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Master of Science in Criminology & Criminal Justice

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Youth Character Building Programs: Why They're Important

The education system of the United States demonstrates the inequalities between the wealthy and the working poor. Although the country prides itself on providing public education to American children, the quality of that education depends greatly on its funding and varies by state and district (Corsi-Bunker, n.d.). Funding for education is the responsibility of the state and local government but the federal government also contributes (Fioriello, 2021). Private investors also donate to academic institutions, which amplifies the inequality by providing more resources to schools with wealthier investors. Funding for public school expenses depends heavily on local property taxes, which is related to property value. Wealthier communities receive more funding for expenses - due to the value of their homes, they have higher property taxes compared to homes in low-income communities (Corsi-Bunker, n.d.). These economic inequalities inevitably impact the quality of education and academic resources provided within the school district. This research aims to develop a character-building program that can be implemented in community-based organizations.

Each state is responsible for funding its school through its Department of Education. In many states, the public education system is broken down even further into local school districts, who are overseen by school boards. School boards are in charge of executing educational policies and providing schools support with programs. As a result of the community-based school system, there are vast inconsistencies among schools concerning resources available, quality of teachers, and courses offered (Corsi-Bunker, n.d.). Afterschool and summer programs are also financially dependent on state and federal grants - access to these grants may depend on the validity of the program to perform to a national or state standard.

Some after school programs promote character building skills such as the Boys and Girls club, sports clubs, and specialty interests. These resources are extremely important components to the development of youth as they encourage academic participation, strengthen communication and social skills, and teach positive behavior (Fischer, 2019). Although research indicates that consistent participation in an evidence-based program leads to improved outcomes, (among students at risk of failing academically) these programs still struggle financially (McCombs et al., 2017). Due to lack of private funding and donations, programs that serve low-income youth rely mainly on public funding - this causes policymakers to question the validity of these programs (Fischer, 2019). As a result, community-based afterschool programs may not get the funding needed because of lack of evaluation and resources. This research indicates that there is a lack of academic resources such as after school programs offered in underperforming school districts.

The public school system also has an evaluation system to distinguish how a school is performing academically. In Massachusetts, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education gives all public schools a ranking. The highest rating is a level one and the lowest is a level five. According to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, there are currently three chronically underperforming districts including: Lawrence, Southbridge and Holyoke Public Schools. A chronically underperforming district is considered low performing and not showing signs of substantial improvement over time (DOE, 2021). Lawrence has 26 public schools and serves almost 14,000 students but ranks in the bottom 50% of public schools in Massachusetts with a math and reading proficiency of 32% and a graduation rate of 72%. The majority of the students are Hispanic and English is their second language (DOE, 2021).

When observing the three school districts that are considered chronically underperforming there are commonalities that cannot be overlooked. According to the 2019 United States Census Bureau, 55.8% of these school districts are populated by Hispanic and Latinos with a median of 16.63% of them being foreign born, which is above the national average of 13.6% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). This high percentage of foreign-born residents may be one of the factors that impact the academic performance of students in these districts (Williams & Deutsch, 2016). Some may also feel disconnected to the public school system due to their lack of education or language barrier, if English is their second language (Lickona, 1993). Another similarity is the low household median income, which is \$45,500. This is \$17,000 less than the national average of \$62,843 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). The necessity for families to work may outweigh the ability for some guardians to assist in their children's academic development.

Unfortunately, many low-income communities do not receive equal education because they lack additional resources for academic success such as character building programs, quality teachers and advanced courses (Camera, 2018). The majority of families that live in these communities cannot afford extracurricular activities for their children, which could help improve their children's development and academic growth. In many cases children grow up in single parent homes with minimal supervision because their parent is working two jobs. As a result, these youth are left to fend for themselves and often turn to the code of the street and give up on school (Anderson, 1999). These marginalized youth in communities such as Lawrence need the collective support of their community to rehabilitate them.

Although Lawrence offers some positive youth programs such as the YMCA, the Boys and Girls Club, The Community Group and Family Services of the Merrimack Valley these local

organizations do not provide enough assistance to combat the needs of the children in this school district. Implementing more resources, such as character building programs especially for early youth, may be a proactive strategy to prevent students from self destructive behavior or dropping out of school (Extension Service Cooperative, 2002).

Character building programs teach and practice important life skills that many youths may not be exercising at home, such as honesty, academic motivation and respect (Pala, 2011). It is important for youth that do not have access to quality education, to have access to other academic resources, such as character building programs. There are several national character building initiatives that may be implemented in schools or in the community for example, Character.org, formerly known as, Character Education Partnership. This program is considered the ideal model for character building standards in the United States - they created and implemented an eleven principles framework (Character.org, 2021). Other programs that can be implemented are AllStars or Character Counts!, which also practice: respect, responsibility, caring, fairness, citizenship and trustworthiness (AllStarsPrevention, 2021; Character counts!, 2021).

It is apparent that there is a great need for programs that promote positive youth development in the city of Lawrence. There is a disconnect between the youth and academic achievement, which needs to be addressed. As previously mentioned, the academic struggle in this district may be related to the racial and economic composition of the city as well as the lack of resources within the community (Williams & Deutsch, 2016). Due to the lack of funding to low-income cities, on the state and federal level, implementing and staffing a school based character building program may be out of immediate reach. This research proposes a youth

character building program that may be executed gradually at a community level for example, at the Boys and Girls Club.

Literature Review

In the United States, among other parts of the world, character education has gone through a revitalization phase within the last two decades (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007). Parents, teachers, and political stakeholders are holding schools responsible for providing character development while following academic guidelines. Although character education has been embedded in the foundation of youth development and education for centuries, it is still a developing discipline (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007; Pattaro, 2016). The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 played a large role in the expansion of character education. This law made education a priority and was a milestone for children's rights to education (Jeffrey, 1978). The Elementary and Secondary Education Act mandates funds for every aspect of academia, including primary and secondary education, resources to assist educational programs (i.e. character building programs), encouragement of parental participation, professional development and materials (Paul, 2016). Federal funding for character building programs has also increased within the past two decades, which has led to the vast number of national organizations such as Character.org, Character Counts! and All Stars (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007).

According to Lickona (1993) there are other reasons for the increase in popularity of character building programs such as the decline of the family. Normally, families are the primary moral mentors - however, as traditional family structures suffer because of factors like incarceration, drug abuse, mental illness and domestic violence; schools are left to pick up the slack (Berkowitz & Grych, 1998). As a result, schools have to teach the morals children are not learning at home; and conduct the classroom dynamic of teaching and learning. Another reason

for the push in character education are the recent concerning trends in youth character such as: ethical unawareness, increase in self-destructive behavior, decline in civic responsibility, self-centeredness, rising youth violence, disrespect of authority, bigotry, dishonesty, peer cruelty and sexual precocity (Lickona, 1993).

The United States has the highest pregnancy and abortion rate along with the highest drug use among teens in developed countries (Lickona, 1993). According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2010), suicide and homicide were in the top causes of death among teenagers 12-19 years of age. Trends such as these spark national attention and pressure stakeholders to act with policies. The recovery of ethical values by parents and guardians has also increased popularity of positive youth development. It is the moral obligation of the adults to provide the youth with the values and skills needed in order to thrive in society. These values define our responsibilities in a democracy, affirm human dignity, protect our human rights and promote both the individual and the greater good (Lickona, 1993).

Character education terminology is complicated because there are many phrases and words that refer to the same concept. For example, character education is also referred to as youth empowerment, primary prevention, social emotional learning, cooperative learning, positive youth development and moral dilemma discussion (Pattaro, 2016). These terms are not definitive and are subjected to constant historical change, political connotations, public undertones, and conflict over established terms (Howard, Berkowitz, & Schaeffer, 2004.) When discussing character, it is difficult to define because its concepts (i.e. respect) have subjective meaning and are hard to measure by scientific standards.

According to Wikipedia (2021), respect is defined as a positive feeling or action shown towards someone or something considered important or held in high esteem or regard. It conveys

a sense of admiration for good or valuable qualities; It is also the process of honoring someone by exhibiting care, concern, or consideration for their needs or feelings. On the other hand, Character Counts! defines respect as being tolerant and accepting of differences, using good manners and not bad language, being considerate of the feelings of others, not threatening to hit or hurt anyone and to deal peacefully with anger, insults, and disagreements (CC!, 2021). These different interpretations of the word respect are acceptable but may affect the dynamic within a program if terminology is not defined clearly (Urban & Trochim, 2017.)

There are many definitions used to describe character as a result of statewide programs creating their own definition (Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn and Smith, 2006). As character building programs become more popular, it is inevitable that there are different interpretations of the term character and its concepts such as respect. According to Berkowitz and Bier (2007), character is defined as a complex set of psychological characteristics that enable an individual to act as a moral agent. For the purpose of this research, character will be considered social moral competency developed through practice of ethical behavior (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004). Character education will be considered the deliberate effort to cultivate virtue (Lickona, 2009).

In the United States, the national standard for character education in schools is set by the non-profit organization Character Education Partnership, now called Character.org. This national pioneer in the character education movement was created in 1993 by a coalition of researchers, educators, and local leaders, and is dedicated to the fostering of character education in schools and communities (Lickona, 1993). The program is available for all grades starting from kindergarten through high school. Their mission is to provide resources for educators to build school cultures that are positive, supportive and focus on a set of moral values and character strengths necessary to excel in school (Character.org, 2021). Character.org works with schools at

the district and state level and assist them by determining the best strategy based on their needs and values that best fit the dynamic of the institution. The organization has a global strategy to support schools and communities worldwide and have already begun collaborating with countries such as Mexico, Columbia and China (Character.org, 2021). Since the start of Character.org, more than 3 million students, educators, parents and community members across the country and internationally have been positively impacted by being involved with the Character.org initiative. Character.org practices eleven principles including:

- 1) Core values are defined, implemented and embedded into school culture.
- 2) The school defines “character” to include thinking, feeling and doing.
- 3) The school uses a comprehensive, intentional, & proactive approach for development.
- 4) The school creates a caring community.
- 5) The school provides students with the opportunities for moral action.
- 6) The school offers a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum that respects all learners, develops their character and helps them succeed.
- 7) The school fosters students' self- motivation.
- 8) Staff share the responsibility of developing, applying and modeling ethical character.
- 9) The school's character initiative has shared leadership and long range support for continuous improvement.
- 10) The school engages families and communities as partners in the character initiative.
- 11) The school assesses its implementation of character education, its culture and climate and the character growth of students on a regular basis (Character.org, 2021).

These principles are the foundation of the program and are an essential tool for schools and organizations to succeed in their character education plan. Character.org collaborates with schools by providing trainers and workshops to coach teachers and faculty on how to integrate the 11 principles into their curriculum. This framework is used as a reference for schools to create, implement, evaluate, and maintain their character development plan.

In addition, Character.org has a National Schools of Character Awards Program, which acknowledges districts, and public and private schools (K-12) as National Schools of Character for their accomplishments in character education. Over eight hundred schools nationwide have participated in the National Schools of Character Awards Program, which shows the wide reach of such an organization. As an incentive, the winning schools and districts receive a grant, which they are required to use to continue their character education program and to assist in outreach to other schools struggling to implement quality character education (Character.org, 2021). Districts and schools are chosen as winners based on their ability to implement Character.org's eleven principles and display exemplary character education practices for other institutions to follow. National and State Schools of Character maintain their honor for five years. Although not all character education programs are school based, Character.org provides a comprehensive strategy that can be implemented in various settings.

Another prominent non-profit school-based character building program is Character Counts! It was founded in 1992, by an alliance of educational organizations and has been going strong since. This accommodating program provides positive youth development for schools, kindergarten through high school. Their mission is to improve civility through character development and moral leadership in youth. The program focuses on their “Six Pillars of Character,” which consists of core ethical traits such as: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility,

fairness, caring and citizenship as a foundational strategy. As well as incorporating the TEAM approach and other character education best-practices (CC!, 2021). The TEAM approach consists of Teaching children that their character counts, Encouraging the “Six Pillars of Character,” Advocating for character, and Modeling good behavior. Character Counts! provides a very comprehensive collection of resources including practices from other organizations such as Character.org, Excellence and Integrity Institute and ASCD Whole Child Initiative (CC!, 2021.)

Since its launch, Character Counts! has continuously evolved by enhancing techniques through evidence based research, which has allowed them to become a leading student character education program (CC!, 2021). Character Counts!, is designed to be simultaneously incorporated with other character building methods to produce meaningful, sustainable outcomes that can be evaluated. The program focuses on four domains that they describe as “The Four Wheels of Success.” Each wheel has its own workshop and curriculum designed to reach the schools desired outcome. The first wheel of success is the Academic Domain, which focuses on academic potential by strengthening students' mindset, attitude, values and academic skills. The second wheel of success; Social and Emotional, focuses on improving emotional intelligence through the development of psychological awareness. The third wheel of success; Character, focuses on the skills that help each student reach their development and understanding of the Six Pillars of Character. Lastly, the fourth wheel of success; School Climate focuses on a positive academic environment and addresses all important aspects of the Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports program (PBIS), which is a tool used to improve the behavior of students through evidence-based practices. For example, a welcoming and accessible environment that fosters respectful, positive, and supportive relationships.

Similar to Character.org, Character Counts! offers professional developmental training workshops and resources to schools, organizations and educators to positively impact youth. Currently, their program has served over eight million children and families and its participants continue to grow each year. Character Counts!, also has a global reach and is implemented in schools around the world such as Bolivia, Columbia, South Africa, Puerto Rico and Nigeria (CC!, 2021.) As we can see, Character Counts! offers a well-rounded framework that focuses on character education, social and emotional skills, and academic potential. This comprehensive approach makes Character Counts! stand apart from other character building programs.

Another youth development program created in the early nineties is All Stars Character Education, which is a program offered in the All Stars prevention program. Developed by Dr. William B. Hansen, All Stars Character Education's main goal is to discourage youth from engaging in risky behaviors and to help adolescents build positive and bright futures. This science-based prevention program encourages prosocial attitudes and behavior among 4th and 5th graders (McNeal, Hansen, Harrington, & Giles, 2004). According to *All Stars: A guide to building brighter futures for kids* (n.d.), the program has six positive character qualities it promotes including being caring, forgiving, consideration, honest, respectful and responsible. Their mission is to strengthen students' ability to avoid the precursor behaviors by:

1. Establishing positive norms.
2. Promoting bonding to positive peers and a positive adult.
3. Building six positive character qualities including being caring, forgiving, helpful, honest, respectful and responsible.
4. Promoting positive parent/adult attention
5. Building idealism and a belief in the future

6. Establishing personal commitments to avoid risky behaviors (All Stars, 2021.)

The curriculum for the All Stars Character Education program is a popular activity-driven approach to prevent problem behavior in children such as, lying, cheating, bullying, and fighting (All Stars, 2021.) The program consists of 15 hands-on activities that vary in duration from 20-40 minutes. Each activity provides memos that inform parents or guardians what the objective of the activity was and different techniques on how to reinforce it at home. Youth character building is a collective effort among the schools, participants and parents. All Stars middle school series consists of three programs, designed for three consecutive years of participation.

All Stars Core is the first curriculum for the 6th grade, All Stars Booster is for the 7th grade and All Stars Plus in the 8th grade. The first of the three, All Stars Core is designed for students between 11 and 13 years old or in sixth or seventh grade. The program uses interactive projects to encourage student engagement and hands-on learning. They provide activities such as, group discussions, games, art projects, partner work, video making, and a celebration ceremony. All Stars Core is listed in the National Registry of Effective Prevention Programs by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and as a promising program by the US Department of Education. All Stars Core meets the National Health Education outcome standards and the requirements of research- and outcome-based prevention programming with 21st Century Learning Centers (All Stars, 2021).

The following program All Stars Booster implements nine 45-minute sessions that reinforce lessons from All Stars Core. The program also features interactive techniques to strengthen the ability of youth to avoid risky behavior (i.e. drinking alcohol, smoking or bullying

and early sexual activity) by reinforcing positive norms. The last program in the series All Stars Plus, consists of twelve 45-minute sessions and student/parent conversation, which reinforce concepts introduced in All Stars Core and All Stars Booster. In addition, Plus promotes important skills students need to succeed in order to develop a healthy lifestyle, including: developing skills for making good decisions, learning how to set and be persistent at working towards goals, and learning how to resist peer pressure. Teachers have flexibility about when to deliver Plus should a more intense intervention be desired during either of these years (All Stars, 2021).

All Stars also has a program for high school students called All Stars Seniors. All Stars Senior helps prepare students to make rational and healthy choices and to avoid drugs and alcohol. This program also implements research-based strategies that are fun, engaging and effective by practicing three modules. The 45-minute introduction module is delivered by the teacher in a classroom/group setting. The second module is an online lesson designed to be completed by students independently. It includes six sections and takes up to 90 minutes for students to complete. The last lesson is a 45-minute module taught by the teacher in a classroom/group setting (All Stars, 2021).

The All Stars program has had longevity because of its versatility and cost effectiveness. Unlike Character.org and Character Counts! All Stars is not a non-profit organization and there are costs when implementing the programs such as, teacher training, and curriculum and student materials. Once the program is established, the cost to sustain it are the student materials and training of new teachers. Materials for the students are upgraded annually to apply new trends and scientific outcomes (All Stars, 2021). According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2007), the program has the greatest cost-benefit return among prevention

programs yielding net benefits of \$4,670 per pupil. The program's modern approach coupled with parent involvement, makes All Stars a highly-respected program throughout the school systems and community-based organizations.

It is important to take into consideration that the majority of character education programs do not have comprehensive curriculum or resources. Most community youth-serving programs are small and locally funded - they are poorly staffed and lack time, training, and resources to conduct evidence-based evaluation and planning in (Urban & Trochim, 2017). As a result, there is an abundance of information on character education programs but a lack of literature on systematic evaluations and evidenced-based research on these programs (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Was et al., 2006). There are many studies about the outcomes of individual character education programs (Berkowitz, Battistich & Bier, 2008) but not many longitudinal studies of the validity of character education (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007; Pattaro, 2016). Many programs who have been examined do not meet the scientific standard of evaluation and fail to provide thorough information regarding content and strategies (Berkowitz & Bier 2004; 2007; Was et al., 2006).

Even the national standard, Character.org fails to provide stakeholders with empirical evidence for the efficacy of the program - this may be because it is considered the national standard. Regardless, this lack of literature raises concerns in the transparency of the program. Since Character.org has been active for over thirty years, finding scientific research and evaluations should not be difficult. Nevertheless, schools and stakeholders that implement Character.org fully support the program and the framework. Many schools that participate in the National Schools of Character, such as Columbine Elementary School, report significant academic gains during the implementation of Character.org (Benninga et al., 2003).

Faculty also endorses the program - an educator from São Paulo, Brazil said the following about Character.org, “I can truly say that coming across the 11 Principles of Character transformed my work. The 11 Principles are concrete guidelines for successfully developing a culture of character in any school. Tamra and her colleagues at Character.org do an exceptional job explaining the principles and coaching you through their implementation.” Although there is no access to statistical evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of Character.org it does not hinder the positive impact that Character.org has had on the development of character education and the American school system.

On the other hand, research on Character Counts! has demonstrated positive results in schools that are dedicated to the program in areas including: school climate, character, social and emotional learning and academics. According to Character Counts!, during four years of implementing CC! in Downey, California the annual district Academic Performance Index (API) scores improved by 5% and 96% of parents say that CC! is a valuable part of the school. In Riverside Brookfield High, Illinois failing grades reduced by 26% and verbal altercations decreased 68%. In Puerto Rico 88% of teachers say students are more emotionally and physically safe as a result of the program and there was a 85% increase in students treating each other with greater kindness (CC!, 2021). In Tulare Western High, California students reporting not feeling safe at school decreased from 56% to 50% and in Monte Vista Elementary, California physical violence decreased by 30% among students. Notable outcomes such as these, classifies them as effective.

According to a study conducted by South Dakota State University (2002), a sample of over 7,000 middle and high school youth from South Dakota were assessed from 1998 to 2000, to determine the effectiveness of Character Counts! The participating youth were from six

counties including: reservation, rural and city populations. Baseline data was collected through anonymous self-reported surveys before implementing the program to properly evaluate the impact of the program. Results show that in the three-year span students participated in CC! there was noticeable improvement in character development. The percentage of students that lied to their parents and teachers decreased by 20%, alcohol consumption decreased by 16%, cheating decreased by 22%, trespassing decreased by 5% and bullying by 8% (SDSU, 2002).

In another study, Wiebers (2001) examines the correlation between a schools' involvement in CC! activities and the desired behaviors of elementary school students in Sullivan County, Tennessee. There were approximately 688 participants consisting of educators, guidance counselors, and administrators in 29 of the 31 elementary schools from Bristol, Tennessee City, Kingsport City, and Sullivan County public school systems. Wiebers (2001) administered a written survey to participants that provided general perceptions of the CC! Program. A profile of school involvement in CC! activities were developed for schools with the best student behavior. The results show a substantial positive correlation ($P=.64$) between a schools' involvement in CC! activities and desired student behaviors perceived by elementary school educators and administrators. Findings also revealed that 95.2% of respondents agreed (38.3%) or strongly agreed (56.9%) that character education is an important part of their work, and more than 80% of respondents believe CC! is an effective program. Respondents also agreed (35.3%) or strongly agreed (4.4%) with the statement, "I have fewer discipline problems because of Character Counts!" (Wiebers, 2001.)

Lastly, evidence-based research was the most abundant for the All Stars organization because they conduct independent evaluations of its programs. All Stars provides transparency to its stakeholders by providing easily accessible information regarding research concerning its

program through their online guide. One of the studies mentioned in *All Stars: A Guide to Building Brighter Futures* (n.d.), was the All Stars Core pilot study conducted in North Carolina in 1995 in Lexington Middle School. The study consisted of 8 classes of seventh grade students. The classes were divided and four of the eight classes participated in seventh grade D.A.R.E., while the others received All Stars Core. Participants were given anonymous surveys before and after the launching of All Stars Core. The survey analyzed four mediating variables targeted by the program including; ability to avoid drug use, idealism, normative beliefs and bonding to school. The results show positive outcomes for the All Stars Core program and students. The students that participated in the All Stars Core program had significantly better outcomes than D.A.R.E participants. The most significant statistical outcome was for idealism, bonding, normative beliefs and commitment.

Another independent assessment conducted was the All Stars Core and Booster community field trial conducted by Dr. Harrington of the University of Kentucky (n.d.) The organization wanted to assess how well the program would perform in a community setting. Seven community agencies from six states in the eastern United States participated. These agencies provide after-school and weekend programming for youth ranging in age from 11-15. Twenty-seven groups participated across the seven sites, with three to six groups per site. Groups received either All Stars Core only, All Stars Core and All Stars Booster or served as a no-treatment control group. The results showed that the program performed adequately in the community setting and substance use decreased as a result of youth's participation in the program (AllStarsPrevention, 2021).

In another study conducted by McNeal Jr., Hansen, Harrington and Giles (2004), researchers examined how the All Stars program affects mediating variables such as drug use

(alcohol, cigarettes, marijuana and inhalants) and sexual activity. The study consisted of 1,822 students attending 14 middle schools in Lexington and Louisville, Kentucky. Each school was assigned to one of three conditions. Five schools received the program administered by specialists, three schools had the program administered by a known teacher and six schools continued with their original curriculum and served as the control group. Anonymous written surveys were given before the start of the program and again at the end of the school year. The survey included items to assess such as drug use and sexual activity. The results revealed that when All Stars was implemented successfully, it decreased substance use and sexual activity among students. Teachers were deemed more effective than specialists in implementing the All Stars program and fostering change. On the other hand, the program was not successful when it was delivered by specialists (McNeal Jr. et al., 2004). This may have been because the students and the teacher had trust and knew how to work together as opposed to a trainer who was a stranger.

Character education programs are an essential tool in child development because they provide youth with a second form of moral reinforcement; assuming that youth receive proper socialization at home. In theory, there are dozens of school-based character education programs available for schools in need. Yet chronically underperforming school districts such as Lawrence lack these much-needed programs. This research aims to develop a modern evidence-based character building program that can be implemented in community based organizations. The non-profit organization, the Boys and Girls Club in Lawrence, would be an ideal location for the launch of a new character building program. Since the BGC is already established within the community the youth is already attending. There is a need for new programs and underwriters to implement them within their youth development strategy. Lastly, the youth in the Lawrence

Public School district would benefit from an additional academic program because they are chronically underperforming. This program would flourish in this setting.

Program Description

This contemporary evidence-based character building and prevention program is tailored for all youth including bilingual and ESL between the ages of 7-17 years of age. The mission of the program is to strengthen character and self-esteem development among youth through moral values such as respect, honesty, accountability, and forgiveness. The framework aims to prepare youth how to navigate in high-risk situations safely and cope with negative experiences. The goal of the program is to provide youth with a positive and respectful space that promotes moral values and discusses controversial life topics such as bullying, domestic violence and drug prevention.

The year-round program consists of three modules including: moral values, controversial discussions and coping strategies. The modules consist of three, one-hour workshops/week, and each age group will have its own curriculum with age-appropriate content. The modules are designed to apply a variety of different strategies to engage participants and build trust between the facilitators and its participants. Before and after completion of the program, the facilitator and the participants are required to take an anonymous written survey about concepts and beliefs. This will help the program gather data and evaluate the effectiveness of the modules.

Example of survey questions:

Do you enjoy school? Why or why not?

Do you think school is important? Why or why not?

Do you think family is important? Why or why not?

Who do you consider to be a good person and why?

Do you consider yourself good or bad? Why?

In the first month of the program the objective is to build a trusting environment through collective group activities and bonding. This would include local field trips that promote positive youth interaction such as trips to parks, libraries, ice cream shops, and art galleries. After the introductory month, workshops will be developed that consist of group discussions, problem solving activities, role playing, and visual content such as, games, and written exercises. Depending on the size and needs of the groups, there may be more than one facilitator working with them at a time. In August, at the completion of the program there will be a certificate ceremony held at the Boys and Girls Club.

Location: The Boys and Girls Club on 136 Water Street Lawrence, Massachusetts

Days: Monday, Wednesday and Friday

Time: 4-5pm for ages 7-12 years old;6-7pm for ages 13-17 years old.

Summer: Same days, 11am-12pm for ages 7-12 years old;1-2pm for ages 13-17 years old.

Module One: Do the right thing - Moral values (7-12 years old)

This element of the program is designed to introduce moral values and concepts such as honesty, respect, forgiveness and accountability, which may indirectly strengthen self-esteem and communication skills. In this section of the program the facilitator has the responsibility of exercising these concepts within the group to practice good morals and instill them within the participants. This module consists of three one-hour workshops that are offered weekly. Workshops consist of a combination of group discussions, problem solving activities, role playing, and visual content such as, games, and written exercises. This module will run for five months.

Example of a roleplaying activity - Big Bully:

The participants will be divided into two groups: the bullies and the role models. The facilitator will decide how the groups are split. Each bully will be matched up with a role model and they will be considered a team. The bully will pick a card from the pile then respectfully read and act out what the card says to the role model. For example, the card will say things like “*Get really angry, someone stepped on your sneaker*” or “*Someone just cut you in line say something to get them to move.*” The point of the bully cards is to act as a bully to the role model. The role model then responds as they think a “role model” would respond. The role model gets rated on their response by the facilitator either one, two or three stars. The players switch roles every round, there are three rounds and each round has three cards. The team with the most stars wins. Each team will go one at a time and have 30 seconds to respond, if they don’t respond in time they’re disqualified. The winner will receive an ice cream treat or snack sponsored by Jimmy’s Cafe in Roslindale.

Module Two: Speak up - Controversial discussions (7-12 years old)

This part of the program is very impactful because it exposes participants to sensitive issues such as bullying, domestic violence and drug prevention on an introductory level. These conversations may strengthen communication skills, self-esteem, and rationale. In this section of the program the facilitator has the responsibility of presenting the information about the topic verbally and writing important concepts on a white board. Discussing topics such as these may give participants the knowledge and motivation to make good decisions in stressful situations. This module consists of three one-hour workshops that are offered weekly. Workshops consist of a combination of group discussions. This module will run for three months.

Group discussion activity: The group discussion activity in the program is to generate conversation about issues that are not commonly discussed among the youth. Having group discussions may help develop communication skills, which are helpful in academic development. These conversations will range in topics such as bullying, domestic violence, and drug prevention. The facilitator will be in charge of leading the group discussion by asking questions in an open floor format. The participants are encouraged to respond but are not required. Each conversation will vary in length depending on response rate.

Example of discussion question:

Can anyone tell me what a drug is? What does it look like? What it does? Have you seen anyone do drugs? If yes, what? Where? How did it make you feel?

Possible participant responses:

- 1) I do not know what a drug is.
- 2) Cigarettes and alcohol are drugs. Cigarettes smell funny and alcohol makes people walk and talk funny. My parents smoke cigarettes and drink alcohol all the time at home. I don't care.
- 3) Marijuana is a drug, my brother smokes weed. It looks like a plant and it smells like a skunk. My brother always eats all the food after he smokes. I don't like it.

Possible facilitator response:

- 1) A drug is any substance natural or manmade that alters your mind and body. Some drugs are for medical use and others are for recreational use. For example, Tylenol is a medical drug that's used to help with headaches; cigarettes are a tobacco product smoked for recreation.

- 2) This may require a follow up question such as, do you think that drugs are good or bad for you? Do you like it when your parents smoke cigarettes and drink alcohol? Why or why not?
- 3) This may need a follow up question such as, do you think marijuana is good or bad for you? Why don't you like it when your brother smokes weed.

Module three: What do I do? Coping Strategies (7-12 years old)

This segment of the program teaches participants what to do when they face uncomfortable situations such as bullying. The coping strategy module will focus on basic communication skills as well as social and emotional learning on an introductory level. For some of the participants it may be their first time discussing these topics. These conversations may strengthen communication skills, self-esteem, and critical thinking. In this section of the program the facilitator has the responsibility of presenting the information about the topic verbally and writing important concepts on a white board. Discussing topics such as these may give participants the knowledge and motivation to make good decisions in stressful situations. This module consists of three one-hour workshops that are offered weekly. Workshops consist of a combination of group discussions, problem solving activities, role playing and written exercises. This module will run for three months.

An example of a written exercise:

Have you ever been bullied in school?

If yes, how did it make you feel?

Why is bullying bad?

What should someone do if they are being bullied in school?

Who would you tell?

The participants will be encouraged to write down the answers to the questions and share their answers with the rest of the group.

Facilitators response for written exercise:

Depending on the responses of the participants, the facilitator will always encourage participants to seek help from respected adults such as, parents, teachers and local resources such as, the Boys and Girls Club faculty and other non-profit organizations. The facilitator will also recommend de-escalating tactics that can be used in the moment such as walking away. The purpose of the written exercise is to gauge how much the participant knows about coping and their ability to think critically in these stressful situations.

The structure and activities for the modules are the same among all age groups while discussions and concepts vary based on age. The moral values module will focus on honesty, respect, forgiveness, accountability and self-esteem. The controversial discussions module will also include informal dialogue regarding bullying, domestic violence, and drug prevention but the module will last longer because it encourages dialogue and debate about personal experiences. Lastly, the coping strategy module will focus on communication skills, social and emotional learning, as well as participation in team based activities such as exercising, sports, theatre, and dance. Participating in physical activities such as these is a great way that youth can cope with negative situations.

Participants of the character building program come from different backgrounds and circumstances, which may affect the outcome for each individual. By the completion of the full year program participants should be able to make better decisions and have the skills to communicate their thoughts. Overall, the program will be considered effective if a participant has demonstrated progress in their behavior and attitude. For example, they have shown that they

have strengthened their social moral competency through practicing communication, honesty, respect, accountability and academic motivation within and outside of the program. This can be corroborated by the facilitator of the program, teachers at school, parents/guardians or by their peers. By the completion of the full- year program the participant should be able to some degree; de-escalate situations with their words, make thoughtful decisions, speak honestly and display a positive attitude and improved self-esteem.

Discussion

The school system in the United States is very complex yet it needs improvement in providing quality education consistently and accurately to everyone. Lack of resources should not be a factor in a school underperforming, considering the federal and state government oversee the school system. Resources such as quality teachers, academic supplies and after school programs need to be evenly distributed to each school and district. If schools obtain certain grants by their academic performance, it seems underperforming schools are being penalized for needing more assistance by receiving less funding. In communities highly populated with foreign born residents such as Lawrence, the youth in the community may be struggling to assimilate to American culture between their home and school norms. This may make it difficult for them to motivate themselves academically in a culture they do not know.

Economic disadvantage is also an issue in communities highly populated with foreign born residents. As previously discussed, these youth may not be receiving the necessary support they need from their schools or districts in order to succeed in school. For example, there may be a lack of funding, ESL courses, faculty and academic materials. Additionally, many foreign-born residents may not be equipped to prepare their children with adequate academic support at home because they are too busy working. The home is the primary place for socialization but if a

guardian is not present for the child, then the weight of providing a quality education and moral competency shifts to the school. On the other hand, a parent may be home but may not be educated themselves and lack the knowledge to be able to help their children with homework or projects. It is clear that chronically underperforming school districts need additional resources in order to rebuild a healthier learning environment suitable for the children in the community. Lastly, it is important to consider that many of these students encounter language barriers because they do not speak English - they are learning a second or third language on top of the traditional school curriculum, which is no easy task. School districts need to find an effective strategy to provide non-English speakers with additional academic support.

Implementing this program in the Boys and Girls Club in Lawrence would make a positive impact on the youth and residence in the community. It would also benefit the Lawrence Public Schools, and policymakers. Providing an underperforming school district with supplemental resources for positive youth development is necessary. This program is easily adaptable and can be modified to meet the goals of the organization. It is designed for organizations within the community that support positive youth development and are able to provide constant adult supervision for its participants. This aligns with the mission at the Boys and Girls Club, which is to enable all young people of Greater Lawrence to reach their full potential as productive, caring, and responsible citizens (Boys and Girls Club, 2021). They also focus on creating a safe, fun environment so kids can have every opportunity to be successful in life. This is a great platform to apply this character building program because it also fostered a positive environment where moral values are practiced.

Limitations

One of the limitations of the character building program is that it has not been implemented in any organizations. Therefore, there is no evidence of its effectiveness, which may hinder organizations from supporting the program. Another limitation is the range of the age groups available for participants; 7-12 years old and 13-17 years old. This age gap might be too wide and may cause setbacks in time and practice. On the other hand, it may not. The participants may benefit from having older and younger peers to grow with. Another limitation could be that the ESL participants may need their own group in order to provide optimum outcomes. A bilingual setting may be too time consuming for the facilitator.

Strengths

This energetic curriculum uses engaging activities that encourage youth to think critically while promoting teamwork. It is adaptable and can be implemented in multiple settings. The facilitators are bilingual, well-trained and professional and care about the well-being of the participants. This program provides a positive learning environment that fosters moral values and concepts encouraged by national character education standards. It is offered throughout the whole year and provides youth with academic resources in the summer. This community-based program offers youth support and an opportunity to strengthen social skills by meeting other youth within their community.

Every community is capable of providing quality education and resources but it has to be a priority. This character building program is going to be effective because it is going to be evidence based by collecting data from surveys and observations to improve each year. The facilitators in the program are fully trained and committed to helping these youth better themselves. According to Berkowitz and Bier (2004), in order for character education to be successful there must be fidelity of implementation by full and accurate delivery by a well-

trained facilitator. Additionally, the program provides bilingual facilitators for non- English participants (Spanish available). This is a great feature for participants that may feel disconnected from school because of a language barrier. Evidence-based character education has been associated with many positive outcomes such as academic achievement, prosocial behavior, trust and respect for teachers and moral reasoning maturity (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Pala, 2011). It has also shown to reduce delinquent behavior such as truancy, teenage pregnancy, failing grades and suspension (Pala, 2011). Character building programs play an important role in providing a quality education and should have a stronger presence in underperforming districts such as Lawrence, MA.

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Appendix**Survey questionnaire:**

1. Do you enjoy school? Why or why not?
2. Do you think school is important? Why or why not?
3. Do you think family is important? Why or why not?
4. Who do you consider to be a good person and why?
5. Do you consider yourself good or bad? Why?
6. Is lying bad? Why?
7. Do you know what bullying is? If so explain
8. Do you know what domestic violence is? If so explain
9. Do you know what drugs are? If so explain
10. What are you looking forward to in the program?

Module 3, written exercise:

1. Have you ever been bullied or seen someone get bullied in school?
2. If yes, how did it make you feel? Explain
3. Is bullying bad?
4. What should someone do if they are being bullied in school?
5. Who would you tell?
6. Why should you tell someone when someone is bullying you?
7. Are you afraid to tell someone that you're being bullied? If so, why?