



Youth Leadership Academy / Project GRAD Final Evaluation Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2005, with the support of Verizon Foundation, the National Urban Technology Center (Urban Tech) partnered with Project GRAD in the Newark Public schools to introduce a set of on-line instructional materials, The Youth Leadership Academy (YLA), into the educational experience of students attending Malcolm X Shabazz High School in the city of Newark, New Jersey. The goal was to enhance the life skills, motivation and educational achievement of these students in keys areas of their health, sexuality, educational planning and conflict resolution. The project was implemented in two phases: Phase I (pilot year) included 9th grade special education students in the Spring '06 semester (February- June, 2006); Phase II included both a second cohort of 9th grade students the following academic year plus a returning cohort of 10th graders who had experienced the YLA modules as 9th graders the previous year.

This Executive Summary highlights the major findings of a comprehensive evaluation conducted in the Spring of '06 on YLA's impact on project participants and their teachers. The evaluation had two primary objectives. First, to establish the extent to which YLA had a positive net effect on participants by comparing performance on a number of behavioral outcomes for project participants and a comparison group; and second, to implicate these findings within a framework that allowed one to understand the role implementation played in affecting outcomes. This second goal was arrived at by conducting an implementation study that focused on understanding program operation, staffing, training, and teacher fidelity to implementation.

The overall design for the outcomes evaluation was mixed-methods. This included a matched comparison treatment/control design and an action research component involving two teachers. The outcomes evaluation was guided by the five hypotheses presented below:

Hypothesis 1: In the *pre-test* measurements of the outcome variables, no significant difference is expected between students assigned to the treatment group and the control group.

Hypothesis 2: In all subsequent evaluations, students in the treatment group will score significantly higher than students in the control group on all of the outcome measures.

Hypothesis 3: Within the treatment group, the duration and/or intensity of participation in YLA will be positively related to outcomes such that students with longer and more intensive involvement in YLA will have more favorable outcomes on all measures than students with less duration and intensity of involvement.

Hypothesis 4: Students whose teachers who were more successful in integrating YLA into their subject areas will demonstrate a greater change in attitudes and behaviors than those whose teachers were less successful.

A number of data collection instruments were used in the study. These included: a) YLA Teacher Assessment of Students' Behaviors (TASSB), b) the YLA/Verizon Student Survey (YLASS), and c) the YLA Treatment Teacher Survey.

Findings: Project Implementation

- Initial planning for the project occurred in a meeting at the high school, organized by Project GRAD staff, which included the school principal, selected participants from the freshman teaching team, the media coordinator, the YLA staff and the project evaluators. There were a total of 29 scheduled teacher training sessions over the course of the program at the school.

- Among the major challenges to optimal implementation of the YLA curriculum were the following:
 - *Technology access and reliability:* Sometimes the Internet worked and sometimes it did not. Oftentimes the labs were scheduled for YLA teachers but the reservation was changed to accommodate another activity/class at the last moment.
 - *Scheduling of training:* Although the group training sessions at the beginning of the year were bountiful, they were short in duration and a few teachers did not attend regularly when the meetings were held at 7:30 am.
 - *Maintaining Teacher Morale and Commitment:* Beyond a primary focus on test preparation, a plethora of concurrent initiatives at the school made it difficult for teacher to prioritize the YLA initiative. Moreover, most of the participating treatment teachers were novices: All freshman team teachers were non-tenured teachers; (4) were Teach America – alternate route teachers; and (2) were new to teaching and MXS. This meant that most participants were still getting their “sea legs” as beginning teachers.
 - *Consistency in support from lead organizations for curriculum integration:* During the course of Urban Tech’s in-class consultations, it became apparent that some of

the teachers were more comfortable with, and better equipped for, performing these tasks.

Findings: Student Outcomes

The key findings on student outcomes are discussed below. The findings are highly suggestive of YLA’s positive influence on students’ academic and non-academic behaviors. The general findings are presented first, followed by highlights of the results that are directly associated with each of the hypotheses that was tested.

- Nine out of the ten teachers reported that their students’ level of engagement with YLA content was good, very good or excellent.

- Nine out of ten teachers rated students’ time on task, use of technology, and interaction with peers during YLA lessons very positively.

- Most teachers agreed that YLA had the greatest impact on improving students’ abilities to express themselves more appropriately, their willingness to discuss sensitive topics and their growing understanding of important life skills –and this was especially true of “special needs” students.

- The majority of teachers did not believe that most of their students had improved in those behavioral dispositions that clustered around peer relations and felt that most students still were reluctant to trust others.

Hypothesis 1: In the pre-test measurements of the outcome variables, no significant difference is expected between students assigned to the intervention group and the control group.

- Pretest data on student academic performance showed no statistically significant difference in the performance on the Grade Eighth Proficiency Assessment between YLA students and students in the control group; that is, at the start of the YLA intervention both groups were roughly equivalent in their academic performance in language arts and mathematics.
- Pretest data on student attitudes showed no statistically significant differences between the treatment (YLA students) and control group students for 11 of 13 behavioral measures on the TASSPB; that is, at the start of the YLA intervention, the treatment and control groups were roughly equivalent attitudinally.

Hypothesis 2: In all subsequent evaluations, students in the intervention group will score significantly higher than students in the control group on all of the program outcome measures.

- Academic performance: Two measures of achievement were examined; marking period grades in the subject areas and performance on the standard based assessment that is administered district-wide at the end of the ninth grade (for regular education students only). Results showed that while there was no difference between groups in first marking period grades, the final grades of YLA students were significantly higher than the control group.

Twice as many students in YLA (27.4%) as compared to the control students (13.5%) were likely to receive a grade of B or higher.

- **Engagement/Motivation:** Three proxy variables were used to measure engagement: absences, tardiness and suspension. Results showed that students in the control group were almost two and a half times more likely to be absent from classes than students who were in YLA. Moreover, students in the control group were reported as being tardy 5.72 times compared to 3.8 times for YLA students.
- **In-Class Behavior:** Proportionately more students who were involved with YLA were deemed by their teachers to have shown an improvement in all of the behavioral categories that were examined, than students who were part of the control group. The most striking differences between both groups of students were found for the behavioral categories representing motivation, staying on task and peer relationships.
- **With respect to attentiveness in class,** significant differences were found between students in the control and YLA students who on the baseline were rated as needing improvement in this area. Approximately 18% of students in the control group who at the start of the academic year were identified as needing to improve their attentiveness in class actually did so at the end of the academic year, in contrast to 58% of students who were part of YLA.
- **Self-Concept.** The analyses indicated no significant differences in improvement in personal efficacies and self-concept formation between the groups of students in the evaluation

sample. This observation held for the complete battery of items on the YLASS, as well as for individual subscales.

Hypothesis 3: Predicts that students who remained in YLA continuously should perform better on the outcome measures than either students who moved in and out of YLA or those who were never exposed to YLA insofar as the former would have been more intensively exposed to YLA's curriculum than the other two subgroups.

- The data shows that a significant association existed between intensity of exposure to YLA and final course grades earned. The probability of earning a grade of B or higher was much greater for students who remained in YLA for a complete year than for students who either crossed over between YLA and the control group, or who stayed in the control group for the complete year.
- Intensity of exposure to YLA was significantly associated with both absence and tardiness. First, students who spent a full academic year in YLA were likely to be absent from classes fewer times than those who spent only one semester or no time at all. Students who spent at least one semester in YLA tended to have fewer absences than students who were never exposed to the YLA curriculum. With respect to tardiness, students who remained in YLA for a full academic year had significantly fewer incidences of tardiness than crossover students and students who remained in the control group for the entire school year.
- No significant relationship was found to exist between level of exposure to YLA and improvement in self-concepts and personal efficacies.

Hypothesis 4: Students of teachers who were more successful in integrating YLA into their subject areas will demonstrate a greater change in attitudes and behaviors than those for which the opposite is true.

The final proposition attempts to link level of teacher implementation of YLA directly to student outcomes. Implementation varied greatly among the ten teachers; hence one may conjecture that this is likely to impact to some extent, observable differences among students in the treatment group. In testing this hypothesis, three subgroups were created: Students taught by teachers who we defined as strong implementers, teachers who were moderate implementers and teachers who were described as poor implementers.

- Analyses showed that the students who were instructed by teachers with the highest level of implementation had proportionately fewer suspensions than those who were taught by weak and moderate implementers.

- Students exposed to high levels of implementation were also less likely to have absences and incidences of tardiness than students whose teachers were either weak or moderate implementers. The average number of days students in the high implementing subgroup were absent and tardy was 7.43 and 2.85 respectively; for students in the moderate implementing group, 10.43 and 3.62 and those in the poor implementing group 8.77 and 5.93.

Conclusions, Discussion and Recommendations

A review of the data presented in this report leads to a few clear conclusions.

A. Foremost is the clear message about the challenges to implementing educational innovation in the contemporary school organization. The challenge here is twofold. In the first place, the school is a fragile organization held together, if tenuously, by a series of rigid routines related to scheduling that are not easily disrupted. Introducing any new development seems to conflict inevitably with the rigidity of routines; and when such conflict arises; the routines almost always win –handily. Secondly, the school is an arena in which a multiple (and ever additive) set of demands confront teachers on a daily basis –competing for their attention with certain overarching imperatives, e.g. improving student standardized test scores. Not only are the demands probably unreasonable for any human being, but most of the teachers we meet in these urban districts are all too frequently “new” teachers who are still in the first years of adjusting to their new professional role. They are a particularly vulnerable group of whom we are probably asking more – by way of adaptation – than is reasonable given their limited experience and tentative adjustment to their role. All of this suggests yet again how critical implementation planning is for projects such as this. Organizationally, the decks are stacked against any new initiative surviving, let alone, prospering in the complex school environment. Educational leaders need to do everything possible to “re-stack” the deck in favor of such new ventures.

- B. What is extraordinary is that despite implementation circumstances that were less than optimal, implementation goals were achieved at a “basic” level for most participating teachers.
- C. Having documented the challenges to project implementation, the student outcome results documented appear all the more remarkable. These evaluation findings show quite conclusively that despite uneven implementation, students exposed to the YLA curriculum developed greater motivation and gained in their pro-social behaviors as compared to a control group. The gains were both attitudinal and behavioral; and the greater the student exposure, the greater the gains. Moreover, YLA students performed better academically in their course work as evidenced by final grades than students in the comparison group.
- D. While the findings are statistically conclusive, a number of questions remain. One set of questions relates to the connections among the findings themselves. The one area in which YLA participating students did not improve vis-à-vis the control group was in the area of perceived self-efficacy, self-esteem and self concept –precisely that area that is a primary focus of the YLA curriculum. To what extent is that finding a function of the limitation of our instruments, i.e. incomplete or flawed measures of self-esteem? A function of the relatively limited time frame of the treatment – a maximum of one year of fairly limited weekly exposure? Possible contaminating effects between the treatment and comparison groups? Some have suggested that projects such as YLA need a longer time to impact student attitudes and self-concepts.

Based on these conclusions, we would make the following recommendations for future program development and research:

- A. Any future YLA project will require extended and intensive implementation planning that recognizes the need to “build in” adaptations to both the organizational realities of the school and work realities of teachers. This suggests that both building level administrators and teachers must be directly involved in implementation planning from the beginning. Moreover, it is likely that schools will need to evaluate realistically how a supplemental project such as YLA fits in more broadly with the instructional agenda of the school and its technological infrastructure. Everyone, including the teachers needs to understand where YLA fits within their priorities in a high demand environment.

- B. An important part of that implementation planning will be an assessment of the instructional and professional development needs of participating teachers. Explicit attention will need to be focused on where in the curriculum YLA modules might contribute and, even more importantly, concrete training and support must be consistently provided to facilitate integration of this new YLA content into the regular curriculum. In this regard, careful planning needs to be undertaken to manage both the training and subsequent scheduling of teachers over a multi-year period (schools typically do not show a long term perspective in their daily operations).

- C. Several kinds of more focused research inquiries need to undertaken by Urban Tech in the future, including the following:

- i. More focused attention needs to be placed on the mechanisms through which YLA modules achieve their cognitive and pro-social behavioral outcomes. How critical is the technology *per se* to those outcomes? How critical is the immediate feedback and interactivity of the YLA modules. Answers to these sorts of questions will allow Urban Tech to focus its attention on the most critical components for student engagement and achievement.
- ii. While there appears to be some connection between amount of exposure to YLA and student outcomes, more controlled studies need to be undertaken to allow us to identify the timing of YLA benefits. How much exposure is required for what kind of benefits?
- iii. Further exploration needs to be undertaken of the puzzling lack of connection between student improvement in certain areas such as behavioral engagement with school and lack of improvement in area such as self-esteem development. Is the resistance of the self-esteem variable an artifact of our measurement error? An artifact of the limited time frame? Student characteristics/ some other variables?
- iv. Finally, further research needs to be undertaken specifically focused on implementation issues. We identified some of the major challenges earlier. Urban Tech can make a major contribution to school reform movement generally as well as to its own efficacy by leading this kind of initiative to understand the etiology and conditions of educational reform in our schools.