

Student Upward Mobility in the Mississippi Delta

A new research collaboration highlights the role that middle school life skills play in fostering academic success and college readiness.

The effort draws on data collected by the Indianola and Deer Creek Promise Communities, two place-based initiatives in the rural Mississippi Delta led by Delta Health Alliance (DHA). Operating in Indianola since 2012 and in Leland and Hollandale since 2017 through the U.S. Department of Education's Promise Neighborhoods Program, these initiatives support local youth with a wide variety of both academic and non-academic supports in partnerships with local school districts.

The study pairs data collected through DHA's interventions with academic and economic mobility data available in Mississippi's state longitudinal data system through a partnership with NSPARC, a research center at Mississippi State University.

Findings are in line with Delta Health Alliance's intervention strategy in the Mississippi Delta, which target both academic and non-academic factors, according to Dr. Karen Matthews, DHA's CEO and principal investigator of the research study. *"Programs such as Life Skills, Youth Council, and Families & School Together complement our academic offerings to provide Delta students with the best chance to thrive"*, she said.

The research findings *"contribute to a growing corpus of evidence linking non-cognitive competencies to later measures of economic mobility"*, said Dr. Rachel Arthur, lead evaluator of Promise Communities programming at the University of Memphis, Center for Community Research and Evaluation (CCRE), which supported the study. According to Dr. Arthur, this project *"is one of few studies that examines long term student outcomes using contextually sensitive, school-based metrics."* Dr. Wesley James, DHA's external evaluator and executive director of the CCRE, said that the study *"uniquely connects Promise Neighborhoods data with other data sources to inform our understanding of economic mobility."*

The study also explored later outcomes such as wages and employment, as well as other categories of non-cognitive skills, but did not find effects for these areas. The study did, however, find that substance use knowledge was also positively associated with academic proficiency and post-secondary enrollment.



STUDY FINDINGS

Students with stronger life skills competencies in grades 7-9, are

- » 150% more likely to be proficient on the English II exam in tenth grade
- » 64% more likely to be proficient in Algebra I

Self-control skills, reflecting students' ability to persevere against adversity

- » Improved academic proficiency
- » May have increased the prospects of enrolling in college by up to 20%

These effects hold even when controlling for baseline levels of academic proficiency, as well as contextual factors such as economic advantage, absenteeism, household characteristics, and demographics.

The most recent version of the manuscript is available on the website of the [University of Memphis, Center for Community Research and Evaluation \(CCRE\)](#).

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