

The ACE Initiative (Achievement & Commitment to Excellence)



Final Evaluation Report 2017 – 2018

Delivered by
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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, Southern Los Angeles. 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 on-site staff. 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 (CGU), 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 have 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 observation, interview, focus group, and 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 showed for people in the community.

The program facilitators identified a few critical components 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, and (4) having EduCare as the home office to provide materials and support.

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

- Program facilitators face unexpected situations that interfere with their implementation quality. They believed that having a program agenda that matches the actual amount of time allotted, trainings or protocols that prepare them to cope with challenging situations, and more frequent communication with the EduCare main office would be helpful.
- Parent recruitment and engagement has remained an ongoing challenge. Parents believed that increasing the communication with the school on these events can help. EduCare on-site staff 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 contacts with EduCare staff may be helpful for them to get engaged in the program. Program facilitators also indicated additional trainings for adults, specifically teachers and school staff, who can possibly help facilitate the program.
- Using others' facilities and services to host ACE events served as a logistical challenge for program facilitators. They suggested having their own facilities to host 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 challenge 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 that had not previously considered attending 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 value 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 concluded 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 in 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 the ownership of the program's goals and engage with the program activities.
- Having on-site EduCare staff, especially the facilitator who works in school on a daily basis, is the indispensable component of the successful implementation of the ACE Initiative. This person should be a good fit for the position in terms of personal characters and connections with the community. He 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 on-site facilitators who fit the position well may help ease the workload and pressure put on a single facilitator, 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 virtue trainings were also mentioned as solutions to offer more workshops. Doing so is likely to enable the ACE Initiative to have 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 maybe 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. It is recommended to modify the student survey by targeting constructs that are aligned with the program outcomes and simplifying the wording of the survey questions. 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.

1 Introduction

EduCare Foundation launched *the ACE Initiative* (Achievement and Commitment to Excellence) to help create a supportive environment in which students, teachers, and parents can thrive. This comprehensive program integrates student services, professional development, and parent engagement to target minority adolescents in North-East San Fernando Valley, Southern Los Angeles. By providing a suite of program services and ongoing support for students, teachers, and parents, the ACE Initiative aims to foster a caring culture that cultivates positive relationships, enrich 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. 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 have on all three groups.

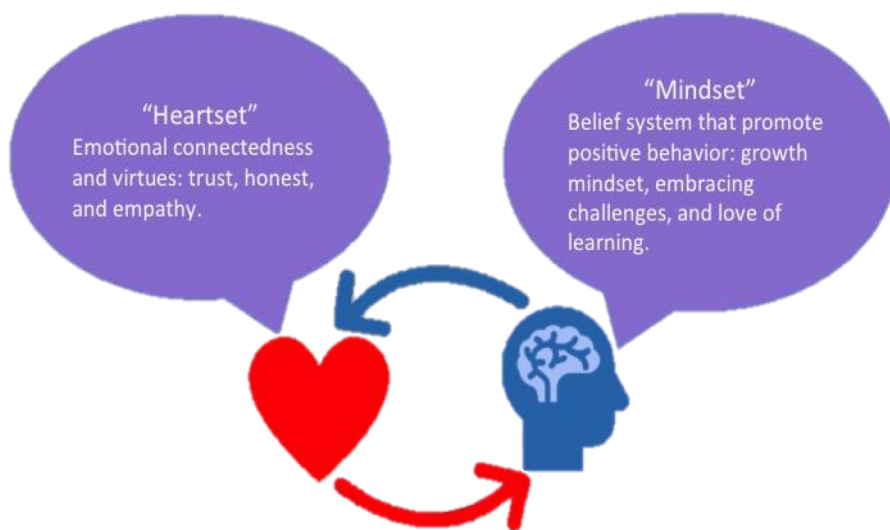
Program Description

For the last three decades, EduCare has been implementing the ACE Program to empower minority adolescents, most of which are low-income, Latino students who face numerous barriers to their learning and development. The program consists of a series of workshops targeting the social and emotional learning (SEL) of students, teachers and parents. SEL is the process through which individuals learn important skills to coordinate their feelings, thinking, and behaviors to achieve life tasks.¹ The ACE program defines SEL skills as growth “mindset” and “heartset,” representing the cognitive and affective components of SEL (see Figure 01). Through learning and practicing these two sets of SEL skills, the program aims to promote positive attitudes and behaviors for students, teachers, and parents.

¹ Zins, J.E., Bloodworth, M.R., Weissberg, R.P. & Walberg, H.J. (2007). The scientific base linking social and emotional learning to school success. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 17:2-3, 191-210, DOI: 10.1080/10474410701413145

Given the success demonstrated by the ACE Program, EduCare expanded it into the ACE Initiative by providing a fuller range of services, including the ACE workshops, events and ongoing support offered by full-time on-site staff. By increasing the intensity of program services, as well as incorporating the event and support components, the ACE Initiative aims to make a stronger, longer-lasting impact for all program participants. This is accomplished by the implementation of an enhanced ACE program that provides year-round support, services, and resources to students, teachers, and parents. The ultimate objective of the ACE Initiative is to establish six schools as ACE Initiative Schools. During the school year of 2017-2018, the ACE Initiative was piloted at SJHA and served around 500 students.

Figure 01. Growth “Heartset” and “Mindset”



The ACE Initiative provides a suite of services for students, teachers, and parents:

1. ACE Workshops

All three groups receive specialized ACE workshops. Students participate in ACE days in which they are given the opportunity to get out of their comfort zone, build confidence, develop social and emotional skills, and foster positive relationships with peers and teachers. 9th grade students receive the three-day workshop at the beginning of the school year while students in 10th through 12th grade receive the one-day ACE. Teachers participate in professional development workshops throughout the school year to learn and practice the growth “mindset” and “heartset.” They develop SEL skills to address the emotional needs of themselves and others, and bond with other teachers. Workshops are also offered to parents several times throughout the school year. Parents are able to learn effective parenting strategies and obtain important information on how to better support their child’s academic pursuit.

2. Events

A variety of events are held to offer additional opportunities for students, teachers, and parents to learn and practice new skills, as well as bond with one another. Students are involved in College Trip, service learning projects, ACE Assemblies, and the Culmination event. 12th grade students participate in the Rope Course retreat where they get to step outside of their comfort zone, take on challenges, and build teamwork skills. Students also get to participate in some of the events with their parents, such as Back to School night, where they share personal feelings toward each other to enhance their relationships.

3. Ongoing Support

The most unique feature of the ACE Initiative is to have a full-time, on-site facilitator who works with students and teachers on a daily basis. This on-site facilitator is responsible for the ongoing needs of the school by creating structures or activities that help address those needs. She coordinates mentorship and counseling programs, arranges support groups for students, prepares seniors for college, and provides informal check-ins and various support to meet the needs of teachers. The ongoing support has an added value of being a consistent advocate for the program, which promotes the integration of core program values on campus.

Evaluation Description

To understand the implementation quality and initial effectiveness of the ACE Initiative, EduCare partnered with Claremont Graduate University (CGU) to investigate the implementation of the program, program experiences of the participants, and the program influences. The current evaluation is accomplished with the support of Beyond the Bell and ERC, and with funding provided by the LA84 Foundation. Dr. Tiffany Berry, Associate Director of the Claremont Evaluation Center (CEC), is the primary investigator (PI) for the evaluation. The team carrying out the current evaluation consists of five graduate students working under Dr. Berry.

Evaluation Questions

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, activities, 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? ²

Evaluation Design and Methodology

To address the evaluation questions, a mixed data collection methods were used, including (1) observation, (2) interview, (3) focus group, and (4) survey. The evaluation team collected, analyzed, and triangulated data across these four different sources to answer the prioritized evaluation questions (see Table 02). Sample sizes and a brief description of procedures are provided below the table. For a more detailed description of observation, interview, and focus group protocols, as well as survey items, please see Appendix A.

² The original question was asking how the ACE Initiative impacted students in terms of their SEL skills, school engagement, and relationships with parents and teachers. Given the modification of student survey items and findings obtained from interviews and focus groups, we decided to focus more broadly on how the program has influenced participants of all three groups.

Table 02. Methods Used to Inform Key Evaluation Questions Grouped by Data Type

	Evaluation Questions		
Data Sources ³	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

Observation (N = 5 observations)

The evaluation team conducted observations on three main program activities: the Ropes Course retreat for 12th grade students, a professional development workshop for teachers at SJHA, and three parent workshops. At least two team members attended each program activity using standardized observation protocols. A separate protocol was developed for each event being observed. However, all protocols include criteria such as quality of the physical environment, the management of the workshop, the materials provided, participant engagement, the interactions among participants, and the interactions between participants and facilitator(s). These categories contained subcategories which differed depending on the event or situation that they were adapted for.

Interview (N = 6 interviews; n = 4 program facilitators | n = 1 on-site facilitator | n = 1 SJHA administrator)

Interviews were conducted to obtain in-depth information regarding the program facilitators’ experiences of implementing the ACE Initiative, and the school administrator’s perceptions about the program. Interviews with the program facilitators focused on the effective strategies for program implementation, challenges they’ve met, resources needed to address the challenges, and suggestions for program improvement. The interview with the on-site facilitator focused on the process of developing and implementing ongoing support, as well as the perceived impact of the

³ It was originally proposed to use LAUSD archival data to examine students’ academic performance. Since the data will not come in until September, the evaluation team communicated with EduCare leadership to not include analyses using archival data.

ongoing support. The interview with the school administrator focused on his role in implementing the ACE Initiative, his perceived value of SEL programming, and the alignment of goals and priorities between the school and the program.

Focus Group (N = 8 groups; n = 35 students | n = 21 teachers | n = 7 parents)

Focus groups were held for students, teachers, and parents to understand their experiences of participating in the ACE Initiative, their level of engagement, and the impact they felt from attending the program. They were also asked to offer any suggestions that they had to help improve the program. These different perspectives on topics such as program content, program implementation, and program experiences are valuable to broaden the understanding of the various aspects of the ACE Initiative.

Student Survey (N = 499)

ERC was contracted with EduCare to administer pre- and post-survey to all students at SJHA. The initial survey distributed at the beginning of the school year measured four SEL skills of students: grit, academic self-efficacy, growth mindset, and school connectedness. The evaluation team added another four items on the post-test survey to assess the specific impact that the ACE Initiative have on students.

Report Structure

The evaluation report is organized into the following four chapters:

Chapter 2. **PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION**

This chapter presents findings related to the implementation quality of the ACE Initiative at SJHA. Particular attention was given to the program delivery of EduCare facilitators and staff, the critical components for effective implementation, challenges met during the process of implementation, as well as suggestions proposed to improve the program.

Chapter 3. **PROGRAM INFLUENCES**

This chapter presents findings related to how the ACE Initiative has broadly influenced students, teachers, and parents at SJHA. Based on information obtained from interviews, focus groups and the student survey, this chapter demonstrates how the ACE Initiative has affected the school culture and the personal growth of participants in all three groups.

Chapter 4. **CRITICAL COMPONENTS RECOMMENDED FOR EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION**

This chapter identified several components that are critical for implementing the ACE Initiative effectively. These set of principles should be taken into consideration and adapted to the specific school context while expanding the program to other schools.

Chapter 5. **CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS**

This chapter first summarizes the evaluation findings for the two evaluation priorities identified and ends with evaluative recommendations that were generated by considering all findings as a whole.

2 Program Implementation

Given that this is the first year for the ACE Initiative being implemented at SJHA, a thorough evaluation on the implementation quality of the main program components was conducted. This chapter summarizes main findings related to program implementation, specifically focusing on EduCare facilitators and staff, the critical components for effective implementation, challenges met during the process of implementation, as well as suggestions proposed to improve the program in the future. To gain this understanding, on-site observations were conducted on program services offered for students, teachers, and parents to assess the overall implementation quality. Interviews with program facilitators and staff explored their experiences of implementing the ACE Initiative. Focus groups with students, teachers, and parents also provided insights on how they perceive the implementation quality of the programs provided to them, their perceptions of program facilitators, and suggestions they have to further improve the program.



Main Finding

Overall, the implementation quality of the ACE Initiative is high, given the satisfactory quality of program delivery and the predominantly positive evaluations toward EduCare facilitators and staff.

Across all the activities observed, the evaluation team gave medium to high quality ratings on: the appropriateness of physical environments where activities were held, the sufficiency of resources offered for participants, staff preparedness, the facilitator's workshop management, participant engagement, interactions among participants, and interactions between participants and program facilitators (see Appendix A for a detailed description of the observation protocols and rating scale used).

Program participants, specifically students and teachers, expressed positive evaluations toward EduCare facilitators and staff for their positive characters, passion for their work, and sincere care showed for people in the community. A summary of personal characteristics mentioned by program participants are presented in the box below:

““

*Like all the time when I go to the after-school workshop, I really love all of them because it's like even if you're having a bad day, they bring you in a good mood and they bring me like they bring you to the class. Like even though you're there, sometimes you're thinking about other stuff and like **they help you realize your potential and what you can do.***

10th Grade Student

““

*Facilitators here are really awesome. **They are lively. They are friendly. And they are really really down to earth.** So even though they've come here a bunch, they feel like we are great school, they have really great feedback. When we were being loud, when we were not sharing, **they have so many tools and tricks in their bag and offer up different ways on how we can become engaged...**They are very in tune to knowing this isn't going down the way that we would hope it is, here, let's change it on this spot, which is amazing.”*

SJHA Teacher

EduCare program facilitators and staff are described as:

- Lively and bring good energy
- Down to earth
- Very good at interacting with students
- Consistent every year
- Open-minded and willing to change or adapt
- Pushes students to do their best
- Really caring!

One quality that is greatly appreciated by teachers is the facilitators' ability to interact with students. One teacher explicitly pointed out that unlike people from other places, facilitators from EduCare are not only content experts, but also know how to interact with students well.

These positive qualities stem from the passion EduCare staff have in their work and the care they express toward students and teachers. One of the lead administrators mentioned that it is the people from EduCare that really makes the ACE Initiative unique: *“They're value-driven. They believe in what they're doing, but they're not going to sell it. (EduCare administrator) is in it to win it. He believes what he's doing. He shows up, he doesn't just pass off to somebody else. You can tell. When you work with organizations that they're just trying to get grants. They stop working hard. And then there's people who want to work hard, and (EduCare administrator) is one of those people. And the people he hires believe in him.”*

A teacher who has attended ACE days for seven years said that even though he felt the content is repetitive, he can always gain something meaningful or new out of the workshop, as the program facilitators demonstrate the same level of enthusiasm and energy toward their work. This is echoed by a program facilitator who stated that people in EduCare have a big heart and therefore are willing to exert the effort to make a difference.

With a shared passion and faith, EduCare staff also bring caring and supportive energy. Several students expressed a strong feeling that they feel program facilitators treat them and their job with a sincere care. This is one of the main reasons why they enjoyed the ACE program.



You could really feel the intent behind it. You could feel that they really care, you got me? They're not doing it for the job, they're doing it 'cause they know what needs to be done. And they do it 'cause they want to. You could truly feel that."

12th Grade Student

This caring culture is actually a major goal that the ACE Initiative aims to achieve. One program facilitator described that his job is beyond teaching the content well. What matters more is the compassionate energy that they are able to bring, which enabled people to open up and have a great experience, *"So the way that is created is not only by the content but by being present with them. The quality of the presence that I show up with that – which EduCare sort of strives for with the work that we do and the facilitators that come into EduCare. It's more about the energy that we bring – in addition to the content – which is a caring, supportive, compassionate sort of energy. I think that works really well. It's really key to the success of the program because I think that when people know they are being cared for then they are more willing to open up and will learn more in that environment."*

Main
Finding

A few critical components of effective program implementation were identified by facilitators: (1) key characteristics of the facilitators, (2) strategic partnerships among facilitators, (3) effective trainings, and (4) having EduCare as the home office to provide materials and support.

Based on the interviews with individual EduCare program facilitators, the personal characteristics below emerged as important features for effective program implementation:

- Be sensitive and empathetic
- Have personal experiences that can relate to program participants
- Sufficient preparation, including understanding who the audience is and being clear about the intention of every activity
- Be responsive to the needs of the participants and tailor the activities accordingly
- Manage personal life well
- Apply program content to their personal lives
- Believe that they are teaching content and skills that are shown effective
- Embody the mission of EduCare as their professional goal

“

*The number one thing that contributes to our success in the workshops is how we're handling our personal life at the time...It's very whole person centric so we really have to be on at all times in every way. **And the more of it we are handling at home well, handling in our lives well and n our health well, the better we do in the room...**We're not projecting our issues on someone that's sharing on the microphone saying I'm having a tough time at home... **We really want to work from the heart so taking care of us first is number one.**"*

Program Facilitator

“

*I think, **number one, is applying them to my personal life.** I also believe one of those would be closed eye processes, which is a sort of like a meditation - visualization...**So before in ACE program I, 90% of the time, will do a closed eye process** just to envision what I want the day to be, what I see myself being a confident facilitator who can really relate to those around me and **that allows me to when I do begin my workshop be able to better perform the way that I want to and the way that I know I need to for those in my program.**"*

Program Facilitator

“

*I've been doing this a while now so it's kind of a part of what I show up with which is about empowering people...**So having done it for a while now, I can achieve those goals because it's so much a part of what we do, it's part of our culture. It's a part of the why most of the facilitators are working there.** We're there because we love what we do. We are inspired to help people and empower them. And I think, give them an element of purpose. I think **it's a big part of getting our goals achieved. It's a deep, deep drive and motivation from all of us to help and support and empower and educate people on what might be ways that they can grow to enhance their lives.**"*

Program Facilitator

Besides personal characteristics, the strategic partnerships among different program facilitators is identified as a key factor for effective implementation. Program facilitators summarized that they are usually paired up based on gender, years of experience, and energy level. Ethnicity is also taken into consideration as a key feature when the dominant population is ethnic minority. All of these are ensuring a balance between facilitators in terms of their personalities and experiences, as well as for the audience to identify with at least one of the facilitators.

One program facilitator appreciated the partnership also for having someone to back him up to meet the demands of everyone during the workshop, *“Having someone to have your back, because so much happens up there, man. And so much happens in the back. So both of us really do spend a long time trying to figure out, like what’s missing so that we can support the other person. I mean there’s also the id – concept of always being on or always being onstage or in front of everybody...Because I mean not only are the students always, even if they are playing, one of them is looking at us, and if not them then the teachers, and if not the teachers then the principal walks in. And there’s kind of a feeling of always having to be on. Having somebody else to be there to carry the load a little bit – a lot I should say...There’s peace in knowing you have someone as solid as that like having your back.”*

Program facilitators felt that the training they received are effective to prepare them for workshop facilitation. Instead of getting formally trained with program directors, the new coming facilitators receive hands-on training from more advanced facilitators, or what they call “resource group leaders.” It is more of a “learn by doing” type of training in which the candidates get paired up with an experienced facilitator, observe the workshop, try to facilitate some sessions and receive feedback about their performance. Some facilitators mentioned that they need to experience all the activities themselves so they know what it is like for participants to go through the workshop. Besides, rotator meetings were held with program administrators to discuss areas to be improved as a group.

Finally, program facilitators expressed appreciation toward having EduCare as the home base that provides all the support, materials, and facilities needed to hold the program. One facilitator said, *“Having a home base like the EduCare office that we do, they’re in charge of refilling supplies, they’re in charge of a lot of things that go into the work that we do in those three days. Without them we wouldn’t have supplies ready, we wouldn’t have a location, wouldn’t have the special needs, special requests like known beforehand. We wouldn’t have parking, we wouldn’t have anything.”* Besides, the on-site program facilitator is pretty satisfied with the amount of support provided for her from the main office. Given that this is the first year to implement the ACE Initiative, she appreciated EduCare directors being present when she is in need, and giving her sufficient flexibility and agency to do her work well.



Main
Finding

Program facilitators face challenges in the process of program implementation: (1) dealing with unexpected situations, (2) recruiting and engaging parents, (3) engaging teachers, and (4) logistical challenges. They proposed related suggestions and support needed to help them address each of those challenges.

- 1. Program facilitators face unexpected situations that interfere with their implementation quality. However, they usually had to cope with these challenges themselves. Program facilitators believed that having a program agenda that matches the actual amount of time allotted, trainings or protocols that prepare them to address challenging situations, and more frequent communication with the EduCare main office would be helpful.*

Program facilitators had met unexpected challenges that made it difficult to follow the original agenda. During one of the observations, the program facilitators had to start the event late due to traffic. According to the interviews with program facilitators, being on time seems to be a consistent challenge for holding ACE workshops and events. However, when this happened, the program facilitators had to adapt the original agenda themselves by cutting down the time spent on certain activities. As one facilitator put, *“Many times I have found myself in a workshop where _have only six hours or five and a half and I’m given an agenda that is a seven hour agenda...I cut activities and/or just try to shorten other ones that go long and try to squeeze in another that could be just as effective.”*

Even though they tried their best to meet the event’s requirements in the allotted time given to them, it concerns program facilitators on whether they are still providing content that is of high quality: *“A lot of times I feel time is really shaved off and we are expected to perform the same amount of activities, give the same effective workshop, and not given the amount of time we actually need. And that is why I believe it lowers the quality of the workshop.”*

Another challenge mentioned during the interviews is cases when an unexpected group of students came in and really interfered with how the program is usually implemented. A few program facilitators described times when the students were disruptive, had severe behavioral problems, or did not speak English as their first language. Similarly, program facilitators had to revise the sessions themselves by using strategies or activities that worked best with the certain group of students: *“We stay with what we do but we just change the order of it. So when we’re with a group that is unruly we don’t want to start the day with us talking, we want to get them engaged. We start the day with games versus lectures, ground rules and all that. And then we also go in with an approach knowing that these kids may have a challenge sitting, they may have a challenge talking and then we incorporate that into our spiel... It really helps us to redesign how we pitch the three days or the one day if we know that we are dealing with a specific set of challenges.”*

To deal with these challenges, program facilitators suggested having a workshop agenda that is practical to possible time constraints. They also indicated that having some sort of trainings or protocols may help prepare them to be adaptive in coping with the unexpected situations:

“

Sometimes it’d be like having a training or having a protocol for situations like that. Like hey what do we do if like these kids are just checked out? You know for us – for the office, their message is just hey hang in there, you can do this, which they’re right, but they’re right because I can handle this, I can do this. But we are trying to figure it out as we go along, we’re figuring out what can work, we’re pulling out all the tricks that we know and hopefully it works. So to some extent, I wish there was a training protocol for that. And then some of those things you can’t be prepared for – so some students try to get in my face in front of everyone and you know that really tests me and we’ve never had any training for that as well.”

Program Facilitator

Even with the training protocol or agenda, unpredictable situations can happen that requires flexible changes. In this case, more frequent communication with the EduCare main office can potentially help ease the pressure of program facilitators having to adapt the session themselves. It may also help ensure that the programs are still being implemented in a way that is aligned with the primary program goals and standards. One program facilitator indicated that it would be very helpful for the EduCare office to let them know beforehand of the upcoming students’ background so that they can prepare the session in ways that ensure the quality of program experiences.

2. *Parent recruitment and engagement in the ACE Initiative has remained an ongoing challenge. Parents believed that increasing communication with the school on these events can help. EduCare on-site staff may play a greater role in involving parents by using effective strategies to directly reach out to parents.*

Both parents and the program facilitators admitted issues around communication to get parents involved in the program. One program facilitator pointed out that building a community to involve parents at SJHA is challenging, as many of the parent meetings are new to them and not mandatory.

During the focus groups, parents explained that the reason why they did not attend ACE workshops is because they were not aware of them or they were told too late about them. One parent explained that the school did not do a good job communicating upcoming parent events. Simply having their child responsible for letting them know about the events was not effective, *“This is because the children don’t tell us which is always what happens. See this is why they don’t know. [Laughter]. Children don’t tell you, and then the school does not have a good communication like now they do so we’re working on it. So that’s why a lot of us, a lot of the parents, they don’t know.”* Some parents even felt that the school has put so much emphasis on students that they ignore involving parents. In addition, many parents do have busy schedules with work and family that conflict with their ability to attend the events.

Considering the different challenges that parents face in attending parent events held by EduCare, parents believed that having more communication with the school should help with the outreach. Some parents mentioned that although the school is trying some different methods, such as organizing a parent committee, the communication has not been improved substantially. One parent suggested having a calendar that is online or mailed to them with a list of all the upcoming events. In this way, they can see which events they can attend and plan ahead of time.

The staff from EduCare, especially the on-site program facilitator, may play a great role in enhancing the communication between parents and the school. A few parents mentioned that they attended the parent workshops because the on-site facilitator reached out directly to them via text messages. The on-site facilitator is now exploring new strategies to get more parents engaged in the parent events. Instead of reaching out to parents of low-achieving students, she was trying to target parents of students with medium to high academic achievement.

3. *Program facilitators face the challenge that some teachers do not endorse or fully engage in the program. For those who do buy in the program, they tend to have the same learning pace as the students. Teachers suggested that having more contacts with EduCare staff may be helpful for them to get engaged in the program. Program facilitators also indicated additional training for adults who can possibly help facilitate the program activities.*

Program facilitators raised the concern that the adults, especially teachers, would not open up as much as students did. They appeared less engaged during the activities or they did not believe in the purpose of the program. This was a challenge for program implementation, as adults are supposed to model and teach the ACE materials to students. Even for teachers who endorse the program, since they have the similar learning pace as the students, it is difficult for them to be a good resource of modeling those positive behaviors. As the on-site facilitator put:

“

I think one of our biggest hurdles is --right now and moving forward--, a lot of the stuff that has to do with social emotional learning like time management or personal responsibility or empowerment or... a lot of teachers don't feel that in their own lives, and I feel like I've been sitting with a lot of teachers who are just learning that about them. They're like, "how can I teach about time management in a lesson if I don't feel like I manage my time well?" or, "how can I help students be positive and set goals when I don't know what my goals are?"

Program Facilitator

Some teachers indicated that they would like to know more about the EduCare staff, such as having quick check-ins prior to the ACE activities so that program facilitators can potentially integrate some of the issues they shared into the workshops. This may also help teachers create connections with the organization, therefore increasing their buy-in of the program. Program facilitators also suggested that they need to train more adults in their understanding and implementation of the program, teachers and school staff in particular, to help facilitate the ACE activities. Indeed, some facilitators raised the concern that the workshops are repetitive for teachers who stayed with the same grade level, which points to the fact that some teachers are already very familiar with the workshop. In this case, involving teachers who can provide valuable insights for the program implementation not only helps them develop a renewed perspective toward the program, but also possibly helps cope with the budget and staff constraints in implementing program activities.

“

We need many more so the ones that we do grab are going to be teachers, are going to be after school workers, parents who are engaged in the community. And if they come into the workshop dry, for lack of a better word, like without knowing anything they – it tends to be really hard because now they’re learning at the same pace as the students are learning, and then there’s a lot of things that especially when it comes to like safety so they have trust series, river crossing games, we want to make sure they have the information. They’re gonna be the eyes, they’re gonna be the responsible – looking over the kids and as well as I can do watching over 100 plus students [laughs] I – I will let some things slip through the cracks. So having staff who understand really helps.”

Program Facilitator

- 4. Using others’ facilities and services to host ACE events served as a logistical challenge for program facilitators. They suggested that having their own facilities to host the program, which may also ensure participants’ engagement during the program.*

A few program facilitators mentioned challenges around borrowing facilities from other people to hold the ACE events. One program facilitator described the noise complaints they got while renting a location for student events. This happened even when students were kept quieter, which can potentially impair their opportunity to fully engage in the program. Another logistical challenge mentioned by program facilitators was the costs of hiring transportation services and the potential consequences that may follow, such as being late due to traffic. They believed that having their own facilities to hold the events can ensure the quality of program delivery and benefit the participants’ experiences in the program.

Main Finding

To improve the overall program model, EduCare staff and program participants proposed several suggestions related : (1) increase the frequency of program activities, (2) use digital tools to promote the program, and (3) expand the program to students beyond high school.

- 1. Students, parents, and teachers all suggested increasing the frequency of ACE workshops so that the program can have longer-lasting impact. Program facilitators indicated that they can do so by breaking the content of the workshop into smaller modules and offering them throughout the school year. Supplementary after-school activities and virtue trainings were also suggested as solutions to provide more program activities.*

Students, teachers, and parents all spoke strongly about increasing the frequency of holding the ACE workshops, especially for students. While admitting the benefit of having ACE workshops at the beginning of the school year, parents were concerned that the positive impact of the workshop would not last long enough for students to keep up the good attitude and behaviors obtained from the workshop. Both parents and teachers suggested adding program activities in the middle of the school year to follow up, as well as in the end to help students reflect on their whole-year experiences. Some parents advocated specifically for implementing the three-day ACE workshop throughout the year, as it offers more intense learning experiences. This corresponds to students' feelings that they prefer the three-day ACE to one-day ACE. The suggestion was made toward all age groups, not just for 9th grade students:

“

Because you know what they turn bad...they need to be brought down and it would be good to have each grade level having those intense three days because for the ninth graders they're scared. It's new, they don't know so that builds them, and they feel protected and united. But then 10th and 11th... they get gutsy and ballsy, and then they forget because all of the teachers have problems with the 10th, 11th and 12th graders...the three days were intense. I think the kids would benefit from the three days if you did it to all age groups, not just one.”

SJHA Parent

Program facilitators expressed similar sentiment that increasing the frequency and intensity of the program will promote longer-lasting impact. Indeed, some of them felt that the amount of information covered in one workshop is overwhelming. Considering the financial and time constraints of offering more full-range ACE workshops, some program facilitators suggested breaking the workshops down into connected modules and spread them out over time. In this case, students will have more time to digest the information presented and incorporate skills learned in their personal lives. One facilitator went further to indicate that weekly or bi-weekly after-school activities can be offered to increase students' accountability by having them reflect on what they learned and how they could better apply skills learned in their own lives:

“

*I feel that we can improve is **being more of a presence on campus for the students**. I know there is an initiative coordinator on campus, but I believe that maybe **having an after school weekly program or bi-weekly program that covers similar concepts to what we cover in ACE be a topic of the after school gathering or just a refresher. Or a conversation piece, for example, how have we seen communication improve over the last few weeks? And just discuss it because I believe that having more accountability or just recalling, recognizing what was done in the past and being able to connect the dots to what was learned and how it is being used in your daily life can lead to it being used more often.***

Program Facilitator

Besides, one program facilitator suggested that instead of driving all students to a specific location, they could try the virtual trainings. Taking the advantage of having on-site program staff, the on-site facilitator can coordinate with a staff at the EduCare main office to co-facilitate the workshop. This is likely to make the ACE program more accessible and affordable:

“

*So we can do a lot more for a lot less money, it wouldn't cost the school as much. You want to do some refreshers sure, **we'll set up a camera at the office in the conference room, we'll have a facilitator go and do a one-hour refresher for the kids. And your ACE coordinator will be in the room because that person knows our activity, they kind of know as much a facilitation techniques as they need to just to be a in-room liaison. They're already there, they're already getting paid, have a facilitator be remote, do the larger part of it remotely and then have the person that's in the room coordinating versus having to drive all the kids you know off site. So you know, making it more accessible or affordable which is a must.***

Program Facilitator

2. *Program facilitators suggested using digital tools to promote the ACE program. Doing so is likely to keep the program content updated, as well as enhance participant engagement.*

A few program facilitators mentioned that some of the program content is repetitive and needs to be updated. One facilitator suggested using more digital tools to promote the ACE program. For instance, the program can create an app in which students can learn and practice skills learned in ACE workshops on a regular basis. Besides, informational videos can be provided to parents and teachers that serve different purposes. The use of online tools helps hold the program accountable for updating the content regularly. The easy access of useful tools may also increase participant engagement by giving them opportunities to incorporate SEL skills in their personal lives:

“

One thing that we've talked about for probably a decade and a half is getting more up to date tools I'll call it. So more things that kids can keep, touch and feel and take home for doing our affirmations, our statements...They do take home tools but more instructional tools, that will help them incorporate what we do at ACE in their lives if they choose to incorporate it. More specifically, these days with the ways things are going I'd love to see us become more digital. So there's you know an app that kind of aligns with what we do at ACE and kids can take a picture of their affirmations, log it in their phone, they can look at if they want to have a heart talk at home we have topics on this apps that a kids can use. They have affirmations or power statements pop up on their phone every week to remind them. How they can incorporate some of the power they gained at ACE they can use in their lives more consistently.”

Program Facilitator

3. *Teachers and students suggested to expand the program to students beyond high school.*

Having experienced the ACE program themselves, teachers and students suggested providing the program to students beyond high school. Some teachers agreed that the ACE program should continue to be offered for alumni who graduated and went to college so that their social and emotional needs can be addressed:

“

We have a lot of the alumni, they come back, and they share with us...when we went onto college trips. Like oh my god, these are the things that we didn't know. And they come back to us and say we wish we would have known this...I know that our purpose here is to make sure that they graduate and go onto college. But I feel like if you don't have the social-emotional stuff at college, then a lot of our kids are also needing that. So maybe have, like a bridge still.”

SJHA Teacher

Seeing the impact of the ACE program on herself, a 12th grade student expressed interest in being the champion of the program and introduce it to younger students:

“

I don't know more opportunities for the students to become volunteers and leaders. I know that's easier done because when you're ... introduced to the program...you're not motivated to help the program. **But it would be ideal to get more students involved in being leaders of introducing this program to others. So maybe like being able to introduce the program to smaller kids like elementary school or something like that.** Yeah just kind of recruiting students to take on the shoes of the facilitator of the ACE program.”

12th Grade Student



Summary of Main Findings

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 showed for people in the community.

The program facilitators identified a few critical components that ensure the effective implementation of the program, including: (1) key characteristics of the facilitators, (2) strategic partnerships among facilitators, (3) effective trainings, and (4) having EduCare as the home office to provide materials and support.

Program facilitators face four major challenges in the process of program implementation: (1) dealing with unexpected situations, (2) recruiting and engaging parents, (3) engaging teachers, and (4) logistical challenges related to holding program events. They proposed related suggestions and support needed to help them address those challenges.

To improve the overall program model, EduCare staff and program participants proposed several suggestions related to the ACE Initiative programming:

- Increase the frequency of program activities so that the program can have longer-lasting impact.
- Use digital tools to keep the program updated and enhance participant engagement.
- Expand the program to students beyond high school.

3 Program Influences

The ACE Initiative aims to foster a supportive environment in which students, teachers and parents all can thrive. This is accomplished by offering specialized workshops that help all three groups get outside of their comfort zone, care for their personal and emotional needs, as well as form positive relationships with one another. Having on-site program staff who are responsive to the ongoing needs in school also helps integrate the program values into the daily teaching and learning at SJHA. The current chapter covers main findings regarding program influences that the ACE Initiative have on program participants. Based on information obtained from interviews, focus groups, and the student survey, this chapter demonstrates how the ACE Initiative has affected the school culture and the personal growth of students, teachers and parents.



Main Finding

One of the most prevalent findings is that the ACE Initiative creates a caring culture that humanizes relationships among students, teachers, and parents. This is accomplished by offering tools and space for people to open up and be authentic with one another. Doing this allows all groups to learn how to be more empathic with each other, engage in trust-building, and create stronger bonding.

- 1. The ACE Initiative offers tools and space for students, teachers, and parents to open up to others, share their true feelings, and be authentic with one another. This builds a compassionate culture that fosters positive bonds, especially for students.*

A great number of students expressed that they really appreciated having an opportunity during ACE days to get to know their peer students and teachers. They enjoyed hearing about and sharing the personal details of their lives, as well as having an opportunity to be vulnerable while exhibiting

another side of themselves. By opening themselves up, students were able to make friends and form positive relationships that are characterized by trust, empathy, and understanding. As a 12th grade student said, *“As a result to the programs that EduCare has provided, I felt a change in my relationship with my fellow students, a positive change. I felt really close to them. And I feel comfortable enough to say we all feel a bond. We all have that bond. That social justice bond. I feel like we have that bond because of the programs and the activities that we have done through EduCare.”*

Another student expressed how forming these relationships made her feel a sense of belongingness at SJHA:

“

I didn't really have a group of friends when I was in middle school, but coming here and going through ACE really helped me a lot. We all opened up to each other, and including me, so it really made me feel safe and it made me feel like this is where I belong.”

12th Grade Student

This opportunity to build relationships seems to be especially important for 9th grade students who are likely to attend high school without knowing anyone else. Parents expressed the sentiment that they were grateful for having their child interact with peers in person and make good friends during the program. One parent described how her daughter came to SJHA alone, but was able to make friends through the ACE days *“My daughter had a hard time coming here to this school because...she didn't know anyone and she was scared. And she was literally tearing because she didn't know anybody, but those three days that when she was in ninth grade in ACE, she was able to meet friends instead of throwing them out right away into a class. So that really helped her, she was able to make friends.”*

By learning to open up and show more understanding toward others, several students mentioned that they also have a closer relationship with their family. One student said that the ACE program helped her become less closed off so that she was able to improve her relationships with her family, *“I was really closed off and would just push people out, no matter what problem I'd be going through. I'd just be like, 'No, I'm fine.' And now it's more of like through the years, each year, there's something that I pulled out of it and that has helped me be who I am today. And I really have opened up and I've personally been talking to my family too, like my sister. I hated her, I was like, 'No, leave me alone.' But now it's really helped me with my relationships at home, and with friendship that I have here.”*

Other students talked about how the ACE program enabled them to have a renewed and more understanding perspective toward their parents. One student said that her mom became her best friend now whom she can trust and share so many things with.

The improved student-parent relationship can also be attributed to the fact that parents learned to be more affectionate and treat their child in a more appropriate way. One parent spoke about listening from the heart as a way to help parents learn how to connect with their teenager better:

“

For me, I learned that as parents we don't listen with the heart because that day they told us to listen with the heart and to let other people talk without interrupting. And I noticed that a lot of us wanted to finish their sentences and that's the thing that we do with our kids. So for me it was very helpful. I need to actually listen. Yeah, just don't give any advice unless you're asked or something. So for me it was like an eye opening.”

SJHA Parent

Similarly, the activities in the ACE Initiative give teachers and parents a safe space to practice being authentic and share who they are. Program facilitators mentioned a few cases in which teachers were allowed to be themselves during program activities, which might be very different from how they behaved in classrooms. As one teacher said, *“There's a lot of silliness on those days and something about...even the adults when we engage in silliness, it lowers a filter so something about the silliness of the play, allowing them to really see each other and feel like they don't need to have a front up when they are at school, they don't need to perform maturity and perform these things. They are mature and play is okay.”*

These workshops afford teachers the opportunity to be vulnerable with their students, which make students realize that teachers are just the same human beings who have real feelings and struggles. As a 12th grade student said, *“It also brought me in a closer relationship to teachers because I thought teachers were just mean, and they were just boring. But in reality, they sometimes go through the same struggles I'm going through. And that's what I really loved about it.”* This is echoed by a teacher who said that the ACE Initiative helps students see her as a real person with real issues and real struggles.

The ACE Initiative allows teachers to form stronger connections with students through addressing students' personal life issues and social-emotional needs.

- 2. Teachers are also able to practice empathy and caring with their colleagues, therefore building a sense of community. Besides, teachers reported positive changes in ways that they interact and approach parents.*

During focus groups, many teachers expressed that they found it amazing for students to discuss personal struggles and needs with them. One teacher pointed out that he really enjoyed the opportunities to address student issues that a math teacher normally would not talk about, such as gender and healthy relationships. As the program gives students and teachers the space needed to share their feelings and accept one another, this specifically helped teachers gain a better understanding of the students' needs and help them address those needs inside and outside of the classroom. Teachers emphasized that without having students to feel safe, loved and nurtured, it is difficult for students to engage in any type of academic learning.

“

I believe the purpose was to create culture amongst our students, between students and faculty and also amongst our parents and I think it was to address the socioemotional aspect. Many of the traumas that we know they come to us with. So it was a way of addressing Maslow's hierarchy of needs and making sure that our students felt safe, loved and nurtured before any kind of academic learning could take place..”

SJHA Teacher

Because of the amount of time spent sharing and bonding with one another during the program, teachers reported building stronger connections with students. One teacher mentioned that the program changed the way she interacted with students as she could understand the needs of herself and students better. Students in response agreed that the program helped them create a strong bond with teachers, which later made it easier to step out of the comfort zone in classrooms. In addition to teachers' comments, the school counselor pointed out how ACE Initiative has helped her grow as a profession so that she was able to help students better address their issues:

“

Participating in the ACE Initiative has made me a more mindful and empathetic counselor. It has allowed me to be much more vulnerable with my students. It has given me the space to feel comfortable enough to share personal information with my kids that I otherwise might not have shared. It has fostered a growth heart set that has given me the patience to deal with the main issues our students bring to the table.”

SJHA Teacher

ACE Initiative not only helps foster the relationship between teachers and students, but allows teachers to develop empathy and understanding toward their colleagues. Some teachers mentioned that sharing personal experiences and feelings may be more challenging for adults than for students, given that teachers are also busy with their daily responsibilities. One teacher mentioned that although they teach in classrooms close to one other, they do not often get to see or talk to others. However, they do feel a need to make connections and appreciated the opportunity offered by the ACE Initiative to humanize relationships:

“

I think that through the PD, especially through the ones that we have at the retreat or the one that we had at the beginning of this semester...I think that it helps to connect with my colleagues, and just kind of hear their stories, and learn how to work with these social-emotional aspects of an adult, it's a lot easier with kids but as an adult it's more complicated, and like I said just building those relationships with one another, getting to know where people are coming from, and when things happen throughout the year...I appreciate that we're given time to genuinely get to know one another as people.”

SJHA Teacher

Besides, one of the school administrators pointed out that the ACE Initiative helped blur the boundary between teachers and administrators. She was grateful that the program reminded everyone that they are all the same human beings with shared visions for students at SJHA:

“

One thing I appreciate about it as an administrator it's sometimes very easy to have an us vs them dynamic with the staff, you know sort of teachers vs administrators. And when we do these activities where we come together whether it's the councils or the group appreciation circles that we had here, it kind of humanizes all of us so that everyone kind of can reconnect with the idea that we're all human being, we're all here for the vision and for the students and it's really helpful for me to repair relationships that I feel disconnected from.”

SJHA Administrator

Finally, teachers reported that the program changed the way they perceive their relationships with parents. One teacher described his experience of being nervous about talking to parents in his first year, but was able to speak proudly about the good qualities of his students at the ACE Parent Night, *“It's changed my outlook on relationships with parents. The ACE parent night happens for the*

freshmen at the beginning of every year, and it gives me kind of like a stepping off point to talk to parents because when I was a first-year teacher I was really nervous about interacting with parents, and I think that hearing them the first time I ever met the parents they're saying something beautiful and nice about their kid, and I could tell them right away like I've seen your student do this...We're both on the same page. We both love your student." Another teacher mentioned that she was able to better communicate with parents about the purpose of activities in the ACE program, bringing them onto the same page to connect and humanize each other.

As the ACE Initiative helps foster positive interactions among each group, this can help build a caring school culture in which students, teachers, and parents will all thrive. The positive relationships built under this caring culture are referred to as the key factor of success and flourish for all groups. As one of the program facilitators said: *"I think it (the ACE Initiative) is creating a positive culture where all those groups of people can just thrive better, I think at the end of the day it's kind of fundamental that we all need relationships, we all need other people, but in the community like ours, it's got trauma, and the impact of trauma on the parents and teachers is a real thing. I think this is, in the long run, helping students learn how to manage their lives better so that they can thrive, but I think it's also helping the adults thrive...It's been proven that student relationships mimic the adult relationships. And so I think having all these groups receiving support and having stronger relationships and feeling more confident in themselves going to create a more positive culture where more people thrive."*

The head school administrator expressed a similar sentiment by saying that it is the relationship that make all these positive impact possible:

“

You see the effects of EduCare and social-emotional learning...You see the effect it has on kids. And the effects are easily, quantifiable...the graduation rates and attendance...But it's because of relationships. And, so, building these relationships allows to get the amazing out of it. The data you can look up. That is what it is. How you get there, that's the thing that nobody can figure out. That's the thing that everybody wants to know. And it's very simple, it's building authentic relationships."

SJHA Administrator



Main Finding

With the safe and caring space created by the ACE Initiative, students, teachers, and parents are able to step out of their comfort zone to be more open, extroverted, and confident. This is commonly seen among students who become less shy, can speak up for themselves, learn how to work in a team, and can face challenges more confidently. Parents and teachers are also able to step outside of their comfort zone to share personal feelings.

Based on the student survey, 64% of the students reported that the ACE program has helped them step outside of their comfort zone (see Figure 02). This is well aligned with what was found during focus groups where students provided details about how they became more comfortable interacting with new people and opening up to share their own stories. Several students mentioned that they used to be very shy and would isolate themselves from the group. However, because of the ACE program, they were able to be more outgoing, share feelings to build trust with others, and even learn to speak up for themselves:

“

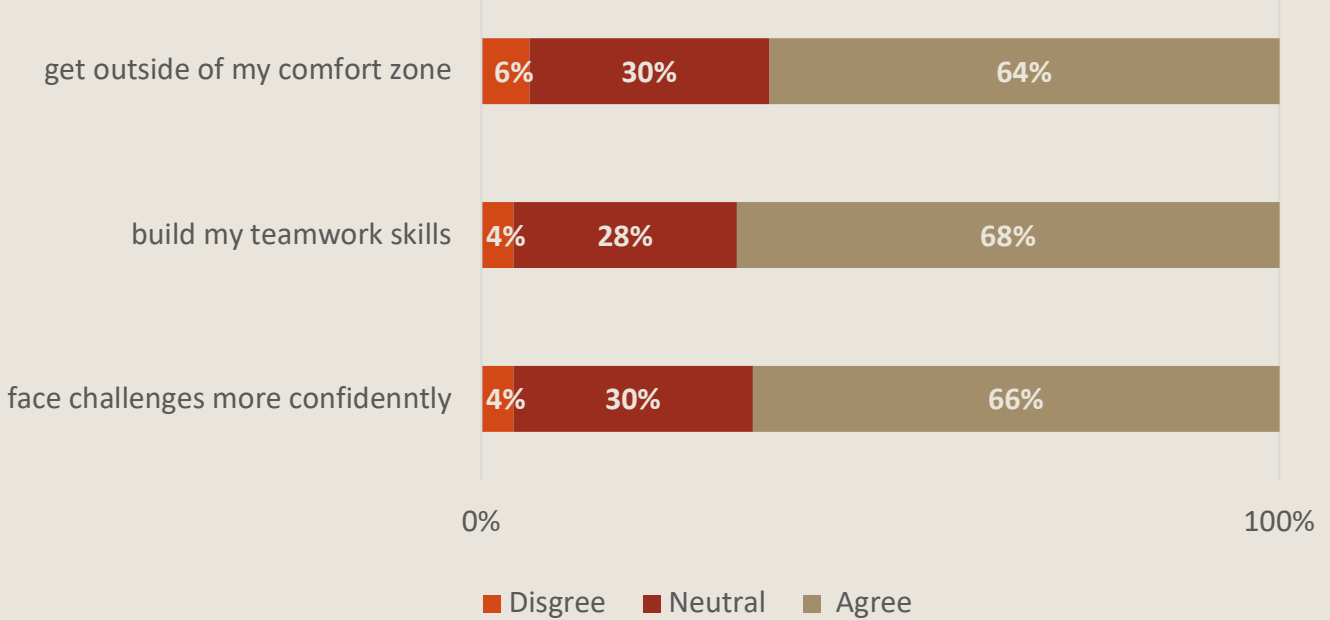
It helped me a lot get out of my comfort zone, and be like very outspoken and self advocate. I was really quiet before I came here to Humanitas. I wouldn't talk to anyone. I'd be really quiet and scared to raise my hand...but I think that ACE really did help me speak up for myself or if I had a thought that I felt had to be shared I was able to share it.”

11th Grade Student

Additionally, 68% of the students reported that the ACE program helped them build their teamwork skills (see Figure 02). As a 9th grade student mentioned, they got to work with people who have different perspectives and different personalities during the program.

Figure 02. The Majority of SJHA Students Found the ACE Program Valuable (N = 444).

The ACE program helps me...



One student gave a unique example on how the program had changed her perspective toward working for her own benefit versus working in a team. She used to only care about her own learning and achievement: *"I was always a model student, but I was out to get mine. I did not care about other people. Their pace weighed on me. I was always like, okay, if the teacher was explaining something and I already had it, I would not be the person to explain it to the person next to me."* However, seeing that she is not alone but embedded in a caring family through the ACE program, she realized how she could do more to contribute to the group:

“

*But I feel like now, especially having the weight of being a mentor and stuff like that, it's not out to get mine, and like our principal always says, "You're always as strong as your weakest link," and this is our neighborhood. And if we're just all separating and we're just all trying to do us, we're gonna be weak. So I feel like being forced to work with people, 'cause it wasn't like activities where you had to sit alone, write stuff and figure out a puzzle by yourself. **It forced me to become a member of a team, and it forced me to become a team player.** Now I can lead instead of just being a person who's just, like, 'Okay, I'm gonna get mine, I'm gonna go to college. I'm gonna get out of here and I'm never coming back.' **It helped me become a person that was resourceful 'cause I like resourcefulness. I was a good student, but I had nothing to give to people. And now I feel like I do.**"*

12th Grade Student

These changes were acknowledged by some parents who described their child as being quiet or shy before starting the ACE activities, but then becoming a lot more talkative, confident, and engaged in class. As one parent put, *“It’s the school and it’s the ACE program...because it touches them. When they are in ninth grade, this is what I love about it because no other school has it...it builds confidence in your child because I’ve seen it with my shy kid...when he came here and he did the ACE he was like ‘wow, this is a family. We love – everybody gets along.’”*

What seems to be more impactful is that through participating in the ACE Initiative, students boosted their self-esteem, especially in facing challenges. This is supported by the fact that 66% of the students indicated that the ACE program helped them face challenges more confidently (see Figure 02). Parents spoke directly on changes in their child’s self-confidence. One parent said, *“They have developed more character...when there’s something that is hard for them to do, they know they have the confidence to give it a try and keep trying until they succeed.”*

Another parent described how the ACE program helped her son deal with traumatic experiences: *“When my son came here, we had just lost their dad. He passed away before my son started here so for him to get that support and share his feelings with people that he didn’t know it was a really good experience. And every year he built up on that...It’s night and day and I think that program really made a difference.”*

For parents and teachers, initially it was hard for them to open up and share their feelings in front of others. However, they were able to overcome their fear and step out of their comfort zone:

“

The biggest thing for me is the comfort zone, they always talk about stepping out of your comfort zone and for me I was always very reserved in terms of opening myself up to students and to other people. And then just doing these different activities, team building activities, it made me open up to staff and as well as students, and just pushing myself to different lengths as well. At the ropes course trying something new, or just talking about something that I usually don’t like talking about, but yeah it’s very beneficial.”

SJHA Teacher

A few parents also talked about how the program helped them “get out of the shell of shyness”. They were able to share experiences and feelings that they usually would not want to talk about, therefore growing as a parent.

Main Finding

The ACE Initiative reveals new opportunities for students that had not previously considered attending college. It also provides information for parents on how to better support their child's academic pursuit.

Students, teachers and parents were all aware of the unique challenges that low-income, Latino communities face in terms of going to college. In the ACE College Trips, having students step onto a college campus and learn about college helped them realize the possibilities of attending college and motivate them to plan out their future. An 11th grade student talked about how the ACE program enabled him to break negative stereotypes and to believe that there is a path out there for him:

“

Because coming from a low-income community, us Latinos to know that we can step grounds on a college, and especially to colleges that people don't think we'd step on...I was given the opportunity to step on it and see ourselves there gave us a boost of confidence, and what to do with their lives, and not just throw it away. ACE has provided us with a lot of opportunities, And the ability to envision ourselves doing something that we couldn't have done ourselves.”

11th Grade Student

At the same time, parents were able to learn how they can become a source of support for their child's studies by financially supporting them to go to college. One parent said, *“This is like life saving for some kids who don't have that support. Even you know EduCare sponsored the college field trip where the kids went to the CSUN where I was a parent chaperone. And it opened my eyes because it made me realize how am I going to afford university for my children if they're not very in the education thing. I was just like 'okay, they're just going to go to Mission College, community college until they eventually wake up and get their you know'. And then at the field trip it was like 'oh my god I could afford this. I could afford CSUN and my kid doesn't have to go straight to a community college.”*



Main Finding

The ACE Initiative brings new perspectives and teaching values for teachers, which changes the way they treat their job and students.

By engaging in the ACE Initiative, teachers reported growth and changes in the way they work. Teachers were aware that the social-emotional aspect emphasized by the program is a brand new perspective for them. They embrace this new value as they understand that students need them for more than academic support. Addressing students' social and emotional needs should become an integral part of the teacher's professional development. One teacher said, *"Because in a typical high school you don't have these programs and you don't have that emotional aspect, like as a teacher? You teach that subject and that's it. That's the extent of our relationship. But you bring this onboard and it opens up a whole new perspective you know like as [TEACHER] was saying the whole human nature, the emotional aspect of people, and so just taking a step back and being able to understand them and then have these experiences with them."*

By endorsing the mission of the ACE Initiative, teachers were able to apply what they learned through the program to become better teachers. Some teachers mentioned that they tried to incorporate ACE activities into their classrooms and advisory lessons. One teacher described how she was able to make positive changes to her own life by practicing the core program values, and encourage those values in her students, *"I am impacted especially by the content of the ACE days that address stepping out of my comfort zone and creating/seeking healthy balance. The biannual reminder has pushed me to make positive changes to my life. I think growing in these areas makes me a better teacher because I can encourage these values in my students. And it reinforces that students need us for more than academic support."*



Summary of Main Findings

The ACE Initiative creates a caring culture that humanizes relationships among students, teachers and parents. It 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 challenge of opening up and sharing personal feelings. Students become less shy, learned 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 that had not previously considered attending 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 ACE materials into their classrooms and advisory plans.

4 Critical Components Recommended for Effective Implementation

The current evaluation was conducted to provide the ACE Initiative with feedback and suggestions for continued implementation and improvement of the program. Given that it is the first year that the ACE Initiative is being implemented at SJHA, the evaluation team identified several components that are critical for implementing the program effectively. These critical components emerged through the focus groups and interviews held with program participants, school administrators, EduCare facilitators and staff. These set of principles should be kept in mind while expanding and adapting the ACE Initiative into other schools.

Main Finding

Early implementation of the ACE Initiative at the beginning of the school year sets a positive tone that is conducive for relationship building.

During focus groups, teachers expressed appreciation toward implementing the program early in the semester. This allows students and teachers to build relationships early on, especially for 9th grade students who tend to come to high school without knowing anyone else. As one teacher stated, *“It would be a totally different thing if we didn’t have ACE at the very beginning of the year. Our classrooms would look completely different.”* Other teachers echoed this sentiment, saying that one of the things that makes teaching at SJHA easier is knowing that everyone is on the same page. Teachers felt that this component is essential to temper expectations early on, begin the process of building relationships with students, and set the stage for the coming school year.

Main Finding

School fit is crucial, including (1) a small school size, (2) a strong administrative support structure, (3) open-minded teachers, and (4) a collaborative partnership with EduCare. These factors make a great difference in the ease of implementation and the level of program integration at SJHA.

1. *A small school size is conducive for relationship building.*

One of the most important factors that enable the ACE Initiative to be successfully implemented at SJHA is having a small school size. This allows teachers to get to know students better and build closer relationships with them. Some teachers indicated that the way that the ACE Initiative being implemented at SJHA may not work at a larger school due to the lack of the familiarity and level of interaction that is possible with a smaller student population. One teacher, who had recently moved to SJHA from a comprehensive high school, described the hurdles to building student relationships when dealing with hundreds of students:

“

Having worked at other schools this is my first year at Humanitas...because they allow us to have smaller classes, there is multiple teachers at each grade level, I have half the children I would have at any other school. I generally had 120 to 170 students when I taught at a comprehensive high school. So, I'm able to build those relationships because I have the room, the capacity to do it. When I had 160 kids I couldn't do that, I saw them and it was like "bye!" it was like, "Who are you?" until December...I can imagine being here after 4 5 6 years, some of you guys have been here for much longer, the relationships just grow very strong."

SJHA Teacher

The school administrators echoed this sentiment by saying that the connectedness offered by a small school size influences student expectations on their relationships with the adults in school. One administrator stated that students often comment on how strange it is that they feel cared for, or that they know their principal's name at all. This level of interaction is perceived to be critical to implement the ACE Initiative, as many of the benefits cited by program participants and EduCare staff rely on the relationships that may be harder to develop in a more populous school.

2. *Strong administrative support enhances teachers' buy-in of the program and prioritizes social-emotional needs over other demands.*

The strong administrative support plays a significant role in getting the ACE Initiative implemented within SJHA. This support greatly contributed to teachers' buy-in for the program. One teacher expressed that since the school administration considers students' social and emotional needs as important, teachers are willing to get on board and make it work.

Because of the champions at the decision-making level within SJHA, priorities were set towards maximizing exposure to ACE programming and incorporating SEL-driven values throughout the school. Some of these decisions include funding additional counseling rather than discipline, actively seeking grant funding for SEL programming, and investing in the support structures available to teachers. Having active, top-down advocacy for the program helps teachers feel supported in implementing the program, and reinforces the value structure present at the school:

“

I think traditionally a lot of things get sacrificed when you try to implement social-emotional learning. Things get sacrificed, like the textbooks, or maybe we don't have a traditional PD this day and instead we're gonna do the social-emotional learning thing. I think because the administration is willing to make those sacrifices and say this is what our values are. I think that we all buy in to that and we all like it's cool.”

SJHA Teacher

Corresponding to teachers' comments, one school administrator elaborated that being a leader meant being adaptive to changes that happen in the school and a willingness to experiment with programs that fit the needs of diverse students. He stated that making budget decisions to prioritize the SEL program and modeling behaviors for teachers and students were critical for creating the structures needed to effectively implement the program. By doing so, he acts as an advocate for SEL, which helps foster a school culture that is conducive for SEL and keep teachers accountable to act in a similar fashion.

3. *Having the “right” teachers who are open-minded and willing to take on responsibilities.*

The effect of the leadership's support is realized through involvement of teachers who are open-minded, willing to take on responsibilities, and who are engaged in the vision shared by EduCare and the school administration. This means that teachers not only engage with the students in a way that fosters SEL, but also that they can interact with each other in a way that promotes humanization, inter-colleague support, and knowledge of their own needs. Although addressing personal emotions and needs with colleagues and students was challenging, in most cases, teachers have been open-minded and willing to adapt given the communal buy-in and the support structure provided at the school. One teacher explicitly mentioned that the school may have intentionally recruited teachers who are open to and competent in this type of work. Additionally, teachers expressed strong willingness to take the responsibility and push themselves to be better teachers. Even if they experience stress and absorb the traumas of working in a low-income, ethnic minority community,

they want to do something more for their students. As one teacher stated, *“We don’t let ourselves off the hook, we take responsibility, and we say ‘we can do something.’”*

4. *EduCare has matched goals with SJHA, therefore forming a collaborative partnership with the school to meet its needs.*

With the school’s goals to foster a culture that builds relationships among students, teachers and parents, the school administrator stated that EduCare came in with a program that aligns with the school’s vision and mission. This leads to a collaborative partnership formed between EduCare and SJHA. The partnership fosters responsiveness from EduCare to implement the ACE Initiative in a way that best fits the needs of students. For instance, when wildfires hit the area in December 2017 and created a different constellation of needs within SJHA, EduCare staff and on-site facilitators help address the emotional needs of students and teachers. On the side of the school, program facilitators spoke positively about the existing conducive school culture and the school’s cooperation in terms of allowing sufficient time for the program. To maintain the partnership with EduCare to maximize program impact for students and teachers, it is critical that the school is constantly invested in and committed to implementing the program well.



Main Finding

Students, teachers, and the school administrators all see value in SEL, especially its potential to address people’s basic social-emotional needs and promote a holistic perspective of individuals.

Rather than seeing social and emotional learning (SEL) as an extra thing to do, students and adults at SJHA think highly of SEL for its potential to create a humane school culture. Under such a caring culture, people’s basic needs of safety, love, and belongingness are met to achieve what many teachers and school administrators referred to as Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. Teachers indicated that without addressing these basic needs, students’ higher-level abilities to think and learn will get impaired, therefore hurting their academic performance. Targeting the social and emotional aspects is especially fundamental among students from low-income, ethnic minority communities to benefit their educational experiences. These students have gone through a lot of trauma in their lives, and therefore need a space to express their emotions and to process the difficult issues.

Additionally, the program gave teachers tools to address student discipline issues in a more understanding way. Rather than using a traditional approach, the program advocates for targeting the emotional root of behavioral issues and figuring out the reasons behind students' actions to help them deal with their personal problems. Teachers resonated with this holistic approach to behavioral problems and stated that, *"We lost a lot of kids, because they were punitively dealt with rather than understanding what the reason for actions are. Because we don't really have the tools to figure out what was going on...So I know that you know something was wrong, some of the kids with the Dean there's never any kind of figuring out what is going on with the kids and I think here we have this opportunity. I'm not saying we don't lose kids, but there's very few that don't get the things that they need through the program. And there's been kids that I definitely know would not have been successful if they didn't have this luck of coming here and having these kinds of programs."*



Our vision is we will achieve self-actualization which is a reference to Abraham Maslow and the hierarchy of needs. It really resonates as true with me that you have to have those lower needs met before you can self-actualize. So our kids have a lot of trauma and they also have a lot of safety, love and belongingness needs that aren't met in their educational experience, in their home life. To me it seems really obvious how that impacts their ability to focus at school. It influences their relationships with teachers...they're shut down or they're tired...to me it's essential to address SEL for them to be able to access the higher level of critical thinking stuff, esteem needs, or the challenging curriculum."

SJHA Teacher

These shared values allow teachers to believe in and invest in the program, as they consider the program as a worthwhile endeavor. Seeing the values in SEL, some teachers mentioned that they were able to adopt some of the program tools in their own work or teaching, such as meditation training. Indeed, some teachers considered SEL as part of the culture of SJHA and as something embedded in everything they do.

One of the school administrators shared the same vision that he wanted to teach students *"how to be more human."* He further described that students nowadays have been pushed so hard to succeed academically that a significant part is missing in their education, which is the social and emotional skills that build resilience. With the ACE Initiative, he wanted to shift the focus of education to help students develop as "whole" individuals:

““

*Everyone’s fighting to be valedictorian. No comradery, no teamship. No leadership...There’s no socio-emotional learning. It’s all about, it’s not transformational. It’s all transactional. And there’s no transformation. **Nobody is trying to be a better human, they’re all trying to be the best. And I think the shift that we need to make as, this sounds silly to say, but as a society, is stop having our kids be the best in the world and have them be the best for the world. And I think the socio-emotional is necessary.***

School Administrator

Students see the same value in SEL for them to receive a type of education that allows them to develop holistically. They expressed great appreciation toward the life skills they learned through the ACE programs. A 12th grade student stated that SJHA offers an education that is beyond content learning. The leadership and communication skills students obtained from the program are critical for them to thrive outside of school.

““

*What's the point of being educated if you're not a good person? I feel like you can shove books down our throats and make us A students, all of us, and have more time to study. But... there is only so much you can take. And **if you're closed off and you don't know how to communicate things...this would just be any other high school where people just walk around, have superficial... Yeah, we're all good, we're all friends,"** and then have everybody really stressed out in a corner, freaking out when you get home. **What's the point of being model students if you can't be good people.***

SJHA Student

Main Finding

Having on-site EduCare staff is the indispensable component of the successful implementation of the ACE Initiative.

The most unique feature of the ACE Initiative is having on-site program staff working on campus. They were described by students as the “father” and “mother” figures of the school. The current section focuses specifically on the on-site facilitator who works with students and teachers closely at SJHA.

This position's role has evolved over time, but is always based on the ongoing needs of the school. Her responsibilities include coordinating mentorship, counseling programs, support groups for students, and EduCare program activities; preparing seniors for college; and providing informal check-ins and various support to meet the needs of students and teachers.

1. *The on-site facilitator is a perfect fit for SJHA.*

The on-site program facilitator has been a perfect fit for SJHA given her previous connection with the school and unique personal characteristics. Having helped design and open SJHA seven years ago, the on-site facilitator was seen as an insider of the school. Teachers mentioned that this is critical, as people cannot expect a school culture shift when the program provider comes from outside of the community. *"I think we're a little bit spoiled with who we have running it. It's having someone who is already a part of our school come in and knows that, I think we've had a smoother first year of it than would most schools because I would think that person would have to spend a lot of time getting to know the school's culture first. So I think in that sense it has gone really well because (the facilitator) was already really a part of our team for so long."*

In addition to that, the on-site facilitator was described as having the right personality and interpersonal skills necessary to take on this position. For example, teachers said that this person is energetic, positive, encouraging, and thorough. More importantly, the on-site facilitator understands the needs of teachers and students, and is able to keep a good balance between addressing personal feelings and knowing what is most important for students and the school. One teacher said, *"Sometimes when we get caught up in our personalities she's really able to always look at what's best for the school and what's best for our kids but at the same time empathizing with people and their feelings and as colleagues, just how burned out we get, how tired we are, she's that support system to see us and help us get what we need but at the same time always keeping our kids at the forefront. That's making sure we're maintaining our values as a school."*

2. *The on-site facilitator is responsive to needs of students and teachers by utilizing effective strategies and appropriate resources.*

Teachers expressed a strong feeling that having a program facilitator working on campus is extremely helpful and supportive. This is mainly because the on-site facilitator is able to see the trends happening and be responsive to the needs of students and teachers. Teachers also described the on-

site facilitator as being accessible and flexible, and will make it a priority to meet the needs of teachers and students. This is echoed by the program facilitator herself who admitted that one of the requirements for her position is to be present.

“

She's always available to attend any meeting so if you communicate "hey, we're doing this thing and we could use your input." She makes it a priority to be there and so she's always very willing to give feedback – she always seeks feedback. When she has a idea she always checks in with several people from multiple teams. So I think the value of her is she's integrated very quickly and I think part of that was definitely she is a part of our design team. She knows the vision and mission, she has a lot of relationships and so she was able to really integrate. She's done so, so effectively. It's about more than just her presence, it's about – she's a voice."

SJHA Teacher

To respond to the ongoing needs in school, the on-site facilitator empowers teachers by forming true collaborations with them. Teachers described that when they meet with the on-site facilitator with any issues or ideas, instead of teaching them how to solve the problems step by step, the facilitator tries to understand the situation and supports teachers to address whatever issues themselves. Just as one teacher said, *"It's not prescriptive – she's not saying 'I'm going to do this for you, but let's do this with you.'"* One teacher provided an insightful description of what the collaboration looks like, *"I think she is exceptional at drawing out the strengths of the people that she collaborates with so that it's a true collaboration. So it's not her coming in and just doing it for us but it's her coming in and supporting us in whatever the idea we have. She lets us flush it out and she is very good at providing support for helping us make – realize it and making an idea reality."*

Besides providing support on her own, the on-site facilitator is able to draw her community resources and partners to create extracurricular activities for students, and allows teachers to gain access to community resources that enable them to create projects they would like to do.

3. *The on-site program facilitator is the "glue" that keeps everything together and serves as the advocate for SEL.*

The on-site facilitator has played a vital role in any progress the ACE Initiative has made toward engaging students, teachers and parents in the program, as well as integrating the linkages between

the three populations to propagate the positive, SEL-centric culture at SJHA. Teachers and the administration all echoed the sentiment on how the program might look different without an internal champion for the program. The on-site facilitator stated that one of her added values described by the lead school administrator is advocacy for SEL:

“

*(The administrator) used to say that **one of my added value was advocacy...and I think it's kind of similar to that like I'm sort of there always reminding them they need to take care of themselves and their students as much as they need to deliver their content.** It's not that people didn't know that, but with the number of demands especially put on teachers, parents and students, everyone is struggling so much. If no one is there to just see them as people and be that presence of what it means to do social emotional learning, it's not that it gets forgotten but it's not gonna be the top of the list."*

Program Facilitator



Summary of Main Findings

This chapter summarized a few critical components that should be taken into consideration while expanding and adapting the ACE Initiative into other schools:

Implementing the program at the beginning of the school year ensures that the teachers and students begin the year from a point of mutual understanding, and sets the stage for them to build relationships.

School fit is crucial for the ease of implementation and the level of program integration in school. This includes: (1) a small school size, (2) a strong administrative support structure, (3) open-minded teachers, and (4) a collaborative partnership between the school and EduCare.

All students, teachers, and school administrators consider the ACE Initiative as valuable for its potential to address people's basic social-emotional needs and promote a holistic perspective of individuals. Endorsing the program values greatly helps motivate them to take the ownership of the program's goals and engage with the program activities.

Having on-site EduCare staff, especially the one facilitator who works within the school on a daily basis, is the indispensable component of the successful implementation of the ACE Initiative. This person should be a good fit for the position in terms of personal characters and connections with the community served. He serves as an internal champion of the program, and is supposed to respond quickly and effectively to the ongoing needs within the school.

5 Conclusions & Recommendations

In the year of 2017-2018, EduCare partnered with CGU to identify two evaluation priorities: (1) assess the implementation quality of the ACE Initiative implemented at SJHA and the overall experiences of program participants, and (2) assess how the ACE Initiative has broadly influenced students, teachers, and parents at SJHA. In response to these two evaluation questions, the evaluation team employed a mixed-methods approach to data collection whereby observation, interview, focus group, and survey data were collected, analyzed, and triangulated across sources to derive evaluative conclusions. This chapter summarizes the evaluation findings for the two evaluation priorities identified, followed by recommendations that were generated by considering all findings as a whole.

Summary of Evaluation Findings

Program Implementation

- The overall implementation quality of the ACE Initiative is high, given the satisfactory quality of program delivery and positive evaluations toward EduCare facilitators for their positive personal characteristics, passion for their work, and sincere care showed for people in the community.
- The program facilitators identified a few critical components that ensure the effective implementation of the program, including (1) key characteristics of the facilitators, (2) strategic partnerships among facilitators, (3) effective trainings, and (4) having EduCare as the home office to provide materials and support.
- Program facilitators face four major challenges in the process of program implementation: (1) dealing with unexpected situations, (2) recruiting and engaging parents, (3) engaging teachers, and (4) logistical challenges related to hosting program activities. They proposed suggestions and support needed to address each of those challenges.

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 approach parents.
- The ACE Initiative helps students, teachers and parents get outside of their comfort zone despite the challenge 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 that had not previously considered attending 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 conducted on the pilot school concluded 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:
 1. Implementing the program at the beginning of the school year sets the stage for relationship building among students, parents, and teachers.
 2. School fit is crucial for the ease of implementation and the level of program integration in school. This includes (1) having a small school size, (2) a strong administrative support structure, (3) open-minded and invested teachers, and (4) a goal alignment between EduCare and the school that allows them to form a collaborative partnership.

3. Students, teachers, and school administrators all see the value of the ACE Initiative in addressing people's social-emotional needs and promote a holistic perspective of individuals. This helps motivate them to take the ownership of the program's goals and engage with the program activities.
 4. Having on-site EduCare staff, especially a facilitator who works in school on a daily basis, is the indispensable component of the successful implementation of the ACE Initiative. This person should be a good fit for the position in terms of personal characters and connections with the community served. He serves as an internal champion of the program, and is responsible for responding quickly and effectively to the ongoing needs within the school.
- To improve the program model and better the program experiences, EduCare staff and program participants proposed several suggestions related to the overall ACE programming:
 1. Increase the frequency of program activities so that the program can have longer-lasting impact. 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 virtue trainings were also mentioned as solutions to offer more workshops.
 2. Use digital tools to keep the program updated and enhance program engagement from students, teachers, and parents.
 3. Expand the program to students beyond high school to reach out to younger and older students who are also in need of addressing their social and emotional needs.
 - The pre and post surveys administered to students at SJHA did not yield meaningful results measuring students' SEL skills. Either no change or a slight drop was shown comparing pre- and post-test results. Based on what was found in the current evaluation, a few speculations were made to explain the survey data. First, the constructs measured by the current student survey (i.e., perseverance, academic self-efficacy, growth mindset, and school connectedness) may not accurately match what the ACE Initiative is focusing on, such as relationship building. Second, some of the survey items are reverse coded or written in complex language. This greatly increases the cognitive load for students to comprehend and answer the questions accurately. Third, 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 without regular follow-ups. Given the issues mentioned above, it is recommended to modify the student survey by targeting constructs that are aligned with the program outcomes and simplifying the wording of survey questions. The evaluation team has developed a set of survey questions that focus on students'

school engagement and their relationships with parents as well as teachers. These questions may be taken into consideration while improving the student survey. 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.

Appendix A – Methodology & Procedures

The current evaluation utilized a variety of methods to ensure the integrity and comprehensiveness of the evidence collected to understand the ACE Initiative. In pursuit of this goal, the evaluation team gathered data through observations, focus groups, interviews, and surveys.

Observations

The evaluation team conducted on-site observations on the Ropes Course retreat provided for 12th grade students at SJHA, a professional development workshop for teachers, and three parent workshops to assess the implementation quality (see Figure 03).

Figure 03. On-Site Observations Conducted by the Evaluation Team



A separate observation protocol was developed for each program activity. All protocols focus on eight criteria based on which the evaluation team make assessment on the implementation quality (see Table 03 for specific criteria used and their definitions). Each criterion includes 3 to 6 items that focus on different aspects of that criterion. These individual items are tailored based on who the participants are and the content of the activities.

We assessed each criterion using both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative assessment utilizes a 4-point scale (1 = Not True, 2 = Somewhat True, 3 = Mostly True, and 4 = Very True) on the items included in each criterion. Qualitative data was collected through an extensive note taking process followed by each evaluator conducting the on-site observation. The qualitative notes act as the primary data source, and the numeric ratings serve as supplementary information for making final

assessment. Two to three evaluators worked together to go through the rating scores and notes for each observation, and make final judgments on the implementation quality. A “high”, “medium”, or “low” quality was assigned for each criterion.

Table 03. Specific Criteria Used Within Observation Protocols

Criteria	Definition
Physical Environment	The extent to which the physical space where the activity is being held is appropriate (i.e. few distractions, enough room).
Materials Provided	The extent to which the materials provided to program participants are appropriate and sufficient.
Staff Preparedness & Activity Implementation	The extent to which EduCare facilitator(s) and staff were prepared and the overall implementation quality, including whether they have a clear plan, whether the session is modified based on ongoing needs, and whether the session time is allocated appropriately
Workshop Management	The extent to which EduCare facilitator(s) and staff were able to gain participants’ attention and offer an appropriate amount of supervision (such as involving disengaged participants and interfering when inappropriate behaviors were displayed).
Participant Engagement	The extent to which participants were engaged and reacted positively toward the program activities
Interaction among Participants	The quality of interactions among participants
Interaction between Staff and Participants	The quality of interactions between the staff facilitating the workshop and the participants

Interviews

The evaluation team conducted phone interviews with the EduCare program facilitators and the on-site facilitator, as well as an in-person interview with the one of the head administrators at SJHA (see Figure 04). Each interview with program facilitators lasted around 30 minutes. The interviews with the on-site facilitator and the school administrator lasted about 1 hour for each. All interviews were recorded using mobile devices for the purpose of data analysis.

Figure 04. Interviews Conducted by the Evaluation Team



A separate protocol was developed for each interview, with different focuses (see Table 04 for some sample interview questions). The interviews with EduCare program facilitators focused on understanding their experiences with implementing ACE Initiative, including their perceptions of implementation quality, critical components and strategies for effective implementation, challenges met during the implementation, and suggestions to further improve the program.

The interview with the on-site facilitator focused on gaining knowledge about the status of ongoing support within SJHA. The evaluation team gathered information on the roles of the on-site facilitator and how the responsibilities changed over time, challenges that have arisen working in this position, and any suggestions that would improve the ongoing support services for students and teachers.

The interview with the school administrator gathered information regarding the role of administration with the ACE Initiative at SJHA, the administrator's perception and beliefs of SEL, his perception of the program delivery, and its effects on the teachers and students within SJHA.

Table 04. Sample Interview Questions Grouped by the Interviewees

Interview with Program Facilitators

Take a few seconds and reflect on the programs you have facilitated, what aspects of the program do you think worked the best?

What resources did you receive that enable you to run the program effectively?

Have you ever met any challenges during the program implementation, if so, how were you able to cope with the situation?

Do you have any suggestions for future improvement in EduCare program activities and practices?

Interview with On-Site Staff Member

What are your main responsibilities in relation to providing support for teachers and students?

What do you perceive is the impact that ACE Initiative has on parents, or teachers, or students?

With all this ongoing support provided for the participants, how do you think this service impacts them in addition to workshops and events?

Interview with Principal of SJHA

Have you been involved with the EduCare Foundation in delivering this intervention? If so, can you please explain what your role has been in this?

Overall, how do you see the intervention aligning with the needs and mission of the school?

What value do you see in SEL for students and teachers, if there's any?

What specific steps did you take in order to support SEL among students and teachers?

Focus Groups

The evaluation team conducted separate focus groups for students, teachers, and parents (see Figure 05 for the number of focus groups and participants involved). Each student group has 8 to 9 students; each teacher group has 5 to 8 students. Two members from the evaluation team facilitated each group, which lasted around 30 minutes. All focus groups were recorded using mobile devices for the purpose of data analysis.

Figure 05. Interviews Conducted by the Evaluation Team



All focus groups started with a grand tour question by asking participants to reflect on the program activities they have participated with the ACE Initiative over the past school year. Then the focus groups mainly focused on the program experiences of all participants, including their perception of program implementation and EduCare facilitators, their engagement level during the program activities, and any challenges met during the activities. Participants also reflected on the perceived impact of the program, and offered suggestions to further improve the program. See Table 05 for some sample questions.

Table 05. Sample Questions for Focus Groups

Student, Teacher, and Parent Focus Groups

- To begin, what kind of programs or events have you attended with EduCare Foundation’s ACE Initiative program this year? For each of the activities you shared, could you share about the purpose of it and what you did in each activity?
 - Thinking about these activities, to what extent do you think you are engaged in the activities for most of the time?
 - We are interested in whether you’ve noticed any difference or change as a result of participating in the ACE program this year. If you have felt that your participation in the ACE program has changed you or others, could you talk about what changes you have noticed?
 - What value do you see in SEL for students and teachers, if there’s any?
 - If you could name one/multiple lessons you learned from ACE, what would that be?
 - If you could share any advice that you think would help improve the program, what would it be?
 - If you could share any advice that you think would help improve the program, what would it be?
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Data Analysis for Interviews and Focus Groups

The evaluation team transcribed each interview and focus group and removed any identifying information during this process. A conventional content analysis method was used, and at least two people from the team completed this portion of qualitative data analysis. They read through the transcript to develop a codebook based on participants' responses. This was an iterative process in which they developed codes, and then reread and revise or summarize themes and codes as needed. The overarching themes were then solidified after evaluators looked through all the codes and identified the most important findings. The analysis focused on the breadth of the content by accounting for the variety of perspectives that were expressed by the participants.

Student Survey

ERC was contracted with EduCare to administer pre- and post-survey to all students at SJHA. The initial survey distributed at the beginning of the school year in Fall 2017 measured students' four SEL skills: grit or perseverance, academic self-efficacy, growth mindset, and school connectedness (see Table 06 for the number of questions included in each measure and some sample questions). For the post-test survey in Spring 2018, the evaluation team added another four items to assess the perceived program impact of the ACE Initiative on students (see Table 07 for the survey questions). These questions were asked using a 5-point Likert scale (i.e., 1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree).

Table 06. Original Student Survey Questions

SEL Skill	# of Items	Sample Items
Grit/Perseverance	11	<ul style="list-style-type: none">I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one.I finish whatever I begin.
Academic Self-Efficacy	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none">I'm certain I can master the skills taught in school this yearEven if the work is hard, I can learn it.
Growth Mindset	12	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Some kids will never be smart, no matter how hard they try.You can get smarter by working hard in school.
School Connectedness	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none">I feel like part of this school.I feel safe at this school.

Table 07. Student Survey Questions on Perceived Program Impact

Additional Student Survey Questions
The ACE program helps me get outside of my comfort zone.
The ACE program helps me build my teamwork skills.
The ACE program helps me face challenges more confidently.
I am able to apply what I have learned in ACE to other areas in my life.

Appendix B – Logic Model

The figure below displays the logic model of the ACE Initiative. The logic flows from inside to outside: the inner circle represents the three program components for students, teachers, and parents. The “heartset” and “mindset” on that circle represents the SEL skills the ACE Initiative tries to develop among all three populations. From inside to outside, we demonstrate short-term, intermediate, and long-term outcomes. Students are in purple; teachers are in red; and parents are in blue. The bidirectional arrows across the entire logic model demonstrate that students, teachers, and parents interact with one another at each outcome level. The ongoing support (in yellow) is represented in both the inner and the outer circles as an ongoing program service that is provided continually.

Figure 06. Interviews Conducted by the Evaluation Team

