Testing and Scaling SEL Implementation Supports: Lessons from Wyman’s Teen Outreach Program® (TOP®)

Over the course of 2017 and 2018, as part of a planned curriculum revision and with funding from the Susan Crown Exchange, Wyman deepened the focus on SEL within the Teen Outreach Program® (TOP®), including curriculum and training content, staff practices, and implementation supports. This summary is based on a case study that summarizes our revision activities, lessons learned, and implications for the field.¹

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 enhancing the program’s focus on building social and emotional learning skills. There were three primary objectives:

1. Explicitly address SEL in program content & materials
2. Support staff practices that are critical to building SEL in youth
3. Design curriculum to optimize high quality facilitation and the development of SEL skills

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 curriculum 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. The TOP Curriculum is now organized around three themes (Building My Skills, Connecting With Others, and Learning About Myself) which align with Wyman’s Framework for Thriving Youth, in addition to the Preparing Youth to Thrive Domains and the CASEL Core SEL Competencies (see reverse). In addition, research on the importance of responsive staff practices and safe inclusive spaces for youth led to an emphasis on high quality facilitation, including increased focus on trauma awareness, individual learning styles, and specific practices to support the development of youth SEL skills.

Lessons Learned
- Start with a robust research base
- Allocate sufficient time and resources to learn and adjust during the revision process
- Define your SEL focus
- Engage in an ongoing learning process as new materials are rolled out

Perspectives from the Field: Impact of the Revision on Teens, Adults, and Systems
We also explored the impact of TOP’s revised program materials on early adopters of the revised materials. We extracted common themes from interviews with 26 TOP coordinators and facilitators, serving more than 2,000 youth across eight implementing agencies or schools. Interview results showed that youth were more engaged, experienced a safer space, and youth and facilitators were using and applying SEL language. In addition, we found that facilitators described being more self-aware about SEL, mastering new skills and building stronger relationships with teens, and tailoring content to meet teens’ social and emotional needs. Impact also extended to the broader organizational systems within which TOP was delivered, including plans to align hiring, supervision and professional development practices more closely with SEL and new ways to communicate the value of SEL across the organization.

¹ The TOP SEL case study is available at https://www.selpractices.org/ and also at https://wymancenter.org/research-and-learning/

For additional information about TOP, please visit http://teenoutreachprogram.com or contact Tori.Gale@wymancenter.org.