



Background

The Alternative Suspension (AS) program was first introduced by the YMCAs of Québec in 1999 in response to a request from a local school in Montréal. The organization was granted funding from Public Safety Canada (PS) to develop multiple sites across Canada in 2009-2015¹. The ultimate goal of the intervention is to reduce criminal activity by increasing youth attachment and commitment to school. It is anticipated in the long-term that the AS program will deter participants from dropping out of school, and have fewer disciplinary actions. The medium-term outcomes of the program include a decrease in school discipline, completion of the school year, and an increased association in pro-social activities. The firm Malatest Program Evaluation & Market Research was contracted by PS to conduct the multi-site impact evaluation of AS, valued at \$612,675. Program sites located in Chilliwack (British Columbia), North /West Edmonton (Alberta), and Moncton (New Brunswick) participated in this evaluation.

Method

The AS evaluation is based on a pre-post design with a non-equivalent control group which is built from three categories of youth: 1) students who were accepted to the program but never participated; 2) students from other AS service sites who were accepted to the program but never participated; 3) non-completers from the evaluation sites and additional AS sites, who started the program but left early. The evaluators used school data, program records as well as data collected by the youth workers. Focus groups and informant interviews were also conducted by the evaluators with youth, program coordinators and youth workers. A

follow-up of the last youth cohort was done (n=17). Descriptive statistical analysis methods and inferential statistical techniques were used jointly with content analysis of qualitative data.

Findings

Students reported strong levels of understanding of their reason for suspension both immediately following return to school, and 30 days after returning to school. Around 89.4% of students (n=207) stated that they “somewhat understood” or “really understood” the reason for their suspension. Understanding of the reason for the suspension showed a statistically significant increase between reintegration and follow-up, which suggests youth becoming more reflective. Across sites, 49.6% of students who completed the program thought that what they learnt would be “somewhat useful” to their school careers, and 42.1% that it would be “very useful” (n=382). About 49.6% of all students found what they learnt during the program “useful” to their life outside school, and 42.6% said that it was “very useful” (n=383).

Based on school’s assessment, youth behaviour (n=462) improved significantly between referral and 30 days after their participation in AS. Students’ academic performance also improved (n=319). Completion of the program had a significant positive effect on youth getting caught up on their schoolwork, and improvements being maintained for at least 30 days after returning to school. There was no evidence that AS increased interest in extracurricular or prosocial activities, although it was reported by some youth, parents, school administrators, and staff. AS coordinators and youth workers also reported such an increase.

At the end of the school year, 45.0% of AS completers completed all of their courses; 44.1% of those youth and 28.8% of the control group “met or exceeded school academic expectations”. About 17.7% of the

¹ In December 2015, the program was implemented in 39 sites across Canada and one site in France.

participants and 40.4% of the control group did not meet these expectations. Overall, 59% of program completers and 38.1% of the comparison group improved their school behaviour. There was a decrease in disciplinary actions for 61.5% of AS completers and 39.6% of the control group. Around 3.8% of AS completers and 14.3% of the control group had dropped out of school at the end of the school year. Completers who were more likely to experience better behavioural outcomes were referred for substance use (29 times more), criminal behaviour (14 times more), or physical or verbal violence (12 times more). Youth from visible minority groups were 3 times more likely to have positive change in their academic outcomes.

The average cost of AS programming per individual completion was \$1,340 in Moncton, \$2,107 in Edmonton, and \$1,693 in Chilliwack. At the end of the school year, 75.2% of AS completers and 56.3% of the control group had at least one positive outcome. Net average costs per positive outcome for the AS program varied from \$8,852 to \$10,818, and marginal costs from \$5,002 to \$7,238.

Implications

The AS model is in direct response to the crucial needs of the participating communities, such as high drop-out and juvenile delinquency rates, and criminal activities amongst youth. The program addresses school-related risk factors by providing a short-term intervention for students who have experienced at least one risk factor. The major components of the AS program are seen as best practices in the literature..

Students facing substance use issues, showing violent or criminal behaviour are more likely to benefit from this program. AS does not increase participation in extracurricular or prosocial activities, but can improve students' behaviour at school, decrease disciplinary actions, and helps the student to meet academic expectations. Although the program does not decrease the risk of being expelled, transferred to another school, or re-suspended, it appears to have positive effects on students and can likely play a role in intervening in students' trajectory from suspension to dropout. School boards and schools that would like to participate in the AS and send their at-risk students to the program must be aware that outcomes achievement is strongly moderated by the school context. The average cost per completion is small considering costs related to criminal activity. Moreover, the cost of

delivering AS was found to be indirectly recoverable through the difference in federal income taxes paid by individuals with a high school education and those who dropped out. Within 12 years after a student graduated from high school the higher federal income taxes would be sufficient to offset the cost of the program.

Source

Malatest Program Evaluation & Market Research (2015). *Multi-site Evaluation of the Alternative Suspension Program. Final Evaluation Report*, December 16th, 2015, submitted to Danièle Laliberté, Public Safety Canada.

For more information on research at the Community Safety and Countering Crime Branch, Public Safety Canada, to get a copy of the full research report, or to be placed on our distribution list, please contact:

Research Division, Public Safety Canada

340 Laurier Avenue West

Ottawa, Ontario

K1A 0P8

PS.CSCCBResearch-RechercheSSCRC.SP@canada.ca

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