The Impact of the ACE Initiative, a School-Wide SEL Program, on the Academic Performance of High-Poverty High School Youth

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Noelle Banuelos, Ph.D.

Stephen Price, Ed.D.

ERC

Introduction

EduCare Foundation has been a leader in the field of social-emotional learning (SEL) since first implementing in 1990 our award-winning Achievement and Commitment to Excellence (ACE) Program. ACE is a trauma-informed, restorative and culturally responsive SEL program incorporating EduCare's Heartset® Education to assist students in learning to manage emotional distress and improve attitudes and self-care behaviors. Heartset® Education is EduCare's unique SEL platform. It promotes and teaches self-awareness, personal responsibility, empathy, and compassion – creating a learning environment in which youth can flourish and realize their full potential, using the strengths they have learned in overcoming life's uncertainties and challenges. The ACE Program consists of highly interactive, three consecutive-day workshops and additional one-day advanced workshops comprised of structured social-emotional learning, team building, and experiential activities for students. A 2016-17 study of the ACE Program revealed that participating students, compared to a matched comparison group, showed improved academic outcomes including a 35.7 higher mean scaled score in English/Language Arts and a 30.9 higher mean scaled score in Mathematics on state standardized tests.

In order to deepen the impact of the ACE Program for our students, EduCare began the **ACE Initiative (AI)** in 2017. AI expands EduCare's successful flagship ACE Program into a comprehensive, integrated, year-long program of student services, professional development, and parent services. AI builds upon the foundational series of ACE student workshops by adding SEL supports into the school culture resulting in a kinder and more empathetic educational community where students thrive. The additional AI

elements include a full-time, on-site EduCare AI Site Administrator, expanded ACE student workshops and comprehensive student support services, professional development for the school's teachers and after-school staff, and customized parent workshops and engagement opportunities.

This report presents the methodology and findings of an evaluation of the ACE Initiative conducted by ERC in its first year of full implementation (2017-18 school year) at the Social Justice Humanitas Academy (SJHA) located within the Cesar E. Chavez Learning Academies of the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Program Design

The ACE Initiative (AI) transforms school culture and environment by: (1) developing students' social and emotional skills that assist them to manage emotions, build positive relationships, communicate responsibly, confidently, and effectively and navigate social environments, enabling them to achieve their academic and personal goals; (2) engaging and empowering parents to more effectively support their child's education; (3) guiding educators to inspire and empower students to become responsible citizens and compassionate leaders who live their dreams; and (4) providing administrators with the tools and resources to create caring school cultures that support student achievement, engage parents, and support teacher development. Outcomes of the program that may be achieved include:

- Increasing student attendance rates and reducing chronic absenteeism
- Improving academic outcomes, graduation rates, and college acceptance rates
- Increasing teacher retention
- Decreasing student dropout rates
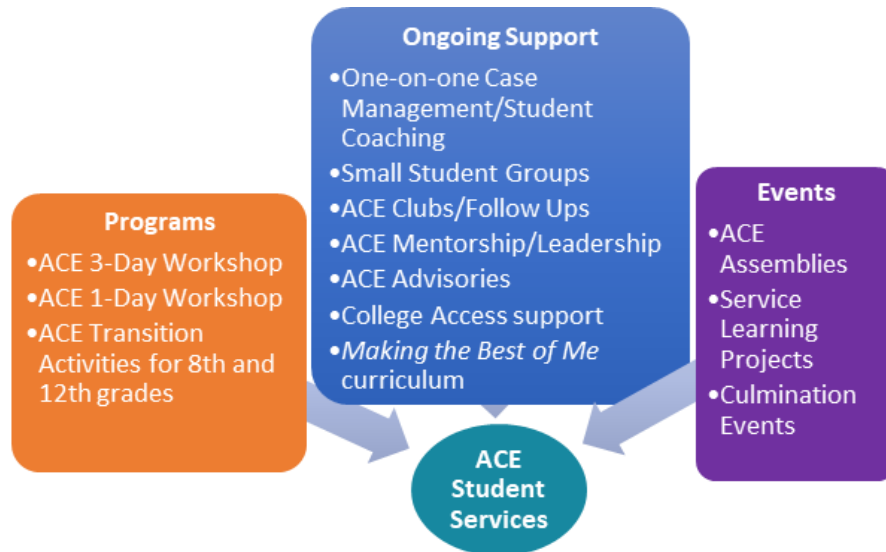
Program Implementation and Support

AI offers explicit instruction through *free-standing lessons* that may be conducted in workshops, classrooms, and in after school activities. SEL components, strategies, and activities are *embedded into the teaching practices* and *integrated into the academic curriculum* as educators actively participate in the comprehensive, school-wide implementation of the ACE Initiative. AI administrators and staff work with school administrators and staff to provide *organizational and systemic support* that enhances student achievement, social and emotional development, teacher and parent development, and a thriving positive school culture.

AI is designed to be implemented during the regular school day as well as after school for a high school student population (9th grade through 12th grade). AI is implemented universally across the school and provides Tier 1 & Tier 2 support on the MTSS Framework[1] through its comprehensive SEL program. Many AI activities are motivated by student interest and are student led, resulting in a fully engaged, fulfilling, and transformational experience. Students develop school spirit and a sense of belonging which helps support their success and the success of others. Scheduling of activities is coordinated at the school level. AI activities consist of the following: 1) ACE Student Services, 2) ACE Professional Development, and 3) ACE Parent Services.
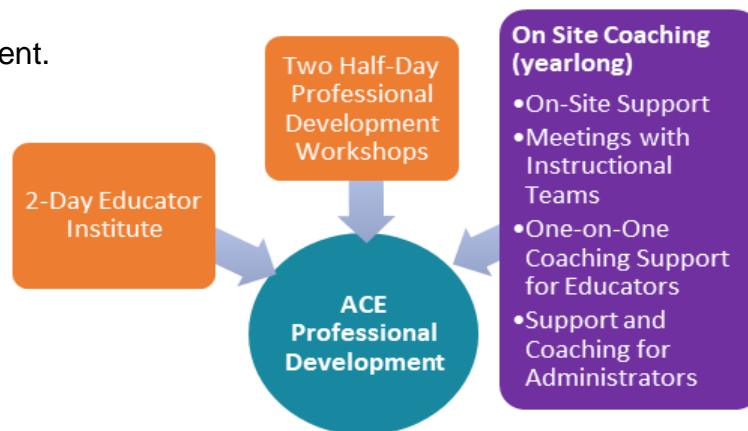
<u>ACE Student Services</u> offer a year-long series of age and grade appropriate SEL and character-building programs that emphasize the development of positive attitudes and wise decision-making that results in better behavior and relationships and improved

[1]See the CDE website for a description of the Multi-tiered System of Support (MTSS): https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/ri/mtsscomprti2.asp

academic performance. Activities, support, and services are designed to build upon the lessons learned and follow a continuous quality improvement (CQI) model. AI staff also perform one-on-one case management and coaching as well as support College Access.

Programs
- ACE 3-Day Workshop
- ACE 1-Day Workshop
- ACE Transition Activities for 8th and 12th grades

Ongoing Support
- One-on-one Case Management/Student Coaching
- Small Student Groups
- ACE Clubs/Follow Ups
- ACE Mentorship/Leadership
- ACE Advisories
- College Access support
- *Making the Best of Me* curriculum

Events
- ACE Assemblies
- Service Learning Projects
- Culmination Events

ACE Student Services

ACE Professional Development provides school educators and administrators with the tools, techniques, and resources to create a safe and caring classroom environment that fosters tolerance, creativity, and improved student learning. Specific emphasis is placed on SEL, College Access & Readiness, Service Learning, English Language Development, Linked Learning (Career Pathways), and Afterschool-Expanded Learning Program Management.

2-Day Educator Institute

Two Half-Day Professional Development Workshops

On Site Coaching (yearlong)
- On-Site Support
- Meetings with Instructional Teams
- One-on-One Coaching Support for Educators
- Support and Coaching for Administrators

ACE Professional Development

ACE Parent Services increase parent engagement and involvement and empowers parents with strategies and tools for parenting with greater confidence and effectiveness.
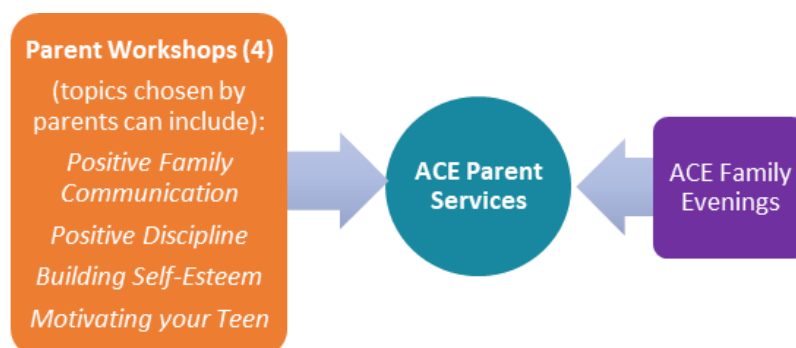
Alignment with CASEL's Five Core Competencies

EduCare's AI program aligns to CASEL's Five Core Competencies:

Self-awareness: AI helps students develop greater self-awareness and identity by having students learn to recognize and share feelings in safe environments, teaching students to speak up for themselves, and helping students develop and become aware of their growing sense of self.

Self-management: Through various AI experiences, strategies, and activities, students learn to manage their emotions, behaviors, and responses to various contexts that result in positive outcomes.

Social awareness: AI provides students with opportunities for service-learning projects and events that promote awareness of social contexts and allow students to express and contribute as they grow.

Relationship skills: AI encourages and teaches students to build positive and multidimensional relationships (e.g., with peers, teachers, caring adults, etc.). Peer

mentoring activities also promote relationship skill building. In addition, by supporting a sense of belonging and connections, students develop community-building and mutual respect.

Responsible decision-making: AI cultivates students' understanding and expression of power and choice in their own lives, leading to responsible decision-making and choices that have a positive impact. Students also learn to make decisions in collaboration with others to advance objectives at a group level.

Incorporation with SAFE Elements

The four SAFE elements are incorporated into the AI program in the following ways:

Sequenced: AI activities are connected and coordinated to foster skills development. The program ranges from providing a summer bridge program for incoming 9th graders, to working with seniors on their future college and career pathways. Students grow with each component of the program as they advance through school and are able to serve as mentors and leaders for those who are just beginning their journey. AI activities are also sequenced and coordinated with teachers' curricula. AI also incorporates *Making the Best of Me*, a sequenced curriculum, into the program.

Active: AI uses active forms of learning to help students master new skills. AI works with educators through active engagement and training to embed AI concepts and activities into their classroom curriculum and advisory plans.

Focused: AI contains multiple components that emphasize developing personal and social skills. The AI program provides a variety of focused activities including, but not limited to, workshops, coaching, mentoring, case management, and field trips that all

incorporate active learning to help students master new skills. Educators, administrators, and parents are also provided with training to support this development.

Explicit: AI targets specific social and emotional skill development. AI staff work with the school and students to determine specific needs and areas for support. They create structures and activities to develop social and emotional skills that will address these targeted needs and give students the necessary tools and skillsets for a positive future. Further, students are engaged in discussion and reflection of the activities to further enhance learning and growth.

School-wide Support

AI provides school-wide support by working within and across all school levels to transform school culture and environment. AI engages students and develops their social and emotional skills to enable them to achieve their academic and personal goals. AI helps students regulate emotions, build positive relationships, communicate responsibly, confidently, and effectively, and navigate social contexts. Through AI, educators develop skills alongside their students and become part of the process, to inspire and empower students in becoming responsible citizens and compassionate leaders. Parents are also engaged and empowered through participation in workshops to support their child's education and future more effectively. School administrators are engaged in the process from the beginning and provided with the tools and resources to create caring school cultures that support student achievement, engage parents, and support teacher development. The full-time, on-site AI administrator is responsible for creating structures and activities to address the ongoing needs of the school. The AI facilitator coordinates mentorship and counseling programs, arranges support groups

for students, prepares seniors for college, and provides informal check-ins and various support to meet the needs of teachers and administrators. AI's ongoing and school-wide support promotes the integration of the school's core values.

Opportunities for Practice

In AI, students had multiple robust opportunities to practice learned social and emotional skills. AI activities are student-centered and allow for peer sharing, discussions, and collaboration. Students served as AI mentors and leaders, promoting continued development of their own skills while facilitating the development of skills for newer or younger students. Mentorship activities also taught students confidence, self-esteem, and greater awareness of others, as well as self. Other opportunities for practice included Advisory, Men's and Women's groups, and small group support sessions which took place both in the classroom and after school. SEL practices were also built into English Learner classes, which included a small newcomer population.

Evaluation Design and Procedures

Design and Recruitment

This evaluation was designed to test the hypothesis that a school-based, universal SEL program will improve the school success of a high-poverty, mostly Hispanic, high school student population. Using a quasi-experimental research design, three school outcomes for an intervention group of 626 students who were exposed to the EduCare Foundation's Achievement and Commitment to Excellence (ACE) Initiative during the 2017-18 school year were compared with those of a comparison group comprised of 1,297 students who attended school at the same campus but were not exposed to ACE.

The Cesar E. Chavez Learning Academies (CCLA), four public high schools of the Los Angeles Unified School District located on the same campus, were selected as the research site. This research site was selected because EduCare piloted the ACE Initiative at the Social Justice Humanitas Academy (SJHA) on the CCLA campus, during the 2017-18 school year. The implementation of the ACE Initiative in only one of four learning academies that served a similar student population on the same campus created the necessary conditions for quasi-experimental design and analysis. Outcomes for students who attended the learning academy where the ACE Initiative was implemented could be compared with those for students with similar demographic characteristics from the same campus who were not exposed to ACE.

Parent/Student Consent

SJHA students were provided with program information and registration forms at the beginning of the school year, which required both parent assent and student consent to participate in EduCare programs at the school site.

Program Delivery

Table 1 presents key AI activities that took place during the 2017-18 school year at SJHA. The program was delivered by a full staff of qualified EduCare professionals. The full time AI Site Administrator worked closely with the school's administrators and teachers to set the AI program calendar for the school year and respond effectively to the ongoing needs within the school. Between four and six of EduCare's ACE Program facilitators provided ACE workshops and related programs, parent workshops, and professional development throughout the school year along with two support staff.

EduCare AI staff worked in close partnership with the full school community including teachers, psychiatric social workers, school counselors, community partners, volunteers, and parents.

Table 1. Key AI Activities Implemented during 2017-18 at SJHA

Summer Quarter	- Held SEL training at SJHA staff retreat - Conducted Summer Student Mentor Training - Implemented AI at 9th grade Summer Bridge - AI Site Administrator worked closely with principals, teachers, and administration to plan and set a calendar for the upcoming school year - Helped support Lead Teachers on SEL lesson planning
Fall Quarter	- ACE 3 day workshop for 9th grade students - ACE follow-up advanced workshops for 10th, 11th, and 12th grade students - Trained teachers to implement ACE parent workshops (ongoing) - Implemented ACE student support groups (ongoing) - Conducted college counseling and implemented college preparatory workshops (ongoing) - Organized overnight SJHA College Trip and incorporated ACE SEL activities - Supported lead teachers on SEL lesson planning (ongoing) - Provided one-on-one SEL case management to identified at-risk students (ongoing) - Conducted student, parent, and teacher surveys and need assessments - Conducted monthly AI partner meetings for planning and evaluation (ongoing) - Provided Professional Learning Group coaching sessions, webinars, and technical assistance to the other three CCLA schools (ongoing) - Teachers and administrators participated in Heartset® Education professional development (ongoing)
Winter Quarter	- Conducted ACE Senior Retreat – this is designed as a rite of passage from high school to college or a career - Conducted ACE Alumni Sessions – for recent SJHA grads, many of whom serve as mentors - Conducted ACE college trips - Conducted financial aid family workshops - Trained teachers to implement ACE parent workshops (ongoing) - Implemented ACE student support groups (ongoing) - Conducted college counseling and implemented college preparatory workshops (ongoing) - Organized overnight SJHA college trip and incorporated ACE SEL activities - Supported lead teachers on SEL lesson planning (ongoing)

	● Provided one-on-one SEL case management to identified at-risk students (ongoing) ● Conducted student, parent, and teacher surveys and need assessments ● Conducted monthly AI partner meetings for planning and evaluation (ongoing) ● Provided Professional Learning Group coaching sessions, webinars, and technical assistance to the other three CCLA schools (ongoing) ● Teachers and administrators participated in Heartset® Education professional development (ongoing)
Spring Quarter	● Organized a parent college trip with SEL activities ● Conducted Senior Signing Day Assembly and other culmination events ● Conducted Mock Interview Sessions ● Held pre-planning discussions for the next school year ● Conducted an end-of year-evaluation ● Trained teachers to implement ACE parent workshops (ongoing) ● Implemented ACE student support groups (ongoing) ● Conducted college counseling and implemented college preparatory workshops (ongoing) ● Organized overnight SJHA college trip and incorporated ACE SEL activities ● Supported lead teachers on SEL lesson planning (ongoing) ● Provided one-on-one SEL case management to identified at-risk students (ongoing) ● Conducted student, parent, and teacher surveys and need assessments ● Conducted monthly AI partner meetings for planning and evaluation (ongoing) ● Provided Professional Learning Group coaching sessions, webinars, and technical assistance to the other three CCLA schools (ongoing) ● Teachers and administrators participated in Heartset® Education professional development (ongoing)

Training Procedures

EduCare hires dedicated, organized, and compassionate people who enjoy working with youth, are strong communicators, are able to respond to changing environments, and share EduCare's values. EduCare recruits bilingual individuals and trains all staff in cultural diversity and responsiveness to ensure programs address the needs of youth from diverse backgrounds and ethnicities. Many EduCare staff are alumni of the high

schools they work with and give back to the next generation in their respective communities.

All EduCare program staff and volunteers are compliant with required health screening and background clearance as directed by current law and District policy for school personnel and volunteers. All program staff participate in training on safety/emergency rules and regulations, as well as maintain a current CPR/First Aid card. In addition to participating in EduCare's comprehensive staff development, all program staff are required to attend District, L.A. County and State training, and are supplied with all appropriate manuals.

Staff Professional Development

EduCare provides regular training and professional development to all AI site program staff. These staff members attend a two-day orientation that covers staff roles and responsibilities, grant requirements, and programming essentials. They also attend monthly EduCare professional development meetings. In addition to a summer orientation, EduCare provides all program staff with one professional development training each quarter facilitated by one of our experienced managers or a collaborating community partner. Program staff are also required to attend at least four trainings conducted by Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE) and other organizations each year. Administrators and Program Managers identify training topics relevant to each staff person's roles and responsibilities. Key program staff also attend industry conferences such as the annual BOOST Afterschool conference and college access conferences. Mid-year and annual performance reviews are conducted for all EduCare staff.

EduCare's program staff are also trained in a variety of teaching methods as well as classroom management strategies, study skills, and working with diverse students. Program staff meet with their supervisors regularly to discuss their work and receive additional training and resources.

All staff participate in EduCare's *Growth Heartset® Professional Development.* Staff learn how to create successful learning environments that are built upon a foundation of caring, connectivity, and proven social-emotional learning practices. Additionally, staff gain the knowledge and peer support to effectively facilitate small groups, promote and implement social-emotional learning, and establish positive school culture and climate initiatives.

Participants

Participants in the evaluation study were high school students in grades 9-12 who attended the Cesar E. Chavez Learning Academies during the 2017-18 school year. This site falls within the Los Angeles Unified School District. Subjects were divided into two groups: 1) an intervention group of all students who attended the Social Justice Humanitas Academy and were exposed to the ACE Initiative and 2) a comparison group of all students who attended the other three learning academies on the Cesar E. Chavez campus and were not exposed to AI. Table 2 shows the demographic characteristics for students in the intervention and comparison groups.

All Cesar Chavez Learning Academies are Title I, public schools located in a high-poverty urban setting which is part of the San Fernando Valley.

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Intervention and Comparison Groups

Characteristics	Intervention Group (n=626)		Comparison Group (n=1297)	
	#	%	#	%
Male*	293	46.8	712	54.9
Female*	332	53.0	567	43.7
Grade 9	266	42.5	262	20.2
Grade 10	144	23.0	375	28.9
Grade 11	105	16.8	302	23.3
Grade 12	111	17.7	358	27.6
Latinx/Hispanic	592	94.6	1200	92.5
Free/Reduced Price Meals	615	98.2	1280	98.7
English Learner (EL)	36	5.8	128	9.9
Special Education	51	8.1	154	11.9
Gifted and Talented Education (GATE)	116	18.5	170	13.1
Foster Youth	0	0.0	2	0.001
Homeless	37	5.9	69	5.3

*Enrollment records for 19 students (1 treatment and 18 comparison) did not report gender as male or female.

Data Collection Measures

Given the nature of this program, this evaluation did not incorporate surveys or other primary data collection instruments. All of the data collected and analyzed for this evaluation was secondary data, as it was initially collected by the school district (LAUSD). Through the standard request process, the district granted the evaluator, ERC, access to all of the data required for this evaluation. These data included student-level and school-level demographics, student attendance, and grade point averages (GPA).

Outcome Measures

Three outcome measures were selected as indicators of school success:

- Grade point average (GPA) – calculated using the traditional four-point scale and included grades for core academic subjects only (English, math, science, and social science courses).

- Percentage of credits earned – calculated by dividing the number of credits a student earned towards high school graduation during the school year by the number of credits they attempted.

- School attendance rate – calculated as the percentage of school days a student attended during the school year of those enrolled in one of the Cesar E. Chavez Learning Academies.

Analyses

Separate analyses of covariance (ANCOVA) were used to compare intervention and comparison group means for each of the three outcome measures from the 2017-18 school year. An alpha level of .05 was used to determine statistical significance.

Chi-square analyses were used to measure baseline equivalence for demographics of interest. These included tests for equivalence on gender, grade level, race/ethnicity, free and reduced-price meal status, EL status, GATE status, and foster and homeless youth status. Demographic variables for which significant group differences were found were included as covariates in subsequent analyses.

Independent sample t-tests were used to measure baseline equivalence for each of the three outcome measures. The year prior to the implementation of the ACE Initiative was

considered as the baseline year. Therefore, intervention and comparison group means from 2016-17 were compared for GPA, percentage of credits earned, and school attendance rates. Each of these three measures were included as covariates in subsequent analyses to make statistical adjustments for baseline differences.

Listwise or case deletion was used as the technique for handling missing data for all statistical analyses. It should be noted that this resulted in slightly lower sample sizes for post-intervention year comparisons when compared with baseline equivalency tests. Since baseline measures were used as covariates, two years of data for each of the three measures (GPA, percentage of credits earned, and school attendance rate) were required for inclusion in the ANCOVAs, resulting in lower sample sizes.

Table 3 shows baseline year (2016-17) means for the treatment and comparison groups on all three outcome measures. The table also includes sample sizes (n), indicating the number of students for whom both baseline and outcome year data was available for each measure. Only students for whom data was available for both the 2016-17 and 2017-18 school years were included in each comparison, which explains the variation in sample size.

Table 3. Baseline Measures and Sample Sizes for Treatment and Comparison Groups (2016-17)

Outcome Measure	Treatment Group		Comparison Group	
	Mean	n	Mean	n
School Attendance Rate	97.1	623	95.5	1270
Grade Point Average	2.89	412	2.44	1058
Pct. Of Credits Earned	90.4	599	86.0	1029

Results

Baseline Equivalency Tests

Chi-square analyses revealed that the intervention and comparison groups differed significantly on the following demographic characteristics: gender X^2 (1, N = 1923) = 11.08, p = .001; grade level X^2 (3, N = 1923) = 107.20, p > .001; EL status X^2 (1, N = 1923) = 9.18, p > .01; special education status X^2 (1, N = 1923) = 6.16, p > .05; and GATE status X^2 (1, N = 1923) = 9.81, p > .05. Therefore, each of these variables were included as covariates in subsequent analyses.

Independent sample t-tests revealed that the intervention and comparison groups differed significantly in the baseline year on GPA, t (1521) = 8.00, p < .001; percentage of credits earned, t (1858) = 39.41, p < .001; and school attendance rate, t (1906) = 6.40, p < .001. Therefore, each of these three measures from the baseline year (2016-17) were included as covariates when conducting group comparisons for the post-intervention year (2017-18).

Group Comparisons on Outcome Measures in the Post-Intervention Year (2017-18)

Figures 1-3 show unadjusted group means for AI participants (intervention group) and the comparison group on each outcome measure. These represent the actual means for AI participants and the control group before statistical adjustments were made for baseline non-equivalence when conducting ANCOVAs. Note that for each figure, sample sizes varied slightly due to the availability of student data for each outcome measure.
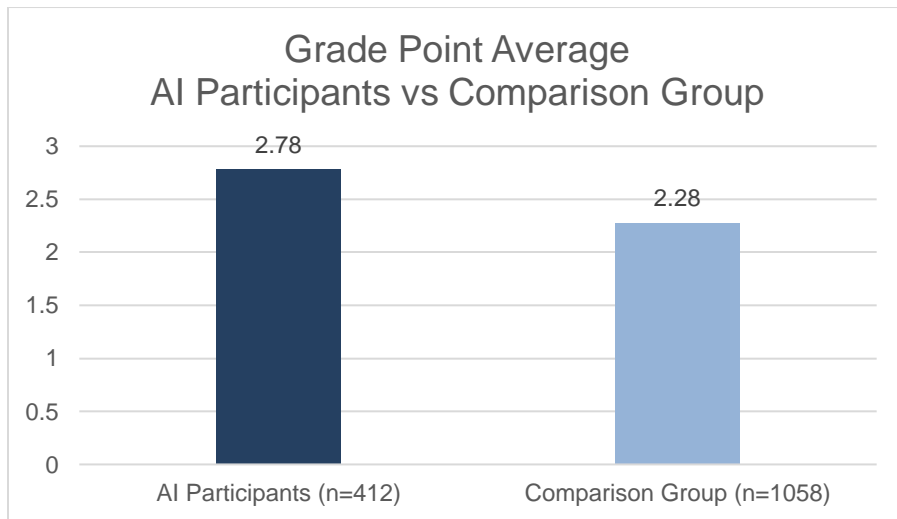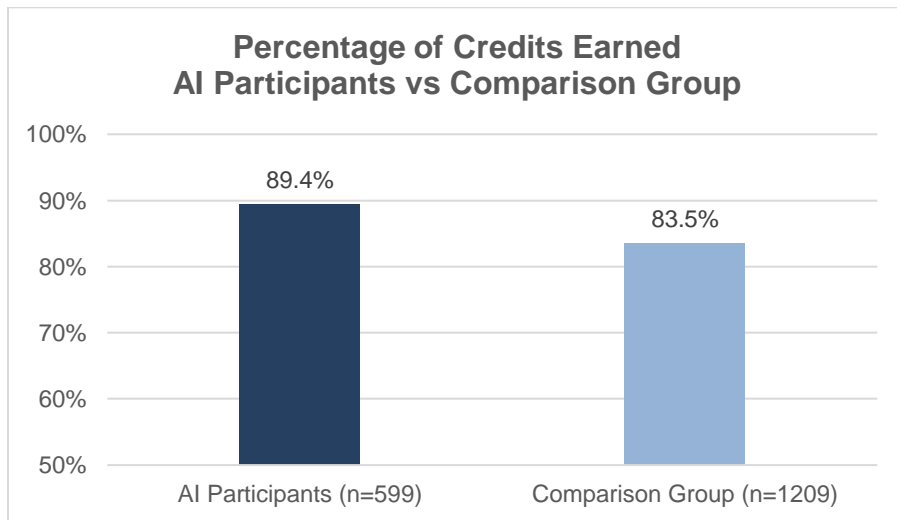
Figure 1.

Grade Point Average
AI Participants vs Comparison Group

	AI Participants (n=412)	Comparison Group (n=1058)
	2.78	2.28

Figure 2.

Percentage of Credits Earned
AI Participants vs Comparison Group

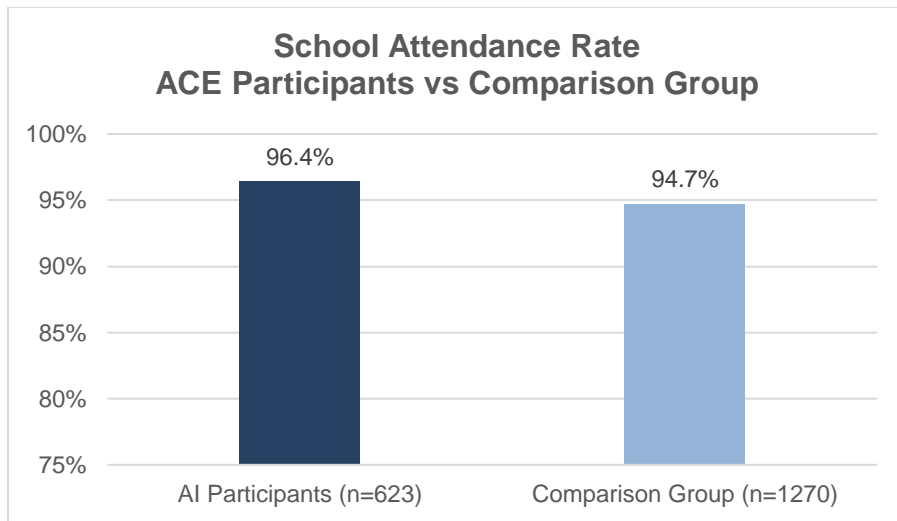|	AI Participants (n=599)	Comparison Group (n=1209)
	89.4%	83.5%

Figure 3.

The ANCOVAs revealed that, after including all covariates, the means for the intervention group were significantly greater than those of the comparison group for all three outcome measures, as summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. *Mean Group Differences (Intervention vs. Comparison Group)*

Outcomes	*M (SD)**	*F*	*df*	*p*
Grade Point Average	0.5 (1.08)	12.00	1469	.001**
Pct. of Credits Earned	5.9 (22.7)	19.20	1807	.001**
School Attendance Rate	1.7 (6.14)	3.06	1892	.001**

*Mean group difference (intervention group minus comparison group) and pooled standard deviation.
**Indicates statistical significance.

Summary and Conclusion

In 2017-18, EduCare piloted a full implementation of its ACE Initiative program in the Social Justice Humanities Academy, one of four learning academies in LAUSD's Cesar Chavez Learning Academies. The evaluation of this pilot in a universal, whole school SEL approach that incorporates all levels – students, teachers, administrators, and

parents – has shown the potential for a wide range of outcomes. The findings have shown that AI students significantly outperformed their counterparts (a comparison group consisting of students in the other three academies) in grade point average, percent of credits earned, and school attendance. Study limitations include possible contamination (intervention teachers sharing practices and learning across to teachers from comparison academies) and contextual aspects of the academies that may have had some impact on the findings.

During this same school year, 2017-18, researchers from Claremont Graduate University conducted a qualitative evaluation of the ACE Initiative at SJHA (Wang, Chen, Resari, Marshburn, & Peterson, 2018). Their findings revealed that EduCare successfully created a caring school culture that humanized relationships among students, teachers, and parents. Researchers found that AI provided a foundation for students to develop social and emotional skills as well as supporting them academically and in pursuing college goals. AI also supported teachers in focusing on the social-emotional needs of students and themselves and helped parents learn how to effectively support their child's development and pursuits.

Overall, as shown in this report, EduCare's ACE Initiative showed great promise in supporting students as they grow and achieve mastery in social and emotional growth and learning as well as success in school achievements. Since 2018, EduCare has effectively expanded the ACE Initiative into 14 schools, through funding from district contracts and foundational sponsors, across the district and with growing interest in other regions. There are several opportunities available for future research that may include expanding the study of AI participation to include social-emotional outcomes,

additional academic outcomes, and high school completion outcomes. In addition,

expanding the study population to include multiple schools would also be

advantageous, particularly in being able to make comparisons of outcomes across

various student sub-groups and identify effective practices.

References

Wang, Y., Chen M. H., Resari, A., Marshburn, A. & Peterson, M. (2018). *The ACE Initiative Final Evaluation Report 2017-2018*. Unpublished manuscript. Claremont Graduate University, CA.