Best Practices in Implementing Evidence-Based Programs in School:
A Qualitative Study of the Primary Project Social and Emotional Learning Program

Introduction

Developed in 1957 by Children's Institute, Primary Project is an evidence-based program that helps children in pre-K through third grade adjust to school, gain confidence and social skills, and focus on learning. The program identifies young children who show emerging school adjustment difficulties and provides them with one-on-one time with a specially trained and supervised paraprofessional. The program is listed on the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) National Registry of Evidence Based Programs and Practices (NREPP) and is currently implemented in more than 150 schools across the country. The length of time the program has been established in sites varies. Many schools have been offering the program for more than a decade while others are new to implementation.

As Primary Project entered its 60th year of operation, Children's Institute was interested in learning:

- **What benefits for children do school staff see as a result of the program?**

- **What contributes to longevity – once programs start implementing Primary Project, what makes it stick? What are the key success factors?**

- **Conversely, what makes programs fail? What challenges do schools face?**

- **What do schools see as the core features of Primary Project – which components are essential?**

In the spring of 2017, Children's Institute launched a qualitative study to get answers to these questions. This brief summarizes preliminary findings from the study and offers lessons learned for schools both new and experienced.

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Methods

The study consisted of the following key activities:

- **Site visits** to 14 schools that are currently implementing Primary Project and have achieved national certification from Children's Institute. To be certified, schools must submit an application, undergo a site visit, and meet a set of criteria for program implementation. The schools were in New York State and Florida and represented urban, suburban, and rural settings. Site visits included interviews with the school principal, two teachers, the school mental health professional (MHP) overseeing Primary Project, and the child associate or paraprofessional who works directly with the children in the program. In addition, site visitors observed the playroom where the intervention takes place and collected key materials and documents representing the program.

- **A national survey** distributed to all schools implementing Primary Project. A total of 429 individuals completed the survey.

Findings

Benefits

When asked about perceived benefits of the program, interview and survey data indicate that schools experience benefits at both the student and classroom level. For example, at the classroom level, several people indicated that teachers experience improved classroom operations and flow as a result of students participating in Primary Project. Interviewees commented *"The teachers are not having to intervene with the kids. So there's less time focused on the negative classroom behavior"* and *"It just allows more fluidity in the classroom, you're not dealing with so much."* In addition, many interviewees, as well as 50% of survey respondents, indicated that the program has resulted in fewer disciplinary incidents. Interviewees and survey respondents indicated that the program leads to the following benefits for students:

- **Improved student attendance** – Half of survey respondents and many interviewees said they have seen improvements in student attendance after participating in Primary Project. Some attribute this to the students' desire to come to school so that they may attend the program.

- **Better ability to focus and participate in class** – Many teachers interviewed indicated that students were happier and more likely to participate in class after being in the program, even for a short time. One teacher reported *"That little break gives them the opportunity, that little outlet, then they can come back and are able to focus."* A MHP noted *"They never talk they never say anything, they never participate in the classroom, and then after a few sessions I go observe them in the classroom they're raising their hand."*

- **Improved confidence and social skills** – The majority of interviewees indicated that they see improvements in children's social and emotional skills as a result of the program. Survey respondents agreed with this. For example, they noted improvements in: relationship skills (88%); self-awareness skills (81%); self-management skills (75%); decision-making skills (74%); and social awareness skills (74%).

- **Connection with a caring adult** – Many interviewees described the benefit of children building a strong relationship with a caring adult (i.e., the child associate). For example, one teacher said *"Some of my students who are really shy have come out of their shell and are able to talk now and have people they can go to besides their teacher...So they've been*

having another adult who knows them personally that looks like they're just picking them out specially to show them how much they care about them."

- **Improved academic achievement for certain students** – Finally, a few interviewees noted that the program has a positive impact on English Language Learners *"Because as they're playing they're identifying things and it really helps to bring them out and then we see that in the classroom."*

Although the data collected for this study is anecdotal and based on perceptions, most schools do evaluate the program and responses in many cases were based on that data. For example, 44% of survey respondents said their school tracks attendance and 22% track disciplinary incidents as part of their Primary Project evaluation. In addition, the majority (85%) use the Teacher-Child Rating Scale to screen students for the program and measure changes in their social and emotional skills.

Key Success Factors

In addition to understanding the benefits of the program, this study aimed to understand what helps the program to be successful in schools. Five clear success factors emerged from the survey and interviews:

- **Strong child associates** – The most common success factor cited on both the survey (38% of respondents) and in the interviews (12 out of 14 schools) was a qualified and committed individual in the child associate position. Interviewees reported things like *"I think it's the skill level of the child associates… it all comes down to the intervention that they're providing and the high quality of that intervention"* and *"A large part is the child associate being able to select the correct students, being able to implement the model and complete all the tasks that are required in the program."* A few people noted that having a bilingual child associate was helpful for connecting to their student population.

- **Support from the school community** – A second factor that both interviewees and survey respondents noted as being particularly important to their success was having the support of the entire school community including the administration, teachers, and families. Administrative support is important for funding, space in the building, and time for screening and training. Teacher support is essential for helping with student selection into the program and allowing students to leave the classroom. Finally, family support is necessary for completed permission forms and willingness to allow their children to participate. One person shared *"Just having a whole school community that sees the benefits of the program has really been the key."*

- **Team work** – Although support from the school community is critical, it is not enough. Data also showed the importance of good team work for a successful program. Twenty percent of survey respondents and most interviewees noted that it is critical to have collaboration and communication among the child associate, the MHP, the administrators, and teachers. This was true whether the staff were hired by an outside agency, as is the case in some regions, or employed by the school. One individual said, *"The child associate is a very integral part of the team and we could not do this program without her number one, but the teachers are very supportive and they just kind of know what to do and when to do it...everybody gets their stuff done and…we are a team."*

- **Fidelity to the model** – Several schools and 14% of survey respondents noted that the model itself and maintaining fidelity to the model were most important to their success. For example, a principal said *"The idea that it's student led and it's not adult centered is very key to it.....just the structure of the program is what leads to its success."*

- **Consistency and stability** – The final success factor noted by several schools during site visits and indicated by 14% of survey respondents was achieving consistency and stability, especially as it pertains to staff. Interviewees described the importance of principal stability for ongoing support of the program, child associate stability for consistency of implementation, teacher stability for overall understanding of the program and willingness to participate, and MHP stability to serve as an ongoing champion.

Although no other single factor received enough mention to be considered a theme, it is worth mentioning a handful of other factors to which survey respondents attributed their success, including: strong supervision of the child associate, a good student selection process, flexibility, having enough resources, a dedicated playroom space, and use of data.

Challenges and Barriers

Just as we asked about success factors, interviewees and survey respondents were asked to indicate what challenges or barriers they have encountered over the years that have hindered their ability to be successful. In many cases, those challenges are the exact opposite of the success factors (e.g., lack of support, lack of consistency, turnover of staff). Challenges and barriers included the following:

- **Funding and resources** – Three schools referenced funding issues as a challenge. In particular, they noted that the program can be seen as an "extra" so maybe the first to get cut when times are financially tight. Others indicated that it is difficult to find funding for additional staff, playroom space, and playroom toys and materials. Among survey respondents, 22% indicated funding issues were a challenge for their school. Nearly 40% anticipate having funding for more than five years, but the other 60% do not, indicating that the sustainability of the program is a source of concern.

- **Scheduling and timing conflicts** – The second most noted challenge among survey respondents and interviewees was related to time. These challenges were voiced in a variety of ways. Almost all programs interviewed cited the lack of ability to serve as many students as they would like as a challenge. Most schools feel the need outpaces their ability to serve students given limited time slots. Schools find it challenging to determine who should receive the service. Others mentioned that they experience pushback when it comes to pulling students out of the classroom, for example *"Finding time in the day with especially kids that get a lot of services, they get OPT, speech and stuff like that, where they're not being taken out of academics and what we've ended up agreeing on is one time a week during our recess period"* which is not ideal. Still others referenced challenges for the child associates in having to see students one right after another without much time in between, for example one associate said *"So on days where it's very much like one right after the other that's very challenging…when we have so many children that we need to see and so many days. We want to be able to make sure that schedule is accommodating to the teacher's needs as well and that gets hard too."*

- **Lack of support from administrators and teachers** - Several MHPs and child associates noted that they feel a lack of support from teachers and administrators in their building which can be a barrier to success. In particular, those child associates who are supervised by outside agencies felt that they may not always be fully included in their larger school community (e.g., do not receive school email addresses for communication purposes). For some teachers and administrators, it is a lack of understanding about the purpose of the program that leads to resistance. For others there are concerns about taking students out of the classroom. Interestingly, survey data was not consistent with these interview findings. When asked how well they understand the program, 95% of principals

and 85% of teachers said they understand the intervention "very much" or "somewhat". The majority of principals (81%) and teachers (71%) said the program was either essential or very important to their school.

- **Family engagement** – Ten of the 14 schools interviewed talked about parental engagement as a challenge. For the most part, these challenges are related to engagement and logistics rather than outright rejection of the program. For example, several schools said it was difficult to obtain signed permission forms. Others experienced poor attendance by parents and/or guardians at scheduled meetings or conferences about the program. A few interviewees reported that parents rejected their child's participation in the program or had problems with the program itself. About 10% of survey respondents indicated that family engagement was a challenge for their school.

- **Staff turnover** – Many of the MHPs cited turnover of the child associates as a problem. In one case, the child associates are interns which results in change year to year. In other cases it is a challenge to find child associates who will stay because they are often low-paying or part-time positions. In addition to disruption for students who participate, turnover also requires resources in terms of training. One MHP said *"I want to also select someone who wants to do this long term and not leave in the middle of the cycle and disrupt the sessions for that student so they don't have to meet a new child associate right in the middle of the sessions."* Turnover of administration was also mentioned as an issue due to the importance of principal support for program implementation. When an administrator who supports the program leaves, there is often concern that their replacement will not understand the program, perceive it to be beneficial, or support the need for resources. Only six survey respondents mentioned turnover as a challenge, perhaps indicating it is not a widespread concern.

- **Space constraints** – Five of the schools interviewed noted that the playroom space has been a challenge for them. The interviewees described problems identifying space that is *"Consistent for the kids, they know where the room is, it's not changing from year to year, it's quiet, it's private because this is confidential."* Space was described as being too small, having background noise, having no windows, or not being dedicated full time so the child associate and the students have to move around. Survey data is consistent with this concern. Although 93% of survey respondents indicated that they have dedicated playroom space in their building, 30% say this dedicated space is shared with other programs.

Discussion

Taken together, survey and site visit data begin to tell a story about Primary Project and what factors are essential in successful program implementation across a variety of school settings. A number of core themes and conclusions emerged.

1) **Staff is essential** – Not surprisingly, the most important component of Primary Project is the people. When things are going well, the child associate is a competent and committed individual who has been adequately trained and at the school for a number of years. The MHP is a champion of the program, actively supervising the child associate and communicating with staff and families about the program on a regular basis. The principal supports the program by providing dedicated space for the playroom, release time for teachers to conduct the screening and selection process, and providing resources for playroom supplies. And finally, teachers are supportive of the program, participate meaningfully in the screening and selection process to identify students for the program, and provide

time for students to be released from their classroom to go to the playroom. Conversely, when there is a lot of staff turnover, when teachers or the principal aren't supportive of the program, or when communication is poor, the program suffers.

2) **Fidelity to the program matters** – The intervention itself is strong and results in a wide range of benefits for students. Although schools shared that it is tempting to change the intervention, for example, to serve students who do not meet screening criteria, to have students come in pairs to the playroom, or to alter the intervention in other ways, sticking to the program as it is intended appears to be working. According to interviewees and survey respondents, students demonstrate gains in their social skills and confidence, participate more in class, and attend school in greater numbers. Providing children with the opportunity to access a dedicated play space where they can choose how to spend their time while simultaneously developing a positive relationship with a responsive and caring adult contributes to these outcomes.

3) **Team work and communication make a good program great** – Schools report that having a sense of camaraderie and teamwork contributes to their success. When all staff work collaboratively, with a shared awareness of their role and expectations, the program runs most smoothly. In addition, when staff communicates well amongst themselves and with families, everyone feels more committed to the program's core components. Teachers are happiest when they have a voice in selecting students and are included in the sharing of evaluation results. Families are most comfortable with the program when they know what it entails and why their child has been selected for participation. Child associates are most able to engage successfully with children when they have clear and consistent time slots, have open communication lines with teachers about the student's needs, and feel like they are part of the school community.

The findings from this study are preliminary and much of the information is anecdotal in nature. Following up on the core themes that emerged from this study presents an opportunity for future research. Children's Institute recommends Primary Project programs use these findings for planning purposes and to improve their program, seek funding, and engage in ongoing continuous improvement.