

The ACE Initiative (Achievement & Commitment to Excellence)



Final Evaluation Report 2017 – 2018

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Executive Summary

Introduction

EduCare Foundation has been implementing the ACE (Achievement and Commitment to Excellence) Program to empower low-income, ethnic minority youth and families for the last three decades in North-East San Fernando Valley, Los Angeles County. The program consists of a series of workshops targeting the social and emotional learning (SEL) of students, teachers, and parents through fostering a growth “mindset” and “heartset” among them. Given the success demonstrated by the ACE Program, EduCare expanded the program into the ACE Initiative by providing a fuller range of services, including the ACE workshops, events and ongoing support offered by full-time site coordinators. By increasing the intensity of program services, as well as incorporating the support and event components, the ACE Initiative aims to foster a caring culture that cultivates positive relationships, fosters aspiration and personal goals, and promotes positive development for all program participants. The ACE Initiative is being piloted at Social Justice Humanitas Academy (SJHA), an academy embedded in César Chávez Learning Academies, for the 2017-2018 school year. Through a partnership between EduCare and Claremont Graduate University, the current evaluation is conducted to investigate the quality of program implementation in this first year, understand program experiences of students, teachers, and parents, and examine the potential influences the ACE Initiative has on all three groups.

Purpose of the Evaluation

The current evaluation was guided by the evaluation questions listed below, each of which was developed in collaboration with EduCare leadership:

Program Process

- 1a.** To what extent are program components of the ACE Initiative (ACE workshops, events, and ongoing support) implemented as intended?
- 1b.** What is the overall program experience of students, teachers, and parents?

Program Outcome

- 2a.** How has the ACE Initiative broadly influenced students, teachers, and parents?

Evaluation Design and Methodology

To address the evaluation questions, the evaluation team employed a mixed-methods approach to data collection using observations, interviews, focus groups, and a survey to triangulate data sources and derive main findings and evaluative conclusions (see Table 01 below).

Table 01. Methods Used to Inform Key Evaluation Questions Grouped by Data Type

| | Evaluation Questions | | |
|----------------|----------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| Data Sources | Program Process | | Program Outcome |
| | 1a. Program Implementation | 1b. Program Experience | 2. Influences on Students, Teachers, and Parents |
| Observation | X | | |
| Interview | X | X | X |
| Focus Group | X | X | X |
| Student Survey | | | X |

Summary of Main Findings

- Program Implementation**

The overall implementation quality of the ACE Initiative is high. The observations on three major activities (Rope Course retreat, professional development workshop, and parent workshop) yield satisfactory quality of program delivery. Program facilitators are appreciated for their positive personal characteristics, passion for their work, and sincere care shown for people in the community.

A few critical components were identified that ensure the effective implementation of the program. They include: (1) key characteristics of the

facilitators, (2) strategic partnerships among program facilitators, (3) effective trainings, (4) holding events using SJHA's facilities, and (5) having EduCare as the home office to provide materials and support.

Program facilitators face two major challenges in the process of program implementation. They proposed related suggestions and support needed to help them address each of those challenges:

- Parent recruitment and engagement has remained an ongoing challenge. Parents believed that increasing the communication with the school on these events may help. The EduCare site coordinator may play a greater role in involving parents by using effective strategies to directly reach out to parents.
- Some teachers do not fully endorse the program or tend to have the same learning pace as the students. Teachers suggested that having more contact with EduCare staff may be helpful for them to get engaged in the program. Program facilitators also suggested additional training for adults, specifically teachers and school staff who may help facilitate the program.

- **Program Influences**

The ACE Initiative creates a caring culture that humanizes relationships among students, teachers and parents. The ACE Initiative offers tools and space for people to open up, share their true feelings, and be authentic with one another. This builds a compassionate culture that fosters positive bonds among students and humanize students' relationships with their family. The program also allows teachers to form stronger connections with students, build a sense of community with colleagues, and adopt effective strategies to interact and approach parents.

The ACE Initiative helps students, teachers, and parents get outside of their comfort zone despite the challenges of opening up and sharing personal feelings. Students become less shy, learn how to speak up for themselves, work in teams, and face challenges more confidently. Parents and teachers are also able to step outside of their comfort zone to share personal feelings.

The ACE Initiative reveals new opportunities for students to attend college. It also provides information for parents on how to better support their child's academic pursuit.

The ACE Initiative brings new teaching values for teachers to focus on the social-emotional needs of students and themselves. They adopt the program values through adapting their way of teaching and interacting with students, as well as incorporating the ACE materials into their classrooms and advisory plans.

- **Program Recommendations**

The current evaluation found several critical components that are recommended for effective program implementation. These components should be taken into consideration and adapted to the specific school context while expanding the ACE Initiative to other schools.

- Implementing the program at the beginning of the school year sets the stage for relationship building among students, teachers, and parents.
- School fit is crucial for the ease of implementation and the level of program integration at the school. This includes: (1) a small school size, (2) a strong administrative support structure, (3) open-minded and invested teachers, and (4) a collaborative partnership between the school and EduCare.
- Students, teachers, and school administrators all see the value of the ACE Initiative in addressing people's social-emotional needs and promoting a holistic perspective of individuals. This motivates them to take ownership of the program's goals and engage in program activities.
- Having a site coordinator who works at the school on a daily basis is the indispensable component of successful implementation of the ACE Initiative. This person should be a good fit for the position in terms of personal character and connections with the community. He or she serves as an internal champion of the program, and is responsible for responding quickly and effectively to the ongoing needs within the school. Having more site coordinators who fit the position well may help ease the workload and pressure put on a single coordinator, and address the ongoing needs of the school in a more comprehensive manner.

To improve the overall program model and better the program experiences, students, parents, and teachers all suggested increasing the frequency of ACE workshops, especially for students. This can be accomplished by breaking the content of the workshop into smaller modules and offering them throughout the school year. Supplementary after-school activities and virtual trainings were also mentioned as solutions to offer more workshops. Doing so is likely to enable the ACE Initiative to have a longer-lasting impact on program participants.

The pre- and post-survey administered to students at SJHA did not yield meaningful results regarding students' SEL skills. Either no change or a slight drop was found while comparing pre- and post-test results. This may be because the constructs measured by the student survey do not fully match what the ACE Initiative is focusing on. Some of the survey items are reverse coded or written in complex language, which increases the cognitive load for students to comprehend and answer the questions accurately. Also, given that many program activities of the ACE Initiative were offered at the beginning of the school year or the semester, the program impact may not last for the whole year. Modifying the student survey by targeting constructs that are aligned with the program outcomes and simplifying the wording of the survey questions is recommended. This may also indicate that instead of offering workshops and events once or twice a year, providing services in smaller time intervals and in a more continuous manner will help make the program impact more sustainable.