

# at-risk for High School Educators

Gatekeeper Training Simulation

## Results from a National Study at 40 States in the U.S.

Released January 2011

*"I found [the simulation] to be realistic and practical. We have so many at-risk students lately, that this course helped to reinforce identifying and dealing with these behaviors."*

*—Teacher from Illinois*

### BACKGROUND

According to a recent CDC study 14.5% of high school students had seriously considered suicide and 6.9% had attempted suicide one or more times during the previous 12 months. Unfortunately, most of these students go unseen by clinicians, leaving them and others at risk. Gatekeeper training has been established internationally as a critical component of comprehensive suicide prevention strategy. According to the Suicide Prevention Resource Center, a "gatekeeper" is "any individual trained to identify persons at risk of suicide and refer them to treatment or supporting services as appropriate."

Between September and December 2010, Kognito conducted an empirical study among 327 high school teachers in 40 states to assess the efficacy of its online gatekeeper training simulation entitled "At-Risk for High School Educators". This report summarizes the results of the study.



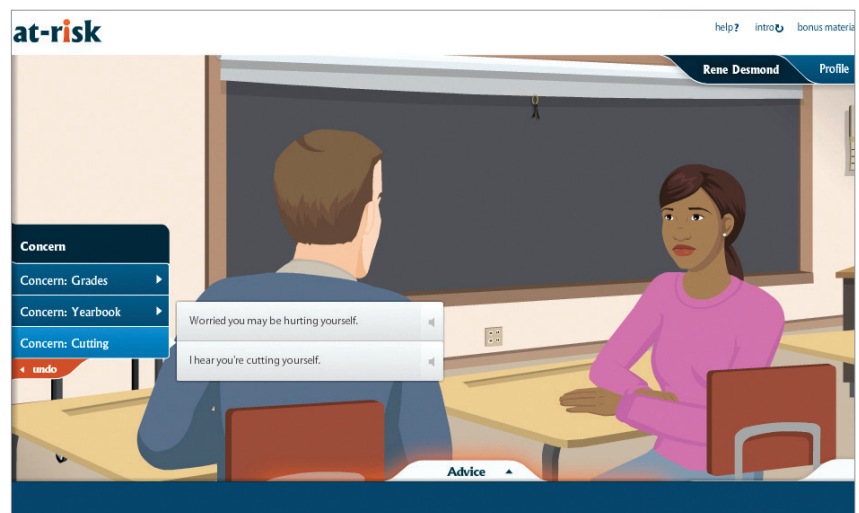
## WHAT IS AT-RISK?

*At-Risk for High School Educators* is a one-hour online, interactive gatekeeper training simulation designed to prepare high school teachers and staff to identify, approach, and refer students exhibiting signs of psychological distress including depression, anxiety, and thoughts of suicide. Unlike any other gatekeeper training program, *At-Risk* engages learners in simulated conversations with student avatars that are fully animated and emotionally responsive.

Through these conversations, educators practice and learn to use open-ended questions, reflective listening and other motivational interviewing techniques to effectively broach the topic of psychological distress with an at-risk student, motivate the student to seek help, and avoid common pitfalls such as attempting to diagnose the problem or giving unwarranted advice. By providing learners with hands-on practice, *At-Risk* increases their confidence and ability to handle similar challenging situations in real life.

Introduced in September 2010, *At-Risk for High School Educators* has been adopted by several states including the Texas Department of Health Services and the New York State Department of Mental Health to provide training to more than 70,000 high school educators. More information about this course and a demo can be viewed at [www.kognito.com/atrisk](http://www.kognito.com/atrisk).

*At-Risk for High School Educators* is part of a suite of gatekeeper training simulations developed by Kognito and tailored to the needs of specific groups of learners, including university faculty, college students, families of returning veterans, health providers, and emergency department personnel.



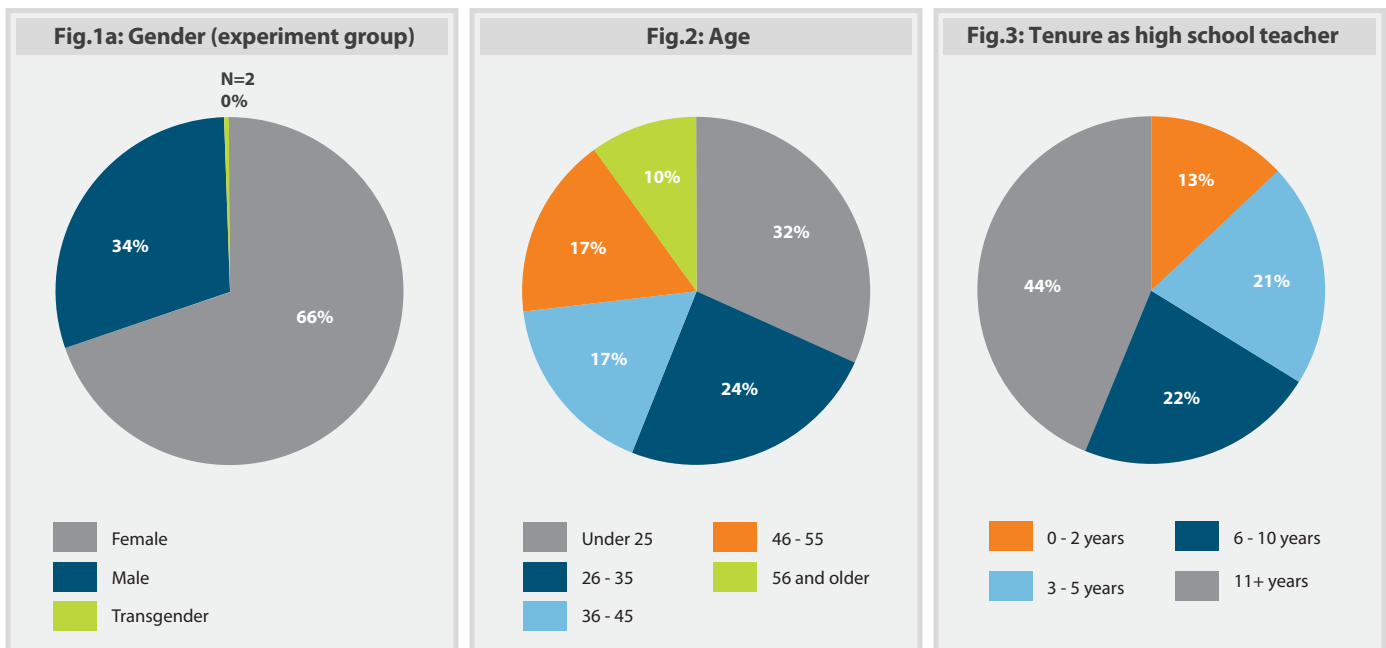
Snapshot of a simulated conversation in *At-Risk*

## ABOUT KOGNITO

Kognito Interactive is an award-winning developer of online role-playing simulations where users build interpersonal skills and learn to effectively manage challenging conversations in the areas of health and behavioral health. Simulations are built using Kognito's proprietary Human Interaction Simulation Platform™ which is based on research in social cognition, neuroscience, and motivational interviewing. The platform enables Kognito to author and deliver virtual practice environments where learners must achieve specific objectives by engaging in simulated conversations with emotionally responsive avatars that possess their own personality and memory. As a result of engaging in practice speaking with realistic avatars, learners can become more confident, motivated, and capable to manage similar conversations in real-life.

## STUDY PARTICIPANTS

The study included 327 high school teachers in 40 states. One hundred, ninety-one (58%) subjects were assigned to the experimental group and 136 (42%) were assigned to the control group. Two hundred, twenty-eight of the participants were women (69.5%), 91 were men (30.2%), and one was transgender (.3%). (Fig. 1) The majority of participants (57%) were from New York, Texas, New Mexico, and California. Subjects' age (Fig. 2) and tenure as teachers (Fig. 3) were similar between the experimental and control groups.



## METHOD

Participants in both groups were provided with an online questionnaire that captured responses utilizing a four-point likert scale. The experimental group completed the *At-Risk* training and then responded to the questionnaire while the control group only completed the questionnaire. Subjects who reported previous experience with gatekeeper training were eliminated from both samples.

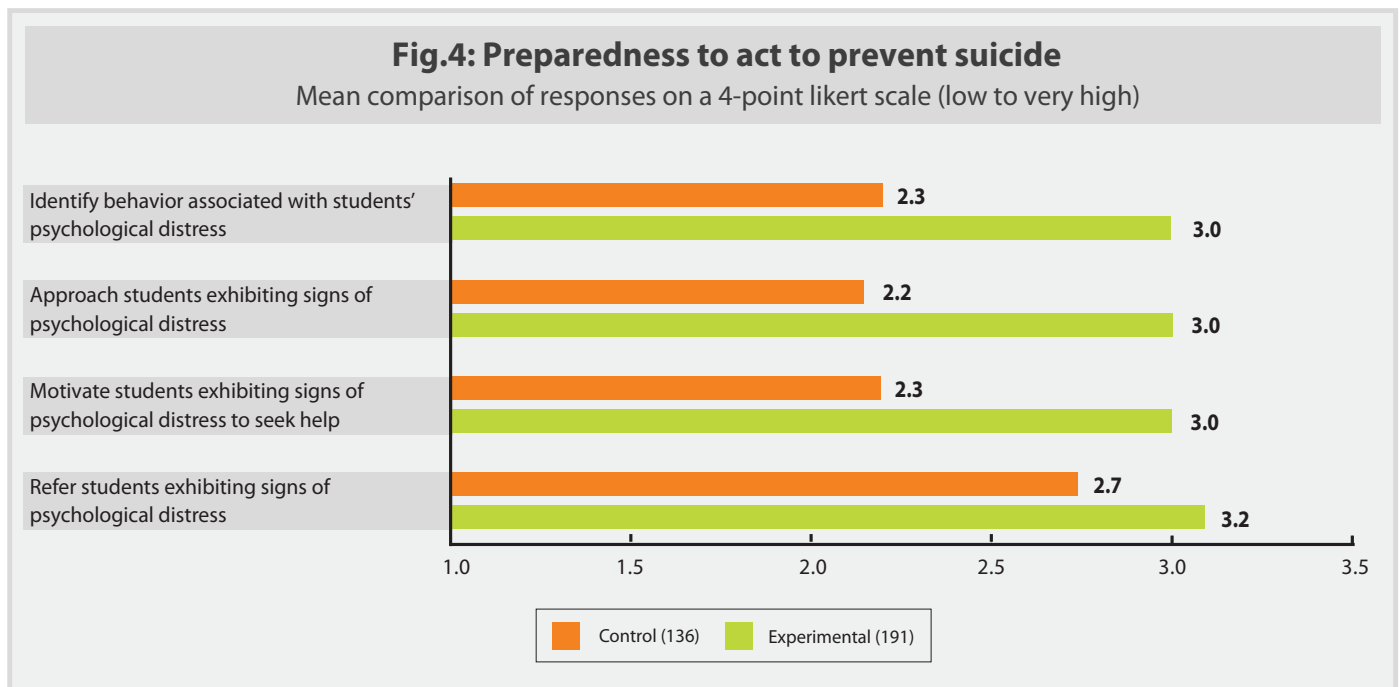
## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Study results were analyzed using independent sample t-tests. Participants' responses in the experimental and control groups were compared on all dependent variables. Results were consistent and **statistically significant at 0.01 level** across demographic characteristics which suggest that the *At-Risk for High School Educators* program is effective for educators regardless of age, gender, and tenure as teachers.

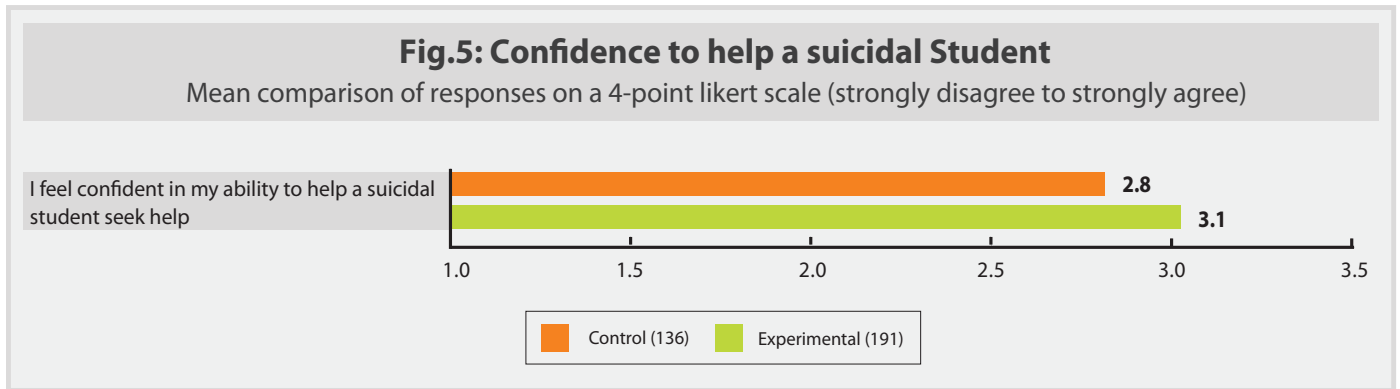
### 1. SKILLS AND BEHAVIORAL INTENTION

The study found that participants in the experimental group rated **significantly higher** their preparedness to (Fig. 4):

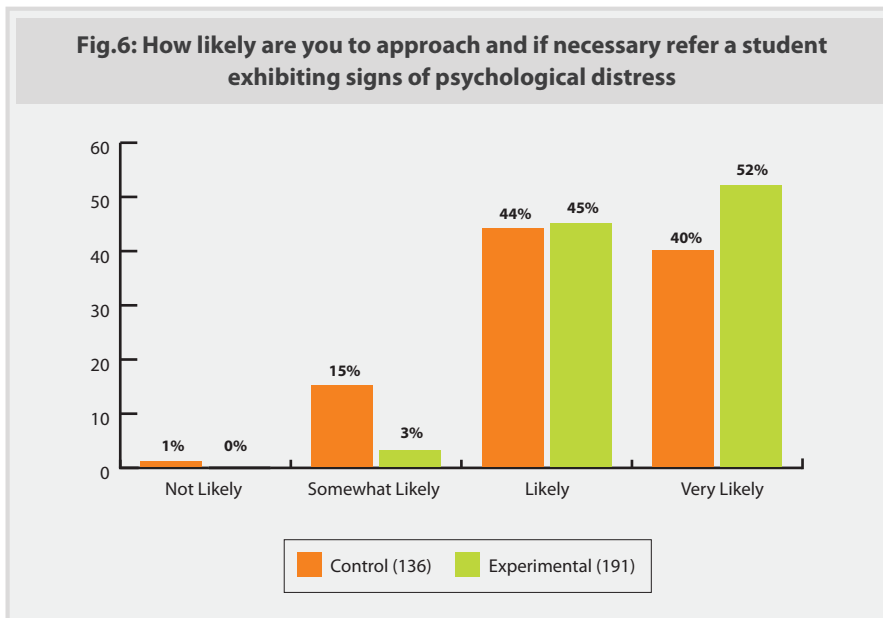
1. Identify behaviors associated with students' psychological distress
2. Approach students exhibiting signs of psychological distress
3. Motivate students exhibiting signs of psychological distress to seek help
4. Refer students exhibiting signs of psychological distress



Participants in the experimental group also reported **significantly higher** levels of confidence in their ability to help a suicidal student seek help. (Fig. 5)



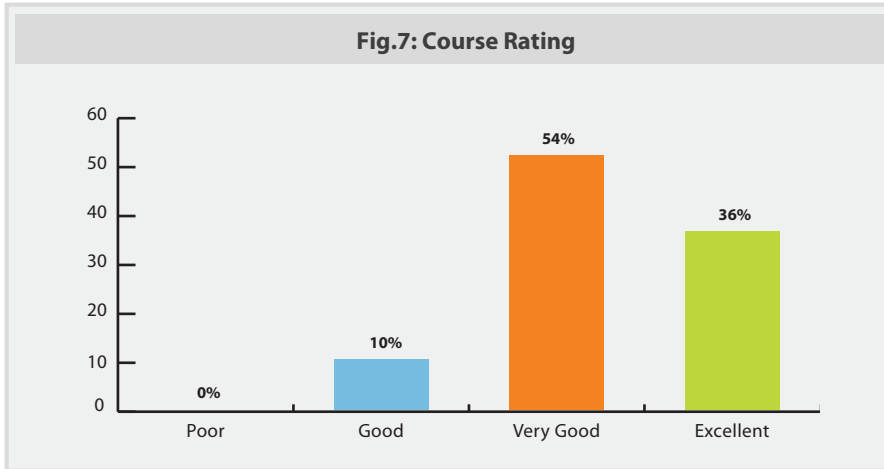
The study also found that teachers in the experimental group rated **significantly higher** the likelihood that they would approach and, if necessary, refer a student exhibiting signs of psychological distress. In fact, over 97% of participants who received the training indicated they were likely or very likely to approach such an at-risk student, compared to 84% in the control group. (Fig. 6)



*97% of participants who received the training indicated they were likely or very likely to approach and refer an at-risk student.*

## 2. LEARNING EXPERIENCE

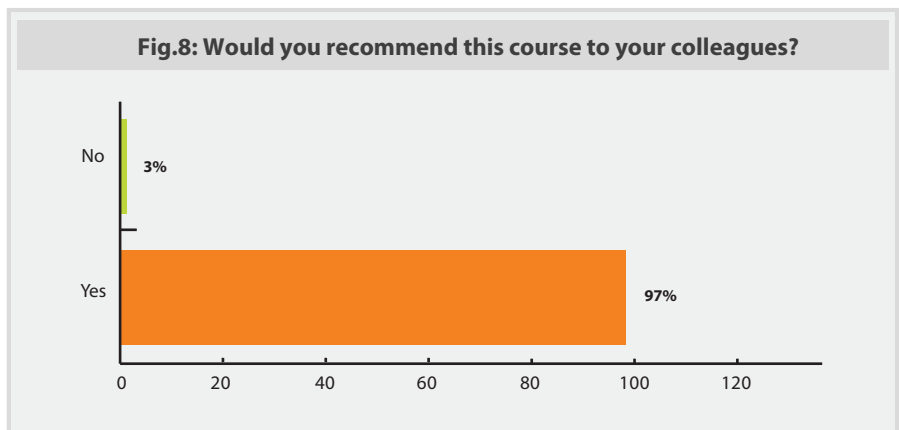
The experimental group was also asked to provide input and assessment about the learning experience. Ninety percent of participants rated the course as “Very Good” or “Excellent”, ten percent rated it as “Good”. (Fig. 7)



*90% rated the course as Very Good or Excellent.*

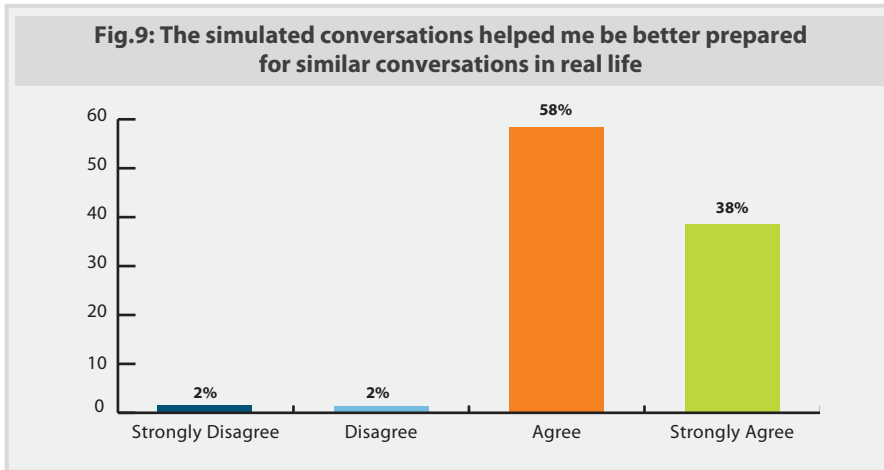
*97% said they would recommend the training to their colleagues.*

Ninety-seven percent of those who completed the training said they would recommend the course to their colleagues. (Fig. 8)



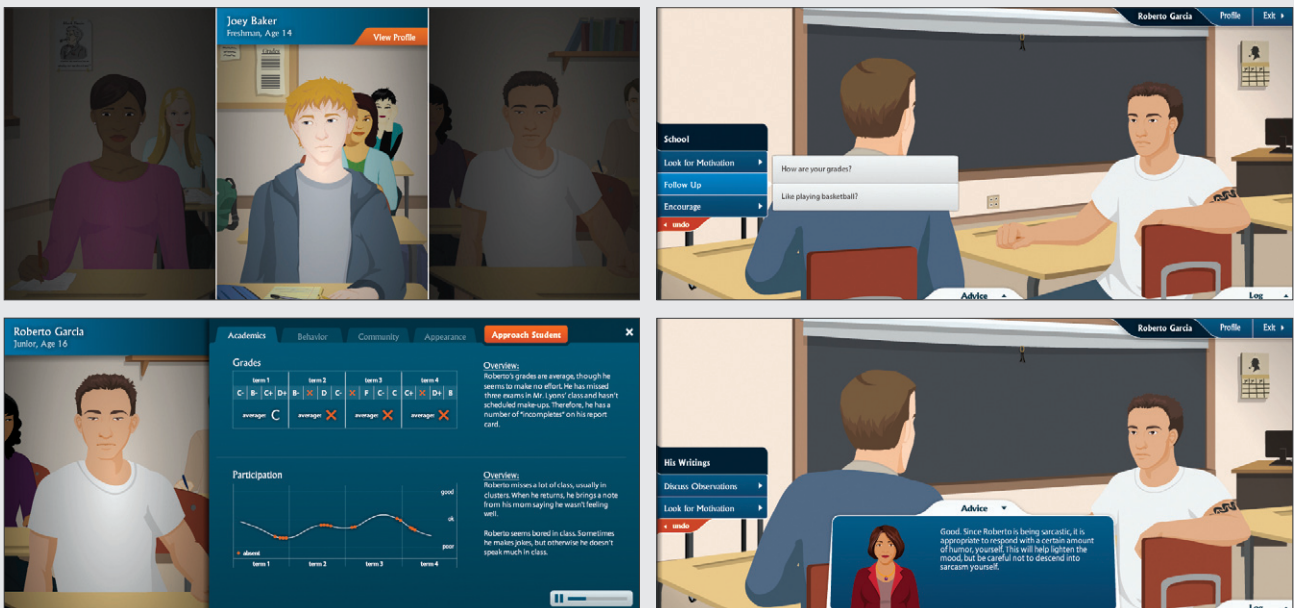
In addition, 96% of participants reported that engaging in simulated conversations with a student avatar exhibiting signs of depression, substance and alcohol abuse, and suicidal ideation was helpful in preparing them for similar conversations in real life. (Fig. 9)

*96% of participants reported that engaging in simulated conversations with at-risk students was helpful in preparing them for similar conversations in real life.*



### Images from Training Simulation

In *At-Risk*, educators engage in virtual conversations with three student avatars to practice using open-ended questions, reflective listening and other motivational interviewing techniques.



### 3. SKILLS TRANSFER

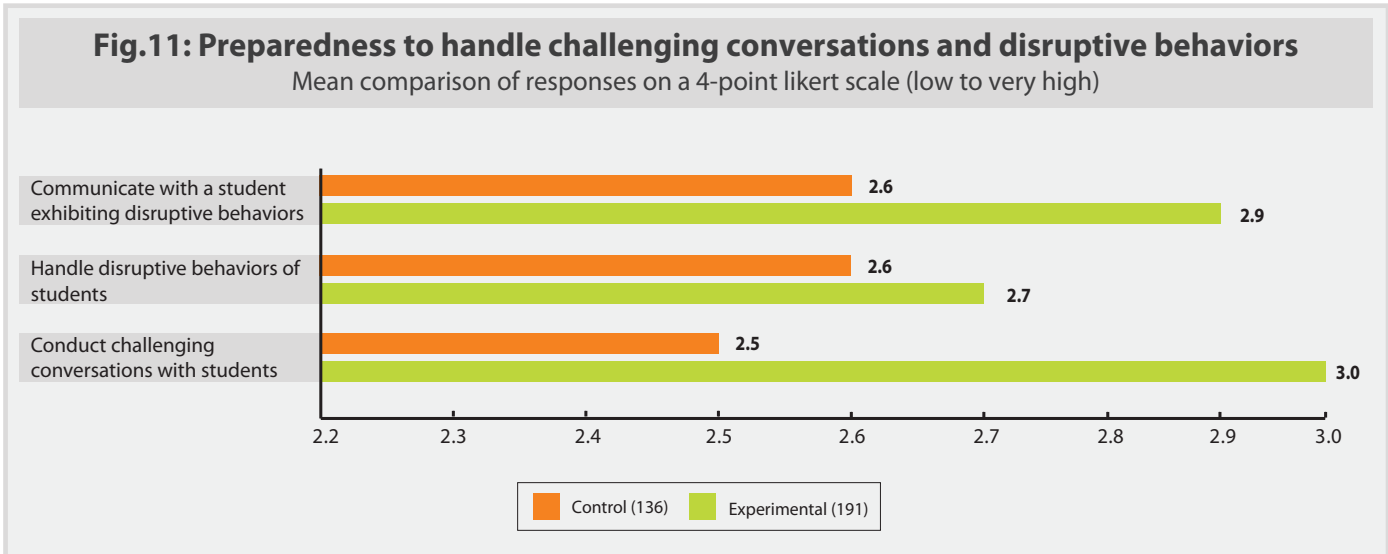
*At-Risk* provides learners with the opportunity to practice and learn effective tactics to manage difficult conversations with individuals exhibiting signs of psychological distress. Many of the skills taught in these conversations – such as using open-ended questions, building rapport, and reflective listening – are relevant to other challenging conversations teachers engage in with students around classroom behavior and academic performance.

The study found that participants in the experimental group rated **significantly higher** their preparedness to:

1. Communicate with a student exhibiting disruptive behaviors
2. Handle disruptive behaviors of students
3. Conduct challenging conversations with students (Fig. 11)

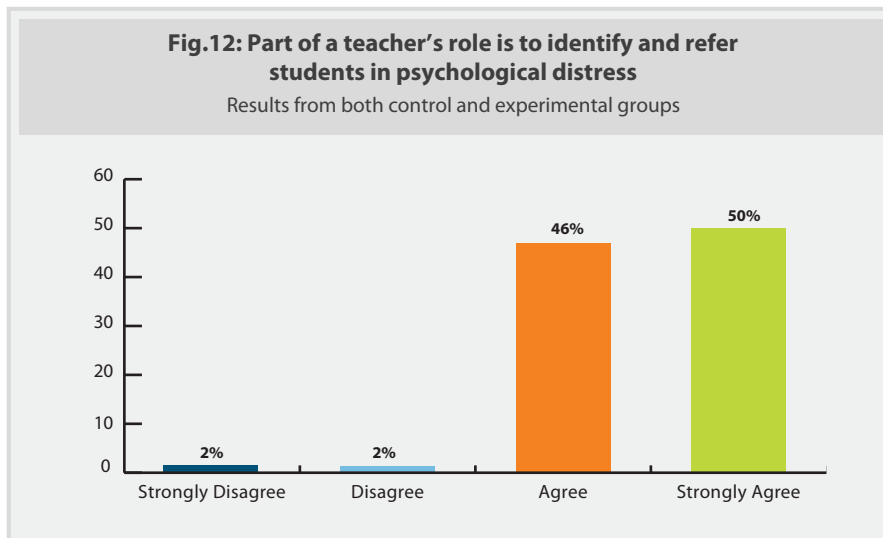
These results suggest that the skills teachers learn in *At-Risk* are transferable and relevant to other challenging conversations they need to initiate and manage with students (Fig. 11).

*At-Risk significantly improves teachers preparedness to manage challenging conversations they have with their students regarding classroom behavior and academic performance.*



#### 4. RESPONSIBILITY OF TEACHERS TO ACT AS GATEKEEPERS

The study found that teachers recognize that part of their role is to identify and refer at-risk students. This perception was evident with both the control and experimental cohorts. While a mean comparison between the answers reported by the experimental group was higher than the control group, it was not statistically significant (0.62) (Fig. 12).



*96% of teachers recognize that part of their role is to identify and refer at-risk students.*

#### 5. COMMENTS FROM THE EXPERIMENTAL GROUP

Subjects who completed the training appreciated most its interactivity, convenience and self-directed nature, advice and coaching, and the realism of characters and conversations, as demonstrated through responses to an open-ended question on the questionnaire for the experimental group about what they liked best about the training.

A sampling of their responses is represented below:

*"I found [the simulation] to be realistic and practical. We have so many at-risk students lately, that this course helped to reinforce identifying and dealing with these behaviors" - teacher from Illinois*

*"Participating instead of just listening to someone talk about working with students is the best way to learn what to do. Hands on training is always best" - teacher from Texas*

*"I liked the simulated conversations. I also liked that the students shown were very different and did not stereotype the kind of student that would be 'at risk" - teacher from Texas*

cont...

*“I liked that it was interactive, and that the conversations and simulations were realistic. I can picture students who fit the profile of the ones in the simulation and it helped make that connection stronger” - teacher from Illinois*

*“Simulations were great and realistic. I’ve had those students in my class.” - teacher from Alaska*

*“The communication skills could be used with all students, not just at risk students to improve relationships.” - teacher from Kentucky*

## CONCLUSION

The results of the study strongly suggest that:

1. *At-Risk* significantly increases teachers’ ability to identify, approach, and refer students exhibiting signs of psychological distress including depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation
2. Teachers who complete *At-Risk* are more confident in their ability to help a suicidal student and are significantly more likely to intervene when faced with such a student
3. *At-Risk* is effective regardless of the age, gender, or tenure of the teacher
4. *At-Risk* is a highly engaging learning experience (based on course rating and the percentage of teachers who would recommend it to their colleagues)
5. *At-Risk* provides a realistic environment for practice interacting with at-risk students
6. The interpersonal skills and tactics taught in *At-Risk* can assist teachers in conducting other challenging conversations they have with their students related to classroom behavior and academic performance

This study is the first phase of a comprehensive assessment being conducted by Kognito about the *At-Risk* series of gatekeeper training simulations. Future phases will include a comparison of *At-Risk* to other gatekeeper training programs, a longitudinal component to analyze changes in participants’ behavior as gatekeepers over time, and an examination of responses to a situational judgment task to measure skill acquisition.

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