Deepening the Focus on Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in an Evidence-Based Program: Perspectives from the Field

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Introduction

The Teen Outreach Program® (TOP®) is an evidence-based, positive youth development program for 6th – 12th graders with over 60 implementing Partners nationwide. As part of a planned revision process, and using the research base on SEL and input from the field, Wyman identified 3 objectives for deepening TOP's SEL focus:

- explicitly address SEL in program materials
- support staff practices that are critical to building youth SEL
- design curriculum to optimize high quality facilitation and SEL

After a 2 year revision process based on research in the field and feedback from diverse stakeholders, a revised curriculum, training, and logic model were released in Fall 2017.

Key Questions:
- ✓ How are the revised TOP program materials impacting youth, adults and organizations?
- ✓ What lessons were learned from the process of deepening the focus on SEL in an existing evidence-based program?

Methods

INTERVIEWS

- In Spring 2018, an external consultant interviewed 26 early adopters from three Wyman Partner organizations located in Florida, Missouri, and North Carolina, serving more than 2,000 youth across eight sites.
- The organizations serve different populations of youth, deliver the program in different settings (in-school, out of school; rural, urban), and have different funding sources.
- Common themes from the interviews were identified and used to inform the development of a case study released in Fall 2018.

SURVEYS

In Spring 2019, 45 (76% response rate) TOP National Network Partners responded to an online stakeholder survey.

INTERVIEWS

Key interview themes: **greater youth engagement, deeper relationships** between youth and staff; **increased use of SEL language** by staff and youth; **increased staff self-awareness of SEL**; and **stronger sense of safe space**.

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

"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."

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

" 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"

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Results

Interviews also showed that the increased SEL emphasis was positively influencing organizations to:

- Align hiring, supervision and professional development practices more closely with SEL
- Enhance communication about the program, the skills that youth are learning, and how those skills are linked to longer term outcomes
- Advance SEL at the broader organizational level

SURVEYS

All item ratings averaged 4.00 or higher on a 5 point scale. Highly rated items:

- *Lessons make strong use of the experiential learning cycle* (M=4.72)
- *New content areas of the curriculum are helpful*
- (M=4.70)
- *Curriculum material is effective in building youth's SEL* (M=4.70)

In addition,
- 81% agreed that the TOP logic model is an effective tool for showing how TOP achieves outcomes
- 94% agreed that the revised TOP curriculum will support teens' SEL needs

Lessons Learned

1. **Start with a research base**
2. **Clearly define your program's SEL focus**
3. **Be prepared for an extensive revision process**
4. **Allocate sufficient time and resources to learn and adjust during the revision process**
5. **Engage in an ongoing learning process as new materials are rolled out and implemented**