Program Name

Advocates for ALL Youth (ALLY)

Program’s Mission Statement

ALLY is dedicated to providing an equitable and inclusive social-emotional educational program to improve mental health and empower all youth.

Program Rationale

Studies show that a rise in anxiety and depression symptoms typically occurs in early-to-middle adolescence (ages 11-15 years) and, if untreated, heightens risk for worsening depression and suicide in later adolescence. Resilience, conceptualized as the process of adapting well to adversity and the ability to bounce back from stressful experiences, has been found to reduce the risk of depression in youth. We are at a pivotal crossroads – behavioral health issues in our community continue to grow, in severity and volume. The exponential growth of our community, the increase in loneliness due to rapidly changing technology, along with the exacerbated social isolation due to COVID-19 are creating a perfect storm for our youth. This program has the potential to contribute to meaningful reductions of anxiety and depression in youth, as well in the longer term, youth suicide.

Program Development

The program was created to cultivate, inspire, and improve a child’s resilience in order for them to have increased capacity to navigate adversity, recover from setbacks, and adapt to change. This program was designed as a universal (includes all students versus only targeting students with current mental health needs), school-delivered 1:1 weekly sessions for 6th grade students, developed to be easily adapted by schools to meet their needs and be sustained over time. Evidence-based research has been followed in all aspects of our program, facilitating our intention to differentiate our approach as scientifically valid as opposed to the myriad of other approaches.

Utilizing the framework of social emotional learning, the program was designed to assist youth with understanding, managing, and expressing their emotions, build and maintain positive relationships with others, and make positive decisions that impact their behavior and academic performance. The program’s curriculum is derived from two models of building resilience in youth. The first, developed by the American Academy of Pediatrics, recommends the seven “C”s of resilience as guidelines for parents to use to help their children recognize their own abilities and resources. These include: 1) competence, 2) confidence, 3) connection, 4) character, 5) contribution, 6) coping, and 7) control. The second model is developed by the Center of Developing Child at Harvard University and focuses on factors that predispose children to positive outcomes when faced with significant adversity. These include: 1) facilitating supportive adult-child relationships, 2) building a sense of self-efficacy and perceived control, 3) providing opportunities to strengthen adaptive skills and self-regulatory capacities, and 4) mobilizing sources of faith, hope, and cultural traditions. Using this curriculum, “trusted adults” (i.e., program facilitators are trained on how to best facilitate conversations with students on resiliency topics including using tools to help youth set and work towards personalized goals. The sessions focus on building the student’s internal protective factors including coping skills, emotional regulation, communication and co-operation, decision making, empathy, social and emotional competence and improving their self-awareness with setting goals and aspirations that align with the future they want to see for themselves.

Participating students meet weekly with their assigned ALLY facilitator for 30 minutes over the semester. The ALLY facilitator can be anyone in the community that is willing to be trained and verified (i.e., background checks) as a “trusted adult”. To ensure our program can be sustained in the future ALLY facilitators can be existing school staff (i.e., bus drivers, cafeteria workers, librarians), retired teachers or counselors, students at a local University/College, and many other options. We work with your school to figure out the best approach.

During each session, the ALLY facilitator assists the student in identifying areas of their life in which they would like to build resilience, utilizes motivational and strengths-based techniques to support the student in developing goals and skills to improve resilience, and provides non-judgmental support to the child along the way. In partnership, the youth and the ALLY facilitator discuss strategies to improve areas of resilience that the youth identifies. Long-term (end of semester) goals are created, and small weekly action steps are outlined. In subsequent weeks, ALLY facilitators’ gauge overall progress, identify and work around barriers, and provide unconditional positive support to help students work towards achieving goals.

Our strengths-based, non-stigmatizing approach focused on resilience and integration of theory-informed strategies is highly adaptable for school-based settings, and with stakeholder input, has allowed for refinement to program content and delivery that is ideally posed for scalability.

\*Note our pilot study conducted in El Paso County was called – Building Resilience for Healthy Kids. Please see the three published study results from this pilot work. Table 1 summarizes our program evaluation from the pilot process.

