



Original article

Strong, Smart and Bold Strategies for Improving Attendance and Retention in an After-School Intervention

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 A B S T R A C T

The Volunteers of America Greater Los Angeles (VOALA) Girls Inc. program is implementing and rigorously evaluating its Preventing Adolescent Pregnancy curriculum as part of a demonstration grant to identify effective teen pregnancy prevention programs sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Adolescent Health (OAH). A total of 517 participants from Title I urban middle and high schools were randomly assigned to either Preventing Adolescent Pregnancy (treatment) or Economic Literacy (control) in two cohorts. Programming occurred after school weekly at middle and high schools. Low attendance and loss of sample (attrition) are common challenges in after-school programming, negatively affecting both the ability of a program to be successful and the integrity of a randomized controlled trial. The current article discusses challenges encountered with recruitment, incentives, and school factors during a first cohort of youth and innovative implementation changes during a second cohort that resulted in increased attendance rates and decreased attrition rates. Commentary is provided by the OAH Project Officer as well as lessons learned after 2 years of implementing the program.

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IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

Implementing a randomized control trial (RCT) study as part of an after school program is daunting due to additional requirements when after school programming is already challenging because of competing obligations. Successful strategies are identified to counter common problems in implementing an RCT as part of an after school program.

After-school programming is recognized as a vital time to provide structured services to students who would otherwise be unsupervised [1]. Yet, after-school programming is a challenge to implement due to many competing after-school activities. To prove an after-school program is effective through a randomized control trial (RCT) adds greatly to the existing challenge. Volunteers of America, Greater Los Angeles (VOALA)—Girls Inc. learned

many lessons along the way while implementing a teenage pregnancy prevention after-school program as part of a demonstration grant for the Office of Adolescent Health (OAH), a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The current article reviews the major problems encountered during program implementation of the VOALA-Girls Inc. curriculum as well as the lessons learned as a result of strong collaboration between the technical assistance contractor, Mathematica Policy Research (MPR), OAH, and VOALA-Girls Inc. The topics include recruitment, incentives, attendance rates, postprogram survey completion rates, and communication.

The Office of Adolescent Health (OAH) and Volunteers of America, Greater Los Angeles—Girls Inc. program share a mission of preventing teen pregnancy. Beginning in fiscal year (FY) 2010, grant funding was provided annually to VOALA-Girls Inc. for the implementation and rigorous evaluation of their innovative teen pregnancy prevention (TPP) program, Preventing Adolescent

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Pregnancy (PAP). The intent of the program is to provide students with accurate information regarding healthy choices on sexual relations to prevent or delay sexual activity, prevent contracting a sexually transmitted disease, and prevent becoming pregnant. The program aims to empower students with knowledge and through activities such as role playing to practice how to be assertive.

The VOALA-Girls Inc. Preventing Adolescent Pregnancy study is challenging as a randomized controlled trial (RCT) in an after-school setting [2] due to the fact that the programming competes with many other available after-school programs as well as sports, tutoring, and family obligations, which affects attendance and attrition [1,3]. After-school programming is even more daunting when implementing an RCT where consistent participant attendance and retention [4], as well as all data collection points, are vital to determining effective outcomes. In addition, RCTs create requirements for participation that other after-school programs do not have [2]. Students need to fill out forms and receive consent from parents prior to program participation, which may not be required by other after-school programs. Other programs may be more flexible with attendance. Therefore, a great deal of the discussion among OAH, MPR, and VOALA-Girls Inc. involved problem solving around these important issues. The challenges and lessons learned have been documented, which will help our understanding of implementing after-school programs [5].

The study

The VOALA-Girls Inc. team includes staff from VOALA, the Girls Inc. program, and Advanced Empirical Systems (AES). VOALA is a large nonprofit organization that provides needed services to over 30,000 Angelenos through various programs. Girls Inc., which is one of VOALA's programs, provides after-school services to Title I middle and high school female students across the metropolitan Los Angeles area. Title I schools are schools that receive Title I funds due to being attended by a large percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced lunches indicating a large population with financial need. AES is the third-party evaluator of Girls Inc. program implementation and effectiveness. The VOALA internal evaluation department assists in the TPP study and ensures that program fidelity occurs and that Girls Inc. meets performance expectations. OAH supports VOALA-Girls Inc.'s implementation and evaluation activities by assigning an OAH Project Officer and a federally sponsored evaluation technical assistance contractor, Mathematica Policy Research (MPR), to the project. The strength of the implementation team and project management structure is critical to the success of the project. A multidisciplinary team that is inclusive and consists of program and evaluation specialists, administration, external evaluators, organizational leadership, and frontline staff helps to assure that program monitoring along with lessons learned are taken into account with reference to overall program goals and objectives. Each representative on the implementation team contributes a different aspect to the project; more importantly, each member constructively explores their differences to find workable solutions to the problem.

At the national level, Girls Inc. is an organization that promotes the development of curricula designed to empower girls to be "strong, smart, and bold" [6]. VOALA-Girls Inc. (the Los Angeles affiliate) is evaluating the effectiveness of the Preventing Adolescent Pregnancy curriculum when implemented in an after-school format. Preventing Adolescent Pregnancy provides

age-appropriate lessons on sexual health and sexuality, assertiveness, decision-making and future planning. Program specialists were trained staff with at least a bachelor's degree, preferably in the social sciences, and previous experience working with second-decade youth. The program specialists conducted weekly 90-minute sessions over an 11-week period for 5 to 20 students. Interactive activities included debates, role playing, group discussions, and games to provide participants with opportunities to learn and integrate acquired knowledge and assertive skills into their lives. The control group received Economic Literacy curriculum, which focused on financial independence, wants versus needs, budgeting, and future planning. Regardless of curriculum, each session built upon material from previous sessions; therefore, it was imperative that participants attend consistently. The study is being implemented over multiple years. Cohort 1 occurred during the 2011–2012 school year. Cohort 2 took place during the 2012–2013 school year.

For successful implementation and evaluation, VOALA-Girls Inc. must achieve consistent attendance and high completion of postprogram surveys. OAH has a number of performance measures on which all TPP grantees must report biannually, including attendance. OAH has a 75% attendance benchmark for all of their funded TPP programs [7]. If students do not receive a sufficient portion of the curriculum, program effectiveness cannot be determined due to insufficient exposure to material. In addition, postprogram surveys are necessary to determine the level of immediate growth from participating in the program. If too many students do not complete the postprogram survey, then one must question whether there are differences among those students who do and do not complete the survey. The results may not be representative of all students who were enrolled in the study. Participants received 11 weeks of the Preventing Adolescent Pregnancy curriculum in a weekly, after-school setting. During program implementation for Cohort 1, attendance was poor. Factors influencing poor attendance and postprogram-survey completion rates included school factors such as changing school staff, incentives, and program structure. For example, participant recruitment took over a month. Participants first recruited became involved with other activities by the time actual program implementation took place. Of those students who participated, many were involved in other after-school activities. Thus, not only was attendance negatively affected, postprogram-survey turnout was as well. As a result of program improvements, overall attendance and postprogram-survey completion rates improved during program implementation for Cohort 2 (all data are presented in the Methods section).

Methods

Participants

Students were recruited from urban Title I schools throughout the metropolitan Los Angeles area across multiple school districts. A total of 517 students participated across two cohorts in middle schools (sixth and seventh grades, ages 10–12 years) and high schools (ninth and tenth grades, ages 14–16 years) (Table 1). Program implementation for Cohort 1 (373 participants) occurred from October 2011 to May 2012, with 202 participants from six middle schools and 171 from six high schools. Program implementation for Cohort 2 (144 students) occurred from October 2012 to March 2013, with 95 participants from four middle schools and 49 from three high schools.

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