

# YouthZone

## Program Evaluation Report

### Group Support for Behaviorally At-Risk Middle-High School Students

#### The Challenge of Providing Student Group Support

**Evaluation Purpose** This report describes evaluation results of YouthZone group services for students with adjustment problems in their middle or high school. The purpose is determining the value added by these community-sponsored services to school administrative, counselor, and educator assistance already provided to at-risk youth.

Student high school success usually means better social, economic, and vocational futures, better health, and higher quality of post-graduation life. When students underachieve and limp through academic work to graduation, drop out of school or fail to complete coursework following disciplinary action, they move from being an educationally at-risk youth to a life-long at-risk adult. Unfortunately, school-based solutions are limited for students with more significant adjustment programs.

Commonly, school resources allow limited support for middle and high school students with mental health, behavioral, and substance use problems. When this focused assistance is exhausted without apparent benefit, often minimal interventions and a “wait-and-see” strategies are adopted. Discipline may be delivered and formal proceedings instituted. Referral to community resources may be suggested, though these are often not picked up by student or family. In some high schools group counseling is available when provided by school staff or professionals from the community.

There is substantial research evidence that group work with students can add value to standard high school interventions.

- Bridgeland, et al. (2006) reviewed studies of students who dropped out of high school. A major conclusion from this research was that most dropouts were students who could have, and believe they should have, succeeded in school.
- Wilson, et al. (2007) reviewed studies that had evaluated school-based interventions for aggressive and disruptive students. Positive overall intervention effects were found for several approaches, with no distinctive benefit seen for complex programs, special classrooms/school, or specialized treatment modalities. Quality and consistency of intervention produced better results.

- Young, et al. (2015) found that when group counseling was skills-oriented better results for depression were seen than for general unstructured group counseling of adolescents.
- Wisner, et al. (2013) explored the benefits of mindfulness meditation to help behavior problem students improve functioning. Results showed student strengths were enhanced.
- Massey, et al. (2016) observed in high schools that the majority of students who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning felt ostracized in their community and experienced a hostile school climate, which in turn negatively impacted their educational outcomes. Group counseling that taught LGBTQ students coping skills, understanding their strengths, how to use a restorative relationship approach when attempting to problem-solve, and developed resiliency led to improved conflict resolution and problem solving.
- Malekoff (2015) described how in-school groups for adolescents suffering with depression, trauma, grief and loss, stress, suicide, aggressiveness provided protective factors that counterbalance risk factors in students' lives.

Together these group approaches suggest that most teens will respond favorably by increasing their school connectedness through social-emotional learning and problem-solving skill building.

Because most students who leave school prematurely could have succeeded academically and wanted to complete high school, on one level they are partially prepared to pass their courses, find a meaningful social place on campus, and then graduate. With group approaches there is the potential of rescuing sizable numbers of students from avoidable school failure and long-term negative consequences. The challenge is finding resources for groups that match the unmet needs of schools and students and that are effective.

**YouthZone Student Group Work** During 2013-2016 YouthZone tested with middle and high school students a brief group intervention. Students were referred to the group by their school which was often concerned with their adjustment and substance use risk. YouthZone

completed an intake at YouthZone and, where appropriate, were invited to attend a half-day education and group process experience. Youths found to have more serious adjustment issues were referred instead to more intensive, longer-term YouthZone services. A few were seen individually by a YouthZone staff member when this was advisable.

This evaluation had two purposes. First, it determined whether group participation resulted in meaningful

changes in youths' self-assessment of qualities that are related to at-risk behavior. Second, it determined whether the brief group format was working equally well for boys and girls, middle and high school-aged students, and those of different ethnic backgrounds. Recommendations were to be offered depending on evaluation results.

## Evaluating Student Support Group Programs

At YouthZone, staff intake planning is supplemented by information from the *YouthZone Screening for Positive Youth Development*<sup>®</sup> ("Screening"). The *Screening* tool covers a wide range of youth assets and common risk behaviors. It contains 60 questions, of which seven are identifying and demographic, two ask the youth to assess the quality of their *Screening* answers, and 51 inquire about their assets and risks.

**Fig. 1. The Screening Tool Scores**

### **Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drug Use**

Measures the youth's substance use, the potential harm of use, risk behaviors closely associated with extent of use (sexual activity and contact with police), and peer use of substances.

### **Optimism and Problem Solving**

Measures the youth's resilience in coping with setbacks in life, confidence, self-efficacy, and important skills for solving problems and setting and achieving goals, and optimism about his or her future.

### **School and Community Involvement**

Measures the youth's commitment to achieving in school, attendance, grades, and satisfaction with school, as well as his or her involvement in non-academic activities in school and the community.

### **Delinquency and Aggression**

Measures the youth's antisocial outlook toward rules and other people, as well as their readiness to engage in verbal and physical conflict and tolerance of use of frankly dangerous substances, e.g., illicitly obtained medication.

### **Self-Deprecation**

Measures the youth's perception of him or herself as a victim of verbal, physical, and sexual abuse, tolerance of substance use, and thoughts and plans to attempt suicide.

In the results sections below, the Report presents evaluation findings and interpretations.

## Student Group Participants

Altogether, 100 students participated in a YouthZone group after being referred by their school. All except one student were enrolled in a public school. 31.4% were attending a middle school. The average age was about 15 years with a range from 11 to 18 years. Girls made up 38.0% of the participants. About half were Caucasian and half other ethnicities which included students who selected more than one ethnicity. Slightly more than 13%

lived in the Aspen area, 53% between Carbondale and Silt, and 34% resided in the Rifle area. Among participants, 53% were living with both birth parents, 44% with at least one birth parent, and 3% in other family circumstances. 14.7% had been enrolled with YouthZone services at some time prior to their current group attendance.

## Intake-to-Discharge Changes in Screening Scores

**Group Participation Benefit** The method for estimating the value added by YouthZone groups to other services and support provided by their schools' administrators, counselors, and educators was determined by administering the *Screening* to participants at the start and a second time about three months after their group. The approach reasoned that students' pre-scores would reflect their current adjustment with existing assistance

from their schools and that change from the pre- to the post-assessment would reflect change prompted by their group involvement. Accordingly, the evaluation calculated means for the five *Screening* scales for students at the start and then again following their group participation. Table 1 presents these findings.

Results in Table 1 were compared with similar data collected from YouthZone clients referred for other reasons.

Review found that school-referred students were much less at risk behaviorally and emotionally than was the average YouthZone client.

Data analysis discovered that group participants reported reducing their substance use from the time of their enrollment to three-months later. This involved less drinking and use of marijuana. The Optimism and Problem Solving score scale improved. This reflected their perception of a brighter future and feeling more confident about solving problems in their lives. Data also

demonstrated a significant feeling of being re-involved in school. Most participants said they were fitting in at school better when followed up after their group than they thought was true for them at the beginning. Delinquency (behavior that could be related to an arrest) was low among these students, relative to YouthZone’s general youth population and showed only minimal change. Self-Deprecation (related to trauma, abuse, and self-disparagement) was low initially and did not change over time.

**Table 1 Statistical Significance of Pre-Post YouthZone Screening Score Changes**

(This analysis shows the statistical significance of changes in students’ mean group start and end scores on the *Screening* survey)

YouthZone Screening Scale	Group Start Mean	Group End Mean	Significance of Change (F Statistic <sup>1</sup> )
Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drug Use	15.6	14.7	***
Optimism and Problem Solving	24.2	22.2	***
School and Community Involvement	21.1	19.57	****
Delinquency and Aggression	13.5	13.0	*
Self-Deprecation	9.4	9.4	ns

Higher scores indicate lower functioning in the Screening score topics

<sup>1</sup>Statistical significance levels: ns = “not significant,” \* = p <.10 “borderline significant,” \*\* = p <.05 “significant,” \*\*\* = p <.01, “highly significant” \*\*\*\* = p <.001 “very highly significant”

**Equity of Group Participation Benefit** Evaluation looked next at equity of student response to group participation. Three equity factors were considered: student age, sex, and ethnicity. In summary:

- *Student Age* Younger and older students experienced similar reductions in substance use. Nor was age related to greater or lesser change in optimism about their futures. School engagement rose during the group program and occurred equally for lower and upper grade students. There was a tendency for younger students to show more positive change in at-risk behavior, though conduct problems were relatively low for both age groups.
- *Sex* When girls and boys were compared, change in substance use was similar as was change in their optimism and expectations for

their futures. Improvement in school engagement was greater among girl than boy participants. Scores on the Delinquency scale improved very slightly and equally for both sexes.

- *Ethnicity* Student ethnicity (Caucasian, Latino, other ethnicities which included students identifying with more than one ethnicity) made similar progress with reducing alcohol and marijuana use. The significant gains in student optimism occurred equally for the three ethnic groups with similar results for school involvement and on the Delinquency scale.

Evidence found that the school-referred groups worked equally well for male and female, older and younger, and those of different ethnic backgrounds.

## Discussion: The Value-Added by Community-Supported Groups for At-Risk Students

**Summary** The purpose of this evaluation was to determine whether a community-sponsored group session would add value to students’ behavioral adjustment and social-emotional well-being to services and assistance already being provided by their administrators, counselors, and teachers.

In the YouthZone catchment area middle and high schools are intensely and consistently concerned about students with adjustment problems that have not responded to help available on campus. Every school has standard and individual systems in place for students

who are having difficulty fitting in, though most often these have only school resources to support operations. On-campus community involvement is desirable, but how this can be done systematically across a district's middle and high schools has never been successfully resolved. In the past, experience with referring affected students to services in the community has been useful for some, but not the majority.

YouthZone sponsorship of counseling-informed student groups is a step in the direction of school-community collaboration for students who are struggling socially and behaviorally. However, collaboration is not sufficient. There must be evidence that the costs of school preparation and support time and energy, student time, and group sponsorship are paying off in ways beneficial to all. This evaluation contributed to answering this cost-benefits question.

This evaluation was designed to estimate what benefits students might experience, over and above those already occurring for them through school assistance. This involved their completing a survey of risk and protective factors especially designed and tested with young people with behavioral and social adjustment problems. The *Screening* was taken by students as they enrolled in their YouthZone group and then three months after their group had ended. Statistical comparisons revealed where benefits were occurring from group participation.

Immediately on evaluation's examination of student *Screening* data, it was apparent that group participants were having personal and school adjustment problems – but not as serious as YouthZone finds commonly among its delinquency diversion program clients. Thus, substance use was occurring, but not to the extent and with the frequency that was usually seen among boys and girls who had been arrested and referred to YouthZone for restorative programs. That school-referred students were of concern, but not among the most seriously troubled suggested that that YouthZone could design programs that would be effective and at the same time workable with school referral. Analysis of results confirmed this promise:

- *School Connectedness* The largest change pre-to-post occurred with students' perspectives on their school and community involvement. Most students said they felt more connected with both

in the months after group participation. Educators' experience and research show that rising involvement is often followed by academic improvement.

- *Substance Use* It has often been observed that student group process with informed adults is followed by lower levels of youth substance use. Youths reset their perceived norms and expectations and these corrections are followed by use reductions both in amounts and frequency. The YouthZone group members reported in their surveys this change was occurring. Less drinking and marijuana use were taking place in the months following participation.
- *Resilience* The Optimism and Problem-Solving scale on the *Screening* measures student resilience and self-efficacy. Group participation raised student estimates of these qualities in themselves.
- *Delinquent Behavior and Self-Deprecation* Students referred to the groups had relatively few delinquent behaviors (aggressive behaviors or those for which they could be arrested) and relative to the usual YouthZone clients, fewer had histories of abuse or living through traumatizing experiences. Accordingly, measurement pre-to-post found little change in these areas.

Especially important for school settings are student support programs that work for all ages, both sexes, and those of different ethnic backgrounds. When student support programs require too much individualization, they lose their utility in schools that serve all who are enrolled. The YouthZone groups worked equally well for students of many backgrounds.

**Recommendations** Evaluation results are promising for YouthZone sponsorship of school-referred student support groups. These evaluation recommendations will assure students, their families, and schools that the program continues to provide useful assistance:

- Students and families must be reassured that YouthZone groups are working for them. Therefore, every reasonable effort should be made to obtain both pre-and post-*Screening* surveys, with the post survey taking place two-four months following group participation. Results can then be disseminated, building confidence

and attracting additional home and school support for the program. Results may inspire students to give their group participation a chance to improve their lives.

- Future replication of the evaluation is recommended to confirm that the promise of current results is sustained with newly referred students, staffing, and other school referral and operational changes that may occur.
- It would be desirable to create a “brochure” for the school-referred group that reports probable

benefits and that will encourage students and parents that things can be set right at school. This brochure might include several representative “student stories” that create a deeper appreciation of what is occurring with group participation.

- Finally, it is recommended that some inquiry into student academic achievement take place to determine how group attendance may support progress toward graduation.

