity to learn how to add more artistic elements into the classroom.

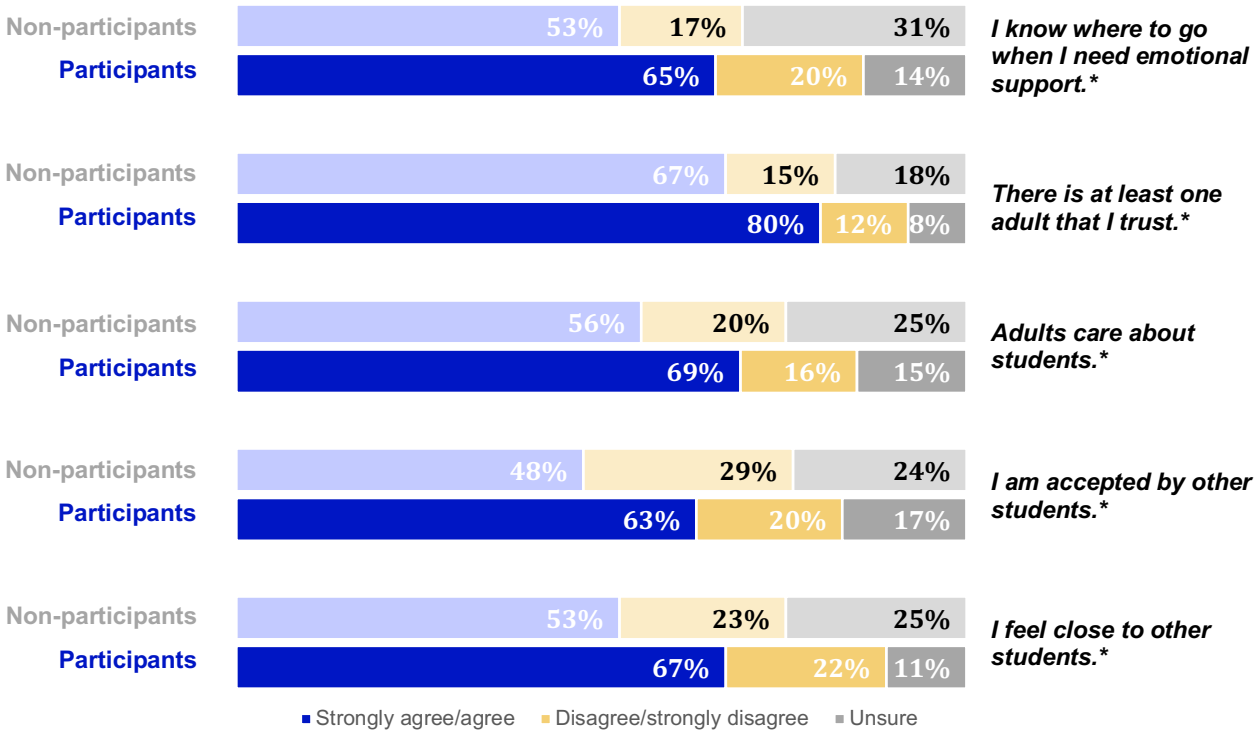
Objective 3: Impact on NMS Culture

Impact on NMS Culture – Student Perspective

On the student exit survey, students rated their agreement with five statements regarding the NMS community (Figure 6). Responses were compared between 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.

For all 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. Regardless of participation level, over half of the students agreed with each of the five statements, except non-participants with the statement, "I am accepted by other students." The difference between participants and non-participants who strongly agreed/agreed with each statement ranged from 12%-15%. As with previous questions, there were high number of "unsure" responses, ranging from 8%-31%, and the percent reporting unsure was substantially higher with those who reported not participating in the uNight activities.

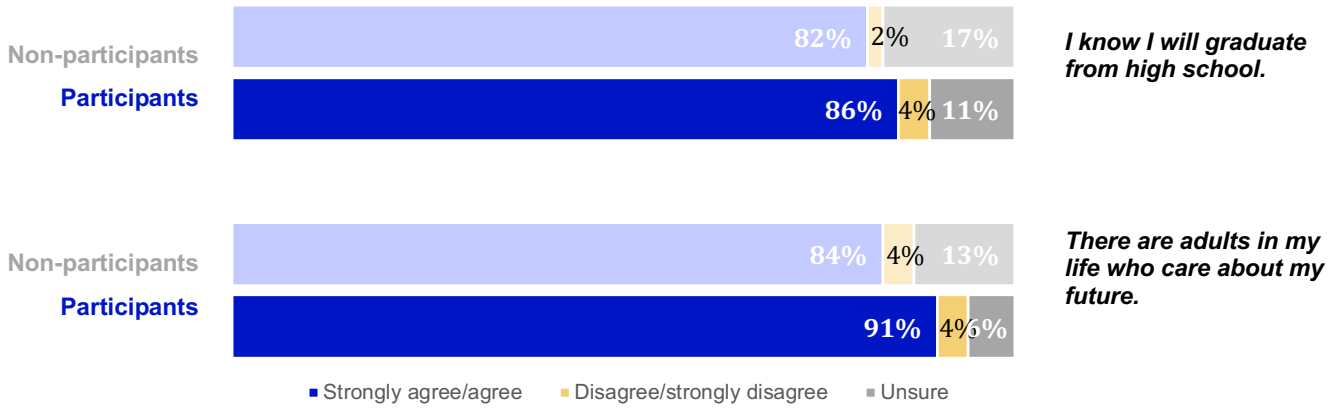
Figure 6: Thinking about Neelsville Middle School....
(n=330-339 for participants, 59-61 for non-participants)



** (p < 0.05)*

Statements regarding 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. Statistical tests showed no difference between responses for participants and non-participants. Most participants agreed or strongly agreed they would graduate (82-86%) and that there are adults in their life who care about their future (84-91%).

Figure 7: Thinking about my future....
(n=321-331 for participants, 56-59 for non-participants)



In the eight discussion groups, NMS students were asked how the uNight project made a difference to the NMS community. Students mentioned that the lessons from the guest artists helped to strengthen the connection between the school and the community and brought value to their school. By bringing the community together, students reported that they enjoyed interacting with a diverse group of people. In addition, students stated that the program increased their social skills and helped them get "out of their bubble" by making themselves known in conversations.



"We liked that we got to interact with more people and it brought people together."

"Still need to learn more about working with other students and the community."

"[The program] made school more diverse and brought everyone together."

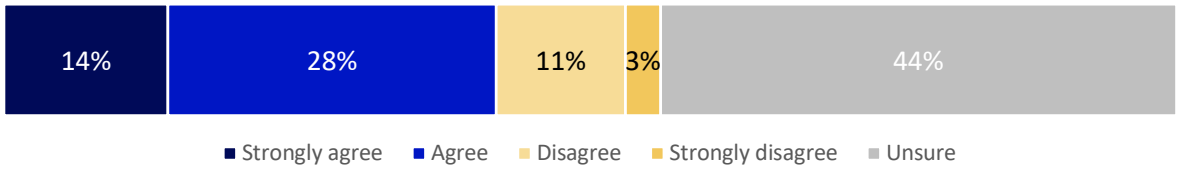
"[We] met people from different countries."

"Social skills gotten better since COVID quarantine."

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 uNight Project (Figure 8). While the largest percentage "strongly agreed" or "agreed" (42%), 14% "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed," and 44% were unsure.

Figure 8: Because of the uNight Project, the NMS culture/climate has improved. (n=36).



During the three staff discussion groups, NMS staff were asked an open-ended question about how the uNight project has made a difference in the community this year. While comments were mostly positive, during two groups, staff mentioned that the program should better engage with parents. While family night was described as a great event, it was also described as having a low turn-out. To improve this, discussion facilitators noted that the showcase could be a year-long process to allow parents and community members the ability to engage in activities the moment they happen rather than when they are close to being over. Lastly, staff members discussed the importance of representation in the classroom and having mentors that reflect the community they serve.



"Family nights are fun. Not a great turn out but it's been powerful. Anything we can do to draw them out and another opportunity to spend time with their kids."

"We need a better job getting the words out to the community."

"We have yet to have Black male mentors who can support other African American males in the classroom and provide encouragement. We need to address this community and encourage more male involvement. Since few black men are in the building, this is an important aspect we must recognize".

Improving the uNight Project – Student Perspectives

Students had many recommendations to improve the program. Most often mentioned was doing creative lessons in required courses, like math, and not just in electives. Similarly, students mentioned they would like more uNight classes and activities and specifically mentioned meeting more times during the month. Students also suggested a wider array of topics (i.e., display art and computer coding) and guest artists. Students stated that it was "unfair" that certain topics received more guest artists than others, and therefore suggested that all topics receive the same number of artists. In a similar vein, the 7th and 8th grade students reported wanting more consistent activities as they felt that they did not receive the same consistent activities as the 6th grade students.



"It would be cool if programming was more in required classes, not just elective."

"More time for the activities. More classes & lessons. More interactive facilitators."

"We want to do our own scripts."

"I'd like to have more of these programs. Two times a month would be cool."

"Maybe adding more stories and more time to learn and watch and do the arts."

"Some of us only had 1 visiting artist and some had 3 or more. I don't think that's fair."

"The program should provide incentives (rewards or recognition) so more students would participate."

Improving the uNight Project – Staff Perspectives

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

Improvement Comments from Survey (n=11)
"As a teacher who is not directly involved in the uNight Project, I guess my only suggestion would be to share more information with the staff or school community in general about what is happening in the uNight program. For example, I don't even know which students and staff are involved or how often they meet with uNight folks or what they do exactly. So, I can't even follow up or comment on the program to the students."
"Have them involved with science."
"I think while the students enjoyed dancing, it was not related to the curriculum. I heard that other grades with writers or storytellers could elevate the curriculum, dancing did not really do that."
"I would like to see them in classes that mirror their activities more (as in Poetry in English class vs. World Studies), although that may be intentional."
"I would like to suggest looping with the artist--meaning I would like to work with Ms. Ridgeway-she was awesome and very good to collaborate with during our 2 month residency."
"Include information in the morning announcements about the uNight Program explaining the different activities as they occur throughout the school year"
"Incorporate into more classes. Make it more connecting to the students at Neelsville."
"Keep deepening the studies of the arts while integrating them into the classroom."
"More communication about visits and things going on in the programs"
"The students in the Lights and Camera class perform for the school."
"The timing wasn't ideal."

Facilitators of the three staff discussion groups provided key take-aways. Similar to what the students mentioned above, staff mentioned that program consistency is important, especially with regard to scheduling. Staff noted that due to the dynamic nature of the program, it was hard to teach and prepare students for what they were going to learn. Staff also suggested that the program should "incorporate more pictures and translations with the storytelling or other artist residencies" because some of the students are learning English as a second language.

Facilitators also noted that enhancing communication between program members and NMS staff could increase the number of students enrolled in the program. Facilitators noted that student enrollment and participation could also increase by enhancing the diversity of the programs and advertising the program more efficiency. Staff suggested that sending a monthly blurb highlighting the program and its activities could increase both student and parent engagement.

Evaluation Summary and Future Considerations

This report provided a summary of evaluation findings from the 2022-2023 uNight 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 participated to the same degree, although most students (85%) reported taking part in a uNight activity (a higher percentage than in years past). 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 were significantly more likely to strongly agree/agree 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 expressed that they learned new things** and enjoyed learning a new way to express themselves and communicate through the uNight project. Staff reported that some students exhibited noticeable improvements in their behavior, and that the students benefitted from having a safe space to release their stress.

- ✓ **Many staff members felt that the program gave them tools to better support and connect with students.** The majority of staff who did not report "unsure" to the questions 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 that they and the students enjoyed breaking away from traditional lesson plans and experiencing how the guest artists brought new ways of learning into the classroom**.**

- ✓ **High rates of "unsure" responses to survey questions continue to suggest an opportunity to increase awareness.** As in past years, there was a substantial number of survey respondents who answered "unsure" to many questions. A focused effort on increasing awareness of the uNight Project at NMS may help increase staff and student awareness of the initiative.

- ✓ **Students and staff offered numerous ideas for improvement.** Students requested creative lessons in required courses, like math, and not just in electives. Similarly, students mentioned they would like more classes and activities and specifically mentioned meeting more times during the month. As in years past, a number of NMS staff, in both the discussion groups and survey, reported wanting more collaboration and communication with uNight staff.