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For more information about
the Strengthening the
Implementation of Marriage
and Relationship Programs
project, please visit the
project [web page](#).

SIMR Practice Brief

Road Maps for Change: Youth-Serving HMRE Grant Recipients' Rapid Cycle Learning in the SIMR Project



Healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) services are designed to help participants build and sustain strong families. HMRE services for youth between the ages of 14 and 24 focus on preparing participants for positive, healthy relationships in adulthood and educating them about the social and emotional aspects of relationships (Alamillo et al. 2021; Simpson et al. 2018). Studies have generally found positive impacts of these services on short-term outcomes related to youths' relationship attitudes and beliefs. To date, however, little evidence has emerged on the effects that HMRE services for youth have on longer-term outcomes (Alamillo et al. 2021; Simpson et al. 2018). To achieve their intended effects, HMRE service providers might need support to address key implementation challenges related to recruitment, retention, and content engagement.



The Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), with funding from the Office of Family Assistance, contracted with Mathematica and its partner, Public Strategies, to conduct the Strengthening the Implementation of Marriage and Relationship Programs (SIMR) project. SIMR aims to (1) strengthen the service delivery of the HMRE grant recipients that participated and (2) develop lessons for the broader HMRE field on promising strategies to address common implementation challenges.

The infographics in this brief present the strategies that each grant recipient focused on in SIMR, how they changed over the course of rapid cycle learning, and lessons and insights for the field (see “What Is Rapid Cycle Learning?” on page 3).

■ What is SIMR?

Strengthening the Implementation of Marriage and Relationship Programs (SIMR) is a national evaluation overseen by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, with funding from ACF’s Office of Family Assistance. It aims to strengthen the capacity of healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) grant recipients to improve their services by addressing implementation challenges in three core areas:

- 1. Recruitment.** Challenges related to identifying and communicating with potential participants, as well as enrolling them in services.
- 2. Retention.** Challenges with initial and sustained participation in services.
- 3. Content engagement.** Challenges related to sustaining participants’ interest and attention during activities and services.

Through SIMR, Mathematica and its partner, Public Strategies, collaborated with 10 HMRE grant recipients (five that serve adults and five that serve youth) to engage in iterative, rapid cycle learning aimed at strengthening their services. These organizations are funded by the Office of Family Assistance from 2020–2025. Through this work, the team cocreated, tested, and refined promising strategies to address recruitment, retention, and content engagement challenges. The study had two main goals: (1) to improve the service delivery of grant recipients in the study and (2) to develop lessons for the broader HMRE field about promising practices for addressing common implementation challenges.

For more information about SIMR, see the study’s [project page on the OPRE website](#).

This brief focuses on the five youth-serving HMRE grant recipients that participated in SIMR (Table 1). In-depth descriptions of what each grant recipient tested and learned in SIMR are contained in a separate study report (Baumgartner et al. 2023). Another report and a companion brief describe rapid cycle learning with adult-serving grant recipients. A series of practice briefs share tips for HMRE service providers, based on findings from rapid cycle learning. More information about these reports and briefs are available in the box on page 12.

Table 1. Youth-serving HMRE grant recipients participating in SIMR

Grant recipient	Location	Service population	Strategies developed and tested	Number of learning cycles completed
Auburn University Youth Relationship Education Program	Auburn, Alabama	Youth in high schools across Alabama	Support HMRE facilitators to identify and manage sources of stress	2
More Than Conquerors, Inc.	Conyers, Georgia	Youth in high schools in suburban Atlanta	Conduct case management with youth in high schools	2
Texas A&M Agrilife Extension	College Station, Texas	Youth ages 18 to 24 in the Brazos Valley of Texas	Recruit youth in rural areas	2
MotherWise	Denver, Colorado	Pregnant and parenting young women ages 14 to 24, most of whom are Hispanic	Use technology to build community and engage participants in virtual services	3
Youth & Family Services	Rapid City, South Dakota	High school–age youth in a variety of settings, both in and out of school	Support facilitators through planning and debriefing strategies	4

What is rapid cycle learning?

Grant recipients in SIMR tested strategies using a rapid cycle learning approach. Rapid cycle learning is a method for quickly and iteratively testing strategies to strengthen programming. It often involves successive cycles—referred to as learning cycles—to pilot strategies, collect feedback from staff and participants on how these strategies are working, and gather data to demonstrate whether the strategies are supporting improvement. Based on what grant recipients learn, staff can refine and test strategies again the learning cycles that follow. The length of a learning cycle is dependent upon the strategy being tested and the program setting.

HMRE grant recipients and other human services providers may be familiar with continuous quality improvement (CQI). Programs can adopt rapid cycle learning as part of their CQI process to test programmatic changes. CQI is often used to support internal improvements. Rapid cycle learning can be used either for internal improvement or in partnership with researchers to build evidence for the broader field.

For more information, see the report [Developing Strategies to Address Implementation Challenges Facing Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Grantees](#).

As part of the SIMR study, the grant recipients developed and tested improvement strategies tailored to their specific needs, service populations, and individual contexts by using an approach to program improvement and rapid cycle learning known as Learn, Innovate, Improve (LI²). LI² is an analytic and evidence-based approach to managing program improvement (Derr et al. 2017). Throughout the three phases of LI², researchers (1) collaborate with practitioners to identify the root causes of a challenge (Learn); (2) create innovative program improvement strategies that are participant-centered, informed by science, and sustainable (Innovate); and (3) test and refine the strategies using rapid cycle learning methods (Improve).

During the Improve phase in SIMR, youth-serving grant recipients conducted between two and four learning cycles (see “What Is Rapid Cycle Learning?” above). They collected different types of data to assess the success of the strategies they were testing, including interviews, focus groups, and surveys of staff and participants; workshop observations; program data; and data from the nFORM (Information, Family Outcomes, Reporting, and Management) system sponsored by ACF that grant recipients use to record participants’ characteristics and participation in services, monitor their service use, and make decisions that are informed by data.

Through their work with the SIMR team, grant recipients did the following:





- ▶ **Addressed pressing implementation challenges.** One grant recipient focused on improving recruitment, while four others focused on topics related to improving content engagement.
- ▶ **Increased their capacity to collect and use data to inform decision making.** Through rapid cycle learning, grant recipient staff administered feedback surveys to participants, tracked recruitment data, and analyzed social media metrics. They then reviewed these data with the SIMR team and developed insights to refine their improvement strategies.
- ▶ **Developed skills for identifying and responding to emerging implementation challenges.** At the end of each learning cycle, the SIMR team met with the grant recipients to review and interpret their data and determine next steps. When new challenges emerged, the grant recipients were able to pivot to address them in later learning cycles.
- ▶ **Developed tools and strategies to support strong implementation through the rest of the grant period.** Grant recipients developed promising tools and strategies to support facilitators, enhance case management, recruit youth from rural areas, and encourage peer and staff-participant relationships. At the end of SIMR, the grant recipients planned to continue using these tools and strategies.


Navigating the road maps for change

The infographics contained in this brief, called “Road Maps for Change,” illustrate the rapid cycle learning activities that each youth-serving grant recipient completed in SIMR, including the strategy that grant recipient staff tested during a learning cycle, what they learned about the strategy, and how the strategy or the focus of the grant recipient changed for the learning cycles that followed. The top part of each graphic shares the grant recipient’s focus for rapid cycle learning, including the general implementation challenge identified and the strategies tested to address the challenge. The top part of each graphic also shares key lessons for other HMRE service providers and the field from the grant recipient’s rapid cycle learning. The bottom part of each graphic depicts the grant recipient’s activities and takeaways from each learning cycle completed. For more detailed information about grant recipients’ rapid cycle learning activities, see the study report (Baumgartner et al. 2023).

ROAD MAP FOR CHANGE KEY

The SIMR Road Map for Change provides a visual overview of the learning cycles a grant recipient completed in SIMR. The key below defines each section.

-  **FOCUS FOR RAPID CYCLE LEARNING:**
The implementation challenge the grant recipient addressed in SIMR and a brief description of the strategy they tested.
-  **KEY LESSONS FOR THE FIELD:**
Insights and lessons for the HMRE field gleaned across all of the grant recipient’s learning cycles.
-  **LEARNING CYCLE(S):**
A description of each grant recipient’s activities during a learning cycle.
-  **CYCLE TAKEAWAYS:**
Key findings and takeaways from the learning cycle.



Next steps

Through their collaboration as part of SIMR rapid cycle learning, the SIMR team and the five youth-serving grant recipients that participated generated insights and lessons to inform strong service delivery that are relevant to other HMRE grant recipients. The tools and strategies that grant recipients developed provide starting points for other organizations that want to strengthen their own HMRE services. Findings from SIMR suggest that youth-serving grant recipients could consider strategies that:

- ▶ **Provide supports and tools for facilitators to successfully lead HMRE workshops**, such as strategies to manage sources of stress and co-facilitate lessons.
- ▶ **Look for innovative ways to reinforce workshop content**, such as by engaging participants with curriculum content on social media and helping youth set and make progress on goals through case management.
- ▶ **Prioritize relationship-building to engage participants**, by establishing a safe and supportive classroom environment and using technology in intentional, innovative ways.

Grant recipients interested in adopting any strategies summarized in this brief can do so using a continuous quality improvement (CQI) process to adapt the strategy to their specific context and then iteratively test it on a small scale to refine the strategy design and implementation.



Road Map for Change

AUBURN UNIVERSITY YOUTH RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION PROGRAM



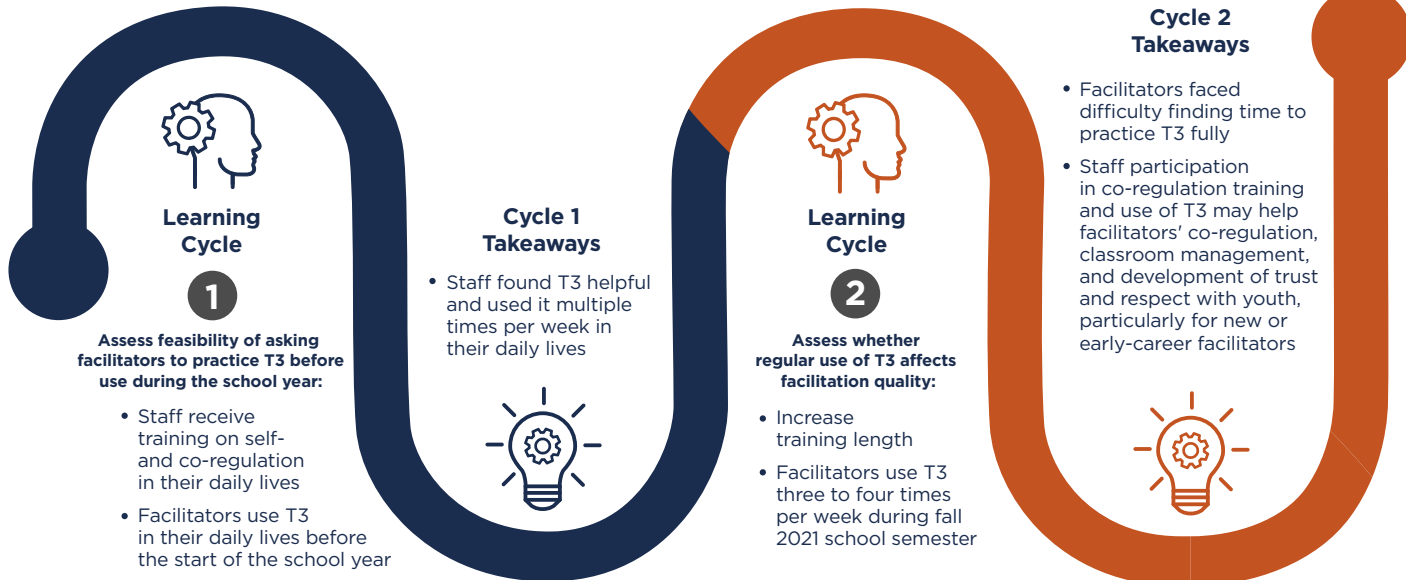
FOCUS FOR RAPID CYCLE LEARNING

- Content Engagement: Use Take Note, Tag It, Tune It (T3), an emotion regulation strategy, to support HMRE facilitators to identify and manage sources of stress



KEY LESSONS FOR THE FIELD

- Focusing on staff self-regulation and co-regulation may be a promising practice
- Consider strategies to support facilitators' emotional regulation that do not add substantially to their workload, such as ongoing coaching





Road Map for Change

UNIVERSITY OF DENVER - MOTHERWISE



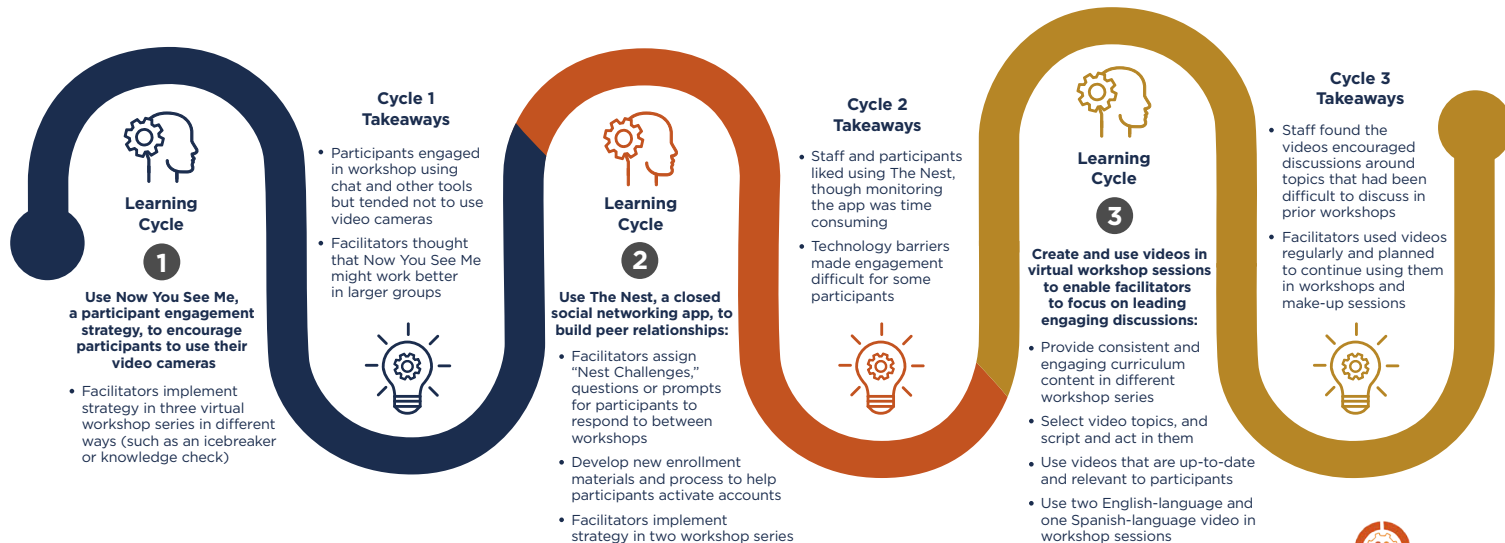
FOCUS FOR RAPID CYCLE LEARNING

- Engagement: Use technology to build community and engage participants in virtual services



KEY LESSONS FOR THE FIELD

- Facilitators can use technology to create a safe and welcoming virtual environment that encourages engagement
- Although some virtual engagement strategies are simple and low-burden, others can be time-consuming to develop and implement
- Engaging facilitators' expertise can be a productive way to develop and test engagement and community-building strategies





Road Map for Change

MORE THAN CONQUERORS, INC.



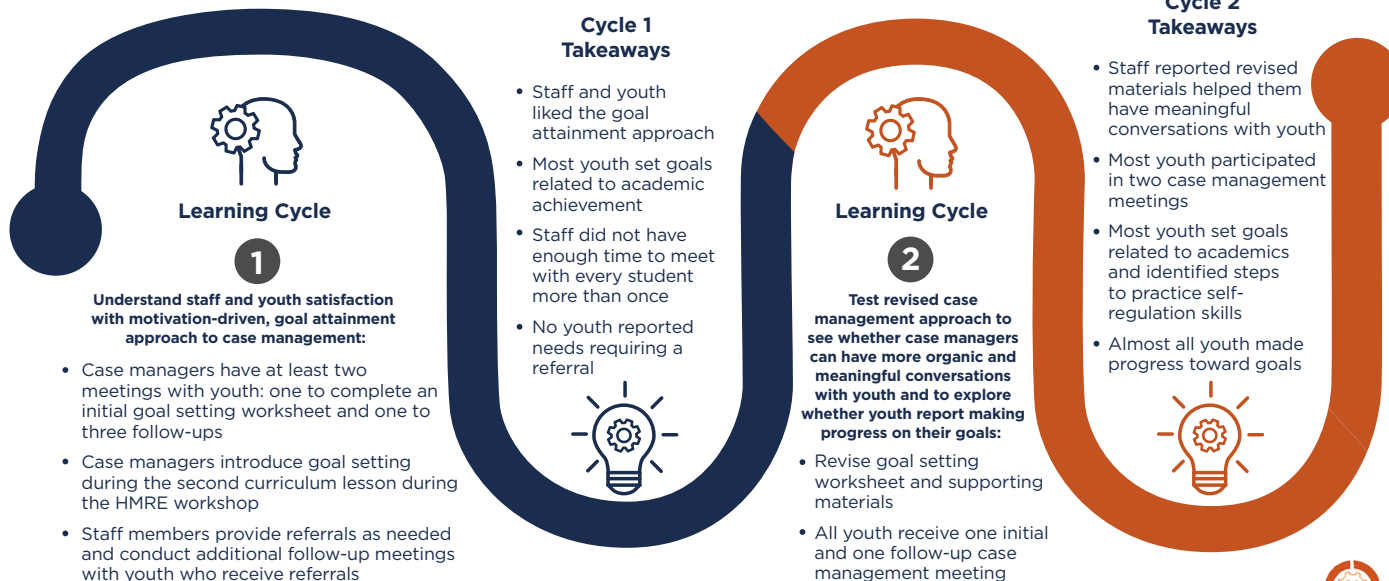
FOCUS FOR RAPID CYCLE LEARNING

- Content Engagement: Conduct case management with youth in high schools using a motivation-driven, goal attainment approach



KEY LESSONS FOR THE FIELD

- Offering case management in schools can be logistically complicated
- Case management that builds self-regulation skills can reinforce HMRE curricula





Road Map for Change

TEXAS A&M AGRILIFE EXTENSION: SUCCESS POWERED BY YOU



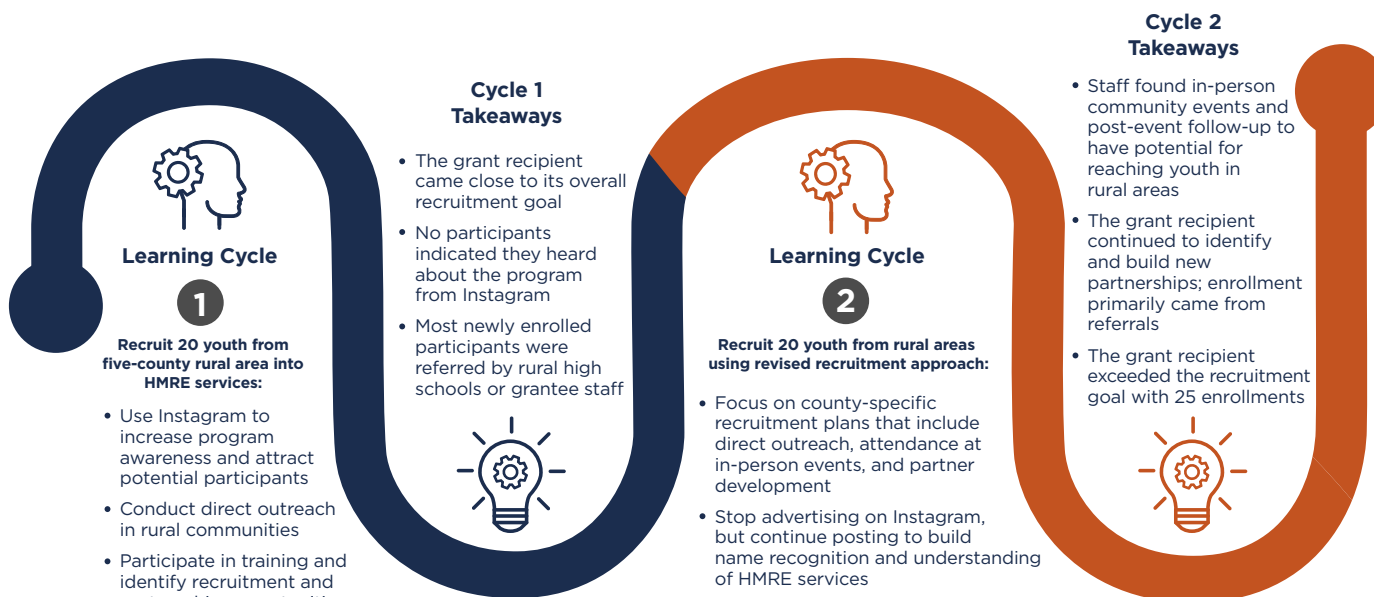
FOCUS FOR RAPID CYCLE LEARNING

- Recruitment: Recruit youth in rural areas using social media and a coordinated recruitment approach with county-specific strategies



KEY LESSONS FOR THE FIELD

- Consider assigning a staff person to coordinate multiple recruitment efforts that account for cultural and other differences between different rural areas
- Successful recruitment in rural areas may require staff to be creative in identifying events and partners who can connect them to youth
- Direct recruitment may be a more successful recruitment strategy than social media for youth in rural areas





Road Map for Change

YOUTH & FAMILY SERVICES



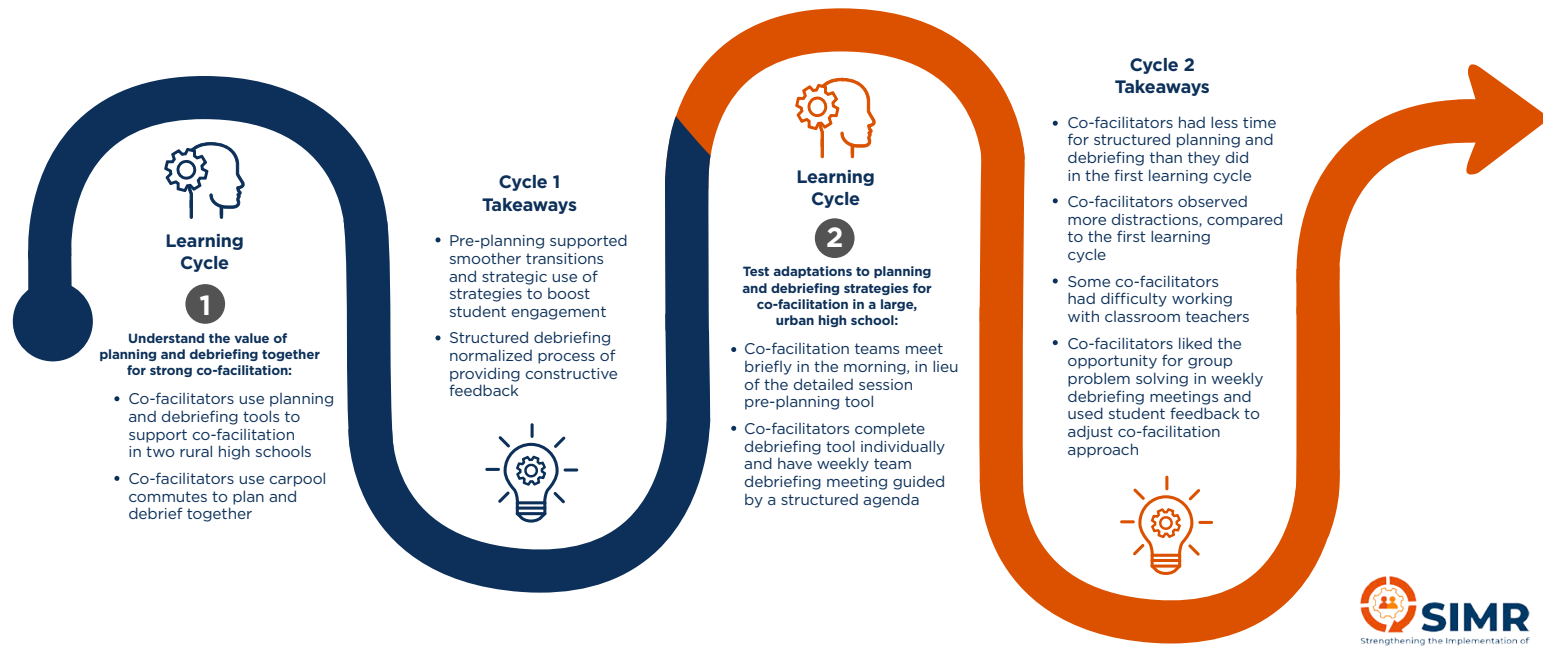
FOCUS FOR RAPID CYCLE LEARNING

- Content Engagement: Support facilitators through planning and debriefing strategies



KEY LESSONS FOR THE FIELD

- Implementing a co-facilitator conversation guide, detailed pre-planning tool, and debriefing tool can help facilitators conduct planning and debriefing in a structured and intentional way
- Using a classroom teacher conversation guide can help facilitators and classroom teachers talk about expectations for classroom management
- Co-regulation coaching offers one promising way to help HMRE facilitators be more explicit and conscious about centering co-regulation in their facilitation, ultimately encouraging the youth they work with to develop healthy self-regulation skills





Road Map for Change

YOUTH & FAMILY SERVICES



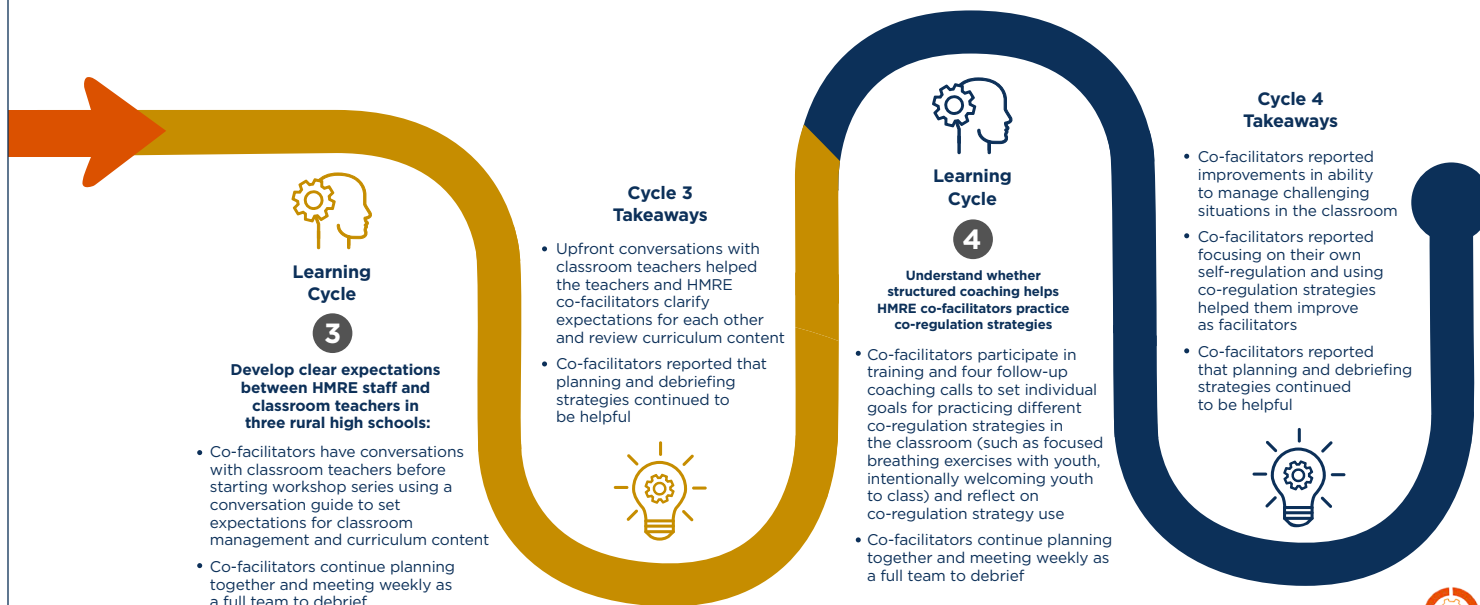
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KEY LESSONS FOR THE FIELD

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■ For more information

The SIMR team has produced a series of publications and resources for researchers and practitioners who are interested in learning more about SIMR, rapid cycle learning, and program improvement. All of these SIMR reports and briefs are available on the [OPRE website](#):

- **Developing Strategies to Address Implementation Challenges Facing Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Grant Recipients.** This report describes the design of the SIMR study and how participating grant recipients used LI² to design and test strategies to address implementation challenges.
- **Strategies for Addressing Common Implementation Challenges in Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Programs: A Guide for Supporting Program Improvement Efforts.** This guide presents promising approaches and strategies for addressing implementation problems common to HMRE services, based on a literature review and active engagement with researchers and practitioner experts.
- **Conducting Rapid Cycle Learning with Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Programs for Youth: Findings from the Strengthening the Implementation of Marriage and Relationship Programs Project.** This report describes the rapid cycle learning process and findings for five youth-serving HMRE grant recipients.
- **Conducting Rapid Cycle Learning with Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Programs for Adults: Findings from the Strengthening the Implementation of Marriage and Relationship Programs Project.** This report describes the rapid cycle learning process and findings for the five adult-serving HMRE grant recipients.
- **Iterating to Improve: Lessons from Rapid Cycle Learning with Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Grant Recipients.** In this digital essay, grant recipient staff who participated in SIMR share their insights and advice for conducting rapid cycle learning.
- **Practice briefs.** The SIMR team developed a series of eight practice briefs to share tips, insights, and practical applications of SIMR findings with other HMRE practitioners on the following topics:
 - Leveraging partnerships to improve recruitment
 - Recruiting Spanish-speaking men
 - Supporting co-facilitation in the classroom
 - Providing skill coaching to reinforce workshop content
 - Adopting a motivation-driven approach to case management
 - Delivering engaging virtual workshop sessions
 - Using data to guide program improvement
 - Supporting HMRE staff

References

Alamillo, J., L. Ritchie, and R. Wood. “The Effects of Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Programs for Youth.” OPRE Report #2021-225. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021

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