Overcoming Obstacles

APRIL
2021

Life Skills Curriculum for Elementary, Middle, and High School

EVALUATION OF CURRICULUM IMPLEMENTATION AND STUDENT IMPACT

Educator Survey

Academic Years: 2018-2019 and 2019-2020

RUTGERS
School of Social Work
INSTITUTE FOR FAMILIES

OVERCOMING
OBSTACLES®

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Praise for Overcoming Obstacles Curricula

Freely Available ✓   Flexible ✓   Organized ✓   Generates Discussion ✓   Engages Students ✓

Recommends **Overcoming Obstacles** Curricula

92%

Using **Overcoming Obstacles** Curricula

38% Teachers
37% Counselors/Social Workers
25% Other
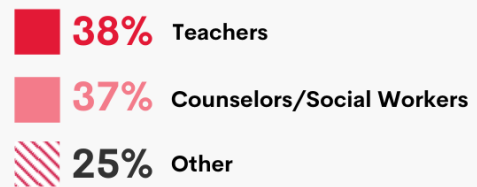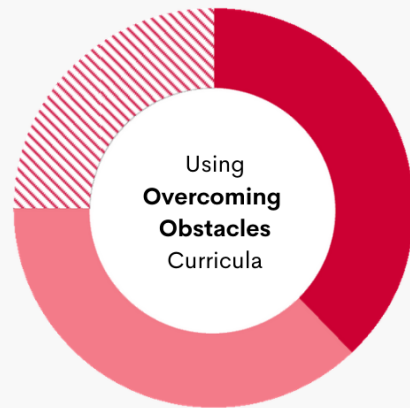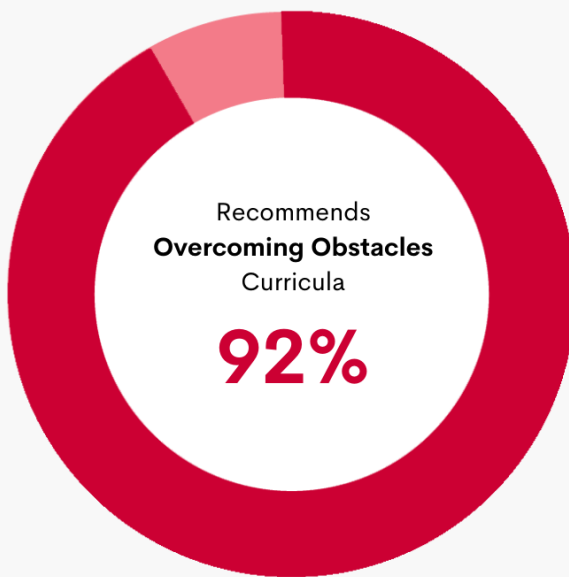
Helps Students Develop Skills

91% Social

87% Emotional

72% Academic

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What are educators telling us about Overcoming Obstacles?

"I am in love with the curriculum and the depth that it covers. I wish the general public was ready for it and understand that this is the need of the moment. I am optimistic that that day will come. Thank you for creating this wonderful curriculum."

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"I have recommended this curriculum to every School of Social Work intern I've had in the past 4 or 5 years, as well as many professionals! It's easy to access, user friendly, and just great interactive opportunities for kids! I highly recommend this!"

· ·

"The Curriculum worked great for my group of kids. There were some activities they dove right into-others, not so much. We have so many ups and downs at our High School Alternative school. Very relevant topics and high-interest, so it made it easy to get the kids involved."

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"I am so impressed with the whole curricula, especially the section where extensions and journal prompts were included. I liked that very little materials or planning was needed to implement these powerful lessons. Students enjoyed them as well."

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"Group activities worked really well when they were physically involved. I was very fortunate to be able to use the dance studio for such activities which had a huge impact on the success of the activity."

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"Thank you so much - we really enjoyed utilizing Overcoming Obstacles Life Skills Curricula as a resource & look forward to continue using it within our program."

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"I am a social worker on the west side of Chicago. Illinois. I found the program very helpful in identifying Common Core goals and implementing services to those students who might receive special education services. I really liked the way things were broken down into developmental stages, which gave me the opportunity to really understand where the child was at in regards to understanding their environment."

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"Best curricula to use here with our students. If something didn't fit, I would simplify or adjust to fit our needs."

· ·

"When I started teaching Middle School (moving from High School) I was at a loss for finding a curriculum I could use. When I found Overcoming Obstacles, I was so relieved. It is very engaging, and my students enjoyed most of the activities. I live in a very diverse community, so I had to change a few of the lessons to be culturally cognoscente, but It has worked out very well."

· ·

"Teaching Overcoming Obstacles has been a very good experience with my students. The students I have, have obstacles to overcome on a daily basis. It just takes a little more time to go thru and pick different lessons that apply to the students. Some weeks I have used elementary, middle and high school curriculum."

· ·

"I love this curriculum. It can be easily modified for the time limits I need. It is simple enough to pick up and teach to students.It also is worded to give the kids pause to think about the subject not just how they can rush through and go to the next. I believe it has had an impact on the students I work with."

· ·

"My clinical interns and students in Classroom & Behavior Management (College of Charleston) were appreciative of the easy access to the online curriculum. They were able to use components in their classrooms and field experiences. While Principal at a Charleston High School, we used the curriculum bi-monthly during our advisement period and it worked very nicely. The modules are relevant and adaptable to local issues / needs."

Survey Highlights

Overcoming Obstacles is a free curriculum that provides educators with the tools to teach elementary, middle, and high school students life skills (www.overcomingobstacles.org). The curriculum is intended to be delivered in a wide variety of settings, such as stand-alone classes, counseling sessions, advisory periods, after-school programs, character education, in-school suspension, peer mentoring initiatives, and/or infused into core content classes.

This report presents findings from the Educator Survey as part of an independent evaluation of the Overcoming Obstacles Life Skills Curriculum (OO) conducted by the Institute for Families (IFF) at the Rutgers School of Social Work.

The primary questions the survey intended to answer were:
1) What are educators' experiences implementing the curriculum?
2) How can the curriculum be improved?

The survey invitation was emailed to educators who registered between July 1, 2017 and June 30, 2019 on the Overcoming Obstacles website to download the curriculum. The survey was administered from August 19, 2020-September 30, 2020, and 1,280 educators indicated that they had used the Overcoming Obstacles curricula. Respondents were directed to different survey paths based on the degree to which they implemented Overcoming Obstacles during the 2018-2019 and/or 2019-2020 academic years. The end of the survey requested feedback specific to curricula they implemented. Note that many states shut down schools for the end of the 2019-2020 school year due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which could have impacted curriculum implementation and survey results. All data were collected anonymously to encourage open and honest feedback.

Highlights:

- While most survey respondents are employed in public schools, there are a wide variety of users of the Overcoming Obstacles curriculum including teachers, counselors, social workers, and other positions.
- There were respondents from every state, two U.S territories, as well as respondents who used the curricula internationally.
- The large majority of respondents had a favorable opinion of Life Skills instruction and its impact on students, and indicated that it helped students develop socially, emotionally, and academically.
- The large majority of respondents also indicated that it helped students develop life skills such as communication, decision making, problem solving, resolve conflicts, goal setting, and stress management.
- Most respondents reported that lessons positively impact student outcomes such as classroom engagement, behavior, and preparation for the future, with fewer reporting a positive impact on absences and/or tardiness.
- Overcoming Obstacles is most frequently praised for being freely available, its flexibility, organization, and ability to generate discussion and keep students engaged.
- A large majority of respondents who implemented Overcoming Obstacles would recommend it to their colleagues.
- Most suggestions for improving the curricula were requests for more components. These included requests for interactive content and activities geared towards the virtual classroom environment, which has become more common due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and a brief PowerPoint or script overview for educators to introduce the curricula to colleagues.
- A wide range of additional topics were also requested, ranging from law, equality, and social justice, to substance abuse, social media, online etiquette, self-identity, dating, and addressing social/emotional and mental health challenges related to trauma and the pandemic.
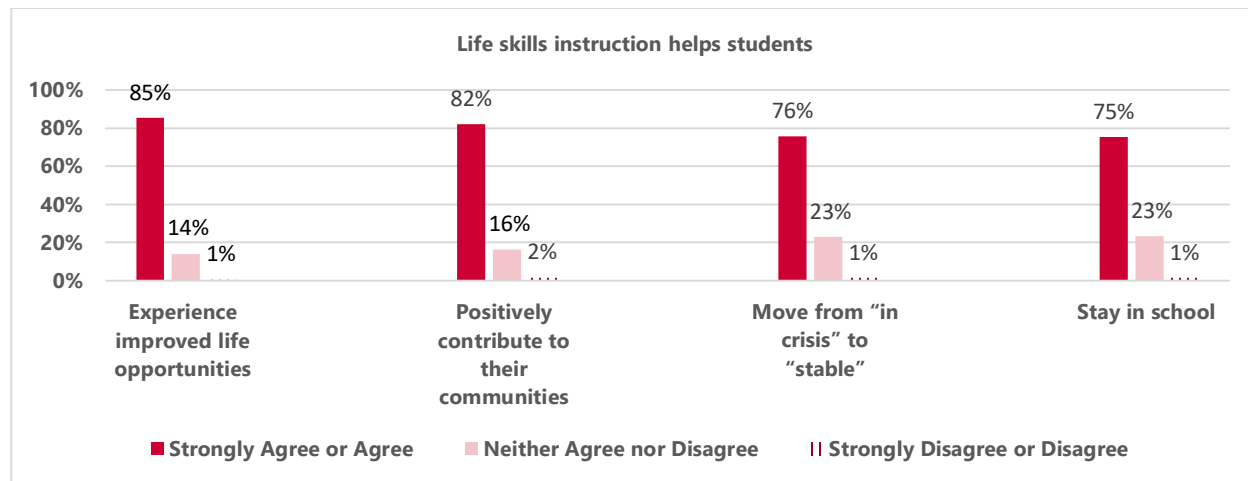
Respondent Demographics

Respondents to the Overcoming Obstacles Curricula evaluation survey included a wide variety of educators. 1,280 respondents indicated they had used the curricula, and these included teachers, counselors/student advisors, social workers, and other positions. Most are employed in public schools. There were respondents from every state, two U.S territories, as well as from other countries.

- **71%** of respondents are employed in public schools; **7%** are employed in charter schools; **4%** are employed in denominational or non-denominational private schools; and **10%** are employed in other educational settings including nontraditional schools, adult educational programs, and/or detention centers; **8%** of respondents are educators that work outside of the classroom such as after-school programs, non-profits, postsecondary education, residential treatment centers, and homeschooling.
- When asked "What is your current position?", **38%** of respondents reported they are teachers or assistant teachers; **26%** are school counselors or student advisors; **11%** are social workers; **3%** are afterschool care providers; **4%** are administrators; and **15%** hold other positions including coaches (athletic, career, behavior support, and curriculum/instruction), and vocational coordinators, volunteers, librarians, and homeschool parents.
- There were respondents from every state, two U.S territories (n=7), and five respondents had used the Overcoming Obstacles Life Skills Curricula internationally (Belize, China, Myanmar, and Vietnam). The highest proportion of respondents reported using the curricula in New York **(10%)**, followed by South Carolina **(7%),** and California **(7%).**

Impact of Life Skills Curriculum on Students

The large majority of respondents had a favorable opinion of Life Skills instruction and its impact on students.

- **85%** report that it helps students experience improved life opportunities
- **82%** report that it helps students contribute positively to the community
- **76%** report that it helps students move from an in-crisis status to a stable status
- **75%** report that it helps students stay in school

Life skills instruction helps students

	Experience improved life opportunities	Positively contribute to their communities	Move from "in crisis" to "stable"	Stay in school
Strongly Agree or Agree	85%	82%	76%	75%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	14%	16%	23%	23%
Strongly Disagree or Disagree	1%	2%	1%	1%

Impact of Overcoming Obstacles on Student Growth

Of the respondents who implemented Overcoming Obstacles during the 2018-2019 or 2019-2020 academic years, the majority reported that the curricula contributed positively to their students' growth.

- **72%** report that it helped students develop academically
- **87%** report that it helped students develop emotionally
- **91%** report that it helped students develop socially

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about how Overcoming Obstacles Life Skills Curricula helped your students develop overall during the 2018-2019 or 2019-2020 academic year?

	Academic	Emotional	Social
Strongly Agree or Agree	72%	87%	91%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	26%	11%	8%
Strongly Disagree or Disagree	2%	1%	1%
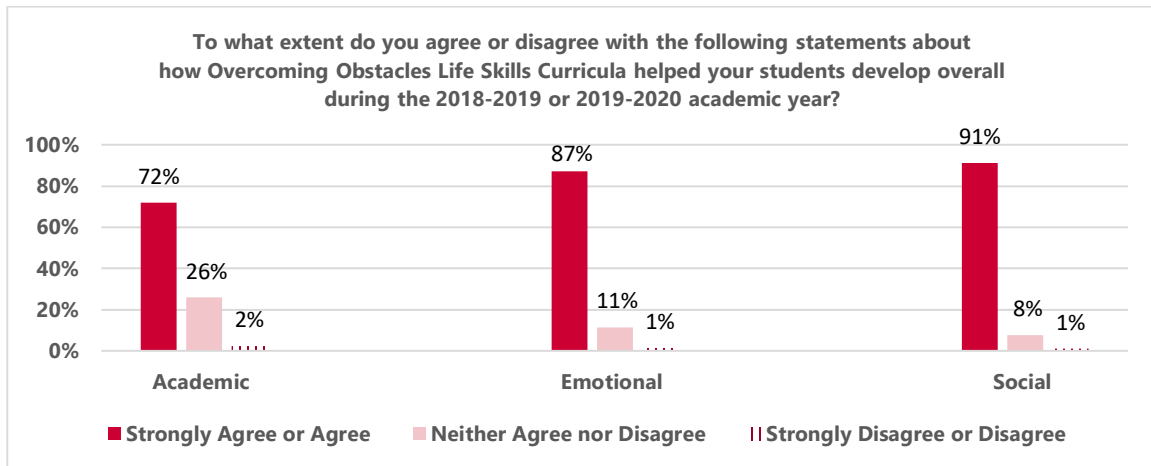
Impact of Overcoming Obstacles on Student Skill Development

Of the respondents who implemented Overcoming Obstacles during the 2018-2019 or 2019-2020 academic years, the majority reported the curricula helped their students with skill development.

- **88%** report that it helped make students with decision making skills
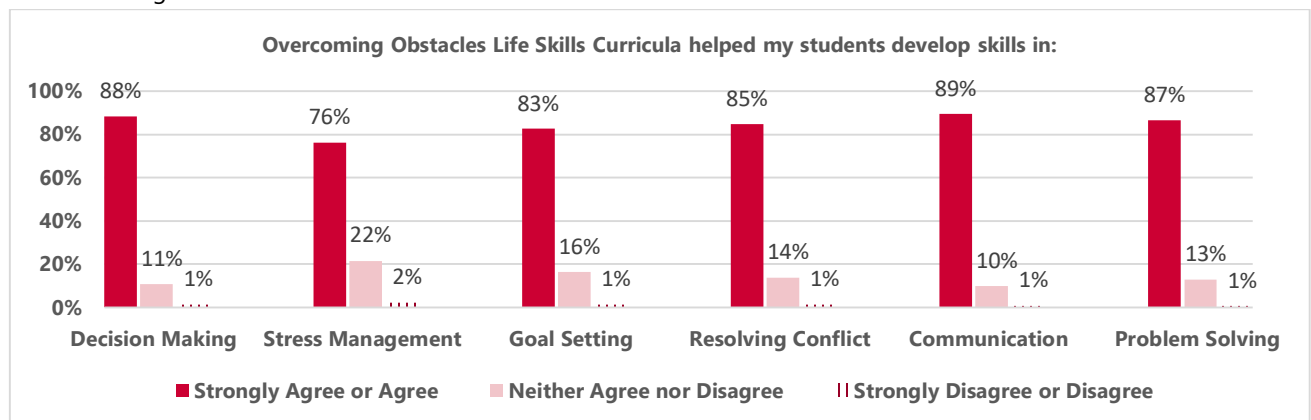- **76%** report that students were better able to manage stress
- **83%** report that it helped students with goal setting skills

- **85%** report that it helped students resolve conflict
- **89%** report that it helped students with communication skills
- **87%** report that its improved students' problem-solving skills

Overcoming Obstacles Life Skills Curricula helped my students develop skills in:

	Decision Making	Stress Management	Goal Setting	Resolving Conflict	Communication	Problem Solving
Strongly Agree or Agree	88%	76%	83%	85%	89%	87%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	11%	22%	16%	14%	10%	13%
Strongly Disagree or Disagree	1%	2%	1%	1%	1%	1%

Impact of Overcoming Obstacles on Student Outcomes

Of the respondents who implemented the curricula during the 2018-2019 or 2019-2020 academic years, most reported that the lessons had positive impacts such as classroom engagement, behavior, and preparation for the future, with fewer reporting a positive impact on absences and/or tardiness.

- **84%** report that it helped engage their students in the classroom
- **58%** report that it helped improve academic performance
- **74%** report that it improved their students' behavior in the classroom
- **40%** report that its improved student absences and/or tardiness

- **62%** report that it helped middle school students adequately prepared for high school
- **63%** report that it helped high school students for college or a career
- **67%** report that it prepared for HS, college or a career

Overcoming Obstacles Life Skills Curricula helped to:

Category	Strongly Agree or Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Strongly Disagree or Disagree
Improve classroom Engagement	84%	14%	2%
Improve academic performance	58%	40%	3%
Improve classroom behavior	74%	24%	3%
Reduce absences and/or tardiness	40%	48%	12%
Prepare for high school	62%	35%	3%
Prepare for college or a career	63%	34%	3%
Prepare for HS, college, or a career	67%	30%	3%
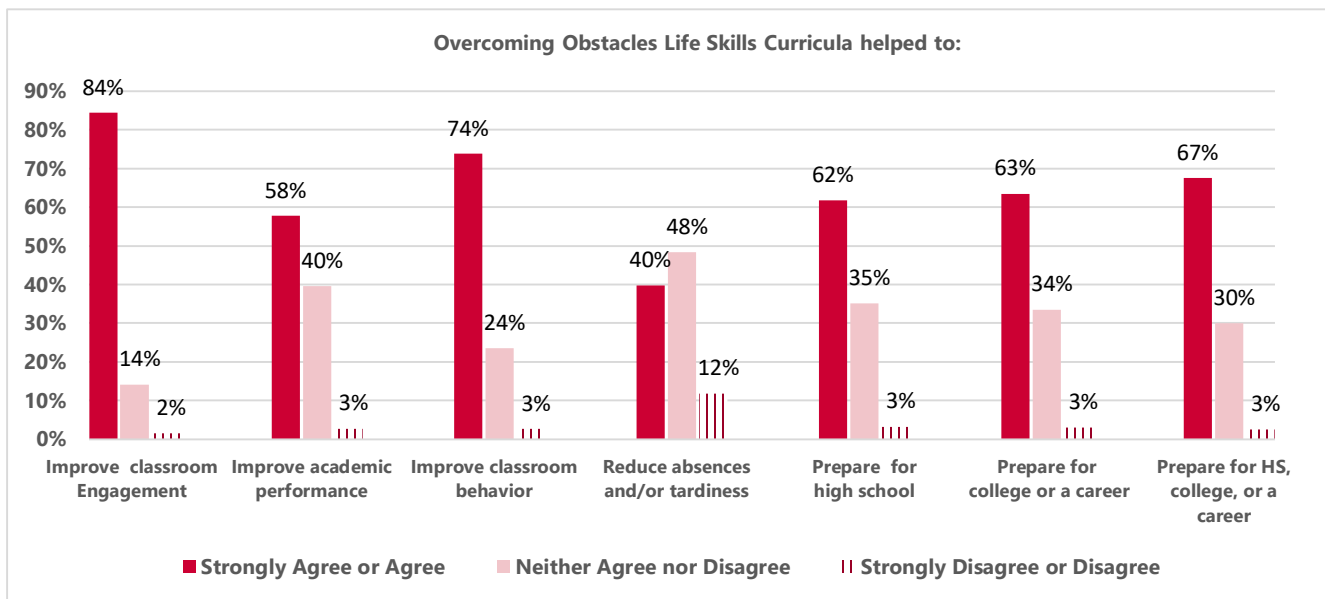
Helpfulness of Each Overcoming Obstacles Life Skills MIDDLE SCHOOL Module
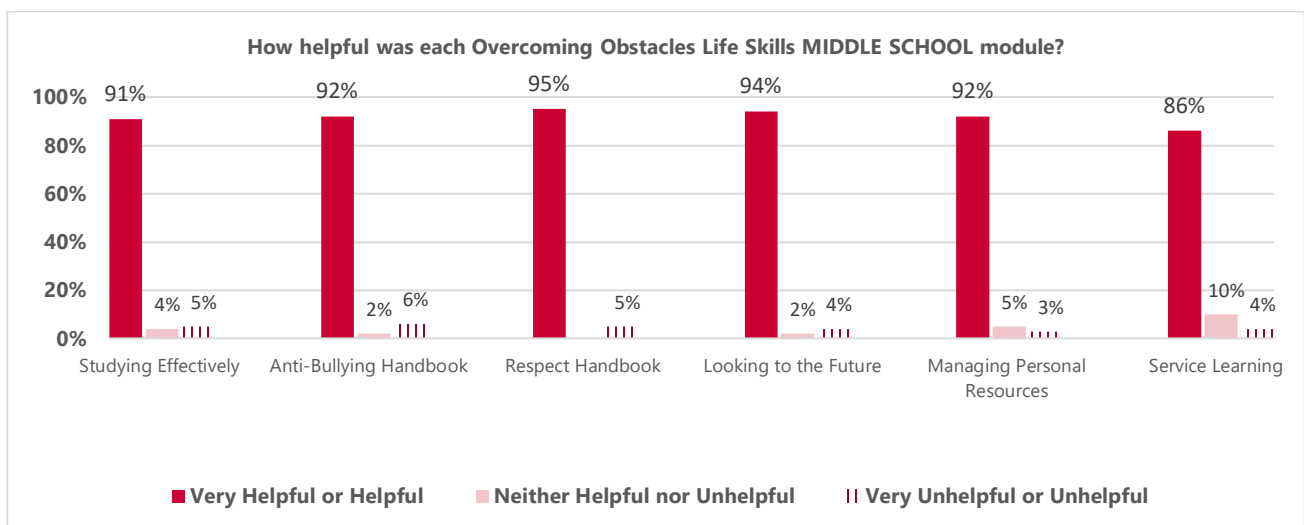
Of the respondents who implemented the middle school curricula during the 2018-2019 or 2019-2020 academic years, most reported that the modules were helpful to the middle school students.

- **96%** reported Goal Setting and Getting started modules were helpful
- **95%** reported the Resolving Conflicts, Decision Making, and Communication modules were helpful

- **95%** reported the Confidence Building and Problem Solving modules were helpful

How helpful was each Overcoming Obstacles Life Skills MIDDLE SCHOOL module?

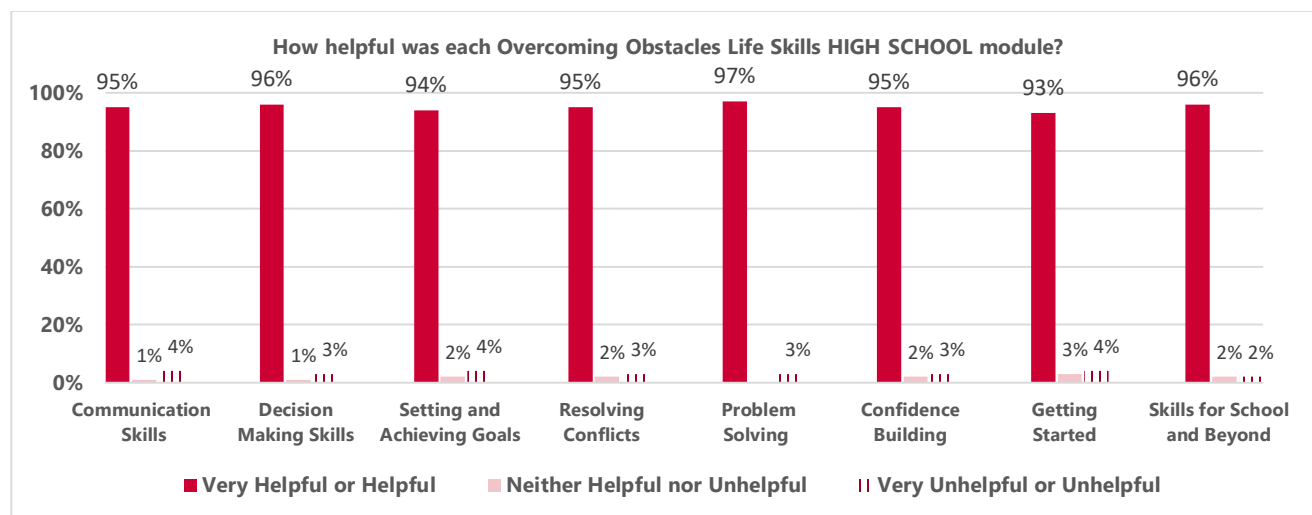|	Resolving Conflicts	Goal Setting	Decision Making	Communication	Confidence Building	Problem Solving	Getting Started
Very Helpful or Helpful	95%	96%	95%	95%	95%	95%	96%
Neither Helpful nor Unhelpful	1%	2%	1%	1%	2%	1%	2%
Very Unhelpful or Unhelpful	4%	2%	4%	4%	3%	4%	2%
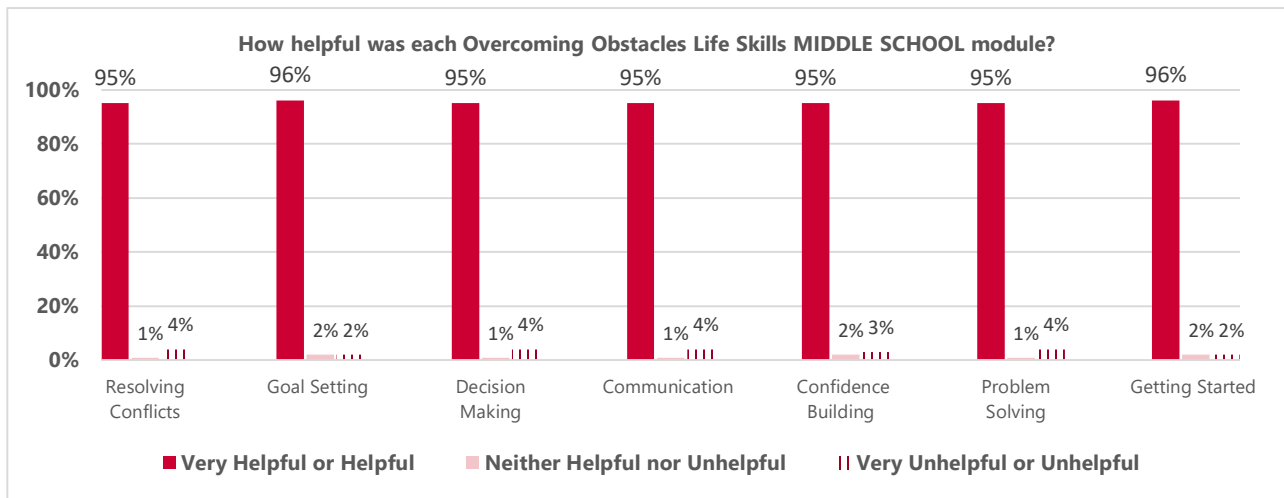
- **95%** reported the Respect Handbook module was helpful
- **91%** reported the Studying Effectively module was helpful
- **94%** reported the Looking to the Future module was helpful

- **92%** reported the Anti-Bullying Handbook and Managing Personal Resources modules were helpful
- **86%** reported the Service Learning module was helpful

How helpful was each Overcoming Obstacles Life Skills MIDDLE SCHOOL module?

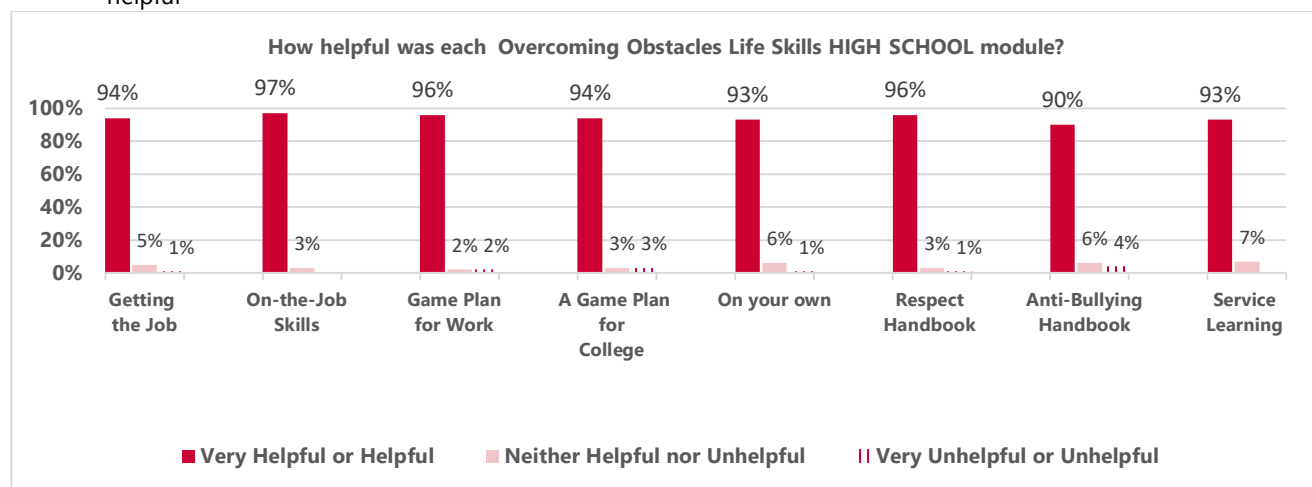|	Studying Effectively	Anti-Bullying Handbook	Respect Handbook	Looking to the Future	Managing Personal Resources	Service Learning
Very Helpful or Helpful	91%	92%	95%	94%	92%	86%
Neither Helpful nor Unhelpful	4%	2%		2%	5%	10%
Very Unhelpful or Unhelpful	5%	6%	5%	4%	3%	4%

Helpfulness of Each Overcoming Obstacles Life Skills HIGH SCHOOL Module

Of the respondents who implemented the high school curricula during the 2018-2019 or 2019-2020 academic years, most reported that the modules were helpful to the high school students.

- **97%** reported the Problem Solving module was helpful
- **96%** reported the Decision Making Skills, and Skills for School and Beyond modules were helpful
- **95%** reported the Communication Skills, Resolving Conflicts, and Confidence Building modules were helpful

- **94%** reported the Setting and Achieving Goals module was helpful
- **93%** reported the Getting Started module was helpful

How helpful was each Overcoming Obstacles Life Skills HIGH SCHOOL module?

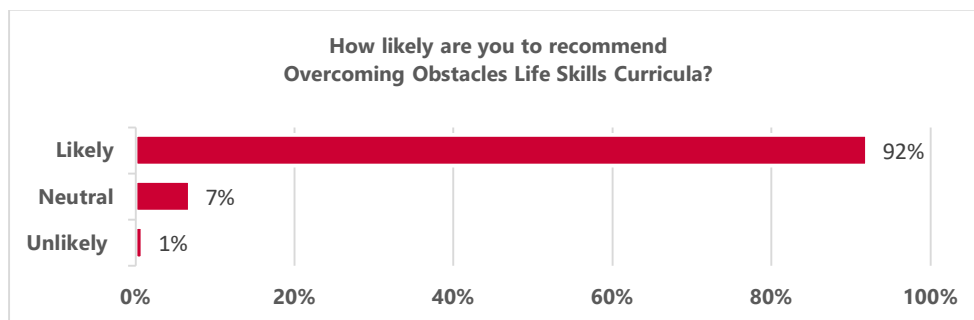| Module	Very Helpful or Helpful	Neither Helpful nor Unhelpful	Very Unhelpful or Unhelpful
Communication Skills	95%	1%	4%
Decision Making Skills	96%	1%	3%
Setting and Achieving Goals	94%	2%	4%
Resolving Conflicts	95%	2%	3%
Problem Solving	97%	3%	
Confidence Building	95%	2%	3%
Getting Started	93%	3%	4%
Skills for School and Beyond	96%	2%	2%

- **97%** reported the On-the-Job Skills module was helpful
- **96%** reported the Game Plan for Work, and Respect Handbook modules were helpful
- **94%** reported the Getting the Job, and A Game Plan for College/Higher Education modules were helpful

- **93%** reported the On Your Own, and Service Learning modules were helpful
- **90%** reported the Anti-Bullying Handbook module was helpful

How helpful was each Overcoming Obstacles Life Skills HIGH SCHOOL module?

Module	Very Helpful or Helpful	Neither Helpful nor Unhelpful	Very Unhelpful or Unhelpful
Getting the Job	94%	5%	1%
On-the-Job Skills	97%	3%	
Game Plan for Work	96%	2%	2%
A Game Plan for College	94%	3%	3%
On your own	93%	6%	1%
Respect Handbook	96%	3%	1%
Anti-Bullying Handbook	90%	6%	4%
Service Learning	93%	7%	

Additional Educator Comments and Endorsements

92% of respondents who have implemented the Overcoming Obstacles curricula are "Likely" (likely or extremely likely) to recommend it to other educators, while only **1%** of respondents were "Unlikely" (unlikely or extremely unlikely) to recommend it. In the open-ended comments, educators praised the program's relevance, adaptability, and value, as well as the layout of the curriculum, and the curriculum's ability to engage students in thoughtful discussion.

How likely are you to recommend Overcoming Obstacles Life Skills Curricula?

Likely	92%
Neutral	7%
Unlikely	1%

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%

Recommendations for Overcoming Obstacles Curricula

While the Overcoming Obstacles Curricula was well rated, participants suggested additional updates to consider. Details of respondents' comments, suggestions, and usage of the curricula are included in the Appendices.

- Updating curricula: While many educators praised the positive benefits of the curricula on student outcomes, many noted that it did not improve student absences or tardiness. It is recommended to review the absence and tardiness curriculum to examine if curriculum updates or instructor guides could improve outcomes, and/or if external factors beyond the students' control are impacting the outcomes, and provide guidance to students to help them mitigate the impact of tardiness and absences that are beyond their control.

- Adding content to current curricula: It is recommended to review materials and the nationwide expectations for virtual delivery in educational settings in the future, to select optimal areas to add content. Most suggestions for improving the curricula requested more components. This included more virtual-friendly materials, such as interactive content geared towards the virtual classroom environment, and activities to assist with the remote delivery that is currently more common due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Adding new curricula topics: Most current topics were highly rated and a wide range of additional topics were also requested. If future additions are being considered, it is recommended to review the educators' topic requests, which ranged from law, equality, and social justice, to substance abuse, social media, online etiquette, self-identity, dating, and addressing social/emotional and mental health challenges related to trauma and the pandemic.

- Increasing educator efficacy: Some educators reported that their limited knowledge on how to teach the content had a negative impact on their implementation of the curricula. It may be helpful to provide instructor guides and/or develop online videos for curricula implementation training.

- Provide materials to help publicize and increase understanding and usage of the Overcoming Obstacles curricula: Educators indicated that the "lack of interest in teaching life skills by administrators" was a challenge to implementing the curricula. Thus, it is recommended to publicize the positive experiences and outcomes of implementing the Overcoming Obstacles curriculum, especially to school administrators. One participant suggested adding a brief PowerPoint or script overview for educators to introduce the curricula to colleagues. This addition could be developed with the intent to not only further the use among educators, but to also increase buy-in from administrators for greater inclusion of the curricula in their school or district programming.