

ASPE RESEARCH BRIEF

OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR PLANNING AND EVALUATION
OFFICE OF HUMAN SERVICES POLICY - U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

THE OKLAHOMA MARRIAGE INITIATIVE

Starting Early: How the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative Helps Schools Prepare Young People for Healthy Marriages

Over 2.5 million students across the country complete their high school education each year.¹ How many of these students will emerge from their adolescent years with the skills and information they need to choose a life partner and form a healthy marriage and stable family? To increase the odds that young people in Oklahoma will enter adult life prepared to address these important life tasks, the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative (OMI) works with the state's high schools to help them offer a research-based curriculum that addresses relationships and marriage in ways that are relevant to the needs and interests of youth. The OMI approach has resulted in a long-term sustainable effort that has strong institutional support. More than 62,500 students so far have elected to take the classes at 289 schools across the state.

From its inception, the OMI recognized that youth are key to its mission of strengthening families and reducing the rate of divorce in the state. The OMI's 2001 statewide survey found that Oklahomans tend to marry for the first time at a younger age than other Americans—on average 2 ½ years younger. Consistent with national data, the survey also showed that Oklahomans who marry young are more likely to divorce than those who marry later.² More than half of Oklahomans who married before reaching the age of 20 had divorced at the time of the survey. The survey also found that young people between 18-20 years of age were less positive about marriage as an institution, and more accepting of divorce and cohabitation, than older Oklahomans.

Nevertheless, survey respondents aged 18—24 years also were much more likely than older age groups to say they would

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH BRIEF

This ASPE Research Brief describes lessons learned during the establishment of the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative, drawing on findings from an in-depth process evaluation conducted by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. under contract to ASPE. This brief was prepared by Robin Dion and Timothy Silman. Future briefs will focus on specific aspects of the OMI's implementation, including its successes and challenges, and strategies used to address obstacles encountered.

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“consider relationship education such as workshops or classes to strengthen their relationship.” This positive finding opened the door for offering services to youth. The remaining challenge for the OMI then, was to identify the best way to deliver these services.

How Does the OMI Reach Youth?

Because so many Oklahomans marry prior to age 20,³ the OMI team determined that helping young people prepare for marriage would require reaching them in their adolescent years. Rather than devising a curriculum on its own and then seeking youth organizations to implement it, OMI staff approached the institution that has the most consistent contact with adolescents—the public high school system—to engage schools as partners.

Working together, the OMI and the state Department of Career and Technology Services found elements of the public educational system on which they could build. Students in Oklahoma high schools, as in other states, were already offered several elective courses under the broad rubric of Family and Consumer Sciences (FACS), including a Marriage and Family Life course that addressed marriage and relationships. Each FACS course has to meet state-approved standards, but teachers have the flexibility to design their own materials and choose supplementary curriculum material. While the broader FACS umbrella encompassed numerous areas of concentration, the Marriage and Family Life course was the most promising for future partnership.

Several available curricula were considered and determined to be unsatisfactory for the OMI youth component. Prior to OMI involvement, FACS teachers were working with a curriculum developed by the State Bar Association, but it focused on the legal aspects of relationships and marriage and did not include skills training. CareerTech and the teachers were open to considering other curriculum alternatives as long as they met state standards.

To improve on the curricula in use for high school students, the OMI also had to look beyond its statewide marriage education curriculum, PREP®, because it was not designed for adolescents. The Connections curriculum, developed by Charlene Kamper, a California-based high school teacher and certified family life educator, with its focus on skills-based education and information about relationships and marriage, held the most promise. To create some consistency with PREP®, the authors of Connections and PREP® were asked to work together to enhance Connections to incorporate key concepts in PREP® - an increased focus on communication and conflict management skills.

A two-year development process resulted in “Connections+PREP®,” a curriculum in two parts designed for younger and older adolescents. The first part, Dating and Emotions, offers a 17-hour curriculum for grades 8-12, and the second part, Relationships and Marriage, is an 18-hour curriculum for grades 11-12 and the first two years of college.⁴ OMI staff later asked Kamper to develop a supplemental lesson for the latter curriculum, focused on child support issues and the real-life responsibilities of parents who divorce or have a child out-of-wedlock.

Connections: Dating and Emotions

The Dating and Emotions curriculum is designed to help teens recognize and understand healthy dating practices and learn to regulate the intense emotions that often accompany dating during adolescence. The interactive lessons explain what healthy dating is all about, prompt youth to understand their interest in dating, help them identify signals of abuse and unhealthy behavior, and guide them on how to handle

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jealousy and anger, determine whether a relationship is working, and how to end it when appropriate. PREP® content focuses on clarifying expectations, dispelling myths, and establishing relationship guidelines.

The Dating and Emotions curriculum is organized around groups of lessons roughly corresponding to the typical adolescent relationship trajectory. The first three lessons focus on helping teens identify whether they are ready to start dating, and how to ask for, accept, or decline a date. The next set of three lessons explains how relationships grow and develop, including the importance of trust, self-disclosure, and communication. Five subsequent lessons focus on managing feelings of loneliness and identifying “problem people” and abusive dating behavior. Determining whether a relationship is working and how to end it when it is not working is the emphasis in the following three lessons. The curriculum ends with three lessons on how to start over when dating relationships don’t work out.

Connections: Relationships and Marriage

The Relationships and Marriage curriculum is intended to help older adolescents and young adults learn what it means to form and sustain a healthy relationship, marriage, and family life. It is designed to increase teens’ self-understanding by helping them explore personality, the effect of family experiences on their expectations for marriage and relationships, and life goals. It takes a skills-based approach to help youth improve communication, using the PREP®-based speaker-listener technique, problem solving and conflict resolution strategies, and recognition of relationship “danger signs.” It includes information on dating relationships, but also explores the concepts of love, commitment and forgiveness, and includes material to help young people think about the implications of cohabitation and marriage. The first three lessons focus on personality, with the following four on relationships. The remaining 11 lessons are centered around communication and marriage.

The Pilot and Roll-Out

Implementation of the Connections+PREP® curriculum began with a pilot in 2002. The curriculum developers trained 24 teachers, selected on the basis of geographic distribution and experience within the FACS system. They were enthusiastic about the material and thought it was highly engaging for their students. Following the pilot, the OMI made the curriculum available free of charge to any interested FACS teacher, through the annual statewide teachers’ conference, at which a simple one-to two-hour overview was provided to introduce teachers to the material. In the past two years, at the request of FACS teachers, the OMI has sponsored annual training on the curriculum, lasting from one to two days. The expanded training has been well received because it gives teachers an opportunity to gain a better understanding of the key points and concepts.

Teacher Response

The response by teachers has been largely positive. By 2007, more than 362 teachers—nearly every FACS teacher in the state—had received training in the curriculum. One good indicator of teacher support for the curriculum is the fact that Connections+PREP® has been offered in 90 percent of Oklahoma high schools with a FACS program (289 high schools.) While FACS teachers have the flexibility to incorporate all or only part of the Connections+PREP® curricula in their course offerings, it appears that many teachers use the entire Relationships and Marriage curriculum within the Marriage and Family Life course offered to juniors and seniors. Adoption of the Dating and Emotions curriculum, which was more recently developed, is increasing.

Teachers who chose to include Connections+PREP® in their FACS classes cited several key advantages of the curriculum. (1) They found the new curriculum material to be a good match with the existing

course objectives and relevant for their students. They also liked the extent of hands-on activities and interactive elements in the curriculum. (2) Teachers felt that the new curriculum brought together all the necessary information in a coherent, organized, and easy-to-use format. (3) The Connections+PREP® curriculum had credibility for the teachers because it had been developed by experts and endorsed by both CareerTech and the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative. (4) The materials and training were provided free of charge—an important benefit given constraints on educational system resources.

Student Response

Student response to Connections+PREP® is suggested by enrollment numbers and engagement in classes. By late 2007, more than 62,500 students had taken a course that included Connections+PREP® material. With an average of about 20 students per class, an estimated 3,125 classes containing this material have been taught in Oklahoma's high schools.⁵ According to teachers, the enthusiastic response from students is the clearest sign of how relevant the curriculum material is to their lives. Teachers commonly reported that students often have not only completed their homework, but come to class excited and ready to discuss it. Other students work ahead in their workbooks, and some stay after class to discuss relationship matters with their teacher. One teacher reported that a student realized it was time to break off a relationship and sought advice from her teacher on strategies for doing so.

Although teachers thought the information and skills imparted by Connections+PREP® are useful for all students, they generally find it particularly useful for youth who lack married role models in their communities. They felt that children with troubled home lives may be less likely to be learning healthy marriage, relationship, and communication skills and that the course might help fill this gap.

Teachers in the focus group sample also reported that the gender composition of students taking the class varies substantially across schools, with some classes being predominantly female and others with a more even gender balance. Overall, teachers estimated that the students were approximately 60 percent female and 40 percent male.

What are the Key Factors That Make This Implementation Approach Work?

The positive response by Oklahoma's youth to marriage and relationship education could be attributed to the fact that they encounter it just when they are actively dating or thinking about dating, and thus have an immediate interest in understanding how relationships work. However, good timing is not the only reason for its popularity. Other factors that appear to have contributed to the success of the OMI's healthy marriage services in high schools, and may be of interest to practitioners, include:

- ***A well-identified avenue for implementation.*** The chief explanation for the success of implementation appears to be that the educational system in Oklahoma was open to offering instruction in relationships and marriage, and the FACS system already had a marriage and family “track” on which the OMI could build. Although the curriculum was not well defined prior to the OMI, there was already a state-supported effort to provide information on the topic, and the new curriculum was seen as an enrichment of existing resources because it aligned well with the state's required objectives. Teachers and staff did not need to be convinced of the value of delivering marriage and relationship skills education.
- ***Ready access to the youth population.*** Working through the public educational system eliminated the need for resources and extensive efforts to recruit youth and sustain their participation. Students typically sign up for the elective FACS classes because they've heard about them through word of mouth, because they need to fill up their schedule with some kind of elective, or because it is written into their Individual Education Plan.

- ***Easily accessible training, materials, and support.*** Implementation in the high school system was facilitated by making it easy to become trained and obtain curriculum materials. Developing a curriculum that meets state educational standards and making it available to teachers free-of-charge removed most barriers they otherwise might have encountered in adopting the curriculum. In addition, the OMI provided convenient and accessible training by curriculum developers and offers ongoing technical assistance throughout the year should teachers need help with any issues related to delivery of the curriculum, thus simplifying the jobs of already-busy teachers.

Practitioners considering developing and implementing marriage and relationship education programs for youth may find it useful to ask themselves some key questions, including:

- *Is your approach likely to be sustainable?* Some efforts aim to reach youth by offering relationship education in after-school programs and other extracurricular activities. While a broad range of strategies is likely to be useful, embedding marriage education within the public educational system may be more likely to result in a long-term and self-sustaining effort.
- *How much of the curriculum is likely to be provided?* There may be a range of opportunities for providing marriage education within a given educational system for youth. Health, physical education, family and consumer sciences, and other programs may be candidates. It is useful to consider how much class time each of the alternatives would realistically devote to the marriage education curriculum.
- *How will you avoid getting mired in a complicated and lengthy approval process?* In Oklahoma, the FACS courses in which the OMI's marriage education is embedded are electives, thereby eliminating the need for a lengthy approval process, and avoiding any controversy that might have arisen as a result of mandatory education in marriage and relationships. The OMI was also careful to emphasize that marriage education is not sex education, a perception that could have raised concerns among parents and school boards.

Potential Implications of This Effort

One of the OMI's implicit goals is to encourage young people to delay marriage until they are more mature and ready to handle the responsibilities of family life. It is possible that increasing the age at first marriage will eventually contribute to a lower divorce rate, yet discouraging marriages among youth could inadvertently increase nonmarital childbearing. This is the reason that a simple message, by itself, to delay marriage among youth is likely to be counterproductive. Essential to the effort to decrease divorce among young people who otherwise might marry at an early age are the skills and information necessary to create and sustain a healthy relationship and prepare for a lasting marriage. Information on the consequences of nonmarital childbearing and divorce among parents, such as that included in the OMI's recent supplementary lesson on child support, is also likely to be an important element.

In addition to encouraging young people to delay marriage and avoid nonmarital childbearing, the OMI envisions other potential advantages of serving youth. Exposing young people to educationally-based material about relationships in high school could normalize the concept of marriage education so that youth would be more likely to take advantage of future opportunities as they develop, such as premarital education. Further, OMI staff hopes that providing marriage education in schools could increase their opportunities to provide comprehensive services for the entire family since it has the potential to encourage their parents to access marriage education in other community venues.

Notes

¹ Common Core of Data (CCD), *Local Education Agency (School District) Universe Survey Data*, 2005-06 (v.1a), 2004-05 (v.1c), 2003-04 (v.1b), 2002-03 (v.1a), 2001-02 (v.1a), 2000-01 (v.1a), 1999-00 (v.1b), 1998-99 (v.1c) (see <http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/pubagency.asp>).

Common Core of Data (CCD), *State Nonfiscal Survey of Public Elementary and Secondary Education*, 2005-06 (v.1a), 2004-05 (v.1e), 2003-04 (v.1b), 2002-03 (v.1b), 2001-02 (v.1c), 2000-01 (v.1c), 1999-2000 (v.1b), 1998-99 (v.1b) (see <http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/stnfis.asp>).

² Johnson, C., Stanley, S., Glenn, N., Amato, P., Nock, S., Markman, H., Dion, R. *Marriage in Oklahoma: 2001 Baseline Statewide Survey on Marriage and Divorce*. Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Department of Human Services.

³ Forty-four percent of ever-married Oklahomans age 18 and older were less than 20 years old when they married for the first time.

⁴ Connections + PREP® is now called just Connections. For more information about the Connections curriculum, see www.BuildingRelationshipSkills.org

⁵The number of students taking a Connections+PREP® class is estimated from a count of the number of workbooks ordered by FACS teachers each year. Data indicating the number of classes per year, per school, and per teacher are not reported to the OMI, but could potentially be collected from CareerTech and analyzed for future reports.

Evaluation Methodology for the OMI Process Study

Information reported in the OMI research brief series is based on an analysis of data gathered during an ongoing multiyear study of the initiative's design, development, and implementation. Study methodologies include semi-structured interviews with individuals and groups, direct observation of program operations, focus groups with staff and participants, and secondary analysis of data from existing reports and surveys. The research team met directly with more than 160 individuals involved with the OMI in various ways, focusing on implementation in the education, social services, health, and community volunteer sectors, and including a special emphasis on OMI services within the state's correctional system. A full report on the findings of this study will be produced in early summer 2008. Mathematica's research team is led by M. Robin Dion, and includes Alan M. Hershey, Debra A. Strong, Heather Zaveri, Sarah Avellar, Nikki Aikens, and Timothy Silman.

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& HUMAN SERVICES**

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