



Transforming Teens. Changing Communities.

Deepening the Teen Outreach Program® (TOP®) Focus on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL):

A Case Study of Curriculum and Training Revision and Early Impact



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About Wyman

Wyman's mission is to empower teens from disadvantaged circumstances to lead successful lives and build strong communities. Since 1898, Wyman has provided engaging, experiential, and empowering programs to youth from the St. Louis region. Our current strategy takes a unique approach to achieving positive youth impact— we deliver high impact services directly to youth; we train and build capacity in others effectively support youth; and we partner to improve youth-serving systems. Wyman is the national replicator of the Teen Outreach Program® (TOP®), and also directly delivers TOP in its home community of St. Louis, Missouri.



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The [Susan Crown Exchange](#) is a Chicago-based foundation invested in shaping an ecosystem of anytime, anywhere learning to prepare youth to adapt and thrive in a rapidly changing and highly connected world.

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Introduction

THE PAST DECADE HAS SEEN the field of youth development coalesce around the understanding that social and emotional skills, such as emotion management, problem solving, empathy, and self-awareness, are critical for life success. Numerous studies have demonstrated that building social and emotional skills has a positive effect on a wide range of outcomes, including improved academic performance, higher earnings, better mental and physical health, more positive relationships, and increased civic engagement.¹ Importantly, evidence shows that social and emotional skills develop throughout our lives -- during childhood, adolescence, and into adulthood.

As with all learning, the context within which skills are taught is critical. Social and emotional learning (SEL) requires the adults with whom youth interact to understand, model, and encourage the development of social and emotional skills, and to also create a positive and safe environment within which the skills can be practiced. However, most SEL materials focus only on the skills needed by youth and do not address the staff practices and the development of safe space that are also critical to creating the appropriate environment where SEL can occur. In order to impact the maximum number of youth, it is essential that the youth

development field effectively scale high quality SEL content and staff practices throughout youth-serving organizations and systems, including education, child welfare, and juvenile justice. This is particularly important for those serving youth from high poverty communities and who have been exposed to trauma.

In an effort to inform the broader youth development field and similar youth-serving organizations, this case study describes Wyman's efforts to deepen the SEL focus of Wyman's Teen Outreach Program® (TOP®). The case study first describes the strategy used to enhance SEL within program materials, including curriculum and training content, staff practices, and implementation supports. Using interviews with early adopters, the case study then explores how TOP's revised program materials are impacting the youth, adults and organizations engaged with TOP. Lastly, implications are considered for scaling the revised program materials across Wyman's National Network of programs and for the broader field of youth development. This case study is an opportunity for Wyman to share what's been learned and to contribute to a dialogue in the field about how the field of youth development can sharpen our focus on SEL – for youth and the adults that work with them.



Wyman's Teen Outreach Program and the SEL Challenge

WYMAN'S TEEN OUTREACH PROGRAM, known as TOP, is a nationally-replicated, evidence-based program that promotes the positive development of adolescents through an engaging curriculum and community service learning projects, supported by trained TOP facilitators. The program takes a strengths-based approach that provides teens with opportunities to learn and practice skills, make decisions, and engage in their communities.

Rigorous research has shown that TOP results in lower likelihood of pregnancy, risky sexual behavior, course failure, school suspension and skipping school.² Numerous federal agencies and organizations have conducted independent research reviews and recognized TOP for its evidence-base, including the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Teen Pregnancy Prevention Evidence Review, and the U.S. Department of Justice Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

In 2014, eight exemplary youth-serving organizations, including Wyman, were selected to participate in the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Challenge.³ The SEL Challenge was a partnership between the [Susan Crown Exchange](#), the [David P. Weikart Center](#) for Youth Program Quality, technical consultants, and the eight programs, designed to identify promising practices for working with adolescents in out-of-school programs. Through the collaborative work in the SEL Challenge, six areas of social and emotional skills were identified: emotion management, empathy, teamwork, initiative, responsibility, and problem solving. In addition, key youth experiences and staff practices that support SEL were identified and described.

While participating in the SEL Challenge, Wyman began an already-planned curriculum revision for TOP. In addition to incorporating feedback from the field and making needed updates, the revision intended to strengthen and expand the program's existing focus on social and emotional skills. In the end, Wyman's involvement in the SEL Challenge and in the development of the related publication, [Preparing Youth to Thrive: Promising Practices for Social & Emotional Learning](#),⁴ deeply informed how TOP curriculum and training materials and implementation supports were revised.

THE TOP APPROACH

TOP achieves positive outcomes for youth by providing them with opportunities to learn new skills and practice them in an emotionally safe and supportive setting with caring, trained adult facilitators. The program's primary goals are to:

- **Improve social and emotional learning, and life skills**
- **Support development of a positive sense of self**
- **Strengthen connections with others**
- **Improve academic outcomes and decrease risky behavior**

TOP has been implemented successfully with diverse communities and in both urban and rural environments. The program is designed to meet the needs of middle and high school teens in a variety of settings, including both in-school and out-of-school. TOP also has resources to help adapt implementation for special populations, such as youth in foster care or juvenile justice settings.

TOP was originally developed in 1978 with the goal of reducing teen pregnancy and increasing high school graduation rates. In 2005, Wyman became the national replicator of the program. Wyman's National Network team provides training, support and technical assistance to replication partners, and supports the National Network community of practice. Funding for TOP flows through health departments, community organizations, and school districts, among others. Wyman's National Network serves over 22,000 youth annually through 59 partners in 30 states.



Deepening the Focus on SEL: Curriculum and Training Revision

THE REVISION PROCESS AND OBJECTIVES

Historically, TOP focused on building social and emotional skills, commonly known as “life skills,” including problem solving, teamwork and responsibility. However, with an increasing research base linking social and emotional skills to life-long success, Wyman knew that TOP was capable of doing more to promote SEL for young people engaged in the program.

As Wyman staff began the revision process, the foremost goal was to maintain TOP’s long-standing evidence-based status and positive youth development approach. To that end, Wyman reviewed the findings of multiple rigorous studies of TOP and identified critical aspects of the program to retain, such as content, structure, dosage, and timeframe. Wyman staff also conducted an in-depth review of the most recent research and best practice literature in the areas of positive youth development, social and emotional learning and adolescent development. As a result, Wyman developed their [Framework for Thriving Youth](#) that depicts the organization’s overall approach to working with teens.

This framework was then used to guide the revisions to TOP.

In addition to the research base, revisions to TOP were informed by input from TOP program partners and youth. In focus groups and interviews, participants provided feedback on topics and skills that needed to be included or strengthened in the curriculum, as well as how to increase the relevance for today’s teens. TOP facilitators also weighed in on how the curriculum and facilitator training could be improved upon in order for them to more effectively support youth learning and skill building.

From the research base and input from the field, Wyman identified three main objectives for deepening the SEL focus of TOP: 1) explicitly address SEL in program materials, 2) support staff practices that are critical to building social and emotional skills in youth, and 3) design the curriculum to optimize high quality facilitation and SEL. The chart (*on page 7*) depicts the objectives and the associated revision activities Wyman took to meet these objectives.

REVISION ACTIVITIES

The overall goal of the revision was to maintain TOP's long-standing evidence-based status and use of a positive youth development approach, while deepening the program's focus on building social and emotional learning skills.

OBJECTIVE	REVISION ACTIVITIES
<p>Explicitly address SEL in program content & materials</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Created Wyman's Framework for Thriving Youth highlighting 3 critical domains: skill building; positive sense of self; connections with others • Revised TOP Logic Model to align with Framework and included specific social and emotional skills as short-term outcomes • Enhanced existing SEL curriculum content and added curriculum content on problem-solving, emotion management, and empathy • Ensured all curriculum content reflected current research or best practices in SEL
<p>Support staff practices that are critical to building SEL in youth</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developed TOP Facilitation Guide with a focus on supporting positive teen/adult relationships, creating a safe space, healthy boundaries, cultural and human diversity, and trauma awareness • Revised TOP Facilitator Training to align with Guide and to focus on effective facilitator behaviors and techniques • Created new facilitator observation tool to align with high quality facilitation features and to support quality monitoring
<p>Design curriculum to optimize high quality facilitation and the development of social and emotional skills</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organized curriculum content around the 3 critical domains highlighted in Framework and Logic Model • Created lessons within each topic across three developmental levels: Foundational, Intermediate, Advanced • Used the Experiential Learning Cycle as the format for lessons • Incorporated activities that address a variety of learning styles • Added "Knowing Your Teens" reflection questions to the existing "Knowing Yourself" section in lesson plans to prompt facilitators to reflect and prepare for how they and teens may experience a lesson • Incorporated trauma awareness into "Knowing Yourself and Your Teens" questions

LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Taking an intentional approach to incorporate SEL into both the “what” (program content) and the “how” (staff practices and program design) had broader implications for the TOP program revisions than first imagined. In the end, in order to achieve the objectives, Wyman revised the TOP curriculum, training, and logic model, and developed a new Facilitation Guide and observation tool. After undertaking this comprehensive revision process to strengthen TOP’s SEL focus, Wyman staff identified lessons learned that may be relevant to other youth programs planning to take on a similar revision:

Start with a research base. The development of Wyman’s Framework for Thriving Youth provided a strong research foundation, helping to guide decisions about what revisions should be made. As can be seen in the table on page 9, the TOP Curriculum is now organized around three themes (Building My Skills, Connecting With Others, and Learning About Myself) which align with the Framework for Thriving Youth, in addition to the Preparing Youth to Thrive Domains and the CASEL Core SEL Competencies.⁵ In addition, research on the importance of responsive staff practices and safe inclusive spaces for youth led to an emphasis on high quality facilitation.

Define your SEL focus. Input from TOP partners was critical to determining what social and emotional skills were important to incorporate and deepen in the revised TOP curriculum. Their feedback helped to narrow the focus to the skills that most closely aligned with TOP. Even TOP, with its comprehensive 140-lesson curriculum could not explicitly address every aspect of SEL.

Allocate sufficient time and resources to learn and adjust during the revision process. Wyman approached the TOP revisions with a “plan, do, learn, adjust” cycle of improvement. As an example, during the revision process, Wyman released a subset of the revised lessons and asked partners to test them and provide feedback through a web survey. This feedback was then incorporated as lessons were refined. Although this iterative process took more time and resources than originally planned, it provided an opportunity for the field to weigh in with feedback at a critical juncture.

Engage in an ongoing learning process as new materials are rolled out. Wyman knew it would take time for TOP’s National Network of partners to fully implement all the revised materials, training, and staff supports. In the first year of release, Wyman allowed flexible adoption of the revised materials so that partners could adjust their timeline for adoption to best suit their organization. This provided an opportunity for reflection and learning based on the experiences of the early adopters, including those interviewed for this case study.



SEL ALIGNMENT: TOP, PREPARING YOUTH TO THRIVE DOMAINS, AND CASEL CORE COMPETENCIES

WYMAN'S TEEN OUTREACH PROGRAM			PREPARING YOUTH TO THRIVE DOMAINS	CASEL CORE SEL COMPETENCIES
THE WHAT	Building My Skills <i>Curriculum Lessons</i>	Emotion Management	Emotion Management	Self-Awareness Self-Management
		Decision Making		Responsible Decision-Making
		Problem Solving	Initiative Problem Solving Teamwork	Responsible Decision-Making
		Goal Setting	Initiative	Self-Management
	Connecting With Others <i>Curriculum Lessons</i>	Community	Responsibility Teamwork	Social Awareness
		Empathy	Empathy	Social Awareness
		Communication	Teamwork	Relationship Skills Self-Awareness
		Relationships	Teamwork	Relationship Skills Social Awareness
	Learning About Myself <i>Curriculum Lessons</i>	Self-Understanding		Self-Awareness
		Social Identity	Empathy	Self-Awareness Social Awareness
		Health & Wellness		Responsible Decision-Making
THE HOW	Facilitation Guide and Training	High Quality Facilitation (HQF)	Safe Space Responsive Practices	Practices supportive of positive relationships among teachers and students

Perspectives from the Field: Impact on Teens, Adults, and Systems

THROUGH ITS STRATEGY FOR ACTION, Wyman seeks to improve youth outcomes by empowering teens, equipping adults, and strengthening systems. Guided by this focus, three TOP partners were asked to share their perceptions of how TOP's enhanced focus on SEL had impacted 1) the experience of teens in the program, 2) the ability of TOP facilitators to promote SEL, and 3) their organization's knowledge and understanding of SEL.

Each participating organization fully implemented the revised TOP materials during the 2017-2018 program year. The organizations are located in different states (Florida, Missouri, and North Carolina), serve different populations of youth, deliver the program in different settings, and have different funders. Each also had varying amounts of experience with social and emotional learning prior to implementing the revised TOP materials.

Representatives from the three participating TOP partner organizations were interviewed in order to understand their organization's previous experience with social and emotional learning and to gather their initial reactions to the revised program materials. Following those interviews, the agencies or schools implementing TOP were contacted and program staff were identified and interviewed. In all, 26 TOP coordinators and facilitators, serving more than 2,000 youth across eight implementing agencies or schools, were interviewed. Common themes were then identified related to the revised materials' perceived impact on teens, adults, and systems.



PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

Children's Services Council (CSC) of Palm Beach County – CSC is a special taxing district which funds prevention and early intervention services. CSC contracts with three provider agencies to deliver TOP in Palm Beach County communities with high rates of teen pregnancy: Urban League of Palm Beach County, Community Partners, and Children's Home Society. TOP is delivered in middle and high schools, after-school programs, and public housing developments. The racial makeup of program participants is 54% Black or African-American, 31% Hispanic or Latinx, 6% Multi-ethnic, and 9% Other.

North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health, Teen Pregnancy Prevention Initiatives (DHHS) – North Carolina DHHS uses Federal Personal Responsibility Education Program (PREP) funding to support TOP delivery through two provider agencies: Martin Tyrrell Washington District Health Department and Coalition for Families in Lee County. The programs serve students in several middle schools and one high school. The communities served are mostly rural, and include many transient families. The racial makeup of the students served is 37% Black or African-American, 32% White, 22% Hispanic or Latinx, and 9% Other.

Wyman – Wyman staff directly deliver TOP in three St. Louis County school districts: Ferguson-Florissant, Normandy, and University City. The St. Louis County Children's Service Fund (CSF) supports TOP in two of these school districts. CSF is funded through a special taxing district dedicated to providing behavioral health services for children and youth throughout St. Louis County. In the third district, TOP is funded by a local funder, The Collective Impact Network. In 2017-2018, TOP was delivered to entire grade levels within middle school social studies classrooms. The racial makeup of program participants is 69% Black or African-American, 14% Multi-Ethnic, 8% White, and 9% Other.

EMPOWERING TEENS

Youth are more engaged. Facilitators perceived that youth were more engaged with the revised curriculum due to both the new SEL topics and the integration of the experiential learning cycle into every lesson plan. Facilitators shared that the SEL topics made the material more engaging because of their relevance to teens' lives, and that youth were especially interested in lessons related to emotion management, relationships, empathy and stereotypes. One facilitator explained that,

“Even when kids want to disengage, they can't. They can't help but get engaged in these topics.”

Facilitators shared that the SEL topics sometimes pushed youth to think differently and could be challenging at times, but also felt the youth were being challenged in a good way. Facilitators described how the experiential learning cycle helped engage youth by creating learning opportunities throughout the lesson. One facilitator remarked, "The experiences and reflections help to create 'a-ha' moments throughout [the lesson]. It keeps [youth] thinking and engaging with the material."

Youth are experiencing a safe space. TOP facilitators often used the term "safe space" when referring to how the revised curriculum has impacted youth experiences. They felt that the curriculum topics, coupled with the high quality facilitation and the experiential learning cycle, guided adults and youth towards deeper, more emotionally open, and healthier conversations. Facilitators also shared that the inclusive language used in the revised curriculum helps establish a safe space for youth to express themselves and learn. One supervisor felt the revised curriculum naturally created

“more moments for connection, and the moments are not avoided due to fear. It seems to be a safe place to have those conversations.”

Youth and facilitators are using and applying SEL language. TOP facilitators observed that teens and facilitators are using SEL language more often and applying it in different settings, such as during Community Service Learning (CSL). The SEL language provides youth with the vocabulary and definitions they need, and it's language that youth can relate to and understand. One TOP facilitator explained,

“We explicitly name what we're doing more – the skills we are learning. That gives youth a way to express what they've learned, and more deeply understand the purpose.”

TOP staff feel that the intentional naming of social and emotional skills also makes it easier to apply and observe those skills within CSL projects. One facilitator shared that "the SEL skills are easy to integrate organically into CSL projects...the lessons align more easily." Several shared that reflections by youth, and feedback to youth, after a CSL project are richer now. Youth are able to name skills demonstrated in themselves and others. For example, after a CSL project at a homeless shelter, youth were able to talk concretely about empathy, initiative and resilience.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING CYCLE (ELC)

The revised TOP curriculum uses the ELC as the format for every lesson. The ELC outlines a step-by-step process to transform activities and experiences into meaningful opportunities for growth, learning and skill-building, based on the work of educator and experiential learning theorist John Dewey. In the TOP curriculum, the ELC is divided into 5 different stages for each lesson (BERDA):

BRIEFING: Group is given information needed to be successful

EXPERIENCE: Activities create a focal point for discussion

REFLECTION: Group answers key question "What happened?"

DEBRIEFING: Group answers key question "So what?"

APPLICATION: Group answers key question "Now what?"

EQUIPPING ADULTS

Facilitators are mastering new skills and building stronger relationships with teens. Facilitators self-reported, and were observed by supervisors, incorporating new skills and approaches into their facilitation. They noted that once they were trained in high quality facilitation, they realized they could do more to support youth to learn and internalize social and emotional skills. One TOP facilitator shared that “I had a sense of pride once I mastered [high quality facilitation]. I feel I know how to do my job. I know how to meet the kids where they are.” Another facilitator noted that the revised curriculum

“lends itself more to meaningful conversations with teens...We have the opportunity to develop deeper relationships and know the teens on a more personal level.”

A supervisor reported that, following the facilitator training, one facilitator became more supportive of the youth and less directive, and also seemed to open up more emotionally while another facilitator who had been more tentative with the youth in the past became much more engaged. Several facilitators shared that they refer to the TOP Facilitation Guide and their training when they work with youth outside of TOP. They felt that the facilitation skills are transferable and can improve their support to, and relationships with, youth in other settings.

Facilitators are more self-aware about SEL. Several TOP facilitators felt that, following the training, they became more aware of their own SEL skills and life experiences, and how those affect their interactions with youth. They shared that high quality facilitation, which includes modeling of skills such as healthy emotion management strategies, requires them to assess and work on their own skills. Many facilitators described the “Knowing Yourself” reflection questions as being valuable and supporting increased self-awareness. Several shared that the questions helped them to address their own emotional baggage and to be more open to listening to youth, while being less judgmental. One facilitator reported that she skipped a lesson after reviewing the “Knowing Yourself” questions and realizing the content could trigger a trauma that she experienced. She was able to pick another lesson that addressed the same topic and skill. While increasing one’s self-awareness can be

HIGH QUALITY FACILITATION (HQF)

Caring, responsive, and knowledgeable TOP staff work to build strong, supportive relationships with teens and create engaging, and empowering TOP Club experiences. HQF techniques include **Facilitating, Scaffolding, Modeling, and Coaching**.⁶ For example, staff:

- Cultivate a safe, caring, and inclusive space
- Provide structure to keep the group focused and on topic
- Encourage teens to persist through challenge
- Model empathy and healthy emotion management
- Coach teens in managing their emotions

challenging, facilitators found it to be professionally and personally rewarding. Another facilitator commented that this section of each lesson plan

“makes sure you’re always mindful of your personal experience. You have to assess your own biases.”

Facilitators can tailor content to meet teens’ needs.

TOP facilitators consistently shared that the revised curriculum is more easily tailored to meet teen needs, including youth with different backgrounds and experiences. Facilitators described being able to identify a skill to be worked on with the youth, and then having a variety of lesson plans from which to select. This included using materials and activities from the different developmental levels: foundational, intermediate, and advanced. Facilitators shared that the appropriate developmental level can vary from group to group, but also by topic. A group of youth may be at a foundational level on one topic and an intermediate level for another. Many facilitators also shared that the new “Knowing Your Teens” reflection questions and tips helped them to think about the content from the teen perspective, which improved their ability to align the lessons with their teens’ needs and developmental level. Facilitators also feel better equipped to address related issues that the lessons may bring up. As one facilitator stated, “I can anticipate what the teens may face. It makes me prepare to have what they may need, including a referral.”

STRENGTHENING SYSTEMS

TOP partners intend to align hiring, supervision and professional development practices more closely with SEL. TOP partners believe the enhanced focus on SEL will influence hiring practices. For example, one supervisor shared that they will prioritize hiring staff who can self-reflect and are connected with their emotions. She explained,

“If someone is disconnected from their own emotions, how can they ask youth to get connected? It’s something that we’ll need to think about when we hire people.”

Several also felt that the focus on SEL has changed how staff are supervised and supported. TOP partners shared that with the previous curriculum, supervisors focused mostly on ensuring facilitators were doing the required number of meetings and CSL hours. Supervision and support are now more focused on how the facilitators are interacting with youth. Supervisors also highlighted the value of the new facilitator observation tool – supervisors use it to observe and provide constructive feedback to facilitators, and facilitators said they regularly used it for self-assessment after a lesson. One supervisor now asks each facilitator to identify one or two aspects of high quality facilitation for which they want more support. During the year, she then engages in reflective supervision with each facilitator related to their highest area of need.

TOP partners can better communicate the program’s value. TOP partners shared that the more intentional focus on social and emotional learning throughout the TOP curriculum, and in the revised logic model, helps to better communicate and demonstrate the value of the program. TOP partners described the revised logic model as an important communication tool because it clearly depicts the relationship between the TOP approach (including the importance of high quality facilitation), the development of social and emotional skills, and longer-term youth outcomes. In North Carolina, where TOP had primarily been identified as a teen pregnancy prevention program, TOP partners and facilitators now talk differently about TOP. They are able to more easily explain how SEL can reduce engagement in risky behaviors that lead to unplanned pregnancy. One facilitator shared that,

“TOP is so much bigger than preventing teen pregnancy. It’s bigger than just risk. The lovely thing about TOP is that it’s not just avoidance. We’re thinking of the bigger picture – about what we want to see these young people do with their lives and what skills they can build.”

The SEL focus also helps communicate across different SEL-related programs being implemented in schools (e.g., Restorative Justice), and is being used to describe the skills each program is working on and how the programs reinforce and complement one another. One partner shared that “the language of SEL is easily understood by a wide variety of people.”

TOP is advancing SEL at the broader organizational level. The TOP partner organizations and service providers interviewed had varying knowledge, training, and exposure to social and emotional learning prior to implementing the revised TOP curriculum. It was notable, however, that regardless of where organizations started, TOP’s increased SEL emphasis is positively influencing the broader organization’s focus on SEL.

One supervisor summed up the influence of TOP’s deepened SEL approach by saying,

“It has impacted the way I engage with facilitators and I think that will impact our outcomes. Our performance is now based on how these teens develop their SEL skills...This has informed not only the way in which we supervise, but as an agency, what we are looking for in behavioral changes within our youth.”

In Palm Beach County, the Children's Services Council has extensive background with SEL and prioritizes supporting SEL programs such as TOP. Nonetheless, the implementing agencies had varying levels of familiarity with SEL. In one agency, TOP staff conducted mock lessons with non-TOP staff to provide a consistent understanding across the organization. The adults found the lessons to be as engaging and fun for them as they are for youth. TOP staff now feel that their colleagues have a better understanding of how TOP works and hope they will be able to better identify and refer youth that may benefit from the program.

The North Carolina Teen Pregnancy Prevention Initiatives had minimal exposure to SEL prior to implementing the revised TOP curriculum. Following the introduction of the revised materials, they feel like the heightened SEL focus is strengthening the program and the impact it will have. As a result, Teen Pregnancy Prevention Initiatives has requested that Wyman train staff across all their PREP programs, so other staff can benefit from TOP's holistic approach and can understand how SEL is connected to health outcomes.

In Wyman's St. Louis partner schools, TOP programs were already identified as the "go to" SEL programming in middle schools. Across all implementation sites, staff reported that TOP draws additional attention to – and appreciation of – SEL. For example, this past year, the district-wide staff orientation in one school district highlighted SEL. Using the revised curriculum, TOP staff presented on how their program supported social and emotional learning. TOP facilitators have noted that the program, especially with heightened focus on SEL, models how to build an intrinsic approach to promoting positive behavior. One facilitator explained that,

“People like what they see. Teachers are intrigued by our approach because it's so different from what they do in class. They want to learn more.”



Next Steps: Moving from Early Adoption to Full Implementation

FULLY IMPLEMENTING THE REVISED TOP curriculum and training was optional for TOP partners in the first year of roll out. Allowing partners to self-select the pace of implementation over the course of 12 months provided the necessary time for Wyman to learn from early adopters, including those interviewed for this case study. This year also allowed Wyman to thoughtfully consider how to scale the revised program materials, and TOP's deepened focus on SEL, throughout their National Network of partners. To that end, the TOP partners were asked to identify what additional supports would help them to further develop youth SEL. The following themes arose:

Continue to build and reinforce high quality facilitation skills. TOP facilitators felt that learning high quality facilitation skills significantly improved their ability to support the development of youth social and emotional skills. While deeply valued, several facilitators commented that practicing and fully adopting high quality facilitation skills takes time. One facilitator shared that it took several months before he could easily facilitate a lesson plan from the revised curriculum. Supervisors and facilitators found the facilitation observation tool very helpful, and said that they would benefit from additional materials that support reflective supervision and peer learning. Several TOP facilitators suggested that brief online videos depicting the more complex activities could help reinforce high quality facilitation skills and more clearly demonstrate the activities' intended purpose.

Expand measurement of youth SEL. TOP partners and providers are interested in new evaluation tools that closely align with the skills in the curriculum and the revised logic model. Recognizing that Wyman is in the process of developing a revised version of the current pre/post-test for this purpose, several facilitators also wondered if a supplemental SEL assessment tool could be developed to be used throughout the program year. They also suggested creating a tool to observe youth demonstrating social and emotional skills during Community Service Learning projects. Such tools would help facilitators assess how much progress is being made over the course of a program year and help them make needed adjustments.

Ensure that highly vulnerable youth are fully engaged. While the consensus of those interviewed was that the revised curriculum allowed facilitators to tailor content to student needs, there were some indications that,

particularly for those serving the most highly vulnerable youth, there may be a need for additional coaching and implementation supports. For example, not all youth connected with activities in the empathy lessons. Some youth expressed that their lives were just as hard or harder than those people they were being asked to empathize with, and they didn't feel they experienced empathy from others about their hardships. One facilitator recommended including more perspectives from high poverty, disenfranchised communities and adding content on social justice and self-advocacy which could help facilitators better engage and empower highly disadvantaged youth.

Support connections to needed resources. TOP's enhanced focus on SEL is leading to deeper and more meaningful conversations among youth and adults and, consequently, youth are revealing more about their personal experiences, including instances of violence, abuse, parental loss, and more. Several facilitators shared that the adults should be prepared to identify when youth need additional support and be able to refer them to the appropriate services, including trauma-informed services. Facilitators are also gaining a greater understanding of their own life history and how that impacts their interactions with others. Based on facilitators sharing how TOP impacted them personally, supervisors may also need to be prepared to connect their staff to resources when challenging issues or past traumas arise.



Conclusion: Implications for the Youth Development Field

THE CHALLENGE FOR THE YOUTH development field is how to effectively scale high quality SEL content and staff practices throughout youth serving organizations and systems. Wyman knew that TOP, a nationally replicated, evidence-based program, could do more to promote youth SEL. Wyman's involvement in the SEL Challenge, which coincided with an already-planned curriculum revision, created an opportunity moment that broadened Wyman's understanding of how to maximize their impact on the lives of youth by enhancing SEL supports throughout all aspects of TOP.

Wyman's experience sheds light on opportunities and challenges for taking effective SEL practices to scale in organizations and systems. TOP partners shared that the focus on high quality facilitation, specific social and emotional skills, creating safe spaces, and using an experiential learning cycle increased the opportunities for youth to fully engage and enhance SEL. TOP staff felt empowered and believe that the program will have a greater impact on the lives of the youth they serve. TOP partners are better able to communicate about the program, the skills that youth are learning, and how those skills are linked to longer term outcomes. TOP's increased emphasis on SEL has also helped partner organizations more broadly advance their organizational focus on SEL. However, Wyman's experience demonstrates that in order to be effective, organizations and systems must do more than add SEL content to what they are currently doing. They should carefully consider how adults are being trained and supported so they can understand and model social and emotional skills, knowledge and behaviors for youth, and how adults can create safe spaces where youth can learn and practice those skills.

This raises implications for the broader youth development field. Moving forward, the field must continue to promote learning among youth-serving organizations that are working to foster SEL. We need to share concrete examples of how to create that right combination of content, staff practices, and safe space that truly promotes social and emotional learning. In order to reach those youth most in need, youth-serving systems such as education, child welfare, and juvenile justice, will need to take quality SEL approaches and practices to scale. We must continue to learn and explore how to integrate high quality staff practices across our systems that interact and engage with vulnerable youth. Only then will all youth develop the skills they need in order to thrive and be successful in life.

END NOTES

¹ The Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development (2017). *The Evidence Base for How We Learn: Supporting Students' Social, Emotional and Academic Learning. Consensus Statement from the Council of Distinguished Scientists*. Retrieved from: <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/evidence-base-learn/>

² Allen, J.P. & Philliber, S. (2001). Who benefits most from a broadly targeted intervention program? Differential efficacy across populations in the Teen Outreach Program®. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 29(6), 637-655.

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³ The eight organizations selected for the Susan Crown Exchange SEL Challenge were AHA! (Attitude, Harmony, Achievement), Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Milwaukee, Philadelphia Wooden Boat Factory, Voyageur Outward Bound School, The Possibility Project, Wyman, Youth on Board, and YWCA Boston.

⁴ Smith, C., McGovern, G., Larson, R., Hillaker, B., & Peck, S.C. (2016). *Preparing Youth to Thrive: Promising Practices in Social and Emotional Learning*. Forum for Youth Investment, Washington, D.C.

⁵ <https://casel.org/core-competencies/>

⁶ Adapted from Smith, C., et al. (2016).