

# Implementation of Two Versions of *Relationship Smarts Plus* in Georgia



December 2018



**Strengthening Relationship Education and Marriage Services**

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## OVERVIEW

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The Strengthening Relationship Education and Marriage Services (STREAMS) evaluation is a random assignment impact study and in-depth process study of five Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education (HMRE) grantees funded by ACF's Office of Family Assistance (OFA). To maximize its contributions to the evidence base and to inform future program and evaluation design, STREAMS is examining the full range of populations served by HMRE programs, including adult individuals, adult couples, and youth in high schools. Each STREAMS site functions as a separate study within the larger evaluation, with each addressing a distinct research question.

This process study report presents findings on the implementation of the *Relationship Smarts Plus 3.0 (RS+)* curriculum in two high schools in suburban Atlanta, Georgia. More than Conquerors, Inc. (MTCI), a nonprofit social service provider with a long history of delivering HMRE programming with funding from OFA, led the implementation. *RS+* is a widely-used relationship education curriculum for youth from 13 to 18 years old. The full curriculum includes 12 lessons designed to help youth better understand themselves, plan for the future, learn the characteristics of healthy relationships, and develop skills to form and maintain healthy relationships. MTCI is implementing two versions of the curriculum: the full version and an 8-lesson summary version. The STREAMS impact evaluation is addressing two research questions:

1. What is the effect of offering relationship skills education as part of the regular school curriculum?
2. How does abbreviating the curriculum influence program effects?

This process study examined MTCI's implementation of *RS+*, including program design; processes for hiring, training, and supervising facilitators; service delivery; and youth engagement.

This report is based on analysis of data from the following four sources, collected during MTCI's first two semesters of delivering *RS+* (fall 2016 and spring 2017).

1. **Semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and observations:** In February 2017, the STREAMS evaluation team conducted a three-day site visit to collect qualitative data. Researchers interviewed 14 MTCI and partner staff, including MTCI facilitators, managers, directors, and staff from the two high schools and county health department; observed two *RS+* curriculum sessions (one at each school); and held three focus groups with 19 students in total who received either the full or summary version of *RS+*.
2. **Staff survey:** All eight of the program facilitators delivering *RS+* completed a web-based survey in April 2017. The survey asked about their work roles and experiences, feelings towards the program, impressions of the quality of their supervision, training opportunities, and organizational climate.

3. **nFORM data:** nFORM is the client management information system that OFA provided to MTCI and other 2015 grantees. MTCI staff entered data on youth attendance and activities. After class, MTCI facilitators completed a short self-assessment about their ability to deliver that day's planned content and engage students. The STREAMS evaluation team analyzed nFORM data on 1,098 students who received *RS+* during the fall 2016 and spring 2017 semesters.
4. **STREAMS baseline survey:** At the beginning of each semester, youth completed a baseline survey administered during health class. The STREAMS evaluation team analyzed survey responses from 1,085 youth who enrolled and completed the survey in the fall 2016 and spring 2017 semesters.

Findings from this process study will provide context and help interpret impact evaluation findings. Key findings are:

- **MTCI developed strong systems for hiring, training, and supervising facilitators that emphasized fidelity.** Systems included a facilitator hiring process that included a rigorous, multi-day preservice training program on *RS+* and facilitation skills, organization-wide emphasis on curriculum adherence, frequent classroom observations, and regular facilitation practice and curriculum review.
- **MTCI worked closely with the curriculum distributor to develop the 8-lesson summary version of *RS+* and develop an implementation plan.** The summary version excluded four lessons on communication and conflict and sexual decision-making. The curriculum developer created special materials and workbooks for the shortened version and led two staff trainings.
- **MTCI facilitators implemented *RS+* with fidelity, maintaining intended differences between the full and summary versions and the control group.** Facilitators delivered the intended number of class sessions and total hours of instruction for both versions of *RS+*. In slightly more than 90 percent of class sessions, facilitators reported using all of the intended curriculum materials and following all of instructional guidance in the manual.



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## I. INTRODUCTION

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Early dating relationships often set the stage for youths' behaviors and experiences as they transition to adulthood. For example, these relationships help youth to develop interpersonal skills that influence later romantic, peer, and professional relationships (Simpson et al. 2017, Collins et al. 2009). Unhealthy early dating relationships may be a warning sign for negative relationship experiences later in life (Simpson et al. 2017, Brent et al. 1993, Joyner and Udry 2000, O'Leary and Smith Slep 2003). Numerous studies suggest that adolescents often lack the knowledge and skills needed to recognize and develop healthy relationships and to avoid relationships that are unhealthy (Gardner and Steinberg 2005; Giordano et al. 2010; Guzman et al. 2009). Healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) programs for high school students hold promise for helping youth to develop healthy expectations for romantic relationships and avoid situations that put them at risk. These programs take a preventative approach, covering topics such as establishing healthy relationships, communicating effectively, and recognizing warning signs of intimate partner violence.

Since the mid-2000s, the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has awarded grants to provide HMRE programming for youth and adults.<sup>1</sup> More than half of grantees receiving HMRE funding since 2011 have offered relationship education to youth (Scott et al. 2017). The current grantee cohort, awarded in 2015, includes 47 HMRE programs, 32 of which serve youth in high school and/or community-based settings. To date, ACF has funded three rigorous multisite evaluations involving HMRE grantees, but none have focused on programs for youth. In 2015, the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) within ACF contracted with Mathematica Policy Research and its partner, Public Strategies, to conduct the Strengthening Relationship Education and Marriage Services (STREAMS) evaluation. STREAMS includes five random assignment evaluations of HMRE programs funded by OFA in 2015. The evaluations focus on understudied populations and program approaches not covered in OPRE's prior federal evaluations, such as HMRE programs for individual adults and for youth in high schools.

To expand the available research evidence on school-based HMRE programming for high school students, the STREAMS research team is collaborating with More Than Conquerors, Inc. (MTCI) in suburban Atlanta, Georgia, to conduct a rigorous evaluation of the *Relationship Smarts Plus 3.0 (RS+)* curriculum. The full *RS+* curriculum includes twelve 90-minute lessons. For STREAMS, MTCI delivers *RS+* in two Atlanta-area high schools as well as a shortened 8-session version of *RS+* to students in different classrooms within the same schools. STREAMS is addressing two primary research questions:

1. What is the effect of offering relationship skills education as part of the regular school curriculum?

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<sup>1</sup> In 2005, Congress passed the Deficit Reduction Act (P.L. 109-171), which first authorized funding for HMRE programs. The funding, administered through OFA, supports grants for programs to offer one or more of eight "allowable activities," including relationship education for high school students. The funding was reauthorized in 2010, through the Claims Resolution Act (P.L. 111-291). Since the passage of the Deficit Reduction Act, there have been three rounds of grants made to HMRE programs across the country (2006, 2011, and 2015).

## 2. How does abbreviating the curriculum influence program effects?

### Box I.1: The STREAMS evaluation of RS+

The STREAMS evaluation of *Relationship Smarts Plus 3.0 (RS+)* has two components: an impact study and a process study. The process study is the focus of this report.

For the impact study, participating health classrooms in two suburban Atlanta high schools were randomly assigned to one of three research groups: (1) a group that received the full, 12-session *RS+* curriculum; (2) a group that received the summary 8-session *RS+* curriculum; or (3) a control group that did not receive any HMRE programming. To participate in the study, students needed permission from a parent or guardian. Participating students were surveyed at three time points: (1) near the start of the semester in which they enrolled in health class (baseline survey); (2) near the end of the semester, after the last class session had been completed (exit survey); and (3) about 12 months after the baseline survey, either in school or by telephone (follow-up survey). Key outcomes include students' knowledge of healthy relationships, perceived relationship skills, attitudes toward dating violence and unplanned pregnancy, and relationship experiences and outcomes. The evaluation team will examine the same set of outcomes for students being offered the full 12-session *RS+* curriculum and those being offered the summary 8-session *RS+* curriculum to determine whether shortening the curriculum affects certain outcomes.

The process study examines how MTCL implemented both versions of *RS+*. This information will support interpretation of the impact study findings and document program operations to support future replication if the programming is shown to be effective. The process study also documents the program context, including similar services available to youth in the control group. In addition, the study examines MTCL's preparation for implementing both versions of *RS+*; procedures for hiring, training, and supervising program facilitators that delivered *RS+* in the classroom; the extent to which MTCL implemented *RS+* with fidelity; and youth engagement with and responsiveness to the program.

This report is based on the following four data sources, collected during MTCL's first two semesters of delivering *RS+* (fall 2016 and spring 2017).

1. **Semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and observations:** In February 2017, we conducted a three-day site visit to collect qualitative data. We interviewed 14 MTCL and partner staff, including MTCL facilitators, managers, directors, and staff from the two high schools and county health department; observed two *RS+* curriculum sessions (one at each school); and held three focus groups with 19 students in total who received either the full or summary version of *RS+*.
2. **Staff survey:** All eight of the program facilitators delivering *RS+* completed a web-based survey in April 2017. The survey asked about their work roles and experiences, feelings towards the program, impressions of the quality of their supervision, training opportunities, and organizational climate.
3. **nFORM data:** nFORM is the client management information system that OFA provided to MTCL and other 2015 grantees. MTCL staff entered data on youth attendance and activities. After class, MTCL facilitators completed a short self-assessment about their ability to deliver that day's planned content and engage students. We analyzed nFORM data on 1,098 students who received *RS+* during the fall 2016 and spring 2017 semesters.
4. **STREAMS baseline survey:** At the beginning of each semester, youth completed a baseline survey administered during health class. We analyzed survey responses from 1,085 youth who enrolled and completed the survey in the fall 2016 and spring 2017 semesters.

HMRE curricula for high school students, such as *RS+*, can take 15 or more hours to deliver. It can be difficult for school administrators to find this much time available in their school schedules. When faced with time constraints, program providers might consider shortening the curriculum, reasoning that students are better off receiving some HMRE programming rather than none. However, currently there is no rigorous research evidence on whether delivering a shortened HMRE curriculum is beneficial to high school students. Research evidence is needed to assess the effects of a shortened curriculum, including whether it produces positive effects or

dilutes or negates the full curriculum's intended effects on youth outcomes. The STREAMS evaluation of *RS+* provides insight into the value of a shortened version of *RS+*. The impact study will provide evidence on whether a shortened curriculum affects selected outcomes. The implementation study, which is the subject of this report, sheds light on the process of shortening the curriculum in a careful and intentional way that preserves core concepts and skills.

### ***Relationship Smarts Plus 3.0***

Distributed by the Dibble Institute, *RS+* is a widely-used relationship education curriculum for youth from 13 to 18 years old. Six of the 32 OFA grantees funded in 2015 that serve youth use *RS+*, making it the most popular HMRE curriculum among the OFA grantees who primarily serve youth in school settings.<sup>2</sup> *RS+* is designed to help youth better understand themselves, plan for the future, learn the characteristics of healthy relationships, and develop skills to form and maintain healthy relationships (Pearson and Reed 2015). A prior evaluation of the *RS+* curriculum in Alabama high schools found that it had favorable impacts on students' relationship attitudes and perceived communication skills after one year (Kerpelman et al. 2009).

**Table I.1. Overview of *RS+***

Session	Full curriculum	Summary curriculum
1: Who am I and where am I going?	✓	✓
2: Maturity issues and what I value	✓	✓
3. Attractions and infatuation	✓	✓
4. Principles of smart relationships	✓	✓
5. Is it a healthy relationship?	✓	✓
6. Decide, don't slide!	✓	✓
7. Dating violence and breaking up	✓	✓
8. Communication and healthy relationships	✓	
9. Communication challenges and more skills	✓	
10. Sexual decision-making	✓	
11. Unplanned pregnancy through the eyes of a child	✓	
12. Teens, technology, and social media	✓	✓

For the STREAMS evaluation, students in the *RS+* classrooms received one of two versions of the curriculum (Table I.1). The full *RS+* curriculum has twelve 90-minute sessions. The sessions cover such topics as knowledge of healthy relationships, communication and relationship skills, avoidance of teen dating violence, sexual decision-making, and unplanned pregnancy. The shorter summary version of the curriculum includes eight 90-minute sessions. The summary curriculum covers most of the full curriculum but excludes sessions on communication skills and healthy relationships (sessions 8 and 9), sexual decision-making (session 10), and unplanned pregnancy (session 11). MTCI consulted with evaluation team members and Dibble Institute staff (which distributes the *RS+* curriculum) in deciding how to

<sup>2</sup> *Love Notes*, another Dibble Institute curriculum, is the most popular curriculum for programs serving older youth. *Love Notes* is designed for at-risk youth ages 16 to 24 and primarily used in community settings. It uses a similar scope and sequence of topics as *RS+*. Eleven grantees use *Love Notes*.

shorten the curriculum. MTCI decided to exclude full sessions instead of compressing 12 sessions into 8 sessions so that youth receiving the summary version could cover selected topics at the same depth as youth receiving the full curriculum. As described in Chapter III, MTCI, the Dibble Institute, and the STREAMS research team decided to cut sessions 8 through 11 based on findings from a pilot of curriculum implementation in the spring 2016 semester and the goals and research questions of the STREAMS evaluation.

### **More Than Conquerors, Inc.**

MTCI is a nonprofit social service provider that serves at-risk families and youth in suburban Atlanta. The organization seeks to improve the capacity of young people to form safe and stable family relationships by providing classes and events focused on relationship education, teen pregnancy prevention, abstinence and character education, and career mentoring. MTCI offers these classes and events through formal partnerships with a large network of area schools, recreation centers, hospitals, and churches. The organization employs a professional team of case managers and facilitators, led by a management team that has worked together for more than 15 years.

MTCI has a long history of delivering HMRE programming with funding from OFA. MTCI began as a faith-based organization that offered support groups for people with substance misuse problems. However, in the late 1990s, MTCI shifted its focus after receiving funding from a local board of education to provide nutrition education to pregnant teenagers. The program leaders found that the teen parents participating in those classes were interested in receiving instruction about healthy relationships, and they pursued funds to provide these services. The organization received two earlier rounds of grant funding from OFA (in 2006 and 2011), which it used to deliver HMRE programming to more than 2,000 high school students in the Atlanta area. In October 2015, MTCI received a third round of grant funding from OFA, which included support for delivering the *RS+* curriculum.<sup>3</sup> MTCI had not previously used this curriculum, so their facilitators received training on *RS+*.

### **Roadmap to the report**

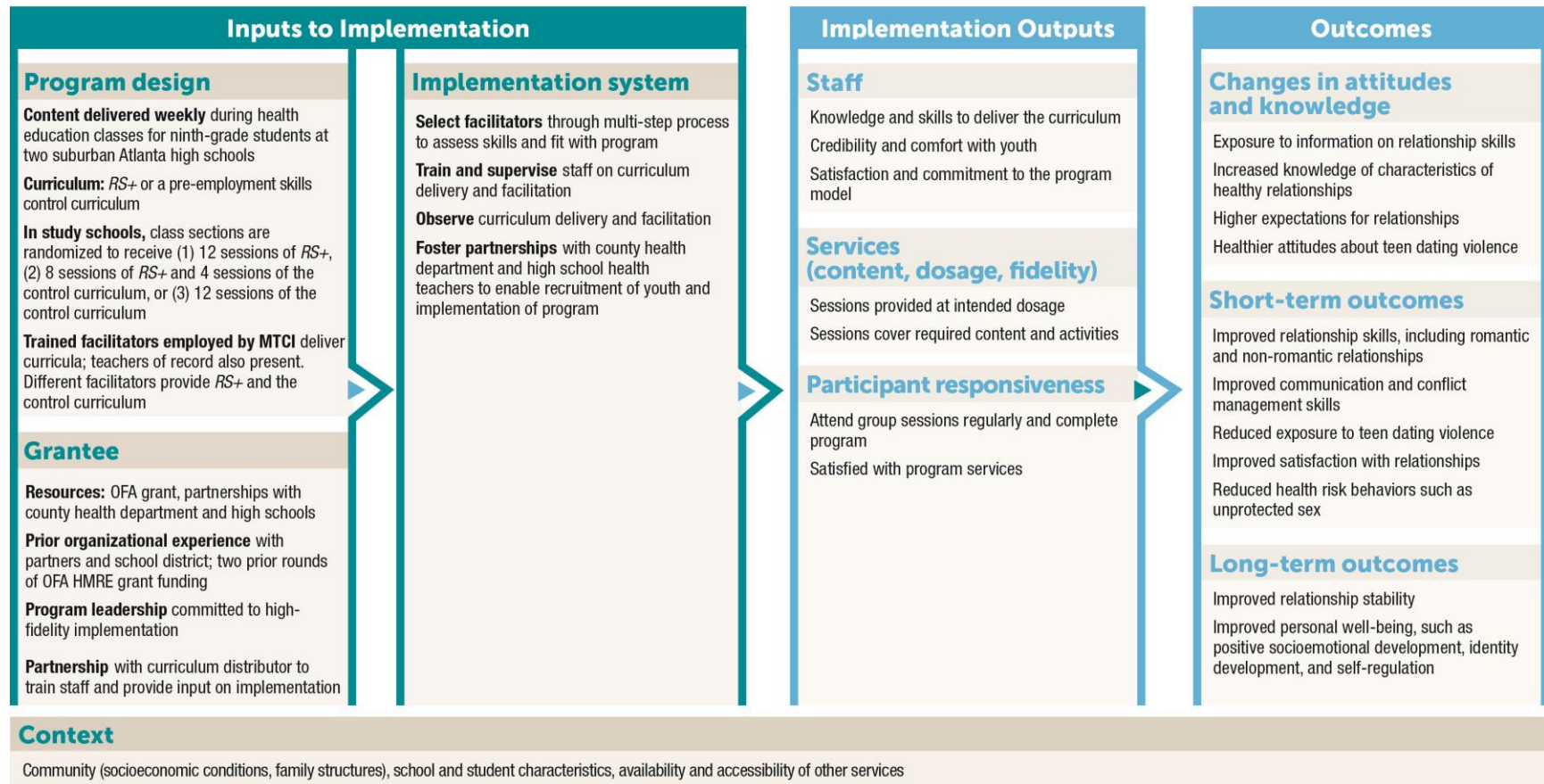
This process study report presents findings on delivery of *RS+* by MTCI in the 2016–2017 academic year. The report is informed by an implementation framework (see Figure I.1). The report follows the structure of this framework. Chapter 2 describes the context for implementation. Chapter 3 describes the program design. Chapter 4 discusses the implementation system and implementation outputs related to program staff. Chapter 5 presents implementation outputs related to services. The final chapter summarizes the main findings about MTCI's implementation of *RS+* in the 2016–2017 academic year. The outcomes shown in the implementation framework are the focus of the impact study of *RS+*, which is ongoing.

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<sup>3</sup> In addition to the implementation of *RS+* in two Gwinnett County, Georgia high schools, MTCI's OFA grant funds implementation of *RS+* in two other suburban Atlanta high schools and two community-based settings. The two latter activities are not part of the STREAMS evaluation.



**Figure I.1. Implementation framework for RS+ in suburban Atlanta, Georgia**



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## II IMPLEMENTING *RS+* IN SUBURBAN ATLANTA

Where a program operates and who it serves can affect how it is implemented and how effective it is. For example, characteristics of the program’s target population or local policies may drive decisions about how to tailor the services. Community characteristics, such as an above-average rate of intimate partner violence, can establish the need for the program. Similar services that are available and accessible to the community may make it harder to distinguish the effects of the HMRE program of interest. This chapter describes the context for MTCI’s implementation of *RS+* at two suburban Atlanta high schools, as well as similar services available to youth in the community.

### The high schools implementing *RS+* serve Gwinnett County’s most disadvantaged students

**Figure II.1. Gwinnett County, Georgia**



Population	859,234
Demographic makeup	41% white 25% black 20% Hispanic
Median income	\$60,289 \$75,411 (white) \$52,203 (black) \$38,924 (Hispanic)

**Source:** U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2011–2015 5-year estimates

Gwinnett County, Georgia, is a large suburb located northeast of Atlanta (Figure II.1). With a population of about 860,000, Gwinnett is the largest county in Georgia. In 2015, the county’s population was 41 percent white, 25 percent black, and about 20 percent Hispanic (American Community Survey, 2015). Despite a high median income for the county, income varied widely across demographic groups. The average white family in Gwinnett County earned almost twice as much annually as the average Hispanic family.

The two high schools in STREAMS drew students from two of the highest poverty areas of Gwinnett County (American Community Survey, 2015). Many families in both areas were headed by individuals with low education who were employed in low-wage, low-skill jobs. Large numbers of families in these areas were led by single parents (Online Analytical Statistical Information System 2017).

The two high schools in STREAMS were among the largest in the county. Together, the ninth-grade classes enrolled at these schools made up nearly 12 percent of all ninth-graders in the county (see Table II.1). More than 70 percent of the students identified as Hispanic. More than 90 percent of students at these schools were

economically disadvantaged, according to the Georgia Governor’s Office of Student Achievement.<sup>4</sup>

**Table II.1. Characteristics of study school students, fall 2016**

	Study school students	Gwinnett County Public Schools
Total enrollment, grade 9	1,747	15,241
Hispanic (%)	60	29
Black, non-Hispanic (%)	26	31
White, non-Hispanic (%)	5	26
Other (%)	10	14
Total enrollment, all grades	5,916	192,046
Economically disadvantaged, all grades (%)	91	55
Limited English proficient, all grades (%)	19	11

Source: Georgia Department of Education 2016a, Governor’s Office of Student Achievement 2016b, Governor’s Office of Student Achievement 2016c, Governor’s Office of Student Achievement 2017a

During the 2016–2017 school year, 1,085 students enrolled in the study (Table II.2). Most were Hispanic, and about 4 in 10 spoke Spanish at home. The biological parents of roughly 2 in 10 students were married at the time they enrolled in the study (Table II.3). About 3 in 10 students were dating someone when they enrolled, and fewer than 2 in 10 students had engaged in sexual intercourse.

**Table II.2. Demographic characteristics of students enrolled in STREAMS**

	Percent of students
Grade in school	
9th grade	87
10th grade or higher	13
Female	47
Race and ethnicity	
Hispanic	59
Black, non-Hispanic	23
White, non-Hispanic	4
Other	14
Speaks primarily Spanish at home	44
<i>N</i>	1,085

Source: STREAMS Baseline Survey.

Note: Percentages include all students who were enrolled in the study during the 2016–2017 school year.

<sup>4</sup> The Georgia Governor’s Office of Student Achievement defines a student as economically disadvantaged if s/he received free or reduced price lunch, their families received Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits, or they were homeless, did not live with their parents, were in foster care, or were migrants.

### Relationship skills education in Gwinnett County

In Gwinnett County Public Schools, sexuality education is usually covered in the ninth grade, when most students enrolled in the study. Most students had not attended a class covering HMRE topics prior to study enrollment (Table II.3). About 31 percent of students had attended a class that discussed teen pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and 25 percent had attended a class about romantic relationships or dating. Eleven percent of students had previously learned about dating violence and about eight percent had attended a class about marriage.

**Table II.3. Dating and relationship experiences of students enrolled in STREAMS**

	Percent of students
Biological parents are currently married	21
Living arrangements	
Lives with both biological parents	48
Lives with biological mom only	41
Lives with biological dad only	5
Lives with neither biological parent	6
Currently in a dating relationship	31
Ever had sexual intercourse	16
Attended a class on an HMRE topic in prior year	
Romantic relationships or dating	25
Dating violence	11
Teen pregnancy or STIs	31
Marriage	8
<i>N</i>	1,085

Source: STREAMS Baseline Survey.

*RS+* was delivered in the schools' regular health education classrooms. In Gwinnett County, ninth-grade health is a semester long class taken by all ninth-graders.<sup>5</sup> According to school district administrators, the standard health curriculum focused primarily on biology and anatomy and covered topics ranging from sexual health to nutrition to the importance of physical exercise. Administrators at the two high schools replaced the sexual health topics in their standard district health curriculum with *RS+* because it covered topics that aligned with statewide standards.<sup>6</sup> In fall 2016 and spring 2017, students had health class for two 90-minute blocks and one 45-minute

<sup>5</sup> A small number of students not in 9th grade, primarily 10th graders, were enrolled in health classes and participated in the study. These students may have transferred in from another school district after 9th grade, or may have been previously enrolled in health class but did not receive credit (such as for a failing grade or too many absences).

<sup>6</sup> Georgia state law requires local boards of education to develop a sexuality education curriculum that covers: (1) peer pressure, (2) self-esteem, (3) community values, (4) the legal consequences of parenthood, and (5) abstinence as the most effective way to prevent pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and HIV/AIDS (Georgia Campaign for Adolescent Power and Potential 2013). The control curriculum, *12 Pluses*, did not align with state standards.

block each week—for a total of 225 minutes per week. The content delivered by MTCI took up approximately 40 percent of the health class during the semester.<sup>7</sup> An MTCI facilitator taught *RS+* or the control curriculum during one 90-minute block per week. When class schedules were rearranged for assemblies, testing, or other school activities, MTCI facilitators used additional class periods to cover the material.

Outside of *RS+*, students had few opportunities to receive relationship skills instruction at the two study high schools, and none of the other options covered skills with the same depth as *RS+*. One high school offered the Personal Responsibility Education Program (PREP),<sup>8</sup> but only to students not enrolled in the study sample.<sup>9</sup> At the other high school, students could access social workers and voluntary single-gender teen mentorship groups that discussed HMRE topics. The Usher Foundation sponsored a leadership academy at this high school that met monthly for an hour and included one unit on positive relationships.

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<sup>7</sup> MTCI delivered a 12-session curriculum focused on pre-employment skills to students in the control group on the same schedule as *RS+* class sessions. Students assigned to receive the eight-session summary version of *RS+* also received four sessions of this pre-employment skills curriculum. Therefore, neither control group students nor students assigned to receive the summary *RS+* curriculum received additional instruction from the standard district health curriculum.

<sup>8</sup> State PREP is a federal program administered by the Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) within ACF in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that awards grants to states for educational programs that can reduce pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and HIV/AIDS.

<sup>9</sup> At this school, two of the four health class sections included MTCI-facilitated content. Students in the other two class sections could participate in PREP services.

### III PREPARING FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF *RS+*

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MTCI received its HMRE grant from OFA in October 2015. All grantees engaged in a nine-month planning period before beginning implementation. MTCI began enrolling youth in *RS+* in the fall 2016 semester. This chapter describes MTCI’s activities during the planning period, including choosing a curriculum, developing an implementation plan, and partnering with schools.

#### **Choosing *RS+***

*RS+* was a new curriculum for MTCI during the 2015 HMRE grant cycle. When developing their grant application, MTCI reviewed a list of HMRE curricula referenced in the funding announcement and included on the Strengthening Families Curriculum Resource Guide website.<sup>10</sup> They decided that *RS+* best met their needs, due to its focus on an appropriate age group (youth ages 13 to 18 years old), emphasis on healthy relationships, and alignment with Georgia’s sexuality education requirements described in Chapter 2. The project director also felt that *RS+* promoted the skills necessary to complete the “success sequence,” a concept that MTCI uses to frame programming. This concept suggests upward economic mobility is supported by achieving common milestones in a specific order: complete education, get a full-time job, get married, and then have children (Haskins and Sawhill 2009). In the previous grant cycle, MTCI used *Connections* (another Dibble Institute curriculum). MTCI determined that *Connections* was not age-appropriate for ninth-grade students,<sup>11</sup> but their positive experience with it contributed to their decision to select another Dibble curriculum.

*RS+* includes 12 lessons organized into six content areas (Pearson and Reed 2015). The lessons are intended to be taught sequentially, building upon one another (see Box III.1).

#### **Aligning programming with the STREAMS evaluation design**

OFA’s funding announcement for the 2015 HMRE grants required all applicants to propose a local evaluation.<sup>12</sup> MTCI proposed a three-arm random assignment impact study to test whether a shortened version of *RS+* could be as effective as the full version. After ACF selected MTCI to participate in the STREAMS evaluation, members of the evaluation team worked with MTCI to refine the design. This included determining the program content for each group. As described in Chapter 1, a “full *RS+*” group would receive 12 *RS+* sessions. A “summary *RS+*” group would receive 8 *RS+* sessions and 4 sessions of a pre-employment skills curriculum developed by MTCI. A control group would receive only the pre-employment skills curriculum and no *RS+* content.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://hmr curriculum.acf.hhs.gov/Curricula>.

<sup>11</sup> *Connections* is designed for youth in grades 11 and up.

<sup>12</sup> When ACF selected MTCI to participate in the STREAMS evaluation, their participation in the federal evaluation replaced the required local evaluation.

The STREAMS research team worked with MTCI to refine programming for each research group. Specifically, this team helped MTCI determine the content of the summary version of *RS+*, the additional content to be offered to the summary and control groups, and the amount of additional content to be provided.

### **Box III.1: *RS+* lessons**

<b>Content area: Self-awareness</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Who am I and where am I going?: Youth learn more about themselves, their development, what is important to them, and identify future goals.</li> <li>2. Maturity issues and what I value: Youth discuss what maturity looks like from physical, mental, emotional, and social perspectives, prioritize values that are important to them, and discuss character traits they value in others.</li> </ol>
<b>Content area: Healthy relationships</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. Attraction and infatuation: Youth think about the foundational elements of healthy relationships and how they develop, and learn about the brain chemistry of attraction to understand the importance of taking a new relationship slowly.</li> <li>4. Principles of smart relationships: Youth learn seven research-based principles to use when starting a romantic or peer relationship, and the concept of mature, balanced love.</li> <li>5. Is it a healthy relationship?: Youth learn how to tell if a relationship is healthy or unhealthy and why people sometimes find themselves in unhealthy relationships.</li> <li>6. Decide, don't slide: Youth learn and apply the concept of "sliding versus deciding" or making clear and active decisions related to life, relationships, and the timing of family formation.</li> </ol>
<b>Content area: Dangerous relationships</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. Dating violence and breaking up: Youth learn about why people break up, how to tell when it's time to break up, and healthy ways to break up. They also learn to recognize early signs of dating violence and how to get help if one is a victim of dating violence.</li> </ol>
<b>Content area: Communication and conflict</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>8. Communication and healthy relationships: Youth examine communication patterns they experienced growing up and become aware of patterns that damage relationships. They also learn communication skills, such as "time out" and the speaker-listener technique.</li> <li>9. Communication challenges and more skills: Youth further build communication skills and learn to recognize hidden issues in arguments and to solve problems with their partner.</li> </ol>
<b>Content area: Intimacy and sexual decisions</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>10. Sexual decision-making: Youth apply the concept of "decide, don't slide" to choices about sex; begin to understand the dimensions of intimacy and the social and emotional sides of sex; identify boundaries around sex; get medically-accurate information on pregnancy and sexually-transmitted infections; and role play saying "no" in risky situations.</li> <li>11. Unplanned pregnancy through the eyes of a child: Youth consider the social, emotional, and financial benefits of parents' healthy relationships to the child and discuss what it means to be a good parent.</li> </ol>
<b>Content area: Social media</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>12. Teens, technology, and social media: Youth reflect on the role of technology and social media in their lives and its risks, discuss how they influence honesty and social-emotional skills, and develop a personal success plan.</li> </ol>

### **MTCI consulted with the Dibble Institute and the STREAMS research team to shorten *RS+***

School administrators or program providers may shorten an HMRE curriculum out of necessity, such as limited time in a school schedule, rather than choice. When faced with such



time constraints, a careful, considered, and deliberate process may enable the shortened version to retain as much of the curriculum's core skills and concepts as possible. MTCI shortened *RS+* based on conversations with the Dibble Institute and consultation with the STREAMS research team. STREAMS facilitated a conversation with Dibble to explain the goals of the evaluation and the research questions, and to get Dibble's input on how to shorten *RS+* for the summary group. Dibble proposed two options: to deliver shortened versions of all 12 lessons over 8 class sessions, or to remove 4 lessons.

Of these options, MTCI preferred to cut 4 lessons for two reasons. First, removing full lessons meant that youth in the summary group would cover selected topics at the same depth as youth receiving the full curriculum. Youth in the summary group would not miss important activities and discussions that might have been cut if MTCI chose to compress the 12 lessons into 8 class sessions. Second, cutting full lessons made it easier for MTCI to train facilitators and maintain and monitor fidelity. MTCI intended for the same facilitators to teach full and summary group classes, sometimes during the same semester. Cutting lessons meant that MTCI did not have to train facilitators to deliver lessons in two different ways and minimized the chances that facilitators would deliver the wrong content during a class session. (As described in Chapter IV, a different facilitator delivered the pre-employment skills curriculum.)

MTCI cut lessons 8 through 11, primarily removing content from two areas (communication and conflict, and intimacy and sexual decisions) for the summary group (Table III.1). MTCI's preference was informed by a pilot of *RS+* they conducted in a Cobb County high school during the spring 2016 semester, using funds from a prior round of grant funding. MTCI had three takeaways from the pilot: (1) students reacted very positively to lesson 12 which covered social media and technology; (2) lesson 10 on sexual decision-making was difficult to complete in 90 minutes; and (3) the discussions in lesson 6 about "family patterns" and "a young father's story" were foundational to understanding the concept "sliding versus deciding". As a result of the first two findings, MTCI advocated keeping lesson 12 and cutting lesson 10. With these preferences, cutting lesson 11 made sense because it built on lesson 10. The third finding reinforced MTCI's sense that removing full lessons was the right approach to shortening *RS+*. MTCI felt that the content area covered by lessons 8 and 9 was important, but that the lessons on self-awareness and healthy and dangerous relationships were more important for the youth in the program.

Although students in the summary group did not receive the four lessons covering communication in healthy relationships and sexual decision-making, some of the content in these lessons were addressed in earlier lessons. For example, lessons 4 through 7 included discussions about family patterns and healthy relationships that are revisited in lessons 8 and 9. Lesson 3 addressed love and infatuation and lesson 6 introduced the concept of deciding versus sliding, which are related to the intimacy and sexual decision-making content in Lessons 10 and 11

Cutting these four lessons focusing on communication, conflict, intimacy, and sexual decisions allowed the STREAMS evaluation to assess whether and how this content influences student outcomes and to provide evidence to help program administrators make decisions about how to shorten the curriculum.

Once MTCI, the Dibble Institute, and the STREAMS research team agreed on the content of the summary version of *RS+*, STREAMS funded Dibble to develop customized slide decks and

workbooks for the summary version and to train program facilitators. The customized slide decks and workbooks cut out references to content taught in lessons 8 through 11.

### **The pre-employment skills curriculum did not overlap with *RS+* content**

MTCI developed a pre-employment skills curriculum, called *12 Pluses for Work Readiness and Career Success (12 Pluses)*, to be delivered to youth enrolled in the *RS+* summary and control groups by a dedicated group of MTCI facilitators. The evaluation team recommended delivering a separate curriculum to the control group for two reasons. First, having MTCI facilitators deliver content for all 12 weeks in full, summary, and control group classrooms minimized burden on the health teachers in the high schools. These teachers did not have to worry about planning lessons for some classes and not others. Second, the evaluation team wanted all youth in the study to receive the same amount of standard content in their health class.

The evaluation team advised MTCI that the pre-employment skills curriculum should have minimal overlap with *RS+* (Box III.2). The curriculum included 12 lessons, covering 9 concepts and skills to prepare youth to enter the workforce. Control group classrooms received all 12 lessons. Summary group classrooms received lessons 1, 5, 8, and 10 (Table III.1). The curriculum does not cover soft skills, such as goal setting and interpersonal communication. The Dibble Institute reviewed a draft of the curriculum to ensure there was no overlap with *RS+*.

### **Box III.2: Lessons in *12 Pluses for Work Readiness and Career Success***

1. **Personal career assessment and planning:** Youth complete an assessment to help them develop individual education and career plans.
2. **Basic workforce skills readiness 101:** Youth receive an introduction to the world of work and the skills needed to be successful in the workforce, including a positive attitude, good health and appearance, communication skills, professionalism, following directions, time management, and customer service.
3. **Developing positive versus negative habits:** Youth discuss and complete role-playing exercises about timeliness, following directions, and creating a productive work environment.
4. **Code switching:** Youth learn how to transition from home to work environments and vice-versa in terms of their appearance and mannerisms.
5. **Tactical planning for a job search:** Youth learn how to describe work experiences and prepare for writing a resume, identify their skills and strengths, network, and how to search for a job.
6. **Resume writing, part 1:** Youth learn the basics of developing a resume, including the parts of a resume, types of resumes, and how to write a cover letter.
7. **Resume writing, part 2:** Youth create a resume, cover letter, goal statement, and thank you note.
8. **Dressing for success, part 1:** Youth learn about the types work-appropriate attire and how to project a look and feel of confidence.
9. **Dressing for success, part 2:** Youth are critiqued on their attire in a mock job setting and get feedback on what may be more appropriate to wear for work.
10. **Interview skills, part 1:** Youth get tips on how to do well on a job interview, including how to address challenging questions and background roadblocks (such as past terminations and criminal records), practice interview skills, and complete a job application.
11. **Interview skills, part 2:** Youth complete a one-on-one job interview.
12. **Promotions and new opportunities:** Youth learn the steps to take advantage of an opportunity for growth in the workplace.

## Partnering with the high schools and county health department

To find high schools willing to participate in the study, MTCI used its network and reputation from two decades of providing relationship education and other youth programming in the Atlanta suburbs. MTCI initially planned to deliver *RS+* in three high schools in a county neighboring Gwinnett, but the superintendent’s office declined to participate due to OFA and STREAMS data collection requirements. When plans to provide *RS+* in that county fell through, MTCI reached out to contacts in the other suburban Atlanta school district that had hosted MTCI programs to find alternative sites. One of the organizations MTCI contacted was the Gwinnett, Rockdale, and Newton Counties Health Department (GNR Health). The Adolescent Health and Youth Development division of GNR Health administered health and sexuality education programming in three suburban Atlanta county school systems. In addition, they sponsored community partnerships in schools across these counties, including afterschool programs, teen resource centers, mentoring programs, and other health promotion activities. As part of these community partnerships, MTCI had offered a relationship skills program in Gwinnett County since 2014.

**Table III.1. Lessons received by each research group**

		Full <i>RS+</i> group	Summary <i>RS+</i> group	Control group
Week	1	<i>RS+</i> lesson 1	<i>RS+</i> lesson 1	12 <i>Pluses</i> lesson 1
	2	<i>RS+</i> lesson 2	<i>RS+</i> lesson 2	12 <i>Pluses</i> lesson 2
	3	<i>RS+</i> lesson 3	<i>RS+</i> lesson 3	12 <i>Pluses</i> lesson 3
	4	<i>RS+</i> lesson 4	<i>RS+</i> lesson 4	12 <i>Pluses</i> lesson 4
	5	<i>RS+</i> lesson 5	<i>RS+</i> lesson 5	12 <i>Pluses</i> lesson 5
	6	<i>RS+</i> lesson 6	<i>RS+</i> lesson 6	12 <i>Pluses</i> lesson 6
	7	<i>RS+</i> lesson 7	<i>RS+</i> lesson 7	12 <i>Pluses</i> lesson 7
	8	<i>RS+</i> lesson 8	<i>RS+</i> lesson 12	12 <i>Pluses</i> lesson 8
	9	<i>RS+</i> lesson 9	12 <i>Pluses</i> lesson 1	12 <i>Pluses</i> lesson 9
	10	<i>RS+</i> lesson 10	12 <i>Pluses</i> lesson 5	12 <i>Pluses</i> lesson 10
	11	<i>RS+</i> lesson 11	12 <i>Pluses</i> lesson 8	12 <i>Pluses</i> lesson 11
	12	<i>RS+</i> lesson 12	12 <i>Pluses</i> lesson 10	12 <i>Pluses</i> lesson 12

Source: Program documents

The director of the Adolescent Health and Youth Development Division of GNR Health introduced MTCI leadership to the administration at a new high school in Gwinnett County. The director thought that the *RS+* program would benefit the school’s largely low-income student body. School leadership had heard positive things about MTCI’s prior Gwinnett County programming. Several teachers in the physical education and health department had worked with MTCI. According to an assistant principal at the school, a Gwinnett County school board member was a proponent of MTCI and urged him to bring them on as a community partner. MTCI leadership delivered a presentation to school and district administrators in early summer 2016 to demonstrate how *RS+* met state and district health and sexual education curriculum

standards. After the presentation, the school administration agreed to partner with MTCI and participate in the study.<sup>13</sup>

This school was not large enough to generate an adequate research sample on its own. Therefore, MTCI reached out to the administration of another Gwinnett County high school where it previously had provided services. This school's administration agreed to continue its partnership with MTCI to provide *RS+* in half of the ninth-grade health classes and to participate in the evaluation.

Before rolling out *RS+* at the high schools, MTCI worked with school administrators and GNR Health to develop an implementation plan. According to the plan, one or two MTCI facilitators would meet with ninth-grade health classes once a week to deliver the assigned curriculum (some older students who were unable to take health as ninth-graders also participated). During the time that MTCI facilitators led instruction, the regular health teacher would take attendance and manage classroom behavior. This meant that each classroom would have two to three adults at all times.

Both schools used block scheduling, with rotating 90-minute periods. Each semester the program manager worked with the schools to develop a master calendar of full, summary, and control group class sections and assigned facilitators to sections. Each school had nine class sections divided equally between the three groups. Most facilitators worked only at one school. Some taught *RS+* to full and summary group class sections; separate groups of facilitators taught *RS+* and *12 Pluses* content.

During implementation, MTCI communicated regularly with the two schools and GNR Health. The program manager met weekly with the GNR Health's Adolescent Health and Youth Development director to discuss implementation and had frequent ad-hoc interactions at the high school where the director was based. The school principals were not primarily responsible for ongoing communication. Instead, the primary contact for each high school was a health and physical education teacher or department head. Most conversations with the schools concerned logistics, especially during the beginning of a semester when the school was obtaining parent consent for youths' participation in the evaluation. MTCI, the schools, and GNR Health did not generally discuss specific students, and did not share student data.

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<sup>13</sup> In Gwinnett County, school administrators have the authority to bring community partners into their schools. Schools also have autonomy from the district to participate in research.

#### IV. SUPPORTING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF RS+

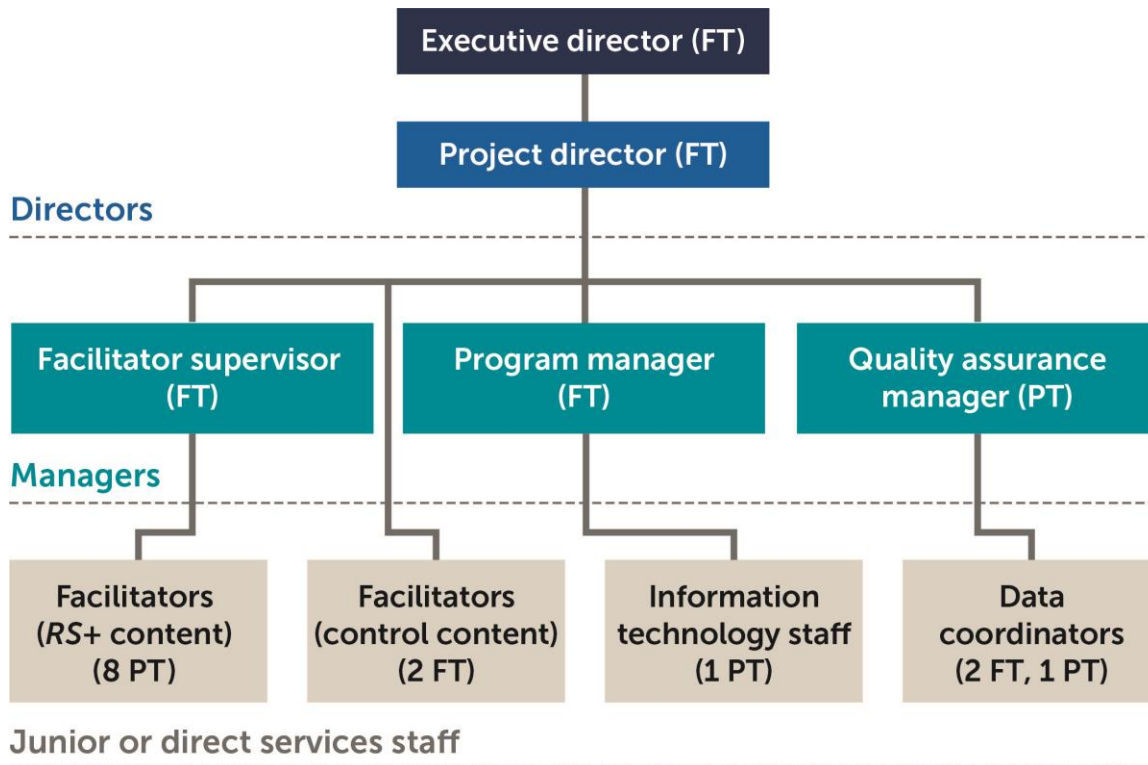
In its most recent HMRE funding opportunity announcement, OFA emphasized the importance of selecting curricula with evidence of effectiveness and implementing them with fidelity. OFA urged grantees to strive to adhere to the curriculum’s guidelines for delivering content. To successfully implement a curriculum with fidelity, grantees must have systems in place to support staff in this endeavor. For example, organizational leaders should ensure resources are focused on implementation with fidelity and strong systems for hiring, training, and supervising staff must be in place (Fixsen et al. 2005).

This chapter describes MTCI’s system for supporting implementation, including its organizational structure and hiring processes, as well as how the organization set expectations for high fidelity implementation, trained RS+ facilitators, and monitored fidelity. In the final section, we discuss staff satisfaction with these systems.

#### Directors and managers had broad responsibilities, while facilitators had clearly defined roles

MCTI was a small organization led by four full-time staff who provided management oversight and supervision. A part-time quality assurance manager and a team of 15 full- and part-time facilitators, information technology staff, and data entry staff delivered RS+ and fulfilled data collection and reporting requirements (Figure IV.1).

**Figure IV.1. Organizational chart for MTCI staff participating in STREAMS**



Note: Staff numbers accurate as of February 2017.

MTCI's **executive director** and **project director** had been with MTCI since the mid-1990s and helped to shape the agency. The executive director did not have any direct responsibilities with *RS+*, but led fundraising, managed fiduciary responsibilities, and communicated closely with the project director. The project director managed the OFA grant and shared responsibility for the study with the program manager, communicating with the STREAMS research team and with schools. She also regularly observed classes and supervised the facilitators providing *12 Pluses*, the control content.

Three additional staff had management responsibilities:

- The **facilitator supervisor** trained and supervised *RS+* facilitators. He managed day-to-day work of the facilitators and ensured that they implemented *RS+* with fidelity. Though all directors and managers participated in hiring, selecting, observing, and evaluating facilitators, the supervisor had lead responsibility.
- A **program manager** oversaw student enrollment into the study. She led identification and selection of schools at the start of the evaluation and managed ongoing relationships with these schools and GNR Health. The program manager also assisted the supervisor in observing and evaluating facilitators. In addition, she oversaw information technology staff and all data collection processes.
- The **quality assurance manager** developed the initial local evaluation plan and helped to select *RS+*. He supervised data entry staff and oversaw compliance with reporting requirements for the grant.

A team of 10 **facilitators** provided direct services to youth enrolled in the study. Their main responsibility was to deliver either *RS+* or the control curriculum, *12 Pluses*. Eight facilitators delivered *RS+* to the full and summary groups and two delivered control programming. In the summary *RS+* groups, different facilitators delivered *RS+* and *12 Pluses* content. In spring 2017, one facilitator delivering *RS+* also delivered *12 Pluses*. Facilitators led between one and six classes per semester, and typically also worked on other MTCI programs serving other counties. In the spring 2017 semester, facilitators for *RS+* co-taught their class sessions, while *12 Pluses* sessions were led by a single facilitator. As of spring 2017, most *RS+* facilitators were African American and male. No facilitator identified as Hispanic or Latino, though one spoke Spanish, and most had less than a four-year degree (Table IV.1). Prior to facilitating *RS+*, all facilitators had experience working with youth, and most had experience in other relevant areas, such as delivering relationship education.

MTCI employed facilitators on annual contracts and experienced limited staff turnover. On staff surveys, facilitators for *RS+* reported an average tenure of about four years, suggesting that most had worked for MTCI before the organization began implementing *RS+*. According to the supervisor, one *RS+* facilitator left MTCI after implementation began in the schools.

**Table IV.1. Characteristics of *RS+* facilitators**

	Percent
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	75
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>	
White (Non-Hispanic)	13
Black/African American	63
Hispanic/Latino	0
Other <sup>1</sup>	25
<b>Education</b>	
Less than a four-year degree	63
Four-year undergraduate degree	38
Graduate or professional degree	0
<b>Work experience prior to <i>RS+</i> facilitation<sup>2</sup></b>	
Working with youth	100
Delivering relationship education	50
Providing case management services	50
Providing parenting education	63
Helping individuals prepare for or obtain employment	75
Helping individuals with financial management or economic stability	63
Working with individuals who have experienced domestic violence	88

Source: STREAMS staff survey. N = 8 of 8.

Notes: <sup>1</sup>"Other" race group includes Asian, American Indian/Alaskan Native, and two or more races.

<sup>2</sup>Respondents could select all categories that apply.

### **MTCI's process for hiring facilitators involved intensive screening and pre-service training**

When hiring *RS+* facilitators, MTCI prioritized two characteristics. First, candidates had to have experience working with youth, through teaching, mentoring, or youth ministry. Second, interviewers sought candidates who were motivated by a desire to help youth achieve a safe, stable, and fulfilling future. One facilitator described this as having a "servant heart." MTCI sought mission driven individuals—not those who saw being a facilitator as just another job. Program managers did not prioritize education when hiring facilitators, though they preferred for candidates to have a bachelor's degree.

MTCI embedded pre-service training and rigorous, multi-stage screening into its hiring process. In preparation for implementing the HMRE grant, MTCI deliberately hired more facilitators than it would need during implementation. All candidates who passed the interview stage—which involved interviews with individual staff and a group interview with supervisors and managers—were hired provisionally as facilitators and participated in an orientation about MTCI and *RS+*. Following orientation, provisional hires attended trainings led by the supervisor on facilitation skills and techniques and the *RS+* curriculum. Trainings lasted several days. At the end, provisionally hired facilitators did "teach-backs," delivering *RS+* lessons to their cohort

of trainees and MTCI staff. About three-quarters of these facilitators—those who gave the strongest teach-backs, according to the supervisor—were retained, while the others were let go.

The provisional facilitators who were retained after the first round of teach-backs received additional training from the supervisor on facilitation and *RS+*. These staff then piloted the full, 12-lesson *RS+* curriculum in a school that was not participating in the evaluation. The supervisor assessed their facilitation skills, curriculum familiarity, and ability to manage classroom logistics. MTCI retained the best performers—again, about two-thirds of the remaining provisional hires. Those who did not progress through the initial training and screening received compensation for their time. According to the supervisor, MTCI successfully used this multi-stage hiring process in the 2011 and 2015 grant cycles.

### **MTCI managed its HMRE grant to maximize fidelity to *RS+***

Fidelity was of utmost importance to MTCI. The supervisor expected facilitators to demonstrate fidelity both to *RS+* content and MTCI's preferred facilitation strategies. All facilitators for *RS+* were expected to teach the same lesson during the same week of the semester. The supervisor expected to be able to walk into any classroom and see the same content and activities being delivered the same way. The only variation related to planned differences between the full and summary versions of *RS+*. Specifically, the timing of lesson 12 on social media differed because the summary *RS+* groups omitted lessons 8 through 11. It was the final *RS+* lesson for both versions of the curriculum, which was week 12 in the full version of *RS+* and week 8 in the summary version of *RS+*. Youth receiving the summary version of *RS+* also received 4 sessions of *12 Pluses*, which were not provided to youth receiving the full version of *RS+*.

Directors and managers oversaw all decisions about curricula and the scope and sequence of sessions. Facilitators raised concerns when something was not working, but directors and managers made decisions. MTCI's policy was to review any proposed change to *RS+*, no matter how small, with the Dibble Institute. Based on the Dibble Institute's input, the supervisor decided whether to make the change, considering how it would affect curriculum fidelity. For example, MTCI discussed with the Dibble Institute a modification to the sequence of activities in lesson 2 on personal values. Facilitators asked to move an activity, a "values auction" in which youth assign relative dollar amounts to values that are important to them, to the end of the session. They found that the auction was high energy, making it difficult to manage time and transition to another activity afterwards. The supervisor indicated that this was the only change that MTCI had made to *RS+* since beginning implementation in the schools.

During site visit interviews, all *RS+* facilitators expressed commitment to MTCI's emphasis on fidelity. On the staff survey, no facilitator reported making unilateral changes to *RS+*. Despite strict requirements about *RS+* delivery, facilitators felt they had sufficient autonomy to inject their personality and style into delivery, and adjust curriculum delivery—though not content—to match classroom dynamics. According to one facilitator, "*RS+* is pretty scripted, but I have to relate to the people in different settings. If I have my class very rambunctious, I have to know to temper it down." Facilitators' openness to evidence-based practices reflects their commitment to delivering *RS+* with fidelity. On the staff survey, facilitators reported they were open to adopting evidence-based practices—including following a manual, trusting research over intuition and



anecdotal experience, and changing what they were used to doing—regardless of whether they were required to use the practice or whether it appealed to them.

### **Training and classroom observations demonstrated a commitment to fidelity**

After the pre-service training but prior to implementation for the HMRE grant, the Dibble Institute began to train the permanently hired facilitators on *RS+*. In August 2016, prior to implementation, staff attended a webinar led by the Dibble Institute that provided an overview of *RS+*. Then in January 2017, prior to the start of the second semester of implementation, Dibble provided further training. Facilitators first attended a webinar on lessons 1 through 3. Then, Dibble led a two-day in-person training on lessons 4 through 12. All facilitators, as well as the supervisor, program manager, and project director, attended this training. In the spring of 2017, facilitators participated in a training delivered by an expert in Hispanic families to understand the cultural backgrounds of their Hispanic students. In follow-up discussions with their supervisor, the facilitators discussed how they could adjust their facilitation approaches to better engage all of their students.

The supervisor, program manager, and project director conducted regular, unannounced classroom observations. The supervisor developed a qualitative tool to guide and score all observations of classroom activities for all of MTCI's programs. The tool measured facilitation skills and curriculum knowledge in three areas on a 100-point scale:

- **Facilitator preparation and effectiveness in delivering curriculum content (50 points)**, including whether the facilitator delivered subject matter clearly, was prepared for class, effectively listened and responded to youths' questions, dressed professionally and wore his or her MTCI nametag, and overall impressions of effectiveness
- **Youth engagement and classroom environment (5 points)**, including whether the facilitator managed time well, created a "safe space" for youth, and had an appropriate demeanor when interacting with youth
- **Use of facilitation techniques, observed knowledge of *RS+*, affirmation of MTCI's core values, and adherence to the lesson plan (45 points)**, including whether the facilitator transitioned smoothly between lessons and activities, used strategies to engage youth in discussions and activities, gave relevant stories and examples to enhance the lesson, showed confidence and comfort in front of the class, and managed classroom behavior

MTCI considered facilitators to meet expectations if their score was at least 66 of 100 points and exceed expectations if their score was above 82 points. Facilitators were observed about twice per classroom per semester.

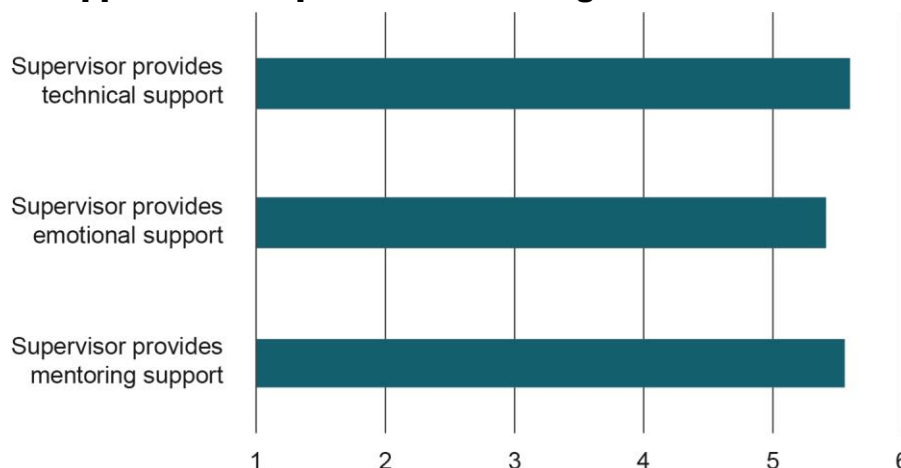
MTCI used observation data to guide program improvement. For example, the supervisor, program manager, and project director met regularly to discuss observations. The supervisor used takeaways from observations to plan facilitator trainings on areas needing improvement. In addition, the supervisor met briefly with the facilitator to provide feedback after each observation and used observation data in annual staff performance evaluations to help assess job success .

Facilitators participated regularly in group trainings that lasted from two to three hours. Sessions were monthly during the school year and weekly during the summer. Led by the supervisor, facilitators reviewed implementation issues identified through observations and previewed upcoming curriculum topics. Facilitators typically focused on one upcoming lesson or activity, discussing each aspect in depth so they developed an understanding of what was being taught, why, and anticipated student reactions. The group also discussed issues encountered during class. If there were common issues that the group could not resolve, the supervisor would seek input from the Dibble Institute. Weekly and monthly trainings followed the same format, though summer training sessions were more in-depth and comprehensive to prepare for the upcoming school year.

Trainings also included teach-backs, where facilitators practiced delivering lessons to their colleagues and received feedback. During teach-backs, facilitators brushed up on *RS+* and practiced facilitation techniques. For example, one technique was called “stop, drop, and roll,” which facilitators used to deflect questions that might be tangential to the lesson or about the facilitator’s opinion on sensitive topics. Facilitators were taught to turn the youth’s question around and pose it to the group instead of answering it themselves.

During interviews, facilitators described ongoing supervision and group trainings as useful. One facilitator described trainings as “iron sharpening iron”—leading and acting as a student in a class during a teach-back lesson helped to sharpen the facilitator’s craft. On average, facilitators for *RS+* agreed that their supervisor provided mentoring and emotional and technical support (Figure IV.2). All facilitators felt that training prepared them to work effectively with youth, ongoing support helped them improve their skills and overcome challenges, and they received needed support.

**Figure IV.2. Support from supervisor according to *RS+* facilitators**



Source: STREAMS staff survey. N = 8 of 8.

Notes: For each construct, an average for each individual was constructed on the items of the scale and then all respondents’ scores were averaged to create the overall scale score. Respondents were asked to respond to each statement on a scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* (1-6), with higher scores indicating more positive feelings about supervisor support.

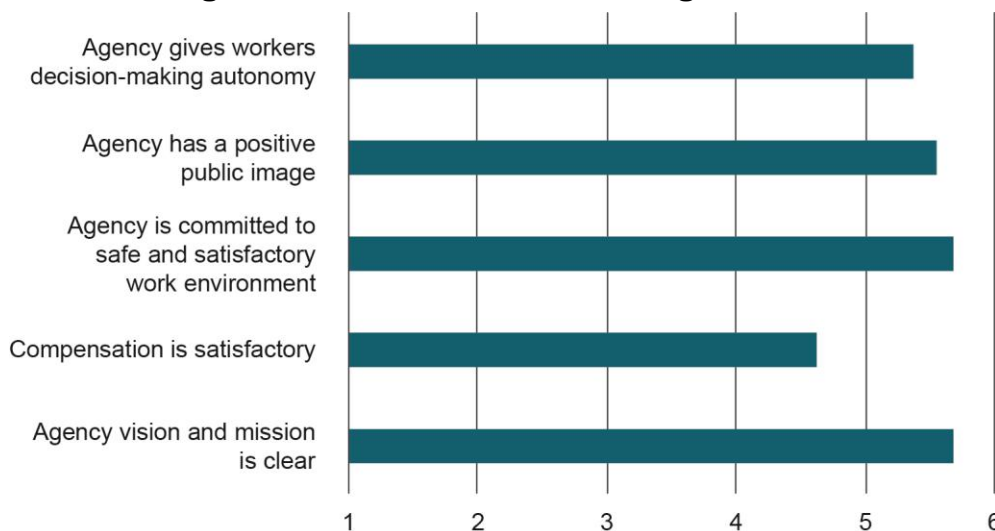
**RS+ facilitators expressed a high level of satisfaction with RS+ and the implementation supports they received**

According to the staff survey, RS+ facilitators agreed that MTCI’s vision and mission were clear and were satisfied with their work experience. In interviews, facilitators said they liked providing RS+ because the content connected emotionally with youth. While facilitators for RS+ had personally favorite lessons, none could identify one lesson as more “important” than others. In part, this reflected the cumulative nature of RS+. Facilitators liked that RS+ started with two lessons on self-exploration, goals, and values. According to one facilitator, “if you don’t have yourself together first, then your relationships are going to fall apart.”

A challenge with developing a cohesive organizational culture, according to the supervisor, was the decentralization of staff. Like other organizations delivering school programming, facilitators worked mostly at schools and had little interaction with facilitators at the other high school. The only time all facilitators were at MTCI’s offices was during trainings. Despite this potential obstacle, facilitators felt positively towards one another and their supervisors. On average, facilitators for RS+ felt that MTCI had a safe and satisfactory work environment and a positive organizational culture (Figure IV.3).

Overall, MTCI created a strong climate for implementation. On the staff survey, facilitators for RS+ described appreciating the support received from supervisors, managers, and the organization. They reported positive feelings about the organizational climate and mission. They also believed strongly in adhering to the selected curriculum, and felt that their supervisor was responsive when they raised issues related to RS+.

**Figure IV.3. MTCI organizational climate according to RS+ facilitators**



Source: STREAMS staff survey. N = 8 of 8.

Notes: For each construct, an average for each individual was constructed on the items in the scale and then all respondents’ scores were averaged to create an overall scale score. Respondents responded to each statement using a scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* (1-6), higher scores indicated a more positive response.

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## V. DELIVERING *RS+* AND ENGAGING YOUTH

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In addition to developing systems for supporting fidelity, programs must deliver the expected dosage of services and engage youth to achieve the intended outcomes. This chapter presents findings on the amount and content of programming offered to each of the three research groups, disruptions experienced during sessions, and youth attendance and exposure to each of the curriculum content areas. This chapter also discusses levels of youth engagement in programming based on facilitator reports and youth focus groups.

### **Facilitators offered the intended amount and content of programming**

During the 2016–2017 school year, MTCI served two cohorts of youth. In each semester of the school year, nine classes at each school were randomly assigned to receive the full version of *RS+*, the summary version of *RS+*, or the control programming. At one high school, two classrooms assigned to receive the summary version of *RS+* were divided into two sections due to large class sizes. This resulted in six class sections receiving the full version of *RS+*, eight sections receiving the summary version of *RS+*, and six sections receiving the control programming in each semester across the schools.

For each class section, facilitators offered 18 hours of programming, which was the intended number of hours. Based on data entered into nFORM (the management information system provided to MTCI by ACF), facilitators offered youth in each research group the intended number of hours of *RS+* content. On average, facilitators provided 17.9 hours of *RS+* content in full *RS+* classes, 12.2 hours of *RS+* content in summary *RS+* classes, and no *RS+* content in control classes. Facilitators also delivered each version of *RS+* according to MTCI's expectations for which sessions to offer.<sup>14</sup> The summary version of *RS+* excluded the four lessons on communication, conflict, intimacy, and sexual decision making, and the full version of *RS+* included all 12 lessons.

*RS+* lessons are designed to occur in a specific sequence and to include all content. In interviews, facilitators discussed adhering closely to the intended order and content of *RS+*. They reported delivering almost all intended lessons during the intended class session. They also followed the curriculum distributor's plans for each lesson, using the distributor's slide decks as guides. In *RS+*, lessons are organized by related concepts and interactive activities. Data in nFORM aligned with facilitators' interview responses. They indicated that fewer than five percent of full or summary class sessions covered a lesson or activity out of order. Also, fewer than two percent of full or summary class sessions covered an unintended lesson or activity, such as a summary curriculum group receiving communication content or a full curriculum group receiving *12 Pluses* content.

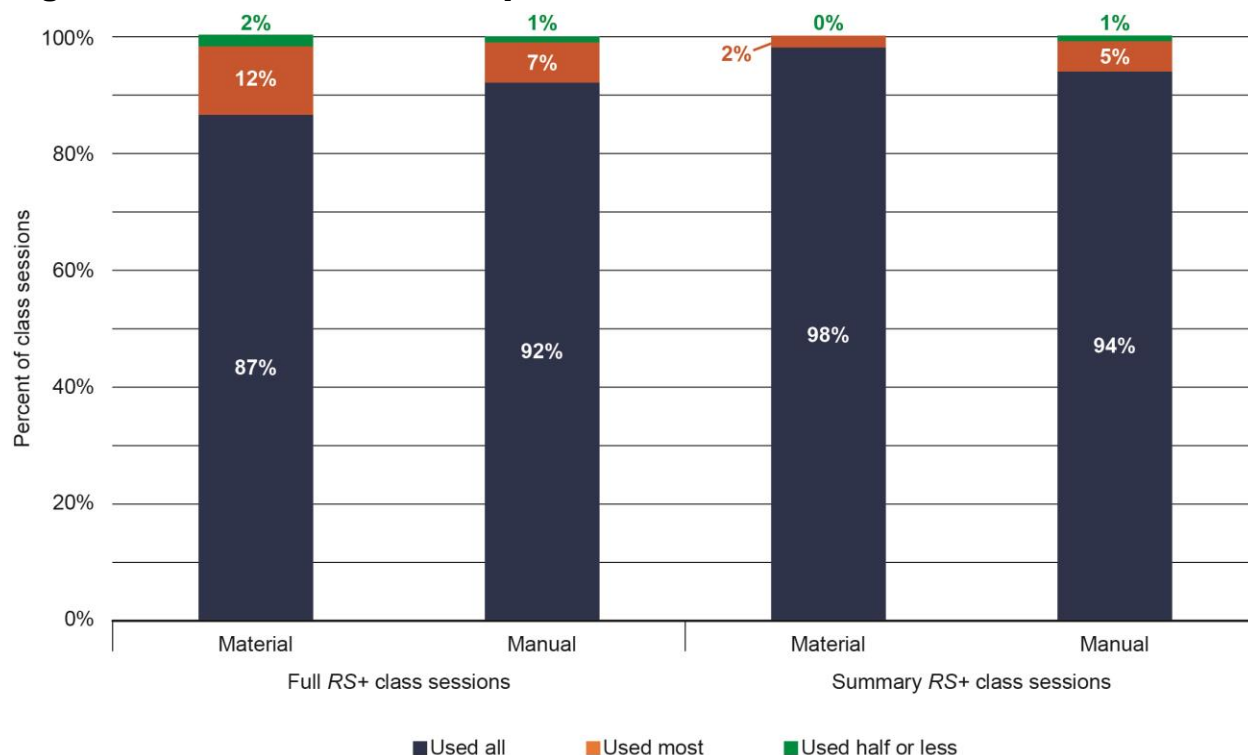
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<sup>14</sup> For one section of the summary version of *RS+*, the facilitator reported in nFORM providing communication and conflict content instead of social media content. For one section of the full version of *RS+*, a facilitator reported in nFORM not providing content on dangerous relationships. For another section of the full version of *RS+*, a facilitator reported in nFORM providing some content related to *12 Pluses*. These are very minor deviations from planned content and could have been reporting errors.

**Time constraints and students’ cultural backgrounds were primary reasons for modifying RS+ content**

Facilitators completed short surveys after each session of the full and summary versions of RS+. In the surveys, they reported how much of the curriculum materials they used and the degree to which they followed the instructor’s manual. These reports indicated that facilitators used “most” or “all” of the curriculum materials and followed “most” or “all” of the curriculum as written in the instructors manual (Figure V.1).

**Figure V.1. Facilitators’ use of planned materials and instructors manual**



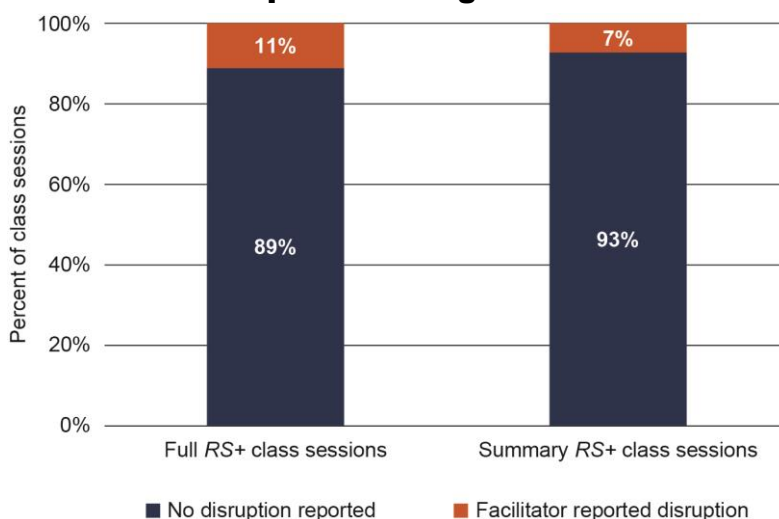
Source: nFORM

According to nFORM data, facilitators changed planned RS+ content in less than 10 percent of sessions. Facilitators reported that time, high levels of student engagement, and students’ culture or background were the main reasons for changing content. During interviews, some facilitators said they had difficulty completing all of the content when a session included watching a video. Also, facilitators described extending time for an activity when students were engaged. For example, facilitators reported that youth asked lots of questions during the sexual decision making and social media lessons. Facilitators reported modifying some planned content because they felt it did not align with the students’ culture or background. In interviews, MTCI staff noted that some class sections included a number of foreign-born students, particularly from Latin America. These students sometimes had trouble engaging with RS+ content because of language barriers, and often did not want to discuss their family lives or personal histories in class.

**Facilitators experienced few disruptions during class sessions**

Facilitators reported few disruptions during class sessions (Figure V.2). In addition, the classroom disruptions that did occur were relatively minor. Facilitators reported that the primary reasons for disruptions included youth arriving late or leaving early, difficulty managing classroom behavior, or “other issues,” such as youth having difficulty comprehending the curriculum or being summoned out of class by the school’s main office.

**Figure V.2. Prevalence of disruptions during class sessions**



Source: nFORM

**With high class attendance, youth received most RS+ or 12 Pluses content**

Because MTCI offered *RS+* and *12 Pluses* as part of a required health class, attendance at these sessions was high. Average attendance rates were over 85 percent for each study group (Table V.1). Also, for each study group, about 70 percent of youth attended 11 or 12 of the class sessions (Figure V.3). As a result, youth received most of the intended content. On average, youth assigned to the full version of *RS+* received just over 15 hours of *RS+* content and very little *12 Pluses* content. Youth assigned to the summary version of *RS+* received just over 10 hours of *RS+* content and 5 hours of *12 Pluses* content. Youth receiving control programming received nearly 16 hours of *12 Pluses* content.

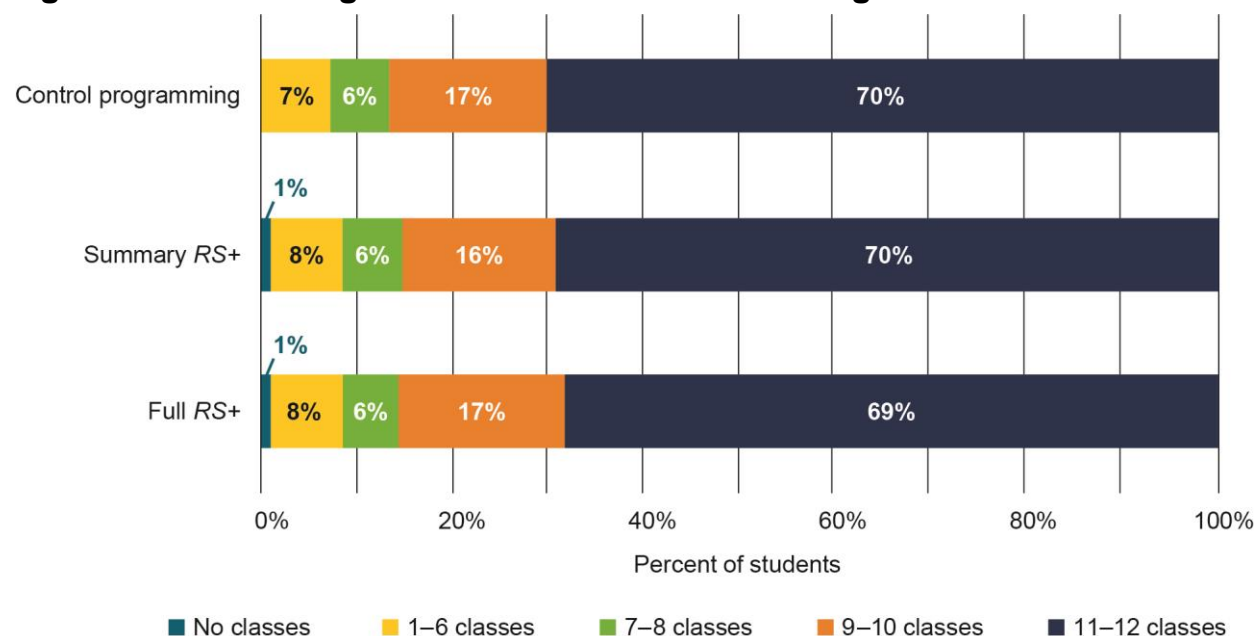
**Table V.1. Average attendance rate for and hours of content received by students**

	Full RS+	Summary RS+	Control Programming
Average attendance rate (%)	88	87	88
Average hours of content received			
Average hours of <i>RS+</i> content received	15.4	10.6	0.0
Average hours of <i>12 Pluses</i> content received	0.2	5.0	15.8
Total average hours received	15.6	15.6	15.8

Source: nFORM

Note: Includes all sample members enrolled in the 2016–2017 school year, n = 1,098.

**Figure V.3. Percentage of enrolled students attending class sessions**



Source: nFORM

Note: Includes all sample members enrolled in the 2016–2017 school year, n = 1,098.

Because attendance rates were high, most students received close to the intended amount of instruction in each content area (Table V.2). Across all research groups, the average deviation between the intended and actual hours across content areas was about 20 minutes.

**Table V.2. Intended and actual hours of programming and percent of youth receiving instruction, by content area**

	Content area						
	Self-awareness	Healthy relationships	Dangerous relationship	Communication and conflict	Intimacy and sexual decision making	Social media	12 Pluses
<b>Full RS+</b>							
Youth receiving instruction (%)	95	99	81	93	92	83	16
Intended hours	3.0	6.0	1.5	3.0	3.0	1.5	0.0
Actual hours	2.7	5.2	1.2	2.6	2.5	1.2	0.1
<b>Summary RS+</b>							
Youth receiving instruction (%)	97	99	88	43	1	85	95
Intended hours	3.0	6.0	1.5	0.0	0.0*	1.5	6.0
Actual hours	2.8	5.2	1.4	0.1	0.0*	1.3	5.0
<b>Control programming</b>							
Youth receiving instruction (%)	0	0	0	0	0	0	100
Intended hours	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	18.0
Actual hours	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	15.8

Source: nFORM

Note: Each tenth of an hour represents six minutes. Includes all sample members enrolled in the 2016–2017 school year, n = 1,098.

\* reported as 0 hours due to rounding.



### **Interactive activities, relevant subject matter, and understanding facilitators engaged youth in *RS+* class sessions**

Participant engagement is an important component of the success of an intervention. Youth may attend class, but if they are not actively engaged in the content, they may not internalize it. Both content and facilitator skill can contribute to the level of participant engagement. Overall, facilitators reported that in nearly all of the class sessions “most” or “all” youth were engaged and that they were able to connect with “most” or “all” youth. Facilitators’ assessments of youth engagement were consistent across both versions of *RS+*.

In focus groups, youth reported that the class was “fun,” despite initial apprehensions that it would be all about dating or focused on sexual health. Instead, youth liked that the lessons on communication and healthy and unhealthy relationships focused on helping them improve their friendships. They also indicated that lessons on not rushing into a romantic relationship were helpful and practical. Youth reported that they and their classmates tended to ask specific questions about “what to do and what not to do,” and appreciated that the facilitators took time to consider their questions and respond thoughtfully. For example, youth would pose a hypothetical situation to the facilitators and ask how to handle it, such as how to say “no” in a pressure situation. Youth in the focus groups said that even if a facilitator tabled a question for later, he or she would always come back to it. Answering these questions helped improve youths’ understanding of the *RS+* content.

In focus groups, youth reported that relying on interactive activities, as opposed to writing and bookwork, helped them engage in the class. Youth appreciated that facilitators shared examples from their own lives, used humor, and were “patient,” “empathic,” and not judgmental. They also liked that class sessions were not lecture-based. Among the activities that youth described enjoying was a values auction where they received a set amount of play money and a sheet listing important values, such as “having a best friend,” “going to college,” and “getting married and having children someday.” Youth had to prioritize the values that were important to them and bid on them based on how strongly they felt about a value relative to others on the list. Youth also enjoyed being able to act out scenarios in front of the class and work frequently in small groups.

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## VI. CONCLUSIONS

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To achieve intended outcomes for youth served through its grant program, OFA has emphasized the importance of implementing HMRE curricula with fidelity. Grantees should faithfully adhere to curriculum developers' guidelines for delivering content. For the STREAMS evaluation, MTCI implemented both the full version of *RS+* and a shortened version developed in close consultation with the distributor. This report presents findings on MTCI's implementation of the two versions of *RS+* during the 2016–2017 school year, including the strategies staff used to implement each version with fidelity.

The STREAMS evaluation is addressing two research questions: (1) the effect of offering relationship skills education as part of the regular school curriculum and (2) how abbreviating the curriculum influences program effects. The first question aims to expand the available research evidence about school-based HMRE programming. The second will generate evidence about whether offering a shortened version of *RS+* is effective. School-based providers interested in providing HMRE programming may not have time in their schedules to provide a full HMRE curriculum, which typically lasts 15 or more hours. They may consider shortening the curriculum, though currently there is no rigorous research evidence on whether delivering a shortened HMRE curriculum is beneficial to high school students. Research evidence is needed to assess the effects of a shortened curriculum, including whether it produces positive effects or dilutes or negates the full curriculum's intended effects on youth outcomes. Findings from STREAMS will advance the field of HMRE programming for youth by providing guidance for school-based providers tailoring *RS+* to fit their school schedules. This process study sought to assess how closely MTCI followed the implementation framework for *RS+* introduced in Figure I.1. This chapter summarizes three key findings that demonstrate MTCI's high-quality implementation of *RS+*.

### **MTCI developed strong systems for hiring, training, and supervising facilitators that emphasized fidelity**

MTCI embedded a rigorous pre-service training program into its hiring process to ensure facilitators were trained intensively, mission-driven, and committed to the organization's values. Training lasted multiple days and included instruction on facilitation skills and *RS+*. Provisionally-hired facilitators were asked to demonstrate their facilitation skills through multiple rounds of teach-backs. Only the most skilled became regular MTCI employees; the others were dismissed. Later, MTCI provided two distributor-led trainings on the curriculum to program staff.

MTCI staff, including the supervisor, project director, and program manager, conducted observations and led trainings to ensure facilitators implemented *RS+* with fidelity. Staff observed facilitators two or more times per semester and used a standardized qualitative tool developed by the MTCI supervisor to guide observations. The supervisor provided feedback to facilitators and used the observation tool to inform group trainings. Trainings included a review of upcoming *RS+* lessons, teach-backs, and a review of any issues that came up in observations. Group trainings occurred monthly during the school year and weekly during summer.

Facilitators felt that the organization-wide attention to curriculum adherence helped them prepare for their classes and feel supported. In a staff survey, all of the facilitators who taught *RS+* felt that they were adequately trained to deliver *RS+*, and received the necessary support and resources to do their jobs well. Facilitators all strongly agreed that MTCI's mission and vision were clear and that the organization was committed to a satisfactory work environment. Overall, facilitators were very open to using evidence-based practices and understood how important it was for all of the classes to follow the curriculum as it was described in the manual.

### **MTCI worked closely with the curriculum distributor to develop the summary version of *RS+* and to develop an implementation plan**

To develop the shortened version of *RS+* for the STREAMS evaluation, MTCI engaged in a careful and deliberate process with the Dibble Institute and the STREAMS research team. MTCI consulted the Dibble Institute to ensure that the shortened version covered the retained lessons with sufficient depth, and with the STREAMS research team to ensure a strong contrast between the full and summary versions. After consultation, MTCI elected to remove four lessons on communication, conflict, and sexual decision-making so that youth in the summary group would not miss activities and discussions that might have been cut if MTCI chose to compress the 12 lessons into 8 class sessions. MTCI received approval from the curriculum distributor to rearrange the order of some interactive, high-energy activities within lessons to make it easier for facilitators to manage classroom behavior. Any time facilitators suggested a change to the way *RS+* was delivered, MTCI consulted with the distributor. The Dibble Institute led two trainings of program staff—once before beginning implementation in the high schools and again in early 2017, during winter break and before beginning implementation with a second cohort of students.

### **MTCI facilitators implemented *RS+* with fidelity, maintaining intended differences between the full and summary versions and the control group**

During the 2016–2017 school year, MTCI adhered closely to the implementation plan for *RS+*, delivering the intended number of class sessions and total hours of instruction and covering almost all of the curriculum materials and activities. Deviations from the *RS+* curriculum manual were infrequent. According to facilitators, in slightly more than 90 percent of class sessions they used all of the curriculum materials and followed all of the instructional guidance in the manual. Facilitators reported changing planned *RS+* content in less than 10 percent of sessions, primarily in response to time constraints, high levels of student engagement in particular topics, or challenges with engaging students with language barriers or cultural differences. Facilitators also reported few disruptions during class sessions. In focus groups, youth described high levels of engagement in sessions that they attributed to the approachability and relatability of the facilitators and fun group activities.

Although attendance was influenced by factors beyond the control of the program, attendance was high with youth attending more than 85 percent of the sessions, on average. On average, youth in the full *RS+* group received about 15.4 hours of the 18 hours of *RS+* content offered to this group, youth in the summary *RS+* group received about 10.6 hours of the 12 hours of *RS+* content offered to this group, and youth in the control programming group received no

*RS+* content. The amount of hours spent on each curriculum closely aligned with the expected allocation between *RS+* and *12 Pluses*.

This study of *RS+* implementation by MTCI in the 2016–2017 school year was conducted in conjunction with a rigorous impact study based on a random assignment research design. The impact evaluation will assess the effectiveness of the full and summary versions of *RS+* on a range of student outcomes one year after random assignment. The report resulting from the impact evaluation will provide new evidence on the effectiveness of HMRE programming for youth in high school. Findings from this process study will provide context and help interpret impact evaluation findings.

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