

## Second Step: Countywide Adoption of the Curriculum: A Rural Community's Learnings

by Kimberly Clouse and Belinda Basca



### CASE STUDY

The SDFSC Case Study Series is intended to provide a snapshot of the programs implemented and lessons learned by SDFSC grantees as a service to other grantees and alcohol and drug prevention providers.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

*Second Step* is a school-based, social-skills program that integrates social and emotional learning curricula into the classroom and includes a parent training component. Youth from preschool through Grade 8 learn and practice vital social skills, such as empathy, emotional regulation, problem-solving, and cooperation. These essential life skills help students in the classroom, on the playground, and at home. Ultimately, by improving the social-emotional skills of students, and by helping parents better understand and address those needs, *Second Step* becomes a violence and substance abuse prevention program.

The *Second Step* program is evidence-based and has been shown to reduce discipline referrals, improve school climate by building feelings of inclusiveness and respect, and increase students' confidence and sense of responsibility.

The curriculum is divided into two age groups: preschool through 5th grade (with 20 to 25 lessons per year) and 6th through 8th grade (with 15 lessons in year 1 and 8 lessons in each of the following 2 years). Each curriculum contains five teaching kits that build sequentially and cover **empathy, impulse control, and anger management** in developmentally- and age-appropriate ways. Children learn to identify and understand their own and others' emotional responses. By doing so they are able to reduce impulsive behaviors, choose positive goals, and modulate their emotional reactions and decision-making process when emotionally aroused. Group decision-making, modeling, coaching, and practice are demonstrated in the *Second Step* lessons using interpersonal situations presented in photos or video format (NREPP<sup>1</sup>).

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has recognized *Second Step* as a Model Program. It is also recognized by the Department of Education as an Exemplary Program. Several Safe and Drug Free Schools and Communities (SDFSC) programs have successfully implemented *Second Step* to improve the lives of children in their communities. The Kings County *Second Step* Project is one such program, and is the subject of this case study.

<sup>1</sup> SAMHSA's National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (NREPP). [http://nrepp.samhsa.gov/programfulldetails.asp?PROGRAM\\_ID=80](http://nrepp.samhsa.gov/programfulldetails.asp?PROGRAM_ID=80)

*An estimated 27,000 schools across the United States have implemented Second Step since the program's inception in 1987, and about 39% of Second Step educators have evaluated their program outcomes. The average length of implementation is 4 years. Since 2000, nearly 12 million students and 3 million adults have participated in the intervention.*

--NREPP, December 2006

## PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The Kings County Second Step Project strived to reduce violence and increase social and emotional management skills for students and their parents by providing a school-based curriculum and a community parenting program. Another component of the program was the allocation of mini-grant funds to implement student developed community service projects.

Kings County engaged 8,392 students in grades K-8 in 33 schools (61% participation) to curricula presented in a classroom setting. Some youth were selected for more intensive services involving facilitated small group sessions. These participants were considered at-risk due to exposure to high rates of gang activity, adolescent violent crime, teenage pregnancy, drinking among youth, and low educational attainment within their community. Approximately 561 teachers and 4,074 parents participated in this component. In addition, 4,345 students also participated in service learning projects in the schools.

Several organizations worked together in the planning and collaboration of the project. The Kings County Behavioral Health Administration successfully formed

partnerships with the Kings County Office of Education, the Kings County Prevention Network, Kings Partnership for Prevention, the Hanford Foundation, First Five and the Family Resource Center Project and each of the school districts receiving services through the project. The front-end planning and collaboration process was led by the Kings County Alcohol & Other Drugs (AOD) office and was facilitated by pre-existing partnerships with Kings County Office of Education and other service providers in the County.

Kings County had four components to their program:

### ***Second Step Curriculum Implementation in Classrooms***

Teachers and facilitators were provided with a curriculum specific to the grade level, which was presented to all students. Each kit covered three units of lessons on empathy, impulse control and anger management. Strategies included group decision making, modeling, coaching, and practice using interpersonal situations.

In 2006, Kings County Second Step Project received an award for the "Best Science-Based Prevention Program in Kings County" by the Recognition Committee of the Kings Partnership for Prevention. Four teachers at three different schools were also recognized for their efforts in conducting a science-based program within their schools. Assemblywoman Nicole Parra and Senator Dean Flores also recognized these successful programs and teachers.

Approximately 60% of the students participating in this strategy were of Hispanic/Latino decent; 11% were white; and 16% were of mixed racial background.

### **Second Step Parent Workshops**

A six-session workshop for parents was provided to involve them in Parental Coalitions where they would learn the same skills their children were learning and would participate in the community service projects developed by the students.

### **Second Step Small Group Sessions**

A total of 478 students were selected to participate in small groups focused on developing social and emotional skills in three primary areas: empathy through use of feeling words, impulse control and emotional regulation. Approximately 40% of the students who participated in this strategy were of Hispanic/Latino decent; 33% were white; and 12% were of mixed racial background.

### **Mini Grant Funds for Service Learning Projects**

Mini-grant funds were allocated to implement student developed community service projects. Projects were required to support and reinforce the *Second Step* program messages. A list of potential projects were identified including, tobacco sting operations, community cleaning efforts, and specific violence-related issues including peer mediation and bullying prevention efforts. Projects that were selected for funding focused on violence prevention using the following research-based strategies: risk- and protective-factor related strategies, conflict resolution involving problem-solving skills, and program evaluation. Park View Middle School in Armona developed a notably successful peer mentor program tied into conflict resolution to make the school safer and reduce the number of school violence incidents.



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Participation of youth and parents in the *Second Step* curriculum and youth who conducted service learning projects was associated with a variety of positive measures:

- Students who completed the small group sessions showed a composite increase of 8% over the life of the grant in their ability to demonstrate empathy.
- Students reported the greatest improvements in feeling there was at least one adult at their school they could talk to about a personal problem.
- Students showed a composite increase of 3.7% over the life of the grant in their ability to demonstrate impulse control.
- Facilitators reported that 98% of youth who completed the small group sessions could recognize and understand feelings.
- Students who completed the small group

sessions demonstrated a composite 9.2% increase over the course of the grant in their ability to show compassion.

- 97% of the students who completed the small group sessions were able to exhibit effective, nonviolent anger management.
- Expulsion rate for youth in the small group sessions declined over the life of the grant by approximately 9%.

Kings County was invited to participate in a research project with the Committee for Children on *Steps to Respect* (a bullying prevention program).



## BEST PRACTICES AND STRATEGIES

There are several key strategies that the *Kings County Second Step Project* has utilized to reduce violence in schools by creating safer school and classroom environments for students.

### #1 Find a Balance between Fidelity and Adaptation

As a science-based curriculum, *Second Step* contains the following core elements:

- Enhances protective factors and reduces risk factors
- Increases social competency
- Includes a parent component
- Provides long-term opportunity for reinforcement at home and throughout school years
- Is family-focused
- Is school based, age-specific, developmentally appropriate and culturally sensitive



Kings County attributes much of its success to having employed these principles in running their program. However, as many grantees have found, it is sometimes necessary to make adaptations to the program to better meet the needs of the population being served and to address each community's unique environment and relationships. Kings County identified strategic areas for adaption with the *Second Step* program that are further outlined in the *Tips for Replicating Success* section. In doing so, they strived to find and maintain a balance between the fidelity of the program and adequate adaption to make it as successful as possible.

## #2 Implement Small Group Sessions for Higher Risk Youth

*Second Step* small group sessions were conducted for students who were identified as needing a higher degree of intervention than could be achieved in a classroom setting. Students were referred to the groups because of anger/aggression, need for impulse

control, emotional disturbance, low self-esteem, motivation/attention deficiencies, family problems, problems with peers, need for problem-solving skills, and need for improved social behaviors. The *Second Step* facilitators conducted small group sessions for early elementary (Kindergarten through 3rd grade), late elementary students (4th grade through 5th grade), and middle school students (6th through 8th grade).

*"The most effective piece was the risk & protective factor delivered in a small group setting. Outcomes achieved in the small group setting exceeded those achieved in the large classroom setting."*

--Nellana Lobdell, Project Coordinator

Kings County found that the small group sessions showed a more positive response for three years in a row. Although the county did not anticipate these findings, other research has shown that with an indicated population, more intensive services, such as small group settings, demonstrate greater results. In fact, the research findings showed that "change

was greatest among students with increased baseline ratings for anti-social behavior<sup>2</sup>."

Similar to this research, the survey results from the small groups showed improvement in virtually every area of student behavior. It also suggests that the use of outside facilitators may encourage student participation due to minimal teacher availability and participation.

As Mary Anne Ford-Sherman, Behavioral Health Director for Kings County, states, "*As we look at sustainability, this will be an important factor to consider when determining the best use of facilitator time and available funds.*"

With its universal application in the classroom and selected intervention with small group sessions, *Second Step* is designed to achieve both breadth and depth in terms of student impact. Not surprisingly, program components that work more intensely with selected students typically show stronger results in individual level measures. Though difficult to evaluate, the more subtle and far-reaching impact of including all students is revealed in improved social norms within the school and community environments.

### **#3 Collaboration and Consistency**

Collaboration and consistency throughout the program are important components for success. Kings County found that demonstrated improvement can be seen in a number of areas when the curriculum includes socio-emotional skills training, parental and community involvement, and small group sessions.

<sup>2</sup> Grossman, D. C., Neckerman, H. J., Koepsell, T. D., Liu, P. V., Asher, K. N., Beland, K., et al. (1997). Effectiveness of a violence prevention curriculum among children in elementary school: A randomized controlled trial. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 277(20), 1605-1611.

School and teacher buy-in are also key factors in the continued success of *Second Step* in Kings County. Sustainability requires training enough teachers to maintain the program. Continued funding is also critical. Another important factor is the continued collaboration with the Kings County Office of Education, which has the resources for pursuing grants and other funding sources.

## **TIPS FOR REPLICATING SUCCESS**

The evidence-based best practices and key strategies employed by the *Kings County Second Step Project* compliment and bolster programs that bring alcohol-and-other-drugs and violence prevention into schools for youth. Community agencies, Kings County Office of Education, and the school districts worked together to implement *Second Step* county-wide. The collaboration and coordination of these key agencies to deliver services was a key factor to the program's success.

The following are specific considerations for prevention programming:

### ***Consider Implementation Efforts of Program***

Paying special attention to details, ranging from creating buy-in to administrative supports, will help ensure smooth implementation and a successful project. Cooke et al. (2007) evaluated the effectiveness of implementation of the *Second Step* program. They found that a "low level of teacher's commitment to the program at some sites, as well as other problems related to program implementation" affected sixth graders' success rate with the program. In reviewing a number of other communities that implemented the *Second Step* program Cooke

et al found the most effective programs had similar characteristics. These characteristics, which are recommended for any grantee implementing the *Second Step* program, included:

- strong teacher buy-in
- community involvement
- adequate follow-up
- intensive training and technical support
- strong staff and administrative support

*"The beauty of Second Step is that it is a canned program, anybody can do it. ...It is very user friendly, very well thought out."*

--Nellana Lobdell, Project Coordinator

### **Adapt Second Step Curriculum to Meet Needs**

- The curriculum was implemented in the classroom by trained facilitators to avoid adding additional responsibilities to teachers' "full plate". Facilitators were masters' level counselors. However, during 2005-2006, over 40 teachers requested training and began to implement the program on their own.
- Curriculum lessons were sometimes combined for fewer total sessions than the original model recommends due to restricted timeframes (content and individual session duration was maintained with fidelity). Due to time concerns schools were sometimes unable to commit to allowing students access for the prescribed number of sessions and it was found that being flexible and negotiating as many sessions as possible usually opens the

door for future sessions closer to the prescribed amount.

- Optional Spanish language versions were supplemented by translating flyers and other resource materials into Spanish.
- Optional parent component was implemented with the supplement of a Spanish translator at sessions with Spanish-speaking parents.
- Appropriate curricula level was identified for each classroom based on emotional and cognitive maturity of students. While *Second Step* offers grade/age-specific curriculum for pre-K through 8th grade students, Kings County may move up or down a curriculum level depending on the needs of each classroom.
- In conjunction with providing curriculum in the classrooms, Kings County offered small, intensive curriculum groups for students with identified need for supplemental support around the curriculum content.



## **Build Strong Community Partnerships for Service Learning Projects**

- Consider seeking additional funding and support from agencies outside of the school setting for the service learning projects.
- Encourage the agencies to partner with a local school for the project. Kings County found that it was expensive to monitor the service learning projects on their own. They hope to continue to foster community partnerships to assist with this program component.

## **Increase Recruitment Efforts of Parents in Workshops**

The parent workshops were an important component of the *Kings County Second Step Project*. Most of the parent participants indicated that they enjoyed the class and learned something new. To increase parent recruitment and retention, grantees might strive to make their parent programs:

- **Voluntary**—With *Second Step*, parents voluntarily participate in the program. Although some programs are mandated, programs such as *Second Step*, in which parents are voluntarily involved, are more receptive to changing their behavior (better communication skills, parenting skills, problem-solving skills, disciplinary skills, management skills, etc.) and are more likely to feel in control of their lives.
- **Flexible**—Successful programs gear content and methods to the interests and needs of parents and provide a variety of techniques for parents rather than a “one-way” approach. Sometimes this can be challenging to achieve while still maintaining fidelity to the evidence-based program.
- **Accessible**—Successful programs are delivered in a variety of settings, including homes, schools, or community institutions, with transportation or childcare provided when needed.



- **Intensive**—Studies find more significant and sustained results when interventions are frequent and occur over a long period of time.
- **Culturally Sensitive**—Successful programs value diversity and reflect an appreciation of the cultural and socioeconomic bases of parent behavior and belief while avoiding stereotyping.
- **Strength Based**—Successful programs build on family strengths and seek to empower parents by encouraging them to find solutions to their own problems.

The *Kings County Second Step Project* has made a difference by providing students in Kings County with consistent and on-going opportunities to develop social skills and behaviors that foster an environment in which students show more empathy, impulse control, compassion, and anger management. Teachers also reported improvement in student behavior pre-post for youth participating in the small group sessions. And finally, the service learning projects are focusing attention on the positive capabilities and contributions the youth of Kings County can make in their community.



## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Aos, S., Lieb, R., Mayfield, J., Miller, M., and Pennucci, A. (2004). Benefits and Costs of Prevention and Early Intervention Programs for Youth. Washington State Institute for Public Policy. <http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/pub.asp?docid=04-07-3901>
- Community Prevention Initiative (CPI). <http://www.ca-cpi.org/>  
Administered by Center for Applied Research Solutions (CARS). Funded and directed by the California Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs (ADP).
- Epstein, M. H., & Walker, H. M. (2002). Special education: Best practices and First Step to Success. In B. J. Burns & K. Hoagwood (Eds.), Community treatment for youth: Evidence-based interventions for severe emotional and behavioral disorders (pp. 179-197). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Frey, K. S., Nolen, S. B., Edstrom, L. V., & Hirschstein, M. K. (2005). Effects of a school-based social-emotional competence program: Linking children's goals, attributions, and behavior. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*. 26: 171–200. <http://www.cfchildren.org/programs/ssp/research/jadp/>

This article discusses the results of a study group consisting of scientists from Committee for Children and the University of Washington. Their article shares the results of the study which validated the *Second Step* program's effectiveness in helping children resolve conflicts, avoid bitter disputes, and behave in a more socially responsible way. The results of their findings were impressive with 42% less aggressive behaviors, 78% greater improvement in teacher ratings of their social competence, 41% less adult intervention in minor conflicts, 37% more likely to choose positive social goals and the girls were 59% more collaborative than girls who were not in the program. Fifteen schools participated in the study—seven in a control group and eight in the intervention group. Students in the second and fourth grades from the *Second Step* schools received twice-weekly lessons in empathy, social problem solving, and anger management. Teachers also worked to support student motivation and skill development by prompting, coaching, and acknowledging improvement throughout the school day.

- McMahon, S.D., Washburn, J.J., Yakin, F.J. and Childrey, G. (2000). Violence Prevention: Program Effects on Urban Preschool and Kindergarten Children. *Applied and Preventive Psychology*. 9:271–81.
- Model Programs Incorporating Evidence Based Strategies. Northeastern Illinois University, Network for Dissemination of Curriculum Infusion, K-12 Real Life Issues Curriculum Infusion. <http://www.neiu.edu/~k12pac/resources.htm>
- National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and SAMHSA. <http://ncadi.samhsa.gov/features/ctc/resources.aspx> and <http://preventionplatform.samhsa.gov>
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Department of Health and Human Services. <http://www.samhsa.gov/index.aspx>
- Walker, H., Stiller, B., Severson, H. H., Feil, E. G., & Golly, A. (1998). First step to success: Intervening at the point of school entry to prevent antisocial behavior patterns. *Psychology in the Schools*, 35, 259-269.

A program for highly aggressive K-3 students. Experimental studies with kindergartners have found great improvements in their overall classroom behavior and academic engagement, and substantial reductions in their aggression during implementation and over many years following the end of intervention.

