Creating College-Going Culture Through Middle School Student Led Youth Participatory Action Research: Unity For Change, Believe In Us!

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Abstract

Student-led middle school youth participatory action research projects were undertaken to increase the college-going climate in two middle schools. Students engaged in participatory dialogue, surveys, and action-based school-wide campaigns. The survey findings demonstrate that the majority of youth aspire to finish high school, and go to college, yet lack resource and role models to guide them on a successful academic track. Throughout the project youth identified the need for schools and teachers to support college-going culture among all the students in the school not only among those who had high grades. They felt particularly strong about not giving up on the peers who were not performing well in school. Our findings demonstrate how supportive and positive social relationships with peers can increase college-going attitudes. Results also provide insight into mechanisms through which youth can influence school climate to increase college-going attitudes.

Background

➢ **Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory** argues that school contexts are important for youth development. As such, school climate is important to successful academic outcomes. Previous research often overemphasizes individual factors while not considering school-level context.

➢ **Positive and college-going school climate and positive peer relationships** are associated with better academic outcomes (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Kahnlou & Way, 2014; Lynch et al., 2013).

➢ **Increased awareness about positive school engagement and college aspirations** is one way to address social and educational inequities of poverty among Mexican descent and Native American youth (Croninger & Lee, 2001).

➢ **Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR)** increases **better educational outcomes** through youth-led research that leads to action strategies at the school level (Kahnlou & Wray, 2014). YPAR is a youth-led strategy that focuses on youth participation in research strategies that lead to action to create change in youth-identified problems in their schools or communities (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). Fundamental to YPAR is the believe in collective efficacy of groups that can come together to collectively create change.

Methods

➢ **YPAR Process:**
- Youth identified their vision for solving school-level problems.
- Youth engaged in participatory dialogue, youth-led survey research, and action-based school-wide campaigns to improve school climate and college-going messages. They met regularly with university researchers who guided the YPAR process.
- Youth created their own questions and administered surveys to 371 of their peers. They also created artwork and their own t-shirts for the project to gain visibility. They created their own videos with their vision and the survey research. School-wide pep rallies were held to share their videos and research. Students shared results with principals. Student subcommittees were created in each class comprised of (1) surveys (2) video/poster/music (3) pep-rally (4) t-shirt committee.

Methods *(cont.)*

➢ **Sample:**
- Two middle schools (6th, 7th, and 8th grade) where 65% of the children lived below the poverty line and 85% were of Mexican descent, 10% were of Native American descent.
- 60 youth participated in the YPAR project and provided qualitative reflections about the impact of the project.
- 371 youth completed surveys

Results

Table 1: Analysis of students' post-project reflections about the YPAR projects in both schools.

| Themes	Shared Thoughts	
Finding values and goals	Trying your best for your education	Being a better person
Feeling involved	Helping community	Contribute in positive changes
Feeling belonging/positive	Taking responsibilities	Learning communication skills

Note. The students expressed a sense of responsibility and a sense of belonging throughout their participation of the YPAR project. Some students highlighted their motivations to pursue their dreams through education. Many students realized how important it is to stay connected to school, and be responsible to empower themselves and their future.

Figure 1. Results from Youth-led Survey on the Importance of High School to Middle School students

How important is high school to you?
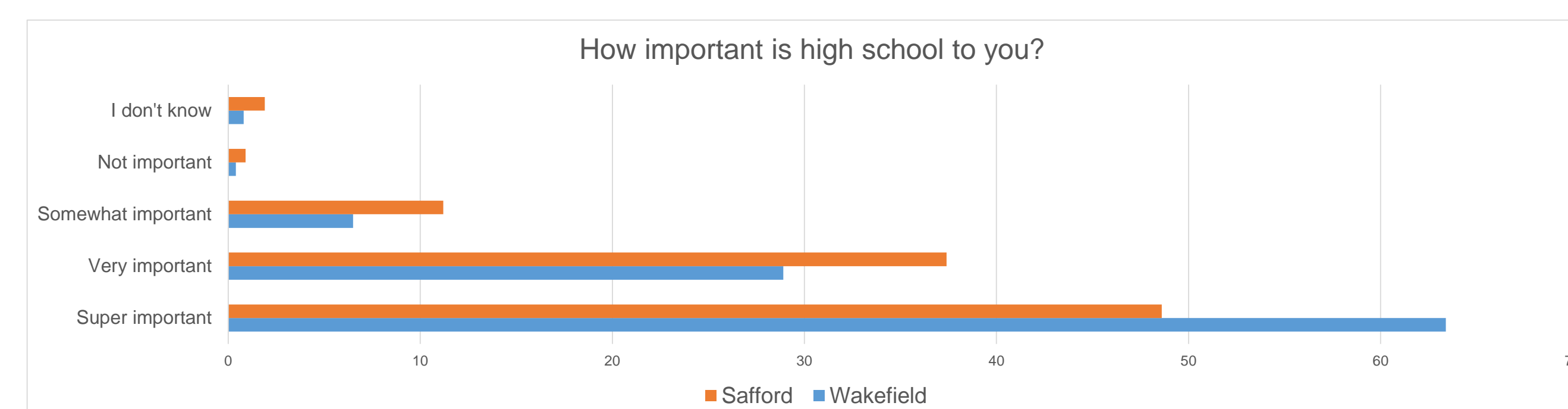
Note. Youths' responses from both schools (N=371) when asked about how important high school is for them.

Figure 2. Youth-led Survey Results about Important of High School Graduation

How important is it to graduate from high school?
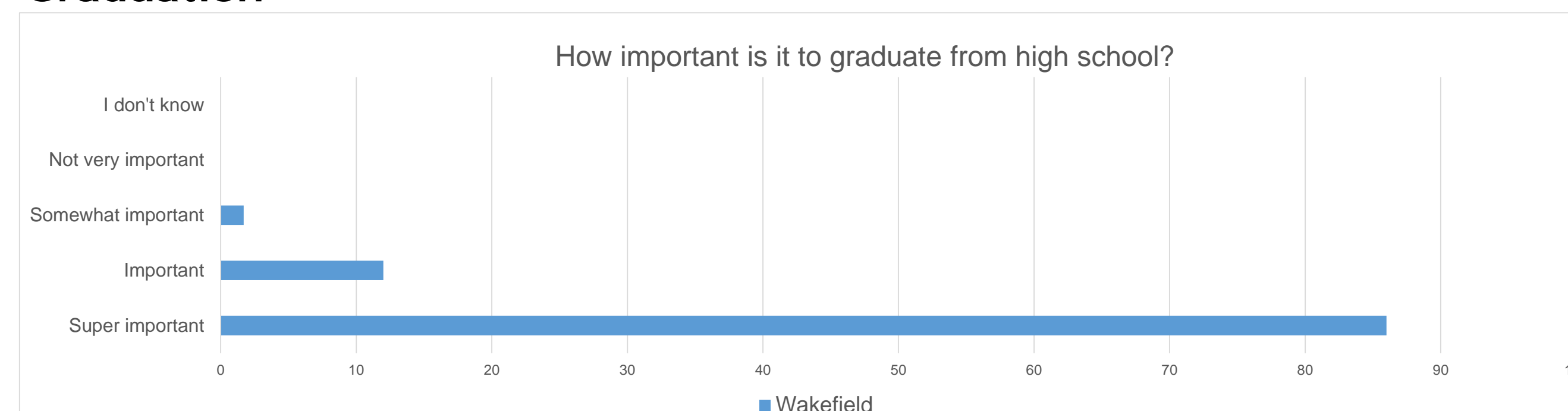
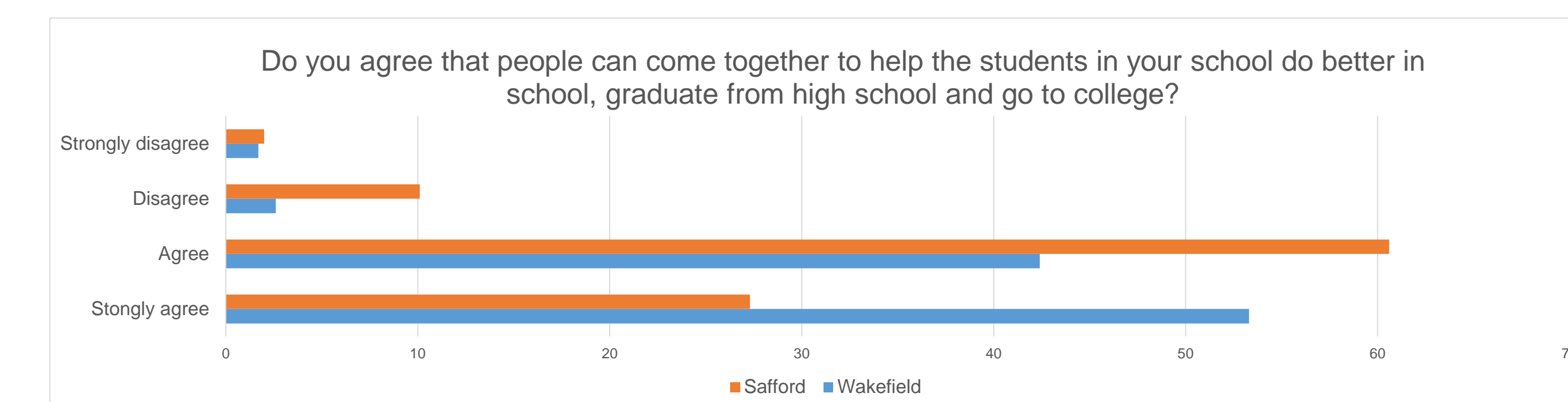*Note. Of the total of 249 students, 86% of them responded that it is 'super important' to graduate from high school.*

Figure 3. Youth-Led Survey Results about the Number of Role Models who went to College and Graduated.

How many people do you know from your school who have gone to college and graduated?
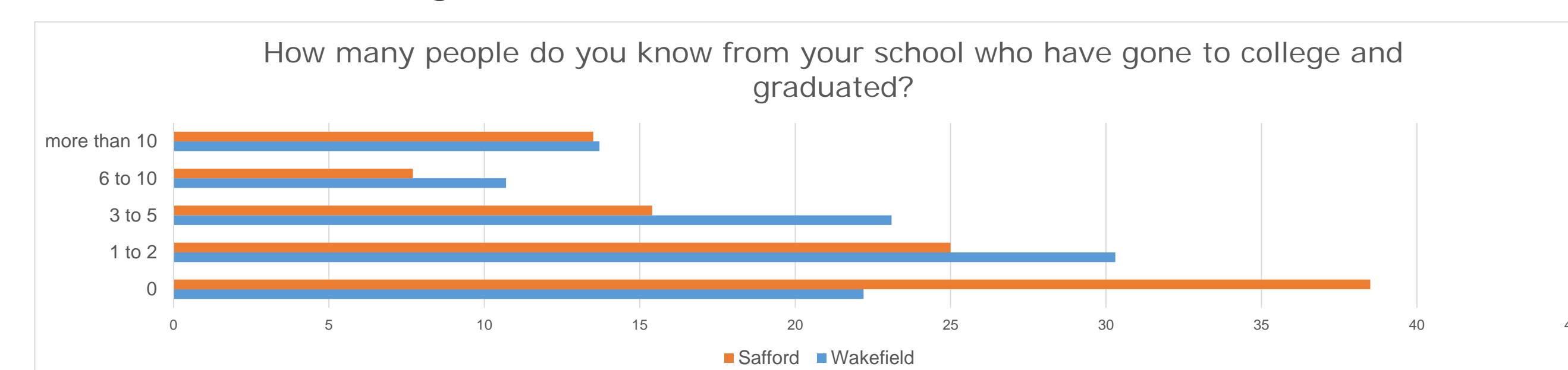
Note. Figure 3 indicates the how many people the students know of who had gone to college and graduated. Around 28% of the students from both schools knew one person who had gone to college and graduated. The high percentage of students not knowing many people who had graduated from college may indicate the lack of college going resources or role models for the youths of South Tucson.

Results *(cont.)*

Figure 4. Youth-Led Survey Results on Collective Efficacy to improve their Schools.

Do you agree that people can come together to help the students in your school do better in school, graduate from high school and go to college?
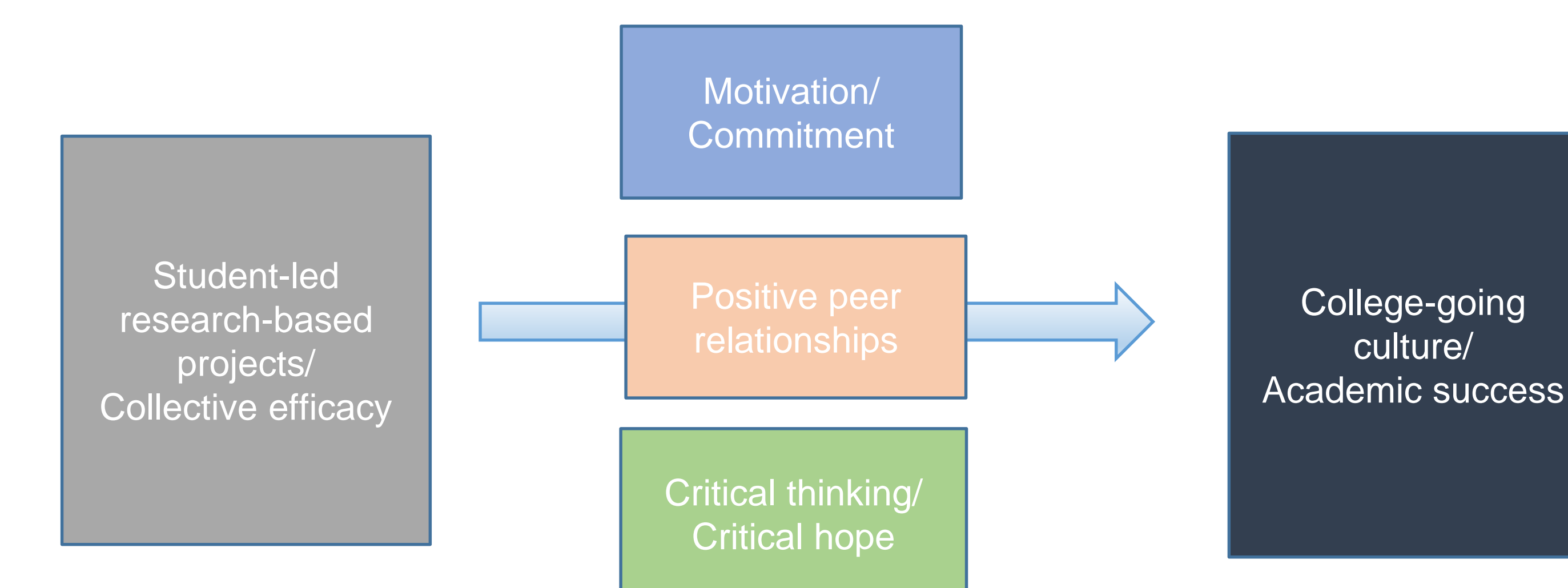
Note. Figure 4 shows how students feel about the possible benefits of collective efficacy to achieve better educational outcomes.
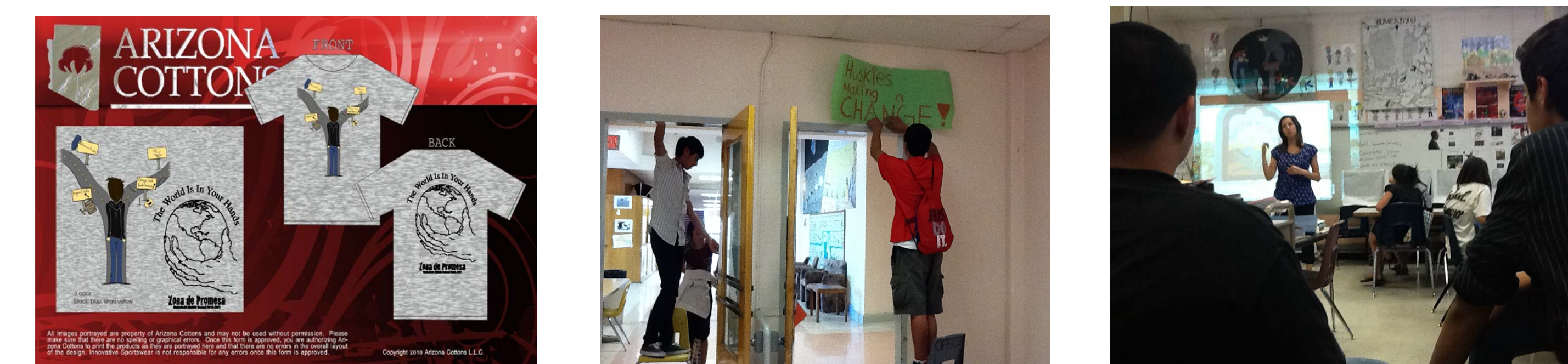
Note. Figures 5-7 show the t-shirt artwork, students putting posters around school with positive messages for college-goingness and dialogue between students and university researchers.

Conclusions and Implications

➢ Key findings show that youth who participated in YPAR felt more empowered, more autonomous, and they learned skills to communicate their school experiences. They felt that they were realizing the importance of education as a passage to pursue their dreams.

➢ Positive peer relationships and collective efficacy to create change are fundamental to improving school climate.

➢ Providing opportunities to discuss and learn about the systemic challenges inherent in poverty and school-level problems is essential to building hope based on critical thinking, or critical hope (Duncan-Andrade, 2009).

➢ Collective sense of critical hope at the school-level contributes to positive school climate, supportive peer relationships, and academic success among youth of color.