

Evidence of Student-Centered Programming as an Important Resource for US High Schoolers' Mental Health and Adjustment

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INTRODUCTION

For US adolescents, there remain pressing concerns on both the contributors and risks to students' mental health, including student pressures with depressive and anxious symptoms (Racine et al., 2021) and risks of self-harm or suicide (Kölves & De Leo, 2016).

Our Minds Matter (<https://ourmindsmatter.org/>) is a student-focused non-profit committed to understanding and promoting aspects of student mental health and safety in daily school life, both by working directly with students in extracurricular clubs to build positive relationships, structure for healthy behaviors and strategies (i.e., recognizing opportunities for mindfulness, extending kindness toward others, building comfort for support-seeking behaviors).

While this program has been active at dozens of middle and high schools to date, there is room to broaden understanding of ways programming complements or promotes student adjustment and mental health. In line with broader views on the benefits of extracurricular activities (e.g., Feldman & Matjasko, 2005), we expected student involvement with OMM clubs to be linked with greater adjustment. *We were particularly interested in ties with outcomes related to OMM's mission to promote mental health and support-seeking for mental health needs among students.*

METHOD

Participants: Across the 2021-2022 academic year, we surveyed 179 high school students (77% cisgender girls; 39% juniors) representing clubs from parts of Ohio, Virginia, and Maryland.

Procedures: Students completed computerized surveys about their involvement with OMM clubs, academic and personal adjustment, and comfort reaching out to others for mental health needs and support. Items were designed to be completed in approximately 10 minutes. The same survey was presented at different points of the year – mostly different groups of students completed these surveys, rather than the same students at each wave.

Measures: Included specific items adapted from existing scales.

Construct	No. Items	Internal Consistency	Construct	No. Items	Internal Consistency
OMM Club Social Support	4	$\omega = .88$	Competence	4	$\omega = .75$
Academic Self-Efficacy	5	$\omega = .86$	Relatedness	5	$\omega = .80$
Mindful Practices	2	$r = .58$	School Stress	3	$\omega = .78$
Compassion	2	$r = .68$	Home-Life Stress	3	$\omega = .93$
Gratitude	3	$\omega = .75$	Peer Pressure	4	$\omega = .92$
Life Satisfaction	1	--	Future Uncertainty	3	$\omega = .80$
Support-Seeking	4	$\omega = .84$	Resilience	3	$\omega = .70$
Autonomy	3	$\omega = .58$			

Analytical Plan:

- Correlations of OMM club involvement (i.e., dosage, leadership, support) with measures of student adjustment
- Regressions testing simultaneous associations of club involvement with measures of student adjustment

RESULTS

Broadly, 1) students who had attended more club activities (**dosage**) with Our Minds Matter (OMM) reported greater adjustment; 2) students who were involved in OMM clubs as **student leaders** reported greater adjustment; and students who reported more **social support** from their OMM clubs reported greater adjustment.

TABLE 1. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

	Range	October (n = 44)	January (n = 97)	March (n = 38)
Number of Attended OMM Club Activities (Dosage)	1 – 8	2.64	2.57	2.85
OMM Student Leadership (%)	--	43%	37%	45%
OMM Club Support	1 – 7	5.15	5.16	5.20
Academic Self-Efficacy	1 – 5	4.11	3.94	4.21
Mindful Practices	1 – 5	3.61	3.65	3.63
Compassion	1 – 7	6.31	6.22	6.10
Gratitude	1 – 7	5.69	5.59	5.73
Life Satisfaction	1 – 7	5.00	4.45	4.75
General Support-Seeking	1 – 7	2.83	3.08	3.02
Autonomy	1 – 7	5.21	5.26	5.28
Competence	1 – 7	4.90	4.82	4.85
Relatedness	1 – 7	5.19	5.25	5.26
School Performance Stress	1 – 5	3.43	3.65	3.70
Home-Life Stress	1 – 5	3.19	3.17	3.15
Peer Pressure	1 – 5	2.64	2.61	2.43
Future Uncertainty	1 – 5	4.16	3.94	3.94
Resilience	1 – 5	2.93	2.59	3.04

TABLE 2. CORRELATION ANALYSES

Measure	Dosage	Leadership	Support
Academic Self-Efficacy	.27	.21	.04
Mindful Practices	.09	.00	.02
Compassion	.29	.11	.33
Gratitude	.33	.14	.25
Life Satisfaction	.37	.22	.32
Support-Seeking	.18	.15	.35
Autonomy	.24	.36	.67
Competence	.16	.18	.72
Relatedness	.17	.17	.71
School Stresses	-.14	-.03	.11
Home Stresses	-.22	.11	.09
Peer Pressures	-.24	-.01	.03
Future Uncertainty	-.21	-.11	.01
Resilience	.26	.11	.10

TABLE 3. REGRESSION ANALYSES

Measure	Model F	Standardized Beta Coefficients		
		Dosage	Leadership	Support
Academic Self-Efficacy	4.41	.18	.22	.06
Mindful Practices	.57	.10	.01	.06
Compassion	9.44	.19	.04	.38
Gratitude	6.19	.28	.02	.21
Life Satisfaction	9.55	.28	.05	.30
Support-Seeking	5.58	.09	.07	.33
Autonomy	32.00	.00	.22	.63
Competence	42.49	-.04	.07	.74
Relatedness	33.36	.02	-.04	.71
Academic Pressures	.80	-.12	-.07	.05
Home-Life Stresses	2.00	-.25	.05	.10
Peer Pressures	1.87	-.25	.07	.05
Future Uncertainty	2.34	-.14	-.18	.00
Resilience	4.20	.17	.08	.21

Note. Bold values are at the $\alpha = .05$ level.

DISCUSSION

Our Minds Matter is an organization working to promote student mental health and healthy school environments through student-centered school programming. Like other growing programs on promoting positive school environments, this program aims to uplift participating students' adjustment and shape positive changes in the school climate through positive student modeling and influences for peers (i.e., McCarty et al., 1996, 2022). Surveys here provided an early look at the potential of OMM club activities for students across multiple school districts in the US.

Broadly, **involvement with OMM clubs was beneficial for students' adjustment**. That is, these aspects of club involvement informed areas of well-being, academic confidence, and psychological resilience. However, club involvement provided little information for specific approaches like uses of mindful practices.

With these early findings in hand, there **may be room to adjust specific club activities for students** (i.e., gratitude-reinforcing activities) and for the larger school body (i.e., encouraging students to recognize and reward prosocial behaviors among peers) that are worth greater emphasis and investment for programs, even as they tailor activities to local student interests and needs.

Future work that compares the prevalence of certain *types of club activities* (i.e., gratitude-focused events) may further contextualize the benefits of these uplifting activities for participating students and their classmates, particularly as club leaders continue finding ways to refine and strengthen the promise of these programs for students' mental health.

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