

***Increasing Awareness and Empathy around Disabilities:  
Rutland County, Vermont, Partner Schools Spotlight***

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## **Introduction**

Changing Perspectives ([www.ChangingPerspectivesNow.org](http://www.ChangingPerspectivesNow.org)) is a national nonprofit organization that provides disability awareness programs in schools through a combination of curriculum materials and educator training opportunities. Its mission is to engage students in open dialogue and real-world experiences to promote disability awareness and foster inclusive communities. Schools across the country are dealing with issues of bullying and social isolation while also being asked to meet the academic and emotional needs of increasingly diverse student bodies. Awareness is the foundation of empathy. For students to achieve a greater sense of empathy, they must first develop an awareness and appreciation of differences.

This report presents findings from eight partner schools in Rutland County, Vermont, that implemented Changing Perspectives programming during the 2018-2019 school year.

## **Programming**

### **Awareness Curriculum**

Changing Perspectives offers schools access to three curricula: PreK Kindness & Empathy, K-8 Disability Awareness, and High School Disability Awareness. This study presents data from educators and students participating in the K-8 curriculum.

The Changing Perspectives K-8 Disability Curriculum uses the lens of specific disabilities, both visible and invisible, to help students gain awareness of and knowledge about disabilities, inspire empathy, and support inclusion. Educators at Changing Perspectives partner schools access all materials – lesson plans, simulation and other hands-on activities, book lists, video clips, reflection exercises – through an online portal. The curriculum is designed to be highly flexible to enable educators to choose from among a range of materials and set the duration of time to use the curriculum; this empowers educators to implement the program in a way that is most relevant and meaningful to their students.

### **Coaching & Professional Development Opportunities**

Recognizing that the issues brought up as part of these curricula can be sensitive ones, Changing Perspectives offers optional coaching to partner schools as an integral facet of the programs. Coaching is designed to assist classroom teachers, guidance counselors, and other faculty in navigating and implementing the program to maximize the benefits for students, educators, and the school.

community. Schools may also opt to engage in more in-depth coaching and/or professional development workshops and activities as part of their Changing Perspectives experience.

## **Study Population: Rutland County Partner Schools**

During the 2018-19 school year, 55 schools in eight states and one abroad implemented a Changing Perspectives curriculum. Of these partner schools, 32 were located in Vermont, including eight in the focus area of Rutland County. An estimated 1,240 Rutland County students participated in Changing Perspectives in these schools:

- Barstow Elementary (Chittenden)\*^
- Clarendon Elementary^
- Middletown Springs Elementary^
- Mill River Union Middle School (Clarendon)\*
- Proctor Elementary \*
- Rutland Town School\*
- Shrewsbury Mountain School^
- Wallingford Elementary

\*Student surveys. ^Educator surveys.

## **Program Evaluation**

### **Purpose**

To inform program design and development, Changing Perspectives conducted post-program evaluations for selected service regions for the 2018-2019 year. This report summarizes the feedback received from partner schools in Rutland County, Vermont, a region where Changing Perspectives is gaining traction and building a density of school partnerships. Dr. Cynthia Char of Char Associates, an independent evaluation firm based in Montpelier, Vermont, provided guidance for Changing Perspectives Executive Director Sam Drazin on the study.

The evaluation's primary objectives were two-fold: (1) to gather formative feedback about the program to inform and improve the curriculum's design and use, and (2) to evaluate the program's educational benefits and impacts upon student learning and educators' classroom practices.

### **Methodology and Sample**

Changing Perspectives administered educator and student post-program surveys at partner schools to gather formative feedback about and impact data on the curriculum.

Educators across all grades received surveys. Fifteen educators from five of the eight partner schools participated in this evaluation.

Educators distributed surveys to students shortly after their last day of using the curriculum in their classrooms. Student surveys were given to students in grades 3-8 using two versions, one for grades 3-6 and one for grades 6-8. A total of 111 students from three of the eight partner schools completed surveys.

**Table 1. 2018-19 Student Respondents by School**

Partner Schools	Responding Students Count
Barstow Elementary School	50
Mill River Union Middle School	21
Proctor Elementary School	40
Total Students	n=111

**Table 2. 2018-19 Student Respondents by Grade Level**

Grade Level	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>	6 <sup>th</sup>	7 <sup>th</sup>	8 <sup>th</sup>
Responding Students	14	18	29	29	17	4

It is important to note that, given the program’s highly customizable approach to design and classroom implementation, a number of factors influence students’ experiences and programmatic feedback. Educator choices, the number of lessons/activities, and time allocated in a given classroom – in addition to demographic variability inherent in the United States public education system – are all variables that impact programmatic outcomes.

### **Organization of Report**

Evaluation results are organized into two sections: (1) Student Findings and (2) Educator Findings.

## Student Findings

### Summary

Consistent with findings from other partner schools, data for students in Rutland County indicate that Changing Perspectives made solid progress toward its student outcome goals in this target region in 2018-19. With one exception (7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> graders regarding increased awareness), and a very slim margin, a majority of students responded positively to all aspects of the program.

### High Student Interest

Using a four-point scale (Not At All, A Little, Some, A Lot), 58% of responding students across all grades indicated Changing Perspectives was interesting to them (82% Some, 34% A Lot).

**Table 3. How interesting did you find Changing Perspectives?**

Survey (Population)	Not At All	A Little	Some	A Lot
Grades 3-6 (n=90)	17% (15)	24% (22)	34% (31)	24% (22)
Grades 7-8 (n=21)	19% (4)	24% (5)	48% (10)	10% (2)

Students were asked to complete the phrase, “What I liked most about Changing Perspectives was...” Responses included:

- “...that we got to learn the difference between empathy and sympathy.” –6th grader
- “...learning how people push through their struggles.” –5th grader
- “...that we talked about many different disabilities and challenges and we didn't just touch on only a few.” –7th grader

### Greater Awareness and Understanding of Disabilities

Using the same four-point scale, student participants were asked to provide feedback across four dimensions regarding understanding, awareness, empathy, and self-awareness; the results are shown in Table 4. The data shows that Changing Perspectives had positive impacts for students on all measures. Younger students reported greater impacts for three of the dimensions, though positive student outcomes are also seen among older learners:

- 54% of 3<sup>rd</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> graders (21% Some, 33% A Lot) and 62% of 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> graders (43% Some, 19% A Lot) indicated that the program helped them **learn more about disabilities**.
- 65% of 3<sup>rd</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> graders (28% Some, 37% A Lot) and 48% of 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> graders (19% Some, 29% A Lot) reported that the curriculum helped them **become more aware of people with disabilities**.
- 73% of 3<sup>rd</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> graders (25% Some, 48% A Lot) and 57% of 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> graders (38% Some, 19% A Lot) credited Changing Perspectives with helping them **think about how to be kind/inclusive**.
- 67% of 3<sup>rd</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> graders (33% Some, 34% A Lot) and 52% of 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> graders (27% Some, 25% A Lot) indicated that Changing Perspectives helped them **reflect on their own challenges**.

**Table 4. Program Impacts on Understanding, Awareness, Empathy, Self-awareness**

Survey (Population)	Not At All	A Little	Some	A Lot
<i>Dimension 1: The program helped me to learn about disabilities.</i>				
Grades 3-6 (n=88)	19% (17)	27% (24)	21% (18)	33% (29)
Grades 7-8 (n=21)	24% (5)	14% (3)	43% (9)	19% (4)
<i>Dimension 2: The program made me more aware of people with disabilities.</i>				
Grades 3-6 (n=87)	19% (17)	16% (14)	28% (25)	37% (33)
Grades 7-8 (n=21)	24% (5)	28% (4)	19% (4)	29% (6)
<i>Dimension 3: The program helped me think about how to be kind/inclusive.</i>				
Grades 3-6 (n=87)	6% (5)	21% (18)	25% (22)	48% (42)
Grades 7-8 (n=21)	24% (5)	19% (4)	38% (8)	19% (4)
<i>Dimension 4: The program helped me to reflect on my own challenges.</i>				
Grades 3-6 (n=86)	17% (15)	16% (14)	33% (28)	34% (29)
Grades 7-8 (n=21)	24% (5)	24% (5)	33% (7)	19% (4)

Open-ended responses reinforce students’ positive attitudes about the program:

- “[I learned] that people with disabilities are the same as us even if they act or look differently.” –6th grader
- “[I learned] that everyone is equal and never to judge because I have a physical disability myself.” –8th grader
- “[Before Changing Perspectives] I didn't really have any clue what people were going through.” –6th grader
- “[Before Changing Perspectives] I never thought about [disabilities] at all.” –6th grader
- “It is important to treat everyone equally.” –8th grader
- “Always include everyone, no matter how different they are from you.” –8th grader

**Strong Student Endorsement of the Importance of Learning About Disabilities**

When asked about the value of the curriculum beyond their own schools, 76% of the Rutland County students indicated that they felt other schools should implement awareness programming, as shown in Table 5.

**Table 5. Should students in other schools learn about kids with disabilities?**

Survey (Population)	No	Maybe	Yes
Grades 3-6 (n=90)	4% (4)	20% (18)	76% (68)
Grades 7-8 (n=21)	10% (2)	14% (3)	76% (16)

Student comments shed light on respondents’ thinking:

- “So [kids at other schools] can be more kind and inclusive to kids who they thought were different.” –4th grader
- “Because it is good to learn about people with disabilities because someone with a disability might be in their class.” –6th grader
- “So that they can be aware of people with disabilities so that they won't make fun of them and so that they could include them.” –6th grader

## Educator Findings

### Summary

Keeping in mind the limited sample size, participating Rutland County educators were enthusiastic about the impacts Changing Perspectives had on their students, classrooms, and professional development. Educators rated Changing Perspectives highly for both its informational and socio-emotional value. Students were engaged, which led to positive marks across student outcomes.

Educators also praised the level of support and coaching they received from Changing Perspectives staff. Regarding professional development, educators reported feeling more prepared to build classroom community within the inclusive classroom model, more confident and comfortable discussing issues around differences with their students, and better able to encourage positive interactions among all students. A majority would recommend the program to colleagues.

### Student Outcomes

On post-program surveys, participating educators were first asked to think about the student experience and student outcomes resulting from Changing Perspectives. Educators gave the program high marks across all elements.

### Strong Educational Value

A solid majority of educators rated the program’s educational value highly across four key dimensions: (1) Informational Value (87%), (2) Socio-emotional Value (88%), (3) Usability (87%), and (4) Appeal to Students (67%).

**Table 6. Educator Ratings of Value of Changing Perspectives**

Dimension	Good	Very Good
Informational Value	60%	27%
Social-emotional Value	53%	33%
Usability	67%	20%
Appeal to Students	47%	20%

Educators also offered a strong endorsement of the program’s educational value, with 80% stating that they would recommend Changing Perspectives to another educator.

Regarding the program's value points, educators shared these comments:

- "It provided discussion points focused on social issues with easy to use lessons."
- "I think the value for me was that my students didn't see the challenges that I saw. However, the day we talked about [how] it's okay to be different really opened up everybody's eyes as to how we felt we were different."
- "Nowadays, kids don't come to school with some of the understandings that are taught in the Changing Perspectives curriculum. This is an excellent way to reach those students."

### **Greater Student Awareness of Own Uniqueness and Understanding of Others**

Rutland County educators reported that Changing Perspectives was somewhat successful in achieving its main educational goals among their students:

- 47% of educators felt that Changing Perspectives had very much helped promote deeper understanding, respect, and acceptance of all people.
- 40% of educators reported that the program was very successful in helping children recognize their uniqueness and challenges.

Educators lauded the programs' ability to help build understanding and community among students:

- "Twenty-five percent of my class is on some type of plan based upon their distinct cognitive and/or emotional need. Most of my students are incredibly empathetic, but not all, and I felt it vital to explore and talk about why/how we are different."
- "It helped them understand their own emotions and develop empathy for others."
- It gave my students a look into others' lives and taught them empathy.

### ***Professional Development Outcomes***

Changing Perspectives' professional development goals are for educators to gain confidence and skills in three major areas: (1) discussing issues around differences/disabilities with students, (2) building classroom community, and (3) encouraging positive interactions among all students. Across elements, about half of the respondents believed that the program helped them gain confidence and skills.

**Table 7. Educator Ratings of Professional Development Outcomes**

Professional Development Outcome	Increased Confidence and Skills	
	Very	Extremely
<i>More confident and comfortable discussing issues around differences (disabilities) with your students</i>	40%	7%
<i>Better equipped with relevant skills in building classroom community within the inclusive classroom model</i>	40%	13%
<i>Better able to encourage positive interactions among ALL students</i>	47%	7%

More specifically, educators felt the program was useful for introducing sensitive topics to all students, an essential building block for inclusivity and respect:

- “I do a social skills class with a group of students who have emotional difficulties and some learning disabilities, and I liked how the issues were addressed through Changing Perspectives.”
- “I believe it has a strong social curriculum that allows us to discuss what occurs every day rather than hide because we are afraid of offending or pointing things out.”

Changing Perspectives offers three forms of support to support educators’ professional growth, and educators were satisfied with the outcomes around these supports.

**Table 8. Educator Ratings of Professional Development Support**

Professional Development Support	Satisfaction with Support	
	Very Satisfied	Extremely Satisfied
<i>Support to school prior to, during, and after program implementation</i>	25%	25%
<i>Work with educators and school leaders to answer questions and provide guidance</i>	38%	13%
<i>Preparation of the materials needed for participating schools</i>	40%	10%

### Concluding Remarks

The evaluation of Changing Perspectives as implemented in Rutland County partner schools reveals that educators and students alike had favorable experiences with the program.



Survey respondents viewed the program as effective in developing students' awareness and appreciation of differences and disabilities and in fostering empathy, kindness, and more inclusive communities. Overall, higher percentages of educators were more complimentary of the curriculum, its resources, and its usability, but at least half of the educators surveyed also reported positive experiences with professional development support and skill building.

Although the sample sizes for this study were limited, many data points, particularly for student outcomes, align with results from broader analyses of Changing Perspectives partner schools. This study provides insight into areas in which Changing Perspectives can improve the experience for both educators and students in and beyond the geographic focus area.

## References

Char, C. and Drazin, S. (2016) *Anyone Can Do Anything: Pilot Evaluation of the Changing Perspectives Disability Awareness Curriculum*. Report from Char Associates and Changing Perspectives, Bradford, VT.

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