

LESSONS LEARNED IMPLEMENTING EVIDENCE-BASED SEXUAL HEALTH CURRICULA IN WEST TEXAS SCHOOLS

2019–2021 Canutillo Teen Wellness Initiative

Project Vida Health Center
El Paso, Texas

INTRODUCTION

Project Vida Health Center (PVHC), in partnership with Canutillo Independent School District (CISD), implemented the “Canutillo Teen Wellness Initiative” (CTWI) between July 2019 and June 2021 in El Paso, Texas. The project was supported by Grant Number TP1AH000196 from the HHS Office of Population Affairs.

The overall goal of the two-year project was to implement a holistic approach to mitigate risky behaviors and reduce unintended teenage pregnancy among CISD students. The project’s intervention included two teen pregnancy prevention (TPP) programs, parent classes, system navigation¹, and youth leadership development. The project also contained a sustainability component, which attempted to institutionalize TPP programs and facilitate navigation in CISD.

¹ System navigation assists families and individuals in locating and receiving the services they need.

PVHC implemented two age-appropriate TPP programs: Making A Difference! (MAD) (for middle school students) and Positive Prevention PLUS (PPP) (for high school students). MAD and PPP are school-based sexual health education and teen pregnancy prevention curricula designed to improve students’ skills and knowledge about sexual health and relationships. These programs aimed to help students learn to communicate assertively, abstain from sexual intercourse, and (should they engage in risky behaviors) make healthy decisions. Both PPP and MAD are evidence-based programs (EBPs).

High school youth attended fourteen 45-minute PPP sessions, and middle school youth completed eight 60-minute MAD sessions. During the 2020–2021 school year, PVHC implemented MAD in Canutillo Middle School and Jose J Alderete Middle School, while PPP was



SIDEBAR: EVALUATION METHODS

The evaluators' overall approach was to determine the following: 1) whether the TPP programs had an immediate effect on student participants after completing their respective program, 2) whether the PVHC implemented the TPP programs with fidelity and quality, and 3) whether stakeholders² found that the TPP programs were a good fit for Canutillo ISD.

The evaluators implemented a one-group pretest-posttest design in which participants completed online surveys between May 2020 and May 2021. The evaluation team conducted a nonresponse analysis and applied weights to the survey data, which adjusted the findings to compensate for nonresponses. The evaluators also conducted the following focus groups: student participants in the summer of 2020 (6 of 679), teachers in the fall of 2020 (4 of 4), CISD student parents in the spring of 2021 (6), and PVHC Outreach Facilitators in the spring of 2021 (3 of 3). The purpose of the focus groups was to understand the stakeholders' program experience.

² Stakeholders included program participants, parents, CISD teachers, and PVHC facilitators.

taught in Canutillo High School and Northwest Early College High School. Additionally, one section of each TPP program was implemented during the summer of 2020 as a summer camp.

LESSONS LEARNED

PVHC facilitators' experience implementing the project in CISD yielded several critical lessons, which should be considered when planning future activities. First, because the COVID-19 pandemic forced PVHC to quickly shift from offering in-person activities to a virtual model, PVHC administrators immediately recognized the need to maintain open and effective communication with CISD, despite being in a remote setting. For example, CISD shared the students' district email addresses and meeting links to the virtual classrooms with PVHC, allowing facilitators to directly communicate with students.

Another lesson learned was that PVHC needed to adapt the curriculum to the online environment to maintain student interest and engagement. Facilitators, for example, developed interactive slides and questions (Pear Deck) as an approach to improve engagement over a typical virtual class. A final lesson learned was that PVHC needed to provide training to staff and CISD teachers on distance

learning strategies and practices. These training sessions introduced best practices on working from home, on social and emotional wellbeing, and also provided program content information to CISD teachers. The training served as an implementation driver and built staff competency.

PROGRAM NEED AND FIT IN CANUTILLO ISD

The project's survey findings support the need for these programs. For example, about 15% of youth stated on the pretest survey that they have engaged in either oral, vaginal, or anal sex. Findings also reveal that older students were more likely to indicate having had sex than did their younger counterparts.

In addition, both teachers and students indicated that the programs were mostly a good fit for the Canutillo community. In a focus group session, teachers stated that MAD and PPP were positive and a good fit for their students and school. A teacher, for example, stated, "[The curriculum is] another cool tool for how to teach, you know, those controversial topics we talked about." Further, over 8 in 10 students (84%) were satisfied with the program overall (based on exit surveys of 345 of 679 participants). A notable share of

middle school respondents, however, indicated that MAD might have some issues related to reliability and the program materials, which need to be addressed. Exit surveys revealed that only 36% of MAD respondents found the examples in their program reliable "all" or "most of the time." One student recommended for PVHC to "work on the realism of some of the scenarios." Another suggested to make the program "less awkward." Overall, the MAD respondents' comments did not provide insights into why some did not find the materials reliable.

Independent observations also indicated that PPP and MAD sessions were implemented with high overall quality.

Overall implementation quality mean score



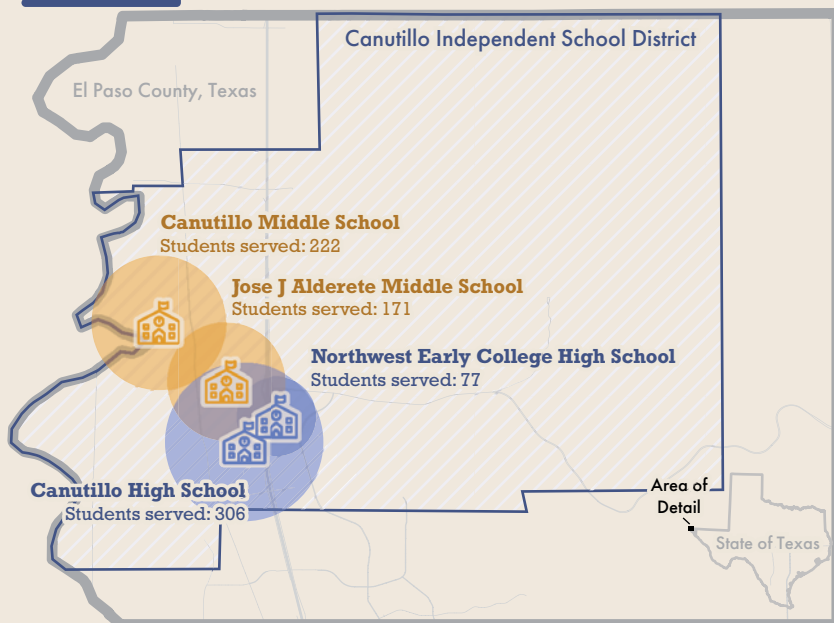
IMPLEMENTATION QUALITY & FIDELITY

It is essential to implement EBPs, such as MAD and PPP, as initially designed. If any critical components are left out or heavily modified, the likelihood of achieving the desired outcomes—in this case, a reduction of unintended teen pregnancies—will be less likely.



679

Youth participants attended the MAD or PPP program during 2020–2021 year



For those responsible for implementing MAD and PPP, it is critical to maintain fidelity and quality standards to ensure effective outcomes.

Evaluation findings indicate that these standards were met during the grant period. Across both programs, PVHC facilitators and CISD teachers implemented a total of 402 sessions across 32 CISD classes and two summer camps. Of these

sessions, about 95% completed all activities and lessons as planned. The percentage of completed sessions were slightly higher for PPP (96%) compared to MAD (92%). Independent observations also indicated that select sessions were implemented with high overall quality.

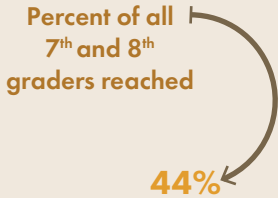
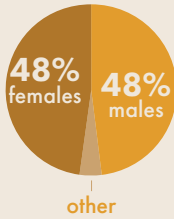
Independent observers, for example, indicated that teachers had a high level of enthusiasm, and their



331

MS students served

Gender



students were active participants. The exit survey also substantiates these findings—nearly 70% (68.1%) of the respondents indicated that they were interested in the programs “all” or “most of the time.”

PARTICIPANT REACH

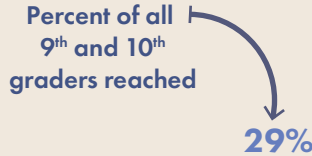
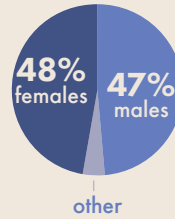
MAD and PPP programs were implemented twice—once as a



348

HS students served

Gender



summer camp in 2020, and then again in CISD physical education (7th grade) and health (9th grade) classes during the 2020–2021 year.

In total, 679 participants attended at least one MAD or PPP session across the two program years. Of those, 87% attended 75% or more of the program’s sessions. Approximately 350 were MAD participants, and about 330 were PPP participants. For



SIDEBAR: COVID-19 DISRUPTIONS

In March 2020, the City of El Paso Department of Public Health began reporting cases of COVID-19 in El Paso County. Like other districts, CISD canceled its in-person classes and shifted to distance learning. MAD and PPP sessions were suspended and PVHC, in coordination with CISD, implemented virtual summer camps to avoid overlap with CISD's instruction.

During the 2020–2021 school year, CISD continued remote learning. Unlike the prior year, MAD and PPP were offered as part of the district's in-school instruction. While CISD and PVHC will need time to understand to the impacts caused by the pandemic, there were positive lessons learned. For example, COVID-19 precautions forced PVHC to be nimble. In response, PVHC adapted its delivery approach to implement its programs in a virtual setting, something PVHC plans to continue in the future. The second lesson learned is that, despite a virtual setting, the programs were successful in improving program participants' content knowledge about sexual health between pretest and posttest assessments.

the 2020–2021 school year, 44% and 29% of all CISD 7th–8th and 9th–10th grade students, respectively, attended the program.

KNOWLEDGE GAINS

As noted earlier, one aim of MAD and PPP was to improve participants' knowledge of sexual health. The evaluation team administered online entry and exit surveys to both the MAD and PPP participants, which included content knowledge assessment items. Specifically, there were 11 and 12 content knowledge items included in the MAD and PPP surveys, respectively. Survey respondents were asked to identify whether a statement was true or false. The option "Don't know" was also included to limit guessing. The scores were summed and a percent correct was calculated for each survey respondent.

Nearly nine in ten (88%) of students had a higher posttest score than their pretest. On average, student respondents answered 43% of the entry items correctly and 77% of the exit survey items correctly. This difference, 34%, 95% CI [30.5, 36.7], was statistically significant, $t(21.2)$, $p < 0.001$. In other words, the evaluation findings indicate that student respondents improved their knowledge of sexual health and relationships after completing their respective program.

NEXT STEPS

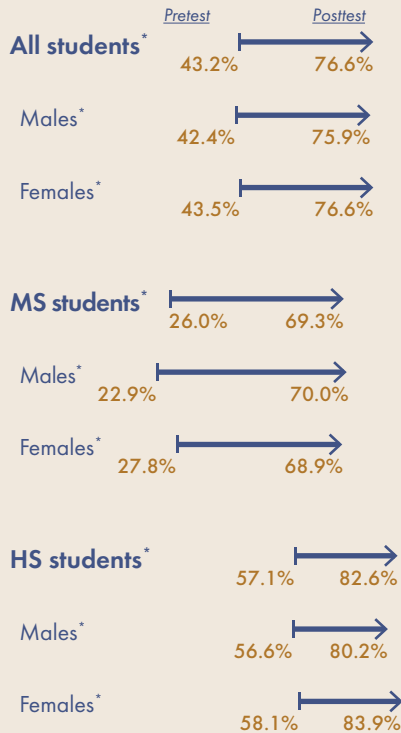
Teachers and principals are at the front lines of youth education, and there is no question that the addition of MAD and PPP programs to the district's curriculum will ask more of teachers. The evaluation, however, reveals that these programs are both needed and effective, and that teachers benefit from technical assistance when implementing them. One of PVHC's next steps is to apply to new funding opportunities (such as PREP grants) to address teen pregnancy prevention and adult preparation topics, as well as to continue supporting teachers to implement these critical topics.

As noted in this brief, the project's evaluation findings show promise—for example, a large share of students showed improvement in content knowledge after the program's conclusion. Improvement in knowledge is the first step towards making healthy and informed decisions on sexual and contraceptive behavior. Because of the success of the programs, CISD administrators plan to continue to offer the EBPs and are committed to maintaining fidelity and quality. As such, the evaluation team believes that the number of unintended teen pregnancies will fall in relation to past years in the Canutillo community.



Students improve their knowledge about sexual health and relationships by 34% after completing their respective program.

Content knowledge mean scores
(percent correct)



* statistically significant difference at $p < 0.001$



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