



Equity in Education

Final Evaluation Report – Executive Summary

JANUARY 2021

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

The focus of Equity in Education (EiE) was to improve educational outcomes for youth with vulnerabilities living in low-income neighborhoods in Ottawa by providing coordinated, wrap around supports directly to students and their families in three pilot communities; and working at a systems-level by providing stakeholders in multiple sectors with mechanisms for shared learning, promotion, and collaboration. In order to achieve these objectives, three Student Parent Support Workers (SPSWs) were hired to work with youth in three communities in Ottawa:

1. **Carlington Community Health Centre (SWAG):** The SPSW provided support to youth/families during grades 11 and 12, building on earlier supports they received in grades 9 and 10.
2. **Banff Avenue and Confederation Court Community Houses (CH):** The SPSW provided support to youth/families during the transition from grade 8 to high school, through two local Community Houses (neighbourhood hubs of support).
3. **St. Paul High School (SPHS):** The SPSW provided support to youth at a participating local secondary school located in a high-needs neighbourhood.

Evaluation

To address the EiE objectives, we developed the following evaluation:

1. How does this pillar of support (provided by the SPSW) differ when it is part of a comprehensive/wrap around program versus when it is community-based?
2. To what extent did youth and families engage with the EiE SPSWs and how did this differ across the pilots, time, and different sub-groups of youth?
3. What was the experience of youth and their families participating in EiE – both as a group and within each pilot?
4. How has EiE been able to respond, adapt, and accommodate external shocks?

Our evaluation followed a mixed-methods design across three phases, from January 2018 to December 2020. Methods included a *document review*; *interviews* and *focus groups* with key staff and stakeholders, EiE students and their parents; and SPSWs and program delivery partners; an annual *baseline* and *follow-up survey* with participating students; an *SPSW record* of outgoing referrals, highlights and challenges; and facilitation of two *stakeholder convening events* and a *stakeholder survey*.

Findings

Overall, quantitative results showed negative trends in many areas. However, without a comparison group, interpreting changes within EiE participants cannot be tied directly to program participation, and may instead reflect external factors such as the school, home and community experiences of participants, as well as shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic. To better understand survey findings, qualitative methods and data were used to understand student experiences, both within EiE and in their broader life, and how participants, SPSWs, parents and partners indicate ‘what would have been’ in the absence of having access to an SPSW.

Student experiences at school

From students’ perspectives, EiE programming provided a safe space to access academic, social, peer, and emotional supports. Many students felt academic supports such as tutoring were directly helpful for school, however most cited the holistic nature of supports as motivating them to stay engaged with school and achieve academically. Former EiE students shared that if they did not have access to EiE, they would have become disengaged in school, dropped out, and/or failed academically.

However, survey results showed that students felt a decreased sense of school membership. Students in the 2018-2019 school year (SY1) and 2019-2020 school year (SY2) both increased their likelihood to report completing homework assignments, as well as ‘just wanting to get by’ – this change was statistically significant in SY2 (not in SY1). In SY1 students were statistically significantly less likely to report being given interesting homework at the end compared to the beginning of the academic year.

These survey results are contextualized through SPSW reports of inequitable access to opportunities at school for students from low-income households. SPSWs particularly noted supporting participants facing financial barriers to their ability to participate in activities in school (e.g., sports, field trips, enrichment opportunities), and supporting students through experiences of racism and discrimination experienced at school – either via policies or individual teacher/staff actions.

Student educational aspirations

In speaking with students, they noted that help they received from SPSWs with planning for post-secondary, both in terms of credit accumulation and the path forward during high school, and in the process of selecting and applying to specific programs, was critical to seeing PSE as a possible path, choosing to apply, and applying.

In SY1, by the end of the academic year, 65% of EiE student respondents had applied to post-secondary programs, whereas in SY2, 31% reported applying. In SY1 a statistically significantly higher number of respondents noted wanting to obtain a post-secondary qualification at the end of the academic year (than at the beginning). In SY1 a statistically significantly higher proportion of students also reported increased interest and positive endorsement by their parents/guardians in participants attending post-secondary education, with no change in SY2 pre/post overall.

Student wellbeing

Many students stated SPSWs offered social/emotional supports not offered by teachers or school staff. To the students interviewed, a balance of fun and social interactions with educational supports was crucial to building and maintaining their relationships with the SPSWs, and their interest in the program.

In SY2 there was a statistically significant reduction in the overall Child and Youth Resilience Measure scale score (with no change in SY1), as well as in the proportion of students who reported a high sense of belonging in their community. A higher proportion of students reported difficulty at home across years, particularly a higher proportion of students reporting increased conflict at home in Summer 2020 compared to Fall 2019.

Contrary to the quantitative results indicating that student resilience decreased in SY2, both students and SPSWs shared stories of continued resilience throughout SY2. Students affected by housing loss, food insecurity, and experiences of discrimination in communities and schools, were able to continue to attend school, engage academically and socially, and cope with multiple life stressors.

Social capital and coping

In SY1 there were statistically significant increases in the number of students reporting volunteering at least once monthly (up 19% from Fall 2018 to Summer 2019), and in students reporting they can easily get help finding work if needed. There was no statistically significant change reported pre/post for students in SY2.

Qualitatively, students shared they felt their SPSW was ‘real’ and ‘got’ the things they were going through. It was helpful to have SPSWs with diverse cultural/racial backgrounds and lived experiences that mirrored their own – students noted that the lack of ethnically diverse teachers and teachers who identify as part of their communities was a challenge for them. Students shared that although they did not feel as though their experiences were reflected in school staff, they were reflected by SPSWs. SPSWs and students reported that a large part of their role was to spend time with students building relationships and trust, offering emotional support, and providing support with developmental tasks such as drafting a resume, and applying to jobs. In addition to directly providing services, SPSWs acted as a link for students to other programs, services, and opportunities. Students reported having a close bond with SPSWs, and as such found it difficult when SPSWs were away from work intermittently, or when they left their positions.

Implementation findings

Having multiple sites allowed for variation in contexts to explore implementation strengths and challenges. A spectrum emerged in the data depending on the level of structure within existing site programming and the clarity of SPSW role scope. St. Paul, the only in-school site, provided the most structure within which an SPSW operated, followed by SWAG, and then the Community Houses. Each sites’ programming was responsive to the communities served. At the CH sites, where staff tend to provide holistic, person-centered supports within a community setting, the boundary between SPSW-specific supports and CH supports was blurred. In addition, the large age range of students served at the CHs, and that there were two physical sites served by the CH SPSW across a vast geographic distance, created challenges for that SPSW. At the SWAG site, where the SPSW was introduced to extend supports historically provided to Grade 9 and 10 students to Grade 11 and 12 students, the intent was for participants to see the EiE SPSW role as an extension of the SWAG programming, with the only difference being student age/grade. While this was successful in regard to student perspectives of programming, there were challenges relating to clearly delineating job tasks and reporting structure at an administrative level.

In general, housing an SPSW within a site where students and families often attend other programming was viewed as a strength – and was part of the initial decision-making process driving site selection. For an SPSW or SPSW-like position to be sustainable within community sites (as opposed to operating from a centralized location), clarifying the scope of the role, reporting relationships, and relationship between the SPSW role and site activities is vital.

Discussion

Our findings related to student experiences at school and resilience, particularly in SY2, must be interpreted in the context of global events and movements including the pandemic, Black Lives Matter, and the effects thereof on students served by EiE.

The shock of the COVID-19 pandemic to the academic year (SY2) cannot be understated – for all students, but particularly for students in their final year of high school. The effects of COVID-19 on many EiE students’ and families’ abilities to cope broadly – having access to food, stable housing, and income security – as well as students’ ability to continue to engage with academics were compounded by existing stressors and challenges associated with living in poverty.

In addition, the results related to students’ overall sense of belonging in their communities and at school, need to be placed in context of the ongoing violence, police brutality both in the United States (e.g., the murder of George Floyd), and locally (i.e., the trial of Const. Daniel Montsion in relation to the death of Somali-Canadian Abdirahman Abdi in Ottawa), and student reports of feeling unsafe in their communities from Spring into Summer 2020. Two-thirds of the EiE participants surveyed identified as Black, and many reported both individual-level and policy-level instances of identity erasure and racism at school. EiE did take action to support students dealing with racism in schools and in the community, through both support during individual incidents, and through providing youth with opportunities to collaboratively discuss and organize among themselves, but these results are nonetheless perhaps unsurprising.

Conclusion and recommendations

...For programs

- It is critical to understand the existing structure, need for services, and programming at host sites, and how an SPSW would fit within these.
- Building relationships and partnerships with local schools is an integral component that allows SPSWs to advocate effectively for students, in terms of academic achievement, and also to help address issues of economic inequity and support students’ well-being.
- Having SPSWs whose lived experiences and backgrounds reflect the communities they serve is important to building relationships with students, as well as promoting and including the identities of racialized students within programs and services, and at school.
- The demand for SPSW services far exceeds the supply of SPSWs, youth outreach workers, and holistic supports for youth within low-income neighbourhoods.

- Addressing root causes of inequity means helping students and families ensure their basic needs – food, shelter, safety – are being met.
- Program content must be tailored to age and stage of education, primary learning language (English, French), and be able to support students in more advanced subjects, particularly for older students.
- Dedicated funding, resources, and supports are needed to retain staff and ensure that they have the time needed to both engage effectively with youth and families, as well as time to build and maintain relationships with schools and community resources.

...For systems

- Schools explore strategies to include, promote, and integrate diverse identities within their policies, curricula, and practices, and increase the diversity of school staff to better represent the communities in which they operate.
- Continue activities spearheaded by school and school board leaders across Ottawa to address anti-Black and anti-Muslim racism in schools; and provide on-going training to school personnel related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) best practices.

...For networks and partnerships

- Coordinating a collective impact initiative requires unique expertise and dedicated commitment and, as a result, would be most effective run by a dedicated body with a relevant core mandate as a backbone organization.
- There is a need to map existing collective impact initiatives and networks in place across the city, to encourage coordination and reduce duplication, particularly across different domains (e.g., education, housing, mental health) for more holistic youth supports.
- Continue to build on the momentum of having liaisons between community organizations, communities, and schools.
- Identify gaps and plans to address those gaps that are feasible and actionable by the networks and partner members.

...For evaluation

- Quantitative measures may not reflect individual change as much as reaction to or perception of systems issues. Look to qualitative methods and data to understand student experiences and interpret survey findings, and how students and parents indicate ‘what would have been’ in the absence of having access to an SPSW.
- Evaluations such as this, which involve networks of community partnerships, need to consider the practicality of evaluation tools and how they can be embedded within existing processes and systems across organizations.
- Methods for sharing equity stories with schools and communities to better inform their practices need to be developed that maintain participant and program safety, while still allowing those stories to drive change towards a more equitable education system.

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