



STARS: Youth-Driven Mental Health Stigmatization Reduction Campaigns in Schools

The System Transformation of Area Resources and Services (STARS) project of central Minnesota is promoting a unique approach to addressing peer stigmatization of children and youth with mental health difficulties. STARS' Children's Mental Health Stigmatization Reduction Campaign is founded upon the belief that true stigmatization reduction will only happen through youth involvement, peer education, and awareness. Developed by social marketer Tara Freed, the STARS Campaign challenges youth in area schools to develop and implement original mental health awareness campaigns that are focused on reducing mental health stigmatization. This peer-education approach is open to any group of young persons aged K-12. STARS employs a variety of strategies to motivate youth and encourage them to be creative in designing and implementing their own anti-stigmatization programs.

How the Program Works

Schools find out about STARS mostly by word of mouth from STARS representatives. The project is also promoted by STARS' staff emailing and calling key personnel at local

schools, such as principals, assistant principals, and school counselors. An anti-stigmatization campaign begins once a school contacts STARS to express interest. A group of students who wish to be involved are chosen by the school to work directly with STARS on developing an original campaign. There are three key pieces of the campaign development process that youth need to complete in order to produce their own campaign with STARS. These components are usually broken into three meetings with STARS staff.

During the first meeting, the policies and procedures for setting up a campaign are reviewed by STARS staff and the youth group. STARS staff explain that youth can create a budget of up to \$1,000, but that all expenditures must be approved by STARS staff. Furthermore, in order for STARS to sponsor a campaign, the campaign's message must be positive, and not include "scare tactics," or messages that might reinforce negative perceptions of people with mental health difficulties. Additionally, STARS requires that all campaign materials be factual, culturally and linguistically competent, and supportive of all youth. Within the

limitations of these guidelines, the youth are encouraged to develop any campaign that raises awareness about youth with mental health difficulties to fellow youth and the community.

Although all youth must go through the same process for getting their projects approved, the level of teacher and STARS staff participation in developing their project varies, depending on the age and grade of the students. At the elementary schools, teachers and STARS staff are more heavily involved in the planning processes, while in middle or high schools, students make almost all the decisions.

Once the youth have developed a campaign, they schedule the second meeting with STARS, during which the youth present a written campaign proposal that is broken into three parts. The first part of the proposal details their campaign. This part describes where and when the campaign will take place, and who the target audience will be. The youth also describe how the campaign will be implemented. The second part of the proposal lists the resources the youth need in order to complete their campaign, and the final part outlines the budget allocations.

After the youth deliver their campaign proposal during the second meeting, STARS reviews it and makes a decision on the proposal within a week. Given the interactive nature of the previous meetings, there are rarely any surprises, and most proposals are accepted. However, as the campaign evolves, STARS usually helps manage some of the logistical challenges that come up, and ensures that the campaign remains in line with the policy and procedural guidelines. Meeting three takes place in order to check up and finalize everything before the youth get started implementing the campaign.

Once the program is approved, the group of youth needs to choose a key adult advisor, and, if the group is based at a middle or high school, a key youth. These people will lead the campaign's development and implementation. They will also be the main contacts between their group and STARS. STARS' involvement and interaction with these key contacts varies throughout the campaign.

Campaign Examples

So far, STARS' youth-driven campaigns have been implemented in seven schools and have reached over 4,000 students and staff. Students at Clearview Elementary created the slogan, "Think green, don't be mean, so we can be seen and reach our dreams." Ivan Sand Community School's Youth Leadership class had

the idea of going "to the top" by educating their state representatives at Mental Health Day on the Hill at the state capitol. Additionally, the Sauk Rapids High School Improvisational Acting Group performed a silent skit depicting a young girl who managed to cope with the many negative influences that youth face today, such as drugs, stealing, and alcohol—without resorting to suicide. The skit was taped and is now shown at high schools around central Minnesota.

The Rocori High School Student Council organized a Suicide Prevention Day, where they handed out "You're Important" buttons and yellow ribbons to more than 850 students. They also sponsored a mother to come and talk to the entire school on how she was affected when her son committed suicide. On Wellness Day, The Monticello Middle School Peer Mentors performed a skit for their entire school. "Turnaround" focused on positive coping skills and making good choices. After the skit, the mentors broke the audience into five workshops and talked about what mental health means to them and where students can go for help.

Evaluation Efforts Past and Future

Current evaluation of the STARS program is minimal. The youth involved in the project answer some basic questions about their perceptions of the campaign's success. Through

this basic evaluation process, STARS found that every campaign group felt that its project was a success, and that almost all of the campaigns affected more people than their original target audience.

STARS' goal is now to find out if these youth-driven campaigns are actually reducing stigmatization associated with youth mental illness. Therefore, STARS is currently working on revising its evaluation process in order to make it less subjective and more evidence-based. Campaign groups will still have to complete their own evaluations as before. However, people in the target audience will now be asked to complete a survey with questions relating to a vignette about a new classmate who is experiencing a mental health difficulty. Respondents will take the survey again at the end of the campaign. STARS' aim is to get at least 50% of the audience to complete the survey both times, with an ideal target of 80%. The results of these data will be used to measure the overall effectiveness of the youth-led projects. STARS also hopes to inspire and help other schools and service organizations nationwide develop and implement their own youth-driven campaigns.

Author

Simon Quartly is a senior at The Evergreen State College.

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