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2019-2020 ACE Program Report



BACKGROUND

In the fall of 2018 the Achieving Competitive Excellence (ACE) Project was introduced to 30 students in the 3rd, 4th, and 5th grades at Adams Elementary School (Colorado Springs School District 11). School administrators selected thirty of their most challenged students. ACE returned to Adams for the 2019-20 academic year (AY) and was incorporated into the entire 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade student body for a total of 260 students. Additionally, 300 students at North Middle School (also in District 11) participated in the ACE Program.

ACE was designed to teach students how to analyze situations in real-time and make the best decision at the moment. Using a proven coaching model, *Think-Say-Do*, students were guided through novel decision-making approaches intended to improve behavior, increase attention, and enhance classroom performance. ACE provided students with adaptive skills to enable social and academic success in and out of the school setting. Students received instruction on how to develop a cognitive strategic plan breaking larger issues into smaller ones—affording them the opportunity to internalize both problem solving and mental flexibility skills.

PROGRAM DESIRED OUTCOMES

Intended results included improved decision making, self-efficacy, focus, concentration and attentiveness, concept learning, critical thinking, and memory. Students were expected to demonstrate improvements in personal mastery—the ability to master their thoughts, behaviors and actions; while recognizing performance barriers such as attitude, negative self-talk, current biases, and the filters through which they viewed the world.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a mixed-methods design consisting of both quantitative and qualitative data streams from multiple sources. Collected data included Likert-based survey instruments, open-ended comments from students and teachers, and disciplinary data provided by school administrators. The survey data was a combination of both student self-reported (SSR) and teacher observations (TO) of the students using four survey instruments: (a) Devereaux Student Strengths Assessment-Mini (DESSA-mini) [TO] (Naglieri, LeBuffe, & Shapiro, 2011), (b) a questionnaire related to specific ACE program objectives [TO] (Lee & Lee, 2019), (c) the Panorama Social-Emotional Learning Assessment (Panorama) [SSR & TO] (Panorama Education, n.d.), and the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Assessment (21CLCC) [TO] (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Open-ended responses to questions [SST and TO] concerning the value of the ACE program were analyzed using the NVivo qualitative analysis software to identify themes. Conclusions were made based on the corpus of collected quantitative and qualitative data using a process of triangulation as described by Kelle (2001).

STUDY LIMITATIONS

Teacher observations varied in consistency and quality between Adams Elementary and North Middle Schools. A total lack of variance among student evaluations in the 21CLCC from some

teachers at North Middle School rendered that data meaningless, and the 21CCLC input from North Middle School was not considered. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic halted attendance during second semester of AY 2019-2020, creating a void in disciplinary data for statistical comparison.

SURVEY INSTRUMENTS

DESSA-Mini

Teachers at both Adams Elementary School and North Middle School completed the DESSA-Mini questionnaires for their students. The results from both schools are shown in Figures 1 and 2.

The root question was, *During the last quarter, how often did the child...*

Figure 1

DESSA-Mini, Adams Elementary School, Second Quarter AY 2019-20

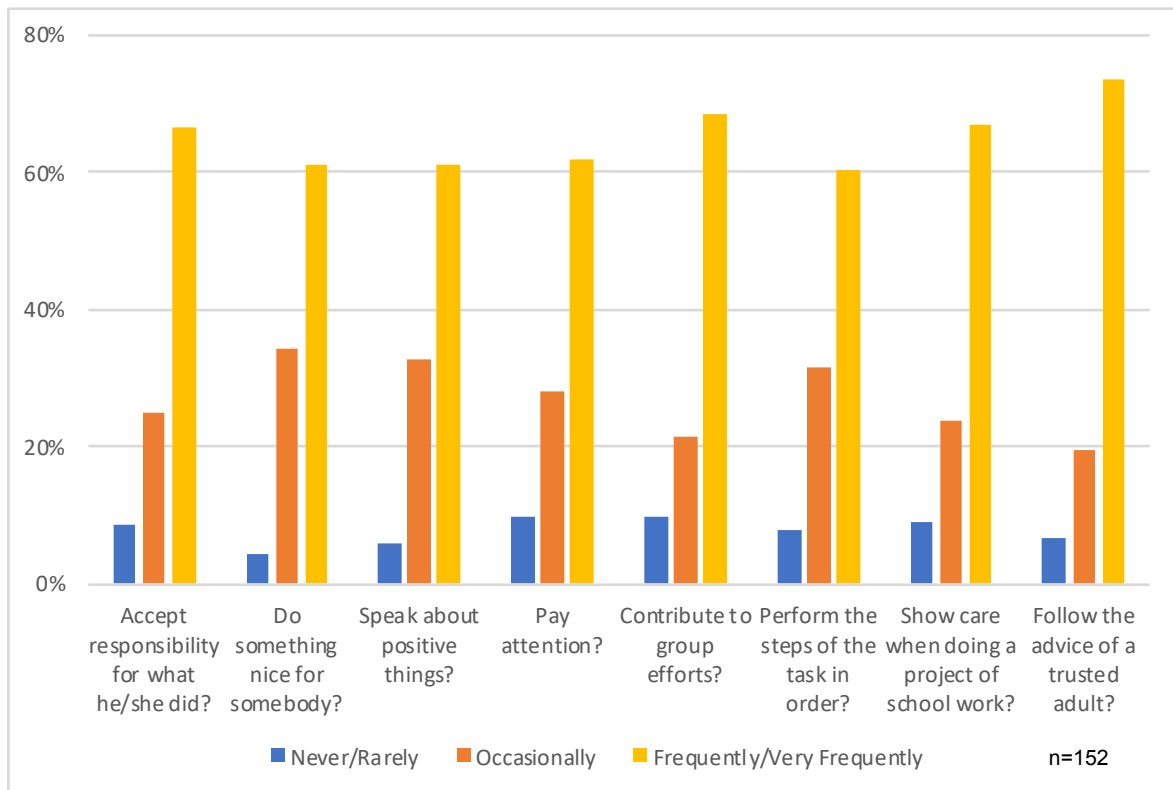
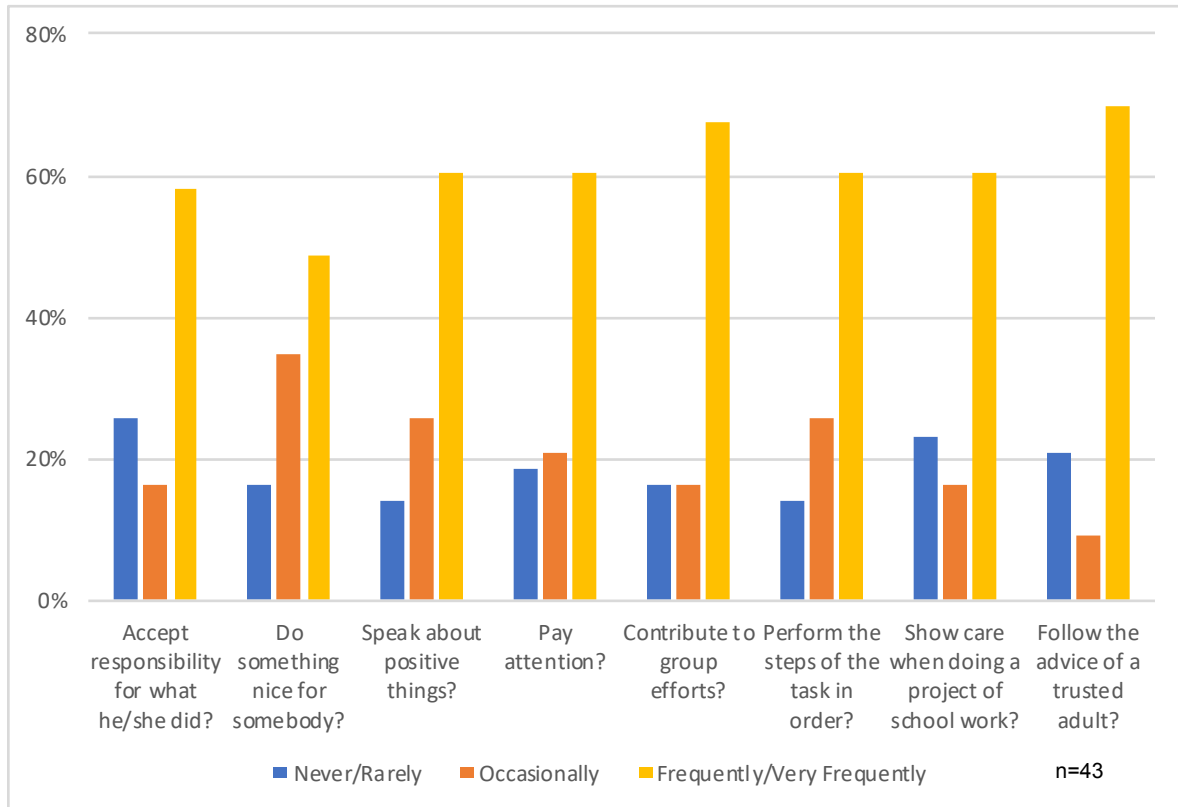


Figure 2

DESSA-Mini, North Middle School, Second Quarter AY 2019-20



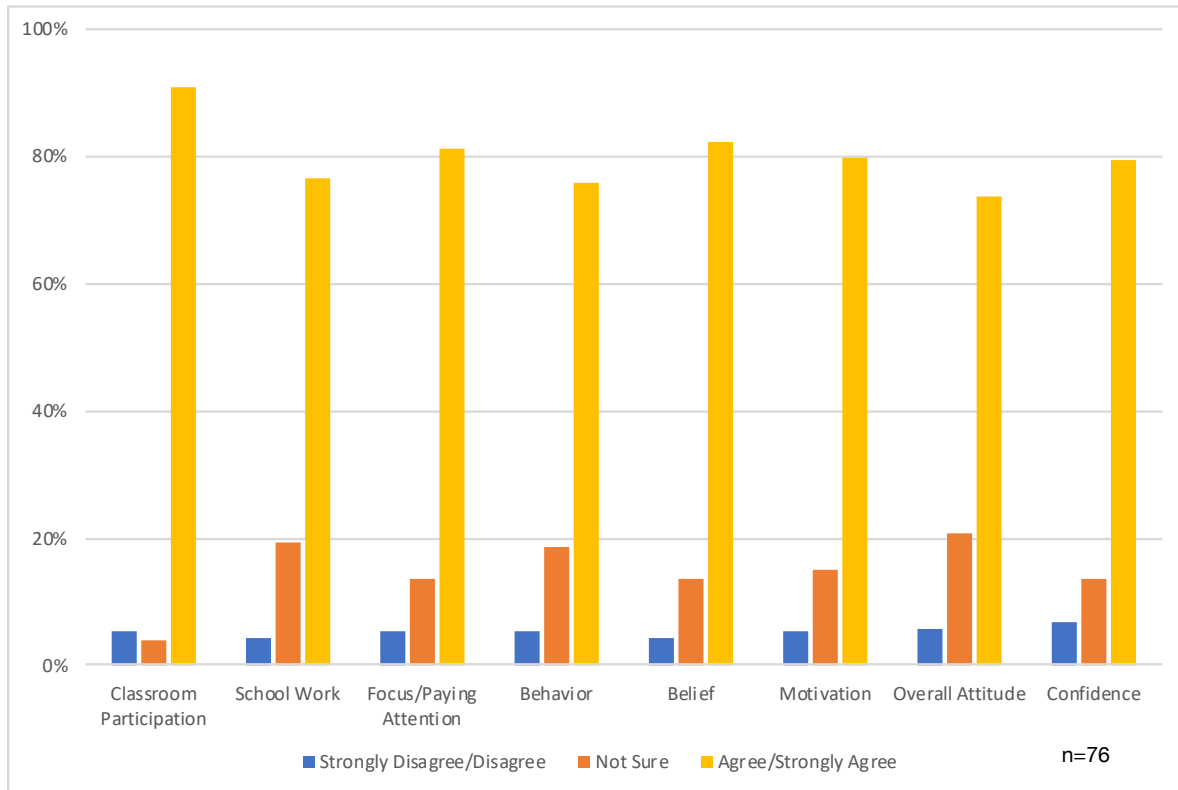
The data indicated that following exposure to the ACE program, 64.1% of students (65% Adams Elementary/61% North Middle) exhibited desired behaviors frequently or very frequently, while 10.4% of students (8% Adams Elementary/19% North Middle) never or rarely did. A two sample t-test for each DESSA-Mini question indicated statistically significant differences ($\alpha=0.05$) in the response means between Adams Elementary and North Middle Schools for questions pertaining to accepting responsibility and performing a nice act for another.

ACE Questionnaire

Students at both Adams Elementary and North Middle Schools completed questionnaires surveying the ACE program’s impact. Response distributions for each question are shown in Figures 3 and 4. For both figures, the root question appeared as, *Was ACE effective in influencing your behaviors in a positive way?*

Figure 3

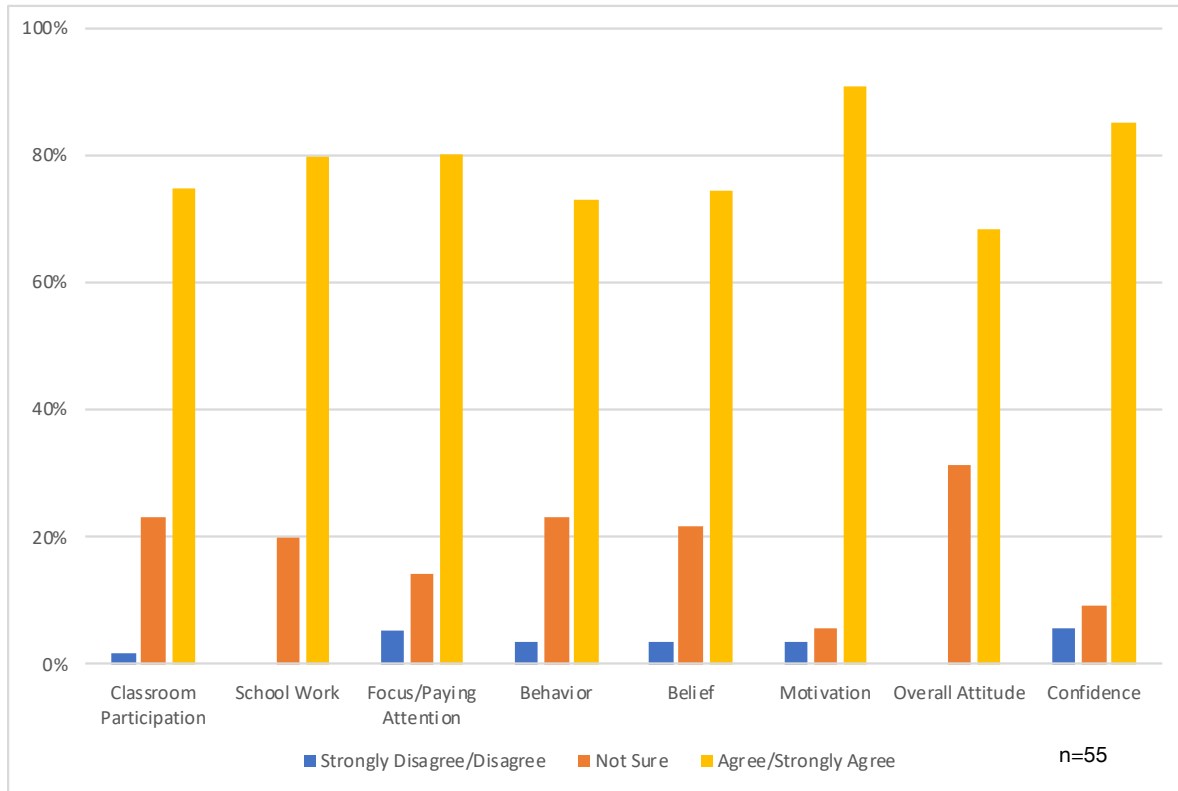
Student Responses to ACE Questionnaire, Adams Elementary School, Third Quarter AY 2019-2020



80% of students at Adams Elementary (n=76) reported agreeing or strongly agreeing that the ACE program positively influenced their behaviors with 78% reporting the same results at North Middle School (n=55). At Adams, *classroom performance* and *belief* were the strongest reported areas (91% and 82%, respectively). At North Middle School students reported the strongest impact in the areas of motivation (91%) and confidence (85%) [statistically significant at $\alpha > 0.10$]. These differences suggest that while students from both schools favorably reported the ACE program in all areas, portions of the ACE program may resonate differently among the grade and middle school populations.

Figure 4

Student Responses to ACE Questionnaire, North Middle School, Second Quarter AY 2019-2020



Panorama SEL

Students at Adams Elementary answered questions from the *Panorama Social-Emotional Learning* (SEL) questionnaire each semester from fall of 2018 to the Spring of 2019. The Panorama SEL is a validated instrument designed to measure various SEL components on a 1-5 Likert scale as shown in Table 1. The administration of the surveys aligned with the introduction of the ACE program in the fall of 2018 and the available longitudinal dataset was used to analyze student perceptions before and after exposure to the ACE program. The sample dataset consisted of 12 purposefully selected at risk students who had exhibited exceptional disciplinary problems for teachers and administrators.

Table 1*Panorama Social-Emotional Learning Results*

SEL Component	Fall 2018	Fall 2019	Change
Compassion	3.1	3.5	0.4
Emotional Regulation	2.8	3.4	0.6*
Engagement	3.4	3.6	0.2
Grit	3.5	3.5	0.0
Learning Strategies	3.6	3.6	0.0
Self-Efficacy	3.0	3.4	0.4
Self-Management	3.2	3.5	0.3
Sense of Belonging	3.7	3.8	0.1
Social Awareness	3.4	3.3	-0.1

* $P < .05$

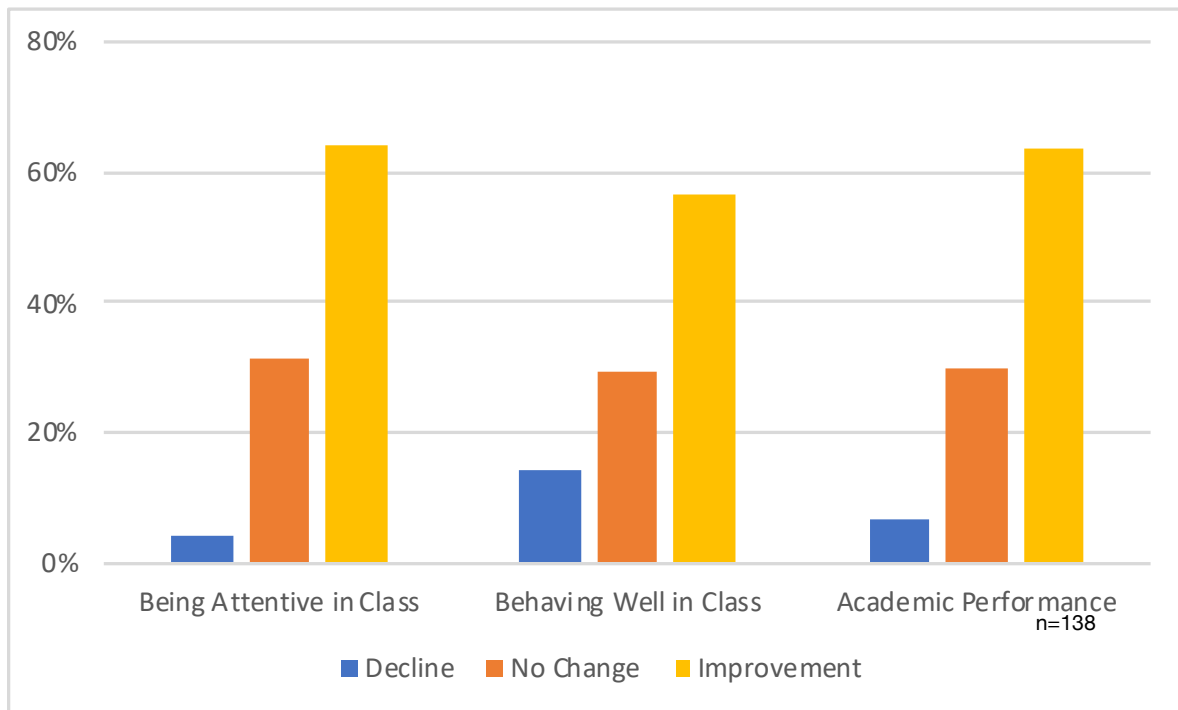
Analysis revealed statistically relevant improvement in the *emotional regulation* category which the school's principal corroborated by noting a reduction in disciplinary problems with those students following ACE program participation.

21st Century Community Learning Centers Assessment

Adams Elementary teachers reported indicators of student attitude and performance (n=171) aligned with the ACE program goals as shown in Figure 7. When completing the assessment, teachers identified those students who both needed (n=138) and did not need improvement (n=33) for each question. For the calculations used to derive Figure 7, only those students identified as needing improvement were included. For the three performance categories shown, teachers reported improvement in 56% and 64% of those students who needed it.

Figure 7

21st Century Community Learning Centers Assessment, Adams Elementary School, Third Quarter AY 2019-2020



STUDENT AND TEACHER COMMENTS

The *word clouds* shown in Figures 5 and 6 highlight the 50 most common words reported by Adams Elementary School students and teachers, respectively, when asked for examples of how they used the Think-Say-Do model taught in the ACE program. (Generated by the NVivo qualitative software package v.12)

Figure 6

Adams Elementary School Teacher Word Cloud Illustrating the Impact of the ACE Program on Their Students



Teachers reported:

Mr. and Mrs. Lee did an excellent job engaging the students with practical everyday lessons that the students could use immediately. The brilliance was that while they are daily lessons for the kids, they are helping to set them up for long term success as well. It was a well designed unit and age appropriate. I saw students who would not consider themselves to be good at learning, paying attention and working.

—Seventh Grade Teacher

We are in our second year of the ACE Program at John Adams Elementary. Last year it was for a small group of students, but now Coach Lee has brought it to the masses. One thing I really like is, that what Coach Lee teaches, we can expand on in our class. A main teaching point that ACE has brought is “Think, Say, Do”. We have reinforced that when we made our vision boards for the new year. The students thought about their dreams and goals for life and for school (THINK), and then spoke them out loud in the form of a vision board (SAY). We also talked about steps to take to achieve those dreams which will help them succeed (DO).

—Fifth grade teacher

The ACE program with Charmas and Janice supports what we are doing here at Adams and what we are hoping to accomplish with our students. ACE, CKH, and PBIS all support the extensive need of our population. I know the kids are gaining real world skills that will help them

not only in school but in life. Charmas has been where these kids are and is living proof that we are not the sum of our DNA. He gives these kids hope for a better life. I would love to have more time with the Lees and see them more regularly. My hope is that they could provide boot camps for kids, field trips to training sessions, and be more interwoven in their life outside of the school walls.

—Fourth grade teacher

In the one year I've been with these kids there a few that stand out to me. There were students throwing punches, chairs, and anything they could get their hands on. Their ability for self-regulation was non-existent. This year those same students still have challenges but have drastically improved their ability to control their anger. They breathe, they think, they use strategies and they better communicate their feelings and what they are struggling with. They are starting to believe in themselves like we believe in them. It's a process but it's begun and I'm super proud of them.

—Third Grade Teacher

DISCIPLINE ISSUES

Adams Elementary School administrators provided disciplinary referral data for both before (Academic Year [AY] 17-18 AY 18-19) and after exposure (1st semester, AY 19-20) to the ACE program (table 2). The COVID-19 pandemic halted attendance during the second semester of AY 19-20, creating a void in disciplinary data for statistical comparison. The first semester AY 19-20 results suggest that disciplinary issues were decreasing following the ACE program.

Table 2.

Pre- and Post-ACE Disciplinary Rates among Third, Fourth, and Fifth Grade Students at Adams Elementary School

Student	2017-2018 referrals	2018-2019 referrals	2019-2020 1st semester referrals
1	9	12	3
2	6	10	4
3	5	3	1
4	1	1	2
5	2	4	2
6	5	9	4
7	14	2	2
8	9	13	3
9	NA	11	8

10	2	0	2
11	2	3	4
12	2	2	1

Conclusions

Education is a gateway for upward mobility throughout the world. The data set analyzed in this study suggests that following exposure to the ACE program, students experienced improved focus, concentration and were better able to regulate their emotions. Analysis supports that learning conditions, attitudes and academic performance improved following exposure to the ACE program at both Adams Elementary School and North Middle School. The data indicated that upon completion of the ACE program, students could better regulate their emotions, were less disruptive, and more motivated to learn.

The ACE program covered similar material for the elementary and middle school student populations under study and yielded positive results for both groups. The elementary and middle school student groups perceived different program benefits, suggesting multiple positive results from the single ACE program.

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