

## **T.E.A.M. Augusta: Promoting Abstinence Through Experiential Learning, Parent Involvement and Asset Development**

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### **Introduction**

The Augusta Partnership for Children, Inc. has initiated a comprehensive approach to reducing premarital sexual activity and resulting teen pregnancy. T.E.A.M. (Teens Engaging in Abstinence until Marriage) Augusta is a community saturation approach targeting approximately 1400 adolescents (ages 10-15) within seven middle schools beginning with 6<sup>th</sup> graders. The seven middle schools were randomly assigned into four comparison and three intervention schools. The four comparison schools will receive treatment as usual (33 hours of Choosing the Best abstinence curriculum) within health classes. The students in intervention schools will additionally receive 90 hours of experiential abstinence learning opportunities: 45 minutes per week for four 9-week periods of abstinence messages, integrated in their technology, fine arts, and family and consumer sciences classes and 60 minutes per week for four 9-week periods within language arts classes. This intervention will continue each year (6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades) with appropriate grade adjusted curricula. Additionally, in two other major intervention thrusts, parents will be offered T.E.A.M. Booster Clubs to build capacity for improved parental communication and involvement and leadership development. Community Partners will be trained in positive youth development and asset development to increase the asset development opportunities available for the students.

There are three primary outcome objectives that provide the foundation for this evaluation. By the end of year 5, targeted students in three intervention schools (1) who are provided experiential learning opportunities; (2) whose parents are involved in T.E.A.M. Parent Booster Clubs, and (3) who participated in asset development opportunities will have a greater understanding of the positive health and emotional benefits of abstaining from premarital sexual activity and a higher rate of abstinence intentions than targeted students in comparison schools. The purpose of this evaluation research is to test six research hypotheses associated with these objectives.

### **Methods**

This study utilizes a longitudinal group-randomized design. Collapsed for the sake of brevity, the research hypothesizes that students in intervention schools (Murphey, Spirit Creek and Hephzibah Middle) who receive the three programmatic aspects of the intervention (experiential learning, improved parental communication and involvement and improved asset development) over three years will experience higher levels of understanding of the positive health and emotional benefits of abstaining from premarital sexual activity and higher rates of abstinence intentions than students in comparison schools (East Augusta, Sege, Morgan Road and Glenn Hills Middle) who experience only the curriculum approach to abstinence education over the same three-year period. The incoming cohort of 6<sup>th</sup> graders in both comparison and intervention schools will be followed with the evaluation research each year of middle school with post intervention follow-up data collection and evaluation through the first year of high school. Baseline data was collected in auditorium style settings, as well as small groups of 20-25 students within the intervention and control schools.

Additionally, Partnership staff will submit monthly accomplishment reports; teachers and students will be involved in focus groups; teachers will complete implementation and feedback forms and dosage data will be collected at 9-week intervals from school officials and community youth organizations. Data collected will be analyzed via multivariate, regression, moderation and attrition analysis.

The research will determine the effect of three independent variables (in-school experiential learning; improved parental communication and involvement, and increased positive developmental asset opportunities) on two mediating variables (student understanding of the health and emotional benefits of abstaining from premarital sex and involvement in asset development opportunities); these will be measured by the AFL Core Instrument and community participation records. The dependent variables (improved parent-child communication, improved abstinence attitudes, decreased sexual behavior and increased intentions for abstinence) will be measured by the AFL Core Instrument. Four variables will moderate the effect of the independent variables on the dependent variables: demographic characteristics and levels of parental involvement, asset development and youth/adult engagement. These are measured by the AFL Core instrument, the Search Institute Development Assets Profile and Youth Adult Engagement Survey, and an evaluator-developed Parental Attitudes and Behaviors Survey.

## **Results**

While baseline data has not been analyzed, a qualitative study of implementation reveals some accomplishments since funding was secured. Technology, language and fine arts and family and consumer science teachers have been trained for project implementation which will begin November 2008. Informed Consent documents have been distributed to parents of 1354 students, obtaining responses from 1065 (79%) and consent and assent from 848 parents and students for a positive response rate of **80%** percent of those responding and **63%** of the total population. The T.E.A.M. Booster Club Parent Education curriculum has been developed. The project database has been developed; local data collectors have been trained. Baseline outcome data was collected on 848 students: (454) in comparison schools and (394) in intervention schools to date. Make up data collection will take place November 2008.

IRB approval has been secured, with multiple amendments to accommodate changes in project timeline and the cross-site evaluation. IRB approval for retroactive consent for the cross-site evaluation is pending final local revisions to the RTI procedures.

## **Discussion**

The most significant learning of the start up year has been the importance of allowing adequate time to design and implement a randomized intervention: insuring fidelity of program implementation across multiple sites, maintaining strong and consistent communications with seven schools and other partners, preparing and implementing full scale data collection in seven schools and insuring adequate statistical power through appropriate sample sizes in both comparison and intervention schools. Challenges addressed during the start up year included the changing and uncertain start up time associated with making the final decision not to pilot the intervention to avoid potential contamination and when the cross site evaluation would be approved. Another challenge has been a lower than expected sample size.

## **Implications**

Beginning implementation without the benefit of a pilot will increase the pressure to get it right and to effectively assess the fidelity of implementation through timely process evaluation. The implications of the lower than expected sample size are not totally understood at the present. Additional sample recruitment will occur prior to makeup baseline data collection and power analyses will be recalculated.

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