



2012-2013

**BREAKING
THE CYCLE
BUILDING
HOPE**

project s.t.e.p.
results report for
non-mainstream
school settings



Measuredoutcome
Bridging the information gap in the non-profit sector



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report marks the first evaluation that looks at the impact of mental health and addictions counselling on participating students in non-mainstream schools based at three project s.t.e.p. supported agencies.

The project s.t.e.p. (support, treatment, education, prevention) initiative is the Ottawa community's response to addressing the need for substance abuse treatment, as well as prevention and early intervention for youth in both mainstream and non-mainstream academic settings. It is a partnership involving community partners, local champions, and leaders.

The purpose of this evaluation is to measure the impact of specific counselling on drug and alcohol abuse, living conditions, and educational performance in three populations of at-risk youth, served by project s.t.e.p. agencies, and in one group of youth served by a non-project s.t.e.p. agency.

Some highlights of the data in this report include:

- 71%** of youth who reported drug use reduced their frequency of use
- 60%** of youth who reported drug use increased participation in harm reduction (stepping off to "softer" drugs, cessation of use)
- 39%** of the 165 participating students improved their living conditions
- 76%** of youth felt that project s.t.e.p. helped them build or rebuild healthy relationships with their family, partner, or community
- 85%** of youth felt better about themselves after participating in project s.t.e.p.

" They have heard everything I have done and what I do, my problems and regrets and still stood by to defend me and worked with me to make things better." - Youth

The first round of data validates that each project s.t.e.p. agency is working with a unique population who are at different stages of stability in their lives. Each of these groups has different motivations and needs, both for mental health and addictions counselling, as well as educational support.

There remains much to be explored with these programs, and this report concludes with recommendations and a summary of the issues and challenges at hand.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to the project s.t.e.p. partners, agency staff, and participants who voluntarily took part in this report, namely Cindy Simpson and Jenny Strange, The Youville Centre; Leigh Couture and Stephanie Campbell, Eastern Ottawa Youth Justice Agency; Natalie Elliott and Ashley Augstman, Operation Come Home; Marianna Shturman, Honarine Scott, and Joseph Moreau, Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health. Thanks also to outside reviewer, Mark Kelly for his contributions, and to Matthew Beutel and Jennifer Benedict, United Way Ottawa. Special thanks to all of the youth who shared their stories and comments.

Written by Rebecca Thomas, Measuredoutcome.org. September, 2013.

Background

One of project s.t.e.p.'s goals is to have school-based addictions counselling support for every publicly funded high school and non-mainstream academic setting in Ottawa. Community stakeholders (including all four public school boards in Ottawa, the Champlain Local Health Integration, Ottawa Public Health, the Ottawa Network for Education, Rideauwood Addiction and Family Services, Maison Fraternité and United Way Ottawa), grantors such as the Sens Foundation and individual donors have contributed to this goal.¹ Project champions include Senator Vern White and MP Mauril Bélanger.

The need for mental health and addictions counselling is great in the high-risk youth population, and it directly influences individual success in setting and achieving education goals. The link between mental health and drug-use has been well studied. People with mental illness are over seven times more likely to use cannabis weekly compared to people without a mental illness.²

Among school-aged children and youth, the need for counselling becomes greater as the child advances in school. Generally, drug use is more likely to occur as grade level increases, typically peaking in grade 11 (ages 16-17).³ This data corresponds directly to the youth and issues that are represented in the project s.t.e.p. programs outlined in this report.

Over the course of this evaluation, project s.t.e.p. funding through United Way Ottawa (in partnership with Health Canada) has helped 234 youth at three agencies in the Ottawa area. Of those youth, 156 were attending a non-mainstream school.

The following report tracks the experiences of youth who are enrolled in non-mainstream schools over the course of six months in project s.t.e.p., as well as nine youth who are in a non-project s.t.e.p. funded program. For evaluation methodology details, please refer to the Appendix of this report.

In late 2012, Measuredoutcome.org was commissioned by the United Way of Ottawa, thanks to a generous anonymous donation, to implement an evaluation framework of the United Way Ottawa-funded project s.t.e.p. alternative schools expansion and to undertake an evaluation of the first year.

" You cannot change the past, but you can move forward with it to try and make a better future." - Youth

¹ Project s.t.e.p. Status Report School-based Addictions Intervention September 2011 – August 2012 (Page 2). <http://unitedwayottawa.ca/media-room/downloads>

² Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, "CAMH study shows mental illness associated with heavy cannabis use," (2013). http://www.camh.ca/en/hospital/about_camh/newsroom/news_releases_media_advisories_and_backgrounders/current_year/Pages/CAMH-study-shows-mental-illness-associated-with-heavy-cannabis-use.aspx

³ Paglia-Boak, A., Adlaf, E.M., & Mann, R.E. (2011). Drug use among Ontario students, 1977-2011: OSDUHS highlights (CAMH Research Document Series No. 33). Toronto, ON: Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.

NON - MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS – WHAT ARE THEY?

Non-mainstream (on occasion referred to as “alternative”) schools are based in community organizations and provide an education option for youth who, for multiple and complex reasons, are not thriving in mainstream schools. Working in conjunction with local school boards, these schools offer more specific-needs services to youth. Such services might include: flexibility around school hours, specific mental health and addictions care support, individualized, goal-specific education plans, cultural or life situation support and sensitivity, and a greater focus on life skills. Classes are typically smaller in size to allow for more one-on-one interactions between the instructors, the workers, and the student.

Partner Agency Participation

Youville

55	youth served
55	(100%) enrolled in school
35	reduced alcohol use
29	reduced drug use

OCH

29	youth served ⁴
9	(31%) enrolled in school
7	referred to outside treatment
4	reduced drug /alcohol use

EOYJA*

9	youth served
9	(100%) enrolled in school
4	reduced drug/alcohol use

Wabano⁵

155	youth served
93	(60%) enrolled in school

* EOYJA is not currently a project s.t.e.p. partner, and they do not have a formal addictions counselling program at this time.

⁴ Over the course of this evaluation, two youth who were engaged in mental health and addictions counselling at OCH, but who were not attending school, decided to enrol in RAC.

⁵ Data for Wabano's participants was not available, as survey participation was low.

The Youville Centre

www.youvillecentre.org

M.F. McHugh Education Centre – Ages 15-21

Youville works exclusively with young single mothers and expectant mothers. A majority of the girls at Youville have been subject to abuse and/or physical violence. While in a formal school setting, youth also receive a full range of counselling and life skills support. Girls have access to housing and childcare as long as they are attending school at the centre.

Operation Come Home (OCH)

www.operationcomehome.ca

Rogers Achievement Centre (RAC) in partnership with the Ottawa Catholic School Board – Ages 16-21

OCH provides employment and support programs for street involved and at-risk youth, as well as education through the alternative school, the Rogers Achievement Centre.

One of the biggest challenges for OCH is the often transient and unstable nature of the lives of the youth they serve. OCH often serves as a first-point of entry for at-risk youth to enter into treatment or counselling programs, whether they are offered at OCH or by another program provider.

Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health – Working Hope Program

www.wabano.com

Urban Aboriginal Alternative High School (formerly Odawa Alternative School), Rideau High School (Ottawa-Carleton District School Board) – Ages 5-24

The Working Hope program at Wabano is a mental health and addictions-focused program that works with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children, youth, and families. They provide a holistic approach to addictions and mental health issues that embraces and teaches Aboriginal cultural heritage and reclamation to program participants.

Eastern Ottawa Youth Justice Agency (EOYJA)

www.eoyja.ca

Saint John Bosco Achievement Centre (JBAC) in partnership with Immaculata High School (Ottawa Catholic School Board) and the John Howard Society of Ottawa – Ages 14-18+

EOYJA works with justice-involved youth, and helps them achieve high school credits and/or employment skills through the JBAC program. JBAC accepts any youth referred to them who has some level of involvement in the justice system and is not able to attend a more mainstream class setting generally due to behavioural reasons.



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Intake Counsellor Survey Results

144 youth were entered into the system through the counsellor entry survey, 92 of whom were students. 65 of those entered youth had completed counsellor exit surveys at the time of this report.

Data presented below falls within the context of the 92 school-based entries.

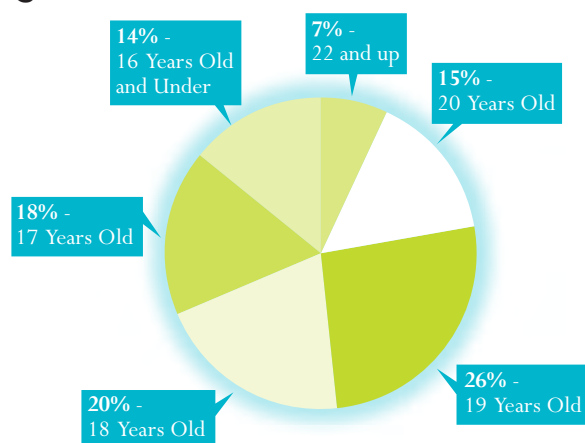
Demographics

Gender

83% Female* (*59% of participants are from Youville)
17% Male

One of the partners, Youville, serves only young mothers. Accounting for this bias, and removing Youville from the gender data reveals that overall, there is still a consistently higher rate of females over males in the program with an average breakdown of 59% females to 41% males.

Age - Students*



* The EOYJA and Youville age range is between 15 and 20, while Wabano and OCH work with children up to youth in their late 20s.⁶

Dependents

7%	of non-Youville youth have dependents
100%	of Youville youth have dependents⁷

Academic Accomplishments During The Course of The Evaluation

26%	completed credits towards diploma /certificate
11%	completed credits towards GED
14%	still enrolled
49%	did not complete school⁸

Living Situation

Youth participating in programs at Youville, EOYJA, and Wabano appear to have comparatively more stable living environments overall than the more transient OCH youth.

Overview

50%	paying rent/living in an apartment
23%	living with family
11%	living in subsidised housing
6%	living in shelters
6%	couch surfing/living in group homes
4%	other

What is the main barrier they face in securing a stable living environment?

Barriers were most often noted as being either financial (47%), or family issues (30%), although the different agencies had slightly different weighting on each category.

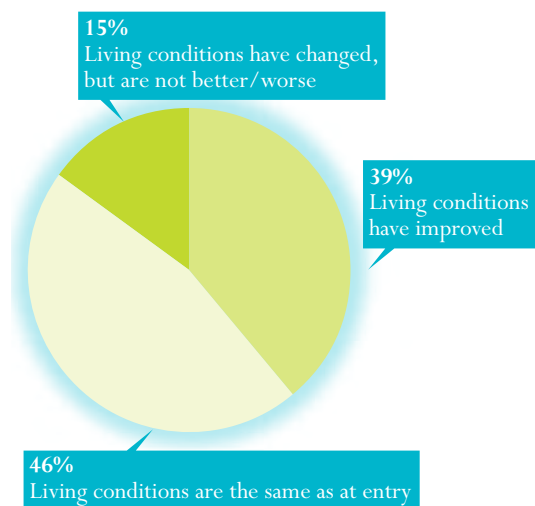
⁶ It is important to note that youth leave, or age out of, the provincial care system at 18, at which point they no longer have access to many services and resources.

⁷ 7% of Youville students were pregnant when they enrolled in project s.t.e.p. schooling.



Changes in Living Situation

During the course of their involvement in project s.t.e.p., 39% of youth, improved their living conditions.



The EOYJA, Youville, and Wabano youth typically come into the program living in more stable environments, relative to the typical OCH youth. These numbers reflect the success of the three programs at maintaining and improving stability, while also reflecting the success of OCH at helping their youth create better living stability.

Many of the Youville youth move out from stable, but abusive relationship situations (away from family/boyfriends) to independent living. OCH youth tend to move from unstable and abusive living arrangements (shelters/street/surfing) back to either more stable family homes or into residential treatment facilities.

***"It is a quiet place where I can actually sit down and get something done. I don't have to worry about the next test or homework assignment because you're not afraid to ask anything."* – Youth**

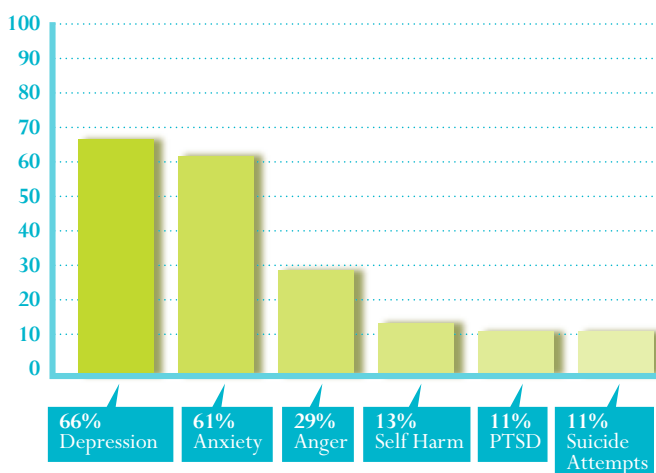
Mental Health Addictions Counsellor Survey Results

The mental health and addictions counsellors completed 78 entry surveys and 65 exit surveys for youth enrolled in school.

Mental Health

Of the 78 Mental Health and Addictions Counsellor Survey entries received for the students, 100% of the youth were identified by their counsellor as having a mental health issue.

Overall Mental Health Issues with project s.t.e.p. Students



* Some counsellors cited more than one mental health issue for some youth. These chart numbers reflect all issues cited by survey respondents.

Overall, 43% of youth in the project s.t.e.p. classrooms have been formally diagnosed with a mental health issue.

Although depression, anxiety, and anger are the most prevalent mental health issues overall, each agency sees their own challenges with their populations.

⁸ Youth were not able to complete their schooling for various reasons, including, but not limited to, personal behaviour issues, child care issues, transfers to another city/program, and employment opportunities. Many youth return to project s.t.e.p. schools after a period of time away to continue their studies. Oftentimes, youth have multiple entry points into a non-mainstream school program before they are ready to complete their goals.

Impact of Mental Health Issues

Overall, 71% of youth involved in the survey experience a moderate to severe impact on their ability to cope with life's challenges.

As with the mental health issues, the impact and severity of the issues on the lives of the students varied between agencies.

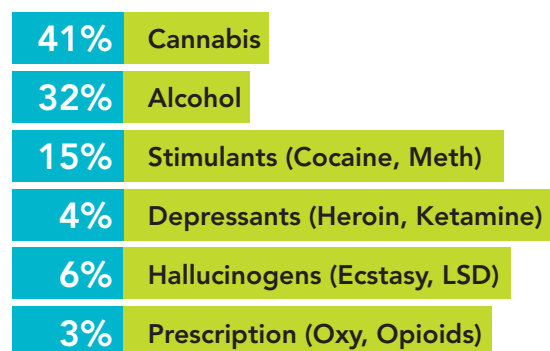
OCH students were more likely to be severely affected by mental health issues (40%), while Youville counsellors reported a moderate impact (58%), and EOYJA reported a minimal impact (83%).

Addictions

Of the 78 Mental Health and Addictions Counsellor surveys entered for students, 42 youth (54%) were actively seeking help for personal addictions, while 18 (23%) of the youth were seeking help in dealing with family or partner addictions.

Of the 42 students who identified drug or alcohol use, the following categories were identified:

Overall Alcohol and Drug Use Among project s.t.e.p. Students

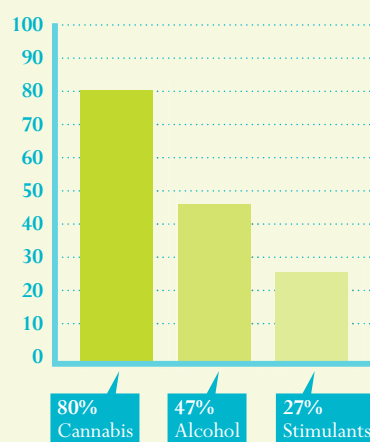


* Some counsellors cited more than one addiction for some youth. These chart numbers reflect all drug and alcohol usage as cited by survey respondents.

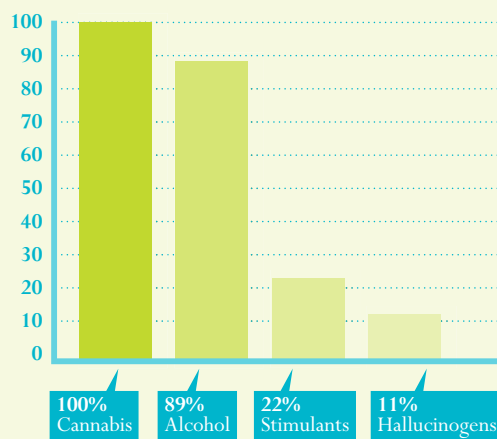
Addictions Issues

Alcohol and cannabis are the primary substances that all four agencies encounter (73% of the youth who are actively facing personal addictions issues use these substances). As with mental health issues, each agency sees unique challenges with their populations.

Youville

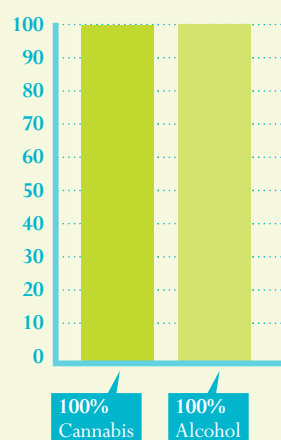


EOYJA

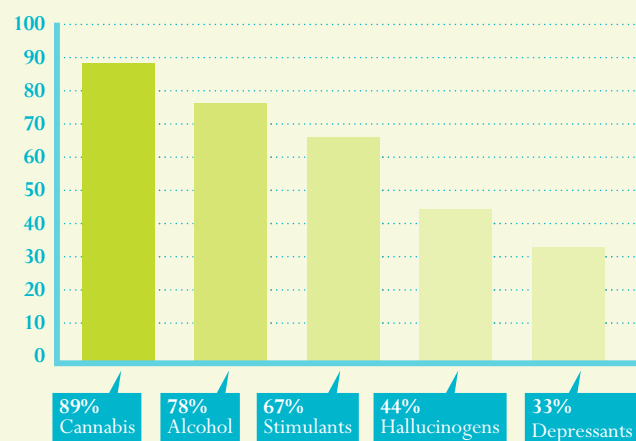


"Addiction and Mental Health Counselling helped me to break away from a vicious cycle. I deserve better and my daughter deserves better." - Youth

Wabano



OCH



* Some counsellors cited more than one addiction for some youth. These chart numbers reflect all drug and alcohol usage as cited by survey respondents.

Impact of Alcohol and Drug Use

Using the Stanford University Continuum Guidelines⁹ as a base, counsellors were asked to identify the impact of drug and alcohol use on the lives of each student.

As with the mental health issues, the impact and severity of addictions issues on the lives of the students varies between agencies.

Severity of Alcohol Use

Alcohol use was predominantly classified as "Social Use" (50-75% of youth) by all agencies except for OCH, who had 57% of youth abusing alcohol.

Severity of Drug Use

A similar pattern to alcohol use was seen for drug use, in that the majority of youth used drugs in a "social" context (47-67% of all youth), except for OCH, who saw 55% of their youth with severe drug dependency issues.

Harm Reduction and Cessation

The priority for all project s.t.e.p. partners is harm reduction or substance use cessation. This means something slightly different for each partner. For OCH and Wabano, whose youth typically use "harder" drugs (cocaine, methamphetamines) with more frequency and severity, this often means reducing use, or limiting consumption to "softer" drugs (marijuana). For Youville, the concern is not only for the young mothers, but also for the health of their children.

71% of project s.t.e.p. youth reduced frequency of drug use since the beginning of the evaluation.

60% of youth increased participation in harm-reduction programs (stepping off to softer drugs, cessation of use, etc).

⁹ Continuum of Use Descriptors: *Experimentation*, *Social Use* (aware of personal limits and uses within them), *Abuse* (dangerous decisions, life being affected), *Dependency* (withdrawal symptoms, significant impact on home/social/work/physical/mental)

Participant Survey Results

A critical component of project s.t.e.p. is continued youth involvement in education programs.¹⁰

Education

83% of all youth in project s.t.e.p. non-mainstream schools maintained attendance at school through the course of this study:

100%	of Youville and EOYJA youth were attending school or taking classes
66%	of Wabano and OCH youth were attending school or taking classes

Of those youth who were attending school, a majority of the youth who participated in the study (88%) enjoy attending school.

Goals for individual youth are mapped out with counsellors. These goals might be academic (get GED, apply to college), while others might be health related (stop using drugs, eat healthier), and still others are emotional or social (feel more confident, feel better about themselves).



Youth at Youville and EOYJA in school-focused programs tend to have further-reaching educational goals as their priorities. Wabano and OCH youth tend to have more immediate addiction and health goals as priorities.

"I'm not a victim, but a survivor"" - Youth

Participant Outcomes

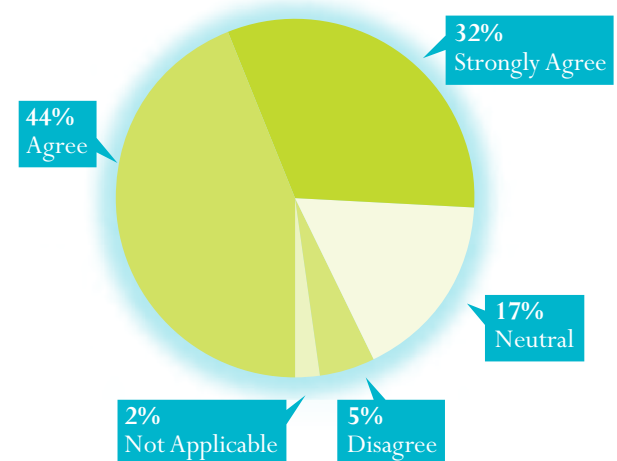
90% of the students who responded to the participant exit survey stated they had achieved what they wanted to in the program.

85%	of youth felt better about themselves after completing the program
95%	of youth felt supported by staff
93%	of youth felt accepted in the program

" They cared for me as me" – Youth

" The counselor came on my birthday on a Sunday and made me feel cared about... plus he made me laugh." – Youth

The program helped me build or rebuild healthy relationships with my family/partner/community:



¹⁰ The students completed 74 participant entry surveys, and 41 participant exit surveys. Participant survey responses were low for both OCH and Wabano, due largely to the more transitory nature of the populations at these two agencies. The student participant entry numbers reflect 45% of the population of the 165 students represented in project s.t.e.p.



CONCLUSION

This report is a summary of how the first year of the project s.t.e.p. expansion into the non-mainstream schools has had an impact on the lives of three different population groups. Working within a unique, collaborative evaluation model, each partner in this project has participated to represent the needs and issues facing its own particular youth population.

When working with high-risk youth, success needs to be defined and measured in different ways. Mainstream education and counselling can't always support the oftentimes complicated and multilayered issues that many high-risk youth face. Many of the youth involved in this evaluation have come to the participating agencies as a place of last hope.

All of the youth in project s.t.e.p. programs are dealing with mental health and drug and alcohol issues that have impacted their ability to maintain a stable, healthy lifestyle and to create an education plan for themselves. For most youth at the represented agencies, the counselling provided by project s.t.e.p. funding is their first encounter with a positive, non-judgmental support network. The impact of this support is clearly a very positive one, at least as shown in this initial evaluation.

It is important to recognize the different stages of stability in the life of each youth, and where that might place them on their path to better health and education. Each project s.t.e.p. agency in this evaluation serves youth with different kinds of challenges with different cultural backgrounds, and measures of success are slightly different for each group.

Recognition of the differences in populations served helps to reach out to youth who are looking to develop an education plan, but who require more stability in their lives in order to accomplish this. With proper support and counselling, youth are able to develop tools to moderate, reduce, and ultimately cease disruptive drug and alcohol use.

One of the keys to the success of the project s.t.e.p. initiative appears to be the acceptance and flexibility of staff to be able to respond to the individual needs of each youth. Moving forward, a continued collaborative and flexible approach to helping at-risk youth will maintain or possibly increase program effectiveness, and enable agencies to reach out to more youth in a more effective manner.

*" This is the best that I have ever done in my life,
I am in school, I'm clean and I got a job." - Youth*

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recognition of Fringe Youth for Education Planning

Consider expansion of project s.t.e.p. parameters to include non-students involved with at-risk youth agencies offering alternative schooling programs. Improved mental health and life stability are a vital precursor for youth to be able to focus on academic needs. As earlier noted, OCH had two youth enrol in the non-mainstream school system after receiving mental health and addictions counselling.

Tracking Referrals

Rarely does one organization offer the entire solution to the complex problems often faced by at-risk youth. Where possible, tracking the youth's history and current use of all programs through the support system might yield further information as to how to better reach out to and help youth as they struggle with addictions, mental health issues, and education. This is not always possible, of course, due to the transient nature of many of the youth involved in the programs.

Increase Male Participation

The gender difference in program participation shows room for development in exploring ways to increase male population in counselling and educational programs.

Early Intervention

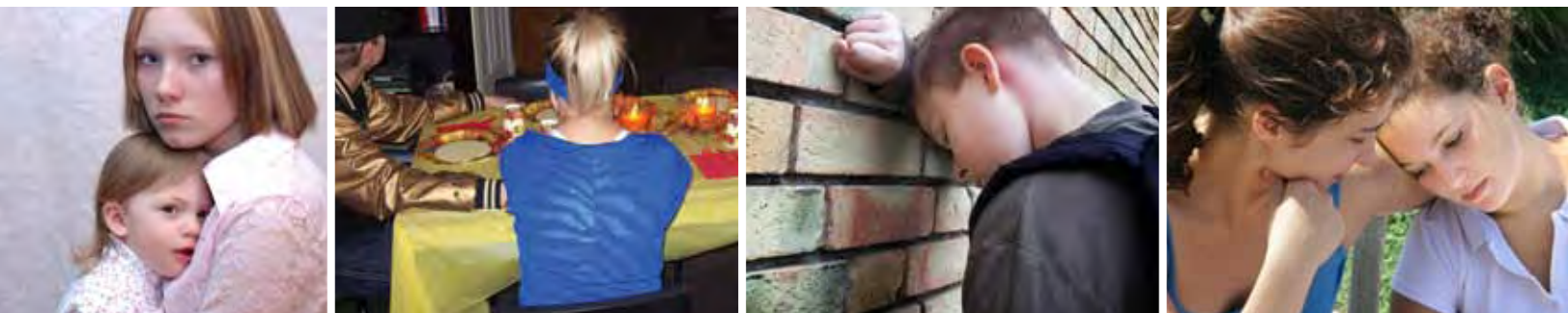
All three project s.t.e.p. funded agencies offer counselling and support to youth who have reached a critical point in their lives. Although outside of the scope of project s.t.e.p., an exploration of ways to reach out earlier to youth—to prevent or treat addiction at earlier stages—could be considered. (Wabano's programming does work on prevention, as well as crisis counselling for all ages.)

Longitudinal Evaluation

Continued evaluation of project s.t.e.p. over a longer period of time would enhance knowledge of longer-term effects of project s.t.e.p. funding on students and youth. Many agencies face a challenge in communicating with youth who have aged out of their programs.

Increased Participation in Evaluation Study

Further consideration of ways to increase student and counsellor participation in the evaluation tools is needed in order to obtain a more complete picture of the different populations served by the project s.t.e.p. program. Continued consultation with each agency, individually, and as a collaborative group, will lead to greater buy-in and participation in the evaluation.



APPENDIX

Evaluation Methodology

The approach was to gather multi-source feedback on experiences with project s.t.e.p. from three participating agencies: Operation Come Home (OCH), The Youville Centre, and Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health. Measuredoutcome.org gathered feedback from three key points of contact for program delivery from each agency: Intake Counsellors, Mental Health and Addictions Counsellors, and the Program Participants. The Eastern Ottawa Youth Justice Agency (EOYJA) is not a current project s.t.e.p. partner, but was included in the evaluation as a service provider to a related, at-risk population.

Key factors that Measuredoutcome.org was asked to examine include:

- Number of youth served by counselling/intervention during the survey time period
- Harm reduction statistics and overall well-being of involved youth
- Academic accomplishments
- Retention of youth in programs over time

Each of the partner agencies was directly involved in the creation and development of the three survey evaluation tools. All participants in the surveys were tracked using a unique intake code that ensured anonymity for each of the youth. Participation in the survey was voluntary for the youth.

Three surveys were developed for use by the main groups within the program: counsellors, mental health and addictions counsellors, and program participants. The surveys were open to all youth who accessed mental health and addictions services, regardless of whether they were enrolled in an alternative school, or not.

In accordance with the project s.t.e.p. mandate, this report is primarily focused on the data collected from the youth who were enrolled in school at the time of this evaluation, however, where appropriate, data reflecting the entire population of youth accessing the program has also been included.

There were 243 participants, overall, who accessed mental health and addictions counselling at the four agencies over the course of this evaluation. In total, 144 entry surveys were completed, and 91 exit surveys were completed.

Of the 243 youth who accessed mental health and addictions services at the partner agencies, 165 were attending a non-mainstream school at the time of this evaluation.

Counsellor Surveys

Two online surveys – an entry and an exit survey – were launched in January of 2013 for the intake counsellors at each participating project s.t.e.p. agency.

The purpose of these surveys was to collect basic intake data to build a profile of project s.t.e.p. participants at each agency.¹¹



¹¹ 92 of the 165 youth who were attending an alternative school program are reflected in the counsellor entry survey, giving an overall survey participation rate of 56%. 65 surveys were collected for the exit portion, for a participation rate of 39%.

Mental Health and Addictions Counsellor Surveys

A second set of online surveys was also launched in January 2013 that focused on the mental health and addictions counsellors at each agency.

These surveys were separated from the general intake surveys in order to maintain youth confidentiality at the agencies where the mental health and addictions counsellor was not also the intake counsellor.¹²

These surveys allowed for a more in-depth focus on building a profile and tracking the progress of each participant as they entered and exited the program.¹³

Participant Surveys

Participants in project s.t.e.p. were also asked to complete an entry and an exit survey.¹⁴ These surveys were also launched in January 2013.

These surveys were structured to capture each participant's experience as well as their thoughts about their sense of self, their emotional well-being, and their life goals. Surveys were created using a strength-based, positive approach to all questions.

These surveys were voluntary, and youth were given the option to opt out if they did not wish to participate.¹⁵

Complementary Research Review

Research conducted on similar, school-based programs, as well as recent research by larger addictions and mental health agencies were also reviewed, and are cited in this report.

Limits of Comparative Data

Although project s.t.e.p. partners share similarities, each agency serves a unique population. Cultural differences, housing stability, family support of participants, for example, all vary between partners. These variables have a significant influence on measures of success and need to be considered when considering the data from this evaluation. Where appropriate, project s.t.e.p. partner results have been separated to better reflect unique population profiles.

For more information on the contents of this report, please contact:

Matt Beutel, Director, Community Initiatives,
United Way / Centraide Ottawa

E: mbeutel@unitedwayottawa.ca,

P: 613-683-3810

www.project-step.ca

¹² At OCH, the intake counsellor and the mental health and addictions counsellor are the same person. EOYJA does not have a formal mental health and addictions counsellor, so these surveys were completed by the intake counsellor.

¹³ 78 of the 165 youth who were attending a non-mainstream school and receiving mental health and addictions counselling are reflected in the Mental Health and Addictions Counsellor entry survey, giving an overall participation rate of 47%. 65 surveys were collected for the exit portion, for a 39% exit participation rate.

¹⁴ Each agency handled the application of this survey in a slightly different way, due to the unique needs of their populations. Youville and EOYJA had the participants fill out the surveys as an individual, formal class exercise, while OCH and Wabano used a counsellor-interview approach for most of their surveys, to account for participant availability, trust and literacy issues.

¹⁵ In total, 74 of the 165 youth are reflected in the participant entry survey, giving an overall participation rate of 45%. 41 youth participated in the exit survey, for a total of 25% exit participation.

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