

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 424 261

TM 029 134

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TITLE Project YES! Pilot Program. Publication Number 97.13.
INSTITUTION Austin Independent School District, TX. Office of Program Evaluation.
PUB DATE 1998-08-00
NOTE 11p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative (142)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attitude Change; *Curriculum; *Drug Use; Elementary School Students; Elementary Schools; Hispanic Americans; Intermediate Grades; *Juvenile Gangs; Limited English Speaking; Middle Schools; Police; *Prevention; Program Effectiveness; Program Evaluation; Student Attitudes; *Violence
IDENTIFIERS *Austin Independent School District TX; Middle School Students

ABSTRACT

Project YES! (Yes to Education and Skills) is a gang violence and drug prevention curriculum created in part from funding from the California Governor's Office of Criminal Justice Planning. It has been implemented in California schools since 1991, and was introduced to the Austin Independent School District (AISD) in 1998. The program, which is delivered primarily by law enforcement officers, can also be taught by classroom teachers or others as a stand-alone program or as part of a school's core curriculum. In Austin, the 5-week stand-alone curriculum was taught by police officers to five fourth-grade classes and three sixth-grade classes from five elementary schools and three middle schools. Most of the participating students were Hispanic Americans, and most were from low-income families. A large percentage (46% of the middle school students) were special education students, and one-fifth of the middle school students were of limited English proficiency. With the exception of the discipline rates for the semester in which the program was given, which were higher for students in the program, academic and behavioral data showed only small differences between the program participants and all AISD middle school students and elementary school students. Pretest and posttest data about student attitude changes were available only from the middle schools and one elementary school, and they showed only two significant attitude changes. The police officers who administered the program thought that there were many positive aspects of the program, among which was an improved attitude toward the police on the part of the students. Officers made a number of suggestions for program improvement, including expanding it to all AISD middle schools. They also thought that the effectiveness of the curriculum would be enhanced if it became part of the core curriculum. The long-term impact of Project YES! has not been definitively established, but it may become a viable method of addressing the problems of gangs and violence. (Contains one figure and two tables.) (SLD)

FEEDBACK

Austin Independent School District

Pub. No. 97.13

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Project YES! Pilot Program

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FEEDBACK

Publication Number: 97.13

Austin Independent School District

PROJECT YES! PILOT PROGRAM

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Program Background and Description

Project YES! (Yes to Education and Skills) is a gang violence and drug prevention curriculum created in part from funding from the California Governor's Office of Criminal Justice Planning. A task force consisting of 60 specialists representing law enforcement, prevention, and education were pivotal in the development of the program. Originally created in 1989, it has been implemented in California schools since 1991. The goals of the program are to build resilience and to equip students with the skills necessary to make informed decisions, set goals for success, and resist negative peer pressures. The program is designed to be delivered either as a stand-alone program, taking approximately five weeks, or can be incorporated into a school's core curriculum. Through scripted lessons, educators are able to deliver gang violence and drug prevention strategies and teach decision-making skills to all students. The program is delivered primarily by law enforcement, but also can be taught by classroom teachers and others including school resource officers and school counselors.

Project YES! was piloted in the Austin Independent School District (AISD) during the spring semester, 1998. Funding was provided from local, AISD and Alternative Education Program (AEP) monies. Due to time constraints, the five-week, stand-alone curriculum was used. The program was delivered to five 4th grade classes and three 6th grade classes by police officers from the AISD Police Department, Austin Police Department, and the Travis County Constable's office. Prior to the start of classroom instruction, all officers attended a one-day training delivered by the Orange County (CA) Department of Education's (OCDE) Project YES! Coordinators. The AISD Police Department also conducted an additional training for the officers prior to the beginning of instruction for the purposes of practicing skills learned during the original training.

Students Served

Students from five elementary schools and three middle schools received Project YES! instruction during the pilot testing of the program. In some instances, individual students were selected by the school principal to participate while in other instances, an entire class was selected. In either case, students were selected based upon a history of behavioral, academic, and/or other problems within the school and, therefore, are not representative of the entire elementary and middle school populations of students at AISD. Demographic characteristics of the elementary and middle school students served by Project YES! can be found in Tables 1 and 3. Academic and behavioral comparisons between Project YES! participants and all other AISD elementary and middle school students can be found in Tables 2 and 4.

Middle School Participants

Table 1: Description of Project YES! Middle School Participants, 1997-98

Project YES!	Gender	Ethnicity	Low Income	Overage for Grade	LEP*	Special Education
Middle School N = 56	52% Females	29% African-American				
	48% Males	68% Hispanic	86%	18%	18%	46%
		4% Other				

Source: GENESYS of AISD Student Master Files

(* Limited English Proficiency)

Table 2: Academic and Behavioral Comparisons

Semester	Attendance	*Grade Point Average	Discipline
Fall, 1997			
Program Participants	96.4%	84.4	8.9%
All AISD Middle School Students	95.6%	83.5	8.6%
Spring, 1998			
Program Participants	93.2%	82.7	19.6%
All AISD Middle School Students	93.5%	83.4	11.8%

Source: GENESYS of AISD Student Master Files

(*Represents the average GPA for listed students on a 100 pt. Scale)

Most program participants were Hispanic (68%) and low income (86%), and a large percentage (46%) were special education students. Furthermore, one-fifth of the students involved were LEP (Limited English Proficient). With the exception of the discipline rates (percentage of students referred for discipline offenses) for the spring, 1998, academic and behavioral data showed only small differences between the program participants and all AISD middle school students. In addition to these comparisons, the retainee rate (percentage of students recommended to be held back from advancement to a higher grade) was considerably higher among program participants (39.3% middle school program participants compared with 16.1% all AISD middle school students).

Elementary School Participants

Table 3: Description of Project YES! Elementary School Participants, 1997-98

Project YES!	Gender	Ethnicity	Low Income	Overage for Grade	*LEP	Special Education
Elementary School N = 115	48% Females	22% African-American				
	52% Males	55% Hispanic	69%	9%	15%	13%
		23% Other				

Source: GENESYS of AISD Student Master Files

(*Limited English Proficiency)

Table 4: Academic and Behavioral Comparisons

Semester	Attendance Rates	Discipline Rates
Fall, 1997		
Program Participants	96.7%	0.0%
All AISD Elementary School	96.6%	1.3%
Spring, 1998		
Program Participants	95.2%	4.3%
All AISD Elementary School	95.5%	1.5%

Source: GENESYS of AISD Student Master Files

As with the middle school sample, most elementary program participants were Hispanic (55%) and categorized as low income (69%). However, a smaller percentage of Project YES! elementary participants were special education students (13%) as compared to the Project YES! middle school students. Fifteen percent were LEP. Although the majority of the academic and behavioral data showed only small differences between program participants and all AISD elementary school students, discipline rates during the spring semester showed greater differences between these groups. Finally, the retainee rate was only slightly higher in program participants (0.9% of program participants as compared with 0.5% of all AISD elementary school students).

Methods of Evaluation

Three methods of data collection were utilized to evaluate the Project YES! pilot program. The results of these efforts are summarized in this section.

Pre/Post Test

To determine the effectiveness of the curriculum in achieving its stated goals, identical pre- and post-tests were administered to student participants. The pre/post-test was designed by the OCDE to detect changes in students' attitudes toward gangs; improvements in social responsibility, decision-making, and refusal skills; and improvements in cultural understanding. The test consists of 23 statements with a Likert-scale response system (1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree). Prior to beginning instruction, the pre-test was administered to 74 students representing three middle schools and one elementary school. Due to a miscommunication between police departments, pre-tests were not administered at four elementary schools. The post-tests were administered to 63 of the original 74 students after completion of the program. It should be noted, however, that the psychometric properties of this instrument have not been established. Therefore, the test should be regarded as a somewhat informal measure, and the results of the test should be interpreted with caution. Furthermore, only the data from the three middle schools and one elementary school who administered *both* the pre- and post-tests were used for analyses. Thus, the results reported here do not reflect the outcome for all AISD campuses receiving the Project YES! curriculum.

The test data were analyzed using a t-test statistic for independent sample to determine significant changes in attitude from pre-to-post test. Only two items showed significant change. Table 5 summarizes the significant findings.

Table 5: Significant Findings: Project YES! Pre/Post Test

Questions	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	Sig. P<.05
Reporting Graffiti on my school campus could make our school a safer place.	3.36	3.82	.04
It is important to set small goals in order to reach larger ones.	4.00	4.39	.01

Source: Project YES! survey data

Program Manager Interview

Two Austin ISD police officers served as program managers for the Project YES! pilot program. They were asked to respond to questions concerning program impact, funding, goals which were not met, and suggestions for future use of funds. Additionally, they were asked to make recommendations for programmatic and evaluation improvements.



Outcomes

Positive outcomes of the program mentioned by these officers included:

- Having the Student Resource Officer (SRO) as an instructor helped change the students' perception of the SRO as just an "enforcer"; and
- Utilizing the SROs provided more opportunities for positive interactions between the SROs and the students.

According to the program managers, problems with implementing the program included:

- Originally, five middle schools were chosen to participate. However, due to scheduling difficulties, two were not able to complete the program.
- Full cooperation was not achieved by all law enforcement agencies involved in teaching the Project YES! curriculum.
- Although a full class period was needed for each officer to teach the curriculum, this was not always possible at the host campuses due to scheduling difficulties.

Recommendations

The program managers made the following recommendations for programmatic changes to improve the effectiveness of Project YES!

- Expand to all middle schools, including both 6th and 7th grades;
- Teach from 2nd – 7th grades as part of the core curriculum (rather than the five-week stand-alone);
- Incorporate team teaching with a police officer and another school staff member (e.g., teacher, school counselor);
- Provide funding which could be used to hire a full-time Project YES! Officer; and
- Require students to be responsible for the material through testing.

Last, the program managers made the following suggestions for additions to the evaluation process:

- Administer a pre- and post-test to parents asking them to determine program impact on their children; and
- Administer a pre- and post-test to the classroom teacher to determine program impact on their students.

Officer Survey and Interview

All officers who taught Project YES! were asked to complete a survey and participate in a group discussion concerning their opinions of the Project YES! program and curriculum. Officers were asked to address the strengths of Project YES!, concerns or problems with Project YES!, and recommendations for improving Project YES!. Due to scheduling difficulties, APD officers met separately from the Austin ISD Police officers and the officer from the Constable's office.

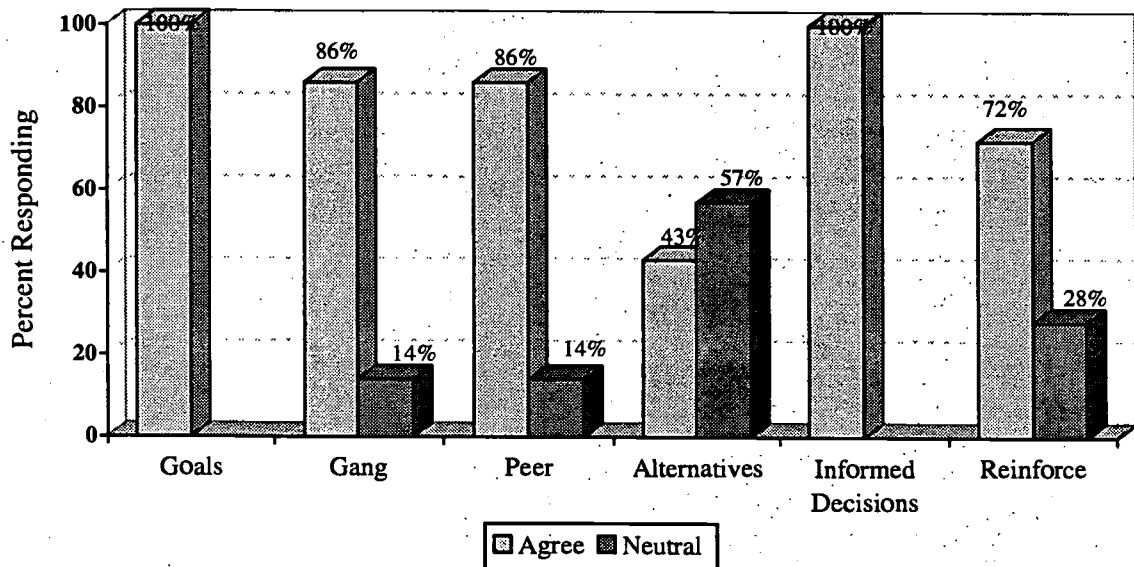
The Officer Survey asked officers to rate the effectiveness (using a Likert scale with 1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree) of the Project YES! curriculum in teaching the following information:

- Strategies for setting goals ("Goals");
- Negative influences of gang involvement ("Gang");

- Strategies for resisting negative peer pressure (“Peer”);
- Strategies they can use to make informed decisions (“Informed Decisions”); and
- Positive alternatives to gang involvement (“Alternatives”).

Additionally, officers were asked to determine whether the curriculum taught valuable skills which could be reinforced by the classroom teacher (“Reinforce”). Figure 1 provides a summary of these results. Overall, most officers agreed that the curriculum was effective. However, the majority (57%) was neutral as to whether the curriculum was effective in providing positive alternatives to gang involvement (“Alternatives”).

Figure 1: Officers’ Perception of Program Effectiveness in Teaching Prevention Skills



Although all officers agreed the curriculum was effective in teaching this information, they also stated that in order to have long-term impact, the material needed to be incorporated into the school’s core curriculum and taught over a longer period of time, preferably kindergarten through twelfth grade. Additionally, APD officers felt that, although having a uniformed officer in the classroom was an important component, the course should be taught by someone familiar with student behaviors such as the School Resource Officer (SRO). They reasoned that the SRO has daily contact with the youth at their school and, therefore, can form a rapport which aids in the delivery of the YES! curriculum. When interviewed, the AISD Officers (SROs) agreed that they had an advantage in that they knew their students fairly well and could tailor the information to meet their needs.

While all of the SROs enjoyed teaching the class, the APD officers were somewhat less satisfied with their experience. The APD officers suggested that in the future, the class should be taught by officers who want to teach and who have had an appropriate level of training to do so. They recommended implementing an officer training-teaching model, similar to the DARE program, where officers have to meet specific qualifications in order to teach, including an extensive multi-day training.

Officers also discussed components of the program they believed to be most effective and those in need of improvement. Reasons why the program was thought to be effective included:

- The curriculum contained topics that were relevant to current events.
- The curriculum taught important decision-making skills.
- The curriculum was appropriate for the grade level taught.
- The curriculum utilized a variety of methods to educate students.

Program components considered ineffective or in need of improvement included:

- The curriculum did not give clear suggestions for alternatives to negative behaviors. This allowed for too much deviation in the answers offered by officers in different classes.
- The role-play activities were not effective for the sixth-grade students. The officers said that students in this age group were too self-conscious to participate in these activities.
- A five-week, stand-alone curriculum is not effective in producing long-term impact. The program needs to be incorporated into the core curriculum and taught throughout the district at multiple grade levels.
- The classroom teacher should be directly involved in a portion of the teaching in order to adequately reinforce the material.

Recommendations and Conclusions

As with many pilot programs, there were some inconsistencies and unanticipated problems with Project YES! during the spring, 1998. First, while ten schools were originally approached to participate in the pilot test, one school could not commit due to scheduling difficulties. Another school began the program, but was unable to complete the entire curriculum, also due to scheduling difficulties. Therefore, the final number of participating schools was eight (i.e., three middle and five elementary schools). Second, while the pre-test was sent to all police departments involved, miscommunication within one of the officer units resulted in the pre-tests not being received and administered by some of the officers prior to the onset of classroom instruction. Finally, test results were mixed; only two items showed significant increases from pre- to post-testing. Therefore, it is questionable whether these differences could be entirely attributed to the program itself.

To address these issues, the following recommendations are made, based upon the program manager and officer interviews and results of the student survey:

- *Incorporate the Project YES! curriculum into the core curriculum at the schools.* While all officers believed that the Project YES! curriculum contained accurate and relevant information, as well as activities which were effective in reinforcing this information, all agreed that a five-week, one-time only program is not sufficient to change attitudes in the long-term. If left as a five-week, stand-alone curriculum, it is recommended that the program begin at elementary grade levels and continue through middle school grades, as the program was designed to do. In fact, the program managers stated that, in the future, they would like for AISD curriculum staff to consider incorporating the program into all core curricula areas at the elementary school level. Additionally, Project YES! program managers plan to acquire the 9th-12th grade curriculum and to train AISD SRO officers in these components as well. The estimated implementation date for the high school Project YES! program is for the

spring, 1999 semester. As of now, plans are to implement the five-week, stand-alone program at participating elementary, middle, and high schools.

- *Utilize officers who are well trained and have a desire to teach the program.* The APD officers felt less prepared than the AISD SROs, since they did not work with youth in a school setting on a day to day basis. Furthermore, APD officers were appointed as Project YES! instructors by their supervisor and reported feelings resentment for having to divide their time between their normal duties and those of Project YES!. Program managers are currently training all AISD SROs in the curriculum. This process will continue throughout the summer so that all AISD SRO officers will be fully trained and able to begin instruction at the start of the 1998-99 school year.
- *Ensure that all officers understand the necessity of administering both pre- and a post-tests.* The student surveys need to be in the possession of all officers involved prior to the onset of classroom instruction so that administration of both the pre- and post-tests can occur. Steps will be taken during the 1998-99 school year to improve communication between all parties so as to ensure proper administration and return of surveys.
- *Work with schools in advance to create a mutually agreeable schedule for delivering the Project YES! curriculum in its entirety.* Two schools were not able to complete the curriculum and some of the officers in other participating schools reported being offered very little time to teach the course. Therefore, the officers encountering this difficulty often had to either rush through the lecture or leave out pertinent components. This may have contributed to the lack of significant findings from the survey. An effort is being undertaken by the Project YES! program managers to work with the principals on this issue for the 1998-99 school year.

The Project YES! curriculum has had success in other school districts in delivering gang and violence prevention information. However, the long-term impact of Project YES! is unknown at this time. With some program modifications, including expansion to all grade levels, incorporation into the core curriculum, and continued evaluation and follow-up of student participants, it may become a viable method of addressing the problems of gangs and violence. Therefore, it has the potential of becoming a successful component of AISD's effort to provide a safe school environment.

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Publication Number 97.13

August, 1998



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