



CASE STUDY



The BARR Center



Year established:
1999



Goal:

Focuses on the make-or-break transitional year ninth graders face in moving up from middle school to high school. The BARR model uses eight interlocking strategies that build intentional relationships, utilize real-time data, and enable schools to achieve concrete academic, social and emotional outcomes for all students.



Impact:

The BARR model is the first and only school-improvement intervention to successfully climb the three tiers of evidence required under the US Department of Education's Investing in Innovation (i3) program. BARR operates in over 100 high schools in 15 states and the District of Columbia. Over the next three years, the number of BARR schools is set to more than double.



Change strategy:

(1) Introduces a positive disruption by requiring schools to embrace eight interconnected strategies that change the way teachers and staff work. (2) Focuses on the "whole learner" by prioritizing relationship building as the foundation for improved academic performance. (3) Fosters supportive relationships among educators by requiring three ninth-grade teachers from core academic areas to form a team that works with the same group of students.

Helping Teachers Connect with Each Other and Their Students

By Lija Farnham and Aviva Altmann

Twenty-one years ago, Angela Jerabek nearly quit her job as a ninth-grade counselor at St. Louis Park High School in suburban Minneapolis. She felt discouraged over the high number of ninth graders failing at least one course, and helpless to remedy the problem. Encouraged by her school's principal, she channeled her frustration into developing an innovative program that builds connections between students and teachers to help both succeed. She called it Building Assets, Reducing Risks (BARR). BARR focuses on ninth graders because they face a make-or-break transitional year from middle school to high school. Research shows that students who succeed in the ninth grade tend to graduate. Many who struggle eventually drop out.

Today, BARR operates in over 100 high schools in 15 states and the District of Columbia, and Jerabek is CEO of a fast-growing organization. Over the next three years, the number of BARR schools is expected to more than double with financial support from the US Department

Photo, above: Students participate in the Lollipop Moment I-Time—an activity in which students and staff reflect on a time someone did or said something that made a difference in their lives. They then write letters to those people and school staff will assist with sending them if students choose to. Credit: Zachary Smith

of Education. BARR stands out as the sole project among 172 federal education innovation grants to progress through randomized controlled trials to win funding at three levels: innovation, development, and scaling up.

Its results are striking. The [BARR model](#) has been proven to create statistically significant impacts in 19 areas of academic performance and outcomes for students, teachers, and schools. And a [Hechinger Report](#) article says, “A little-known program has lifted ninth grade performance in virtually every type of school.” Fewer students ultimately drop out because they feel more engaged and challenged at school. The effects are particularly large for students of color, male students, and students from low-income families.

BARR’s model disrupts the status quo, but not in ways typical of innovative educational programs. It doesn’t require hiring new teachers or changing the student body. It doesn’t overhaul the curriculum or lean on new technology. Instead, it is based on something surprisingly simple. BARR trains teachers to identify and build on students’ strengths to help them thrive in school. To a significant extent, thriving in school requires addressing nonacademic reasons why students fall behind. Hence, BARR prioritizes relationship building as the foundation for improved academic performance.

So how does BARR accomplish all this? It starts with a school adopting BARR’s eight interconnected strategies that fundamentally change the way not just teachers, but administrators, counselors, and the rest of the school staff interact with students.

The strategies:

1. Focus on the whole student,
2. Provide professional development for the staff,
3. Use class time to build social and emotional skills,
4. Create teams of students,
5. Schedule weekly meetings for teachers to discuss students on their teams,
6. Separately plan interventions for high-risk students,
7. Engage administrative staff, and
8. Engage families.

To implement this multifaceted strategy, BARR provides an operating structure that translates aspiration to action. Here’s how it works.

The BARR Center supports schools through the initial disruption that may come with adoption of the model. Specifically, they provide an initial two day in-person BARR implementation training, with two trainers, one of which becomes the school’s dedicated BARR coach. Through weekly planning, coaching and on-site visits, the BARR coach guides school staff to ensure they get the initial lift towards high fidelity implementation and achievement of their identified school goals.

“In every aspect of the model, from the frame itself, down to the day-to-day operations, the first question every teacher has to answer is, ‘What is the student’s strength?’”

ANGELA JERABEK, FOUNDER, BARR

BARR's model requires at least three ninth-grade teachers from core academic areas to form a team that works with the same group of students. That means, for instance, the same students have English, math, and social studies together. A large high school may have multiple teacher teams, each with a distinctive student cohort. This team and cohort approach often requires significant retooling of the way schools handle class assignments. But it's critical for the BARR model.

These cross-disciplinary teams change the way teachers interact. In a typical high school, teachers meet periodically for departmental professional development discussions. BARR breaks down the departmental silos and shifts the conversation from a strictly academic focus to a whole-student perspective.

That more complete view of students takes shape in weekly team meetings, called block time, where teachers share observations of each student's strengths and challenges. Block time centers on what Jerabek calls one of the BARR model's "defining pillars": real-time data. The team works off a spreadsheet that builds a picture of each student by reviewing a variety of in-school factors, including progress in class, attendance, and behavior. The team also discusses factors outside the school, such as extracurricular interests, personal health, issues with other students, or troubles at home. All this data collection allows the team to flag challenges early and work together to solve problems. Importantly, teachers track not just problems but student strengths to identify achievable goals to get or keep students on track for success. "In every aspect of the model, from the frame itself, down to the day-to-day operations, the first question every teacher has to answer is, 'What is the student's strength?'" says Jerabek.



Students share their lollipop moment with conference attendees. Credit: Zachary Smith

Gene Roundtree, headmaster of Snowden International School, a Boston public school, says BARR's emphasis on holistic understanding helped teachers to better support their students. "Before, I don't think our whole team had the opportunity to share the information we have in ways that allow us to understand the totality of the student experience at times where we can plan interventions," says Roundtree. "BARR allows us to have more touchpoints with the students and fewer cracks for the kids to slip into." As an example of this, Jerabek tells the troubling story of another school, where this process of teachers sharing notes on the same students to better understand their full stories led to the discovery that three girls were victims of sex trafficking.

“BARR allows us to have more touchpoints with the students and fewer cracks for the kids to slip into.”

GENE ROUNDTREE, HEADMASTER, SNOWDEN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL, BOSTON

For students coping with the toughest situations in and out of school, BARR's model requires a weekly "risk review" meeting that involves more specialized staff, such as the truancy prevention coordinator, school nurse, or school psychologist. They consider the need for tapping community resources to assist with a range of issues, such as eating disorders, fears of deportation, family dysfunction, or chronic illness.

The second "defining pillar" of the BARR program, says Jerabek, is cultivation of "positive intentional relationships." Team teachers take turns guiding a weekly class discussion called I-Time (as in the personal pronoun) that focuses on relationship building among classmates and between teachers and students. BARR provides teachers a list of discussion topics and coaches them on how to facilitate conversations that tap into social and emotional skill development. The year starts out with activities that help students get to know each other and progresses to deeper conversations, such as race, bullying, and substance abuse.

It is not unusual for teachers to express skepticism of the BARR model when first introduced. Josh Tripp, a former math teacher and now the principal of Bucksport High School in Maine, remembers his initial hesitation. "I was trying to figure out whether this would really show a big benefit to our school," he recalls. "Our graduation rate was only 73 percent, so we had to try something. I was on board, but I was a little skeptical of the SEL (social and emotional learning) piece. I was that math teacher saying, 'do I have to give up 30 minutes of my week and not do math?' The program pushed me outside my comfort level." Bucksport's graduation rate is now 90 percent.

Skepticism shifts to support as teachers see the power of the program. Pedro Nuño, the BARR coordinator for Moreno Valley Unified School District in California, observes that the relationships built during I-Time not only helped to improve students' behavior, but actually transformed how students saw him as a resource and supporter. "We did a lot of activities that didn't involve math, and I got to know kids on a personal level," says Nuño. "We got to build those relationships, so they were willing to do the work because they didn't want to disappoint me. The kids need to know that we care about them."

Students benefit, in good measure, because BARR strengthens relationships among teachers and school staff. Cross-disciplinary cohort-based teams break down typical

department-level silos and foster collaboration among teachers and staff to better understand and serve students.

Teachers spoke to how BARR's block-time relationship-building experience pushed them to be vulnerable with each other. Tripp, the Bucksport High principal, says coming together with other teachers around a student cohort, and seeing some teachers succeed with students better than others, caused him to push his own professional development more than other experiences he'd had. "It's a reflective process for me," he explains. "What is it about my class, my instructional strategy, that is not working for the student? It exposes real vulnerabilities for teachers, and it's also a great opportunity for professional growth."

Collaboration also encourages teachers to hold each other accountable. The block-time meetings require all teachers in the cohort to participate and play equal roles to ensure the success of the meeting. Tripp says that teachers at his school now realize if they don't get their data together, the meeting isn't productive. "My colleagues are sitting here, thinking, 'why didn't you do all the stuff that needs to be done?'" he adds. "They are increasingly accountable to their peers, and that is so powerful."

Lija Farnham is a partner in The Bridgespan Group's San Francisco office. Aviva Altmann is a manager also in the San Francisco office.

The authors thank Bridgespan Editorial Director Roger Thompson for his help in drafting this case study.

THE BRIDGESPAN GROUP

BOSTON 2 Copley Place, 7th Floor, Suite 3700B, Boston, MA 02116 USA. Tel: +1 617 572 2833

JOHANNESBURG Bridgespan Africa Initiative, 10 The High St., Melrose Arch, 2076, Johannesburg, South Africa. Tel: +27 11 012 9280

MUMBAI Bridgespan India Private Limited (registered address), 9th Floor, Platina, G Block, Plot C 59, Bandra Kurla Complex, Mumbai, 400051, India. Tel: +91 022 6628 9624

NEW YORK 333 Seventh Avenue, 11th Floor, New York, NY 10001 USA. Tel: +1 646 562 8900

SAN FRANCISCO 88 Kearny St., Ste. 200, San Francisco, CA 94108 USA. Tel: +1 415 627 4500



www.bridgespan.org

contact@bridgespan.org
contactindia@bridgespan.org