The Building and Empowering Students Together (BEST) program is a multi-disciplinary team comprised of various professionals and community members. The program serves at-risk youth and their families in Martin and Faribault counties. BEST teams meet with families once a month to provide services to children and families with challenging family needs, including issues related to academia, behavior, parenting, family functioning, mental health, and substance use/abuse. The main focus of the BEST program is to provide early intervention. The purpose is to collaborate with the families to achieve the following goals – listen to the family’s needs, support the family and encourage empowerment, assist in brainstorming solutions to resolve the current issue(s), and discuss potential resources for the family.

The purpose of this project was to analyze the effectiveness of the BEST program. Parents/caregivers of youth involved in the BEST program were surveyed to evaluate to what extent the BEST program is achieving its goals. It was hypothesized that participation in the BEST program would result in positive family outcomes, as defined by – needs being met, increased family empowerment, and improved access to resources.

Lack of early intervention typically results in higher numbers of youth entering the juvenile justice system or out-of-home placements, higher drop-out rates, and the need for mental health services (Murray & Belenko, 2005). The BEST program and other similar service programs have based their goals and values off of the Wraparound programs. Blum et al. (2011) define wraparound as “…a team-based process to develop and implement individualized service and support plans for children with serious emotional and behavioral problems and their families” (p. 729). There is accumulating evidence of Wraparound’s effectiveness thus supporting the idea that well-implemented Wraparound services can promote positive outcomes for youth with complex needs and help them live successfully in their communities (Walker & Matearos, 2011).

Methodology
This study utilized a cross-sectional survey and a convenience sampling method. The sample consisted of parents and caregivers of youth involved in the BEST program during the 2011-2012 school year. The survey was conducted between April 15 – June 15, 2012. All thirteen individuals asked to participate in the study completed the survey; resulting in a response rate of 100%.

The measure used for this study was a self-report survey developed based on how the relevant research defined positive family outcomes. The survey consisted of six demographic questions, nine quantitative Likert-type scale questions ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, and two qualitative questions. Quantitative questions were grouped into three categories of positive family outcomes (family needs met, improved access to resources, and increased empowerment). The qualitative questions were grouped into themes that emerged from the completed surveys.

The researcher administered the survey to parents and caregivers one time at the end of a BEST meeting. In order to be eligible to complete the survey, participants had to attend at least three BEST meetings. The data was coded and entered into SPSS. A frequency analysis was run for the demographic information. The nine quantitative questions were collapsed to create the three categories: needs met, improved access to resources, and increased empowerment. The three questions for each category were summed to calculate a mean score. The Likert-type scale rating for each category ranged from 3-15 with a score of 3 being the lowest possible (strongly disagree) and a score of 15 being the highest possible (strongly agree). The mean score for improved access to resources equalled 12 and the mean score for increased empowerment equalled 11.77.

Conclusions and Recommendations
This project indicated that many participants agree that the BEST program is resulting in positive family outcomes. The category of improved access to resources received a mean score of 12 on a 3-15 range, which implies the BEST team is achieving their goal in helping families find resources. The mean scores for family needs being met (11.85) and increased empowerment (11.77) were close behind in the agree range. Due to the small sample size (N=13) the results of this study should not be overemphasized or over-generalized to similar populations. There may have been respondent bias as the participants may have been afraid to opt out of the study.

Implications for Practice, Strengths and Limitations
One of the main strengths of this research was the 100% response rate. Even though the sample size was small, it is notable that all participants asked to participate were willing to do so. The relatively quick, easy, and practically risk-free survey was another strength. The main limits of this study is the small sample size and lack of generalizability to similar populations. There may have been respondent bias as the participants may have been afraid to opt out of the study.

Implications for practice pertain to the researcher as a BEST team member. Perhaps this persuaded participants to agree to be a part of the study and future recommendations would be to have the researcher as a neutral person not involved in the BEST program. Another implication for practice came out of the themes that emerged from the qualitative questions related to parents wanting there to be more focus on the child goals and not on what the parents were doing or not doing. Future practice should center more on child goals or at least more of an equal focus on all family members. In relation to not focusing on what parents are doing/not doing, it is important that all members of the multi-disciplinary BEST team take a strength-based approach.

References available upon request