

# **Lions Quest Skills for Action: Implementation and Outcome Study in Wood County, West Virginia**

## **Final Report**

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## **Abstract**

This study investigated the effects of the Skills for Action (SFC) program on students' social and emotional skills, behavior, and academic effort. SFC is part of the Lions Quest suite of programs provided by the Lions Clubs International Foundation. SFC is a comprehensive, research-based program for students in ninth through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. The study was conducted in Wood County Schools in West Virginia as part of a larger initiative that provided all public elementary, middle, and high schools in the school district with access to the full set of materials, workshops, and sustainability planning support of the Lions Quest programs.

American Institutes for Research conducted the evaluation, which aimed to document program implementation and assess changes in students' social and emotional skills, positive and negative behaviors, teamwork skills, and leadership skills. The main data sources included student surveys and records of office disciplinary referrals. The study sample was composed of ninth and tenth grade students in one large high school that implemented the SFC program and two high schools in the district that did not implement the program.

### ***Program Implementation***

SFC was implemented as part of Developmental Guidance by trained teachers. The teachers expressed a high level of satisfaction with the program, and in particular with its rich content and hands-on activities. At the same time, lack of a school-wide vision for implementation and insufficient teacher preparation time inhibited implementation. The findings suggest that including teachers in decision-making about the implementation model and enabling more flexible scheduling in terms of length and timing of sessions can promote teacher buy-in and student participation.

### ***Program Effects***

Students in SFC classrooms were less frequently involved in incidents of disruptive and aggressive behavior than students in comparison classrooms within the same school. In addition, students in the school that implemented SFC reported stronger teamwork and leadership skills than students in comparison schools. There were no detectable program effects on students' grade point average in English language arts or absenteeism.

### ***Conclusions***

The findings of this study are encouraging. Despite implementation challenges, the program demonstrated several positive effects. The teamwork and leadership skills that the students acquired through the program are essential for cooperative learning in the classroom and for successful involvement in service learning. Moreover, these are essential 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills that can foster college and career readiness. The positive effects on students' behavior can help students stay on track for graduation and avoid the adverse effects of school disciplinary actions. Additional research is needed to replicate the program effects with a larger and more ethnically and racially diverse sample. Longitudinal research is also needed to examine the long-term effects of SFC on students in secondary and post-secondary schools.

# Introduction

This study investigated the effects of the Skills for Action (SFC) program on students' social and emotional skills, behavior, and academic effort. SFC is part of the Lions Quest suite of programs provided by the Lions Clubs International Foundation (LCIF).<sup>1</sup> SFC is a comprehensive, research-

***Skills for Action aims to promote high school students' social and emotional competencies, character values, attitudes consistent with a drug-free lifestyle, and 21st century skills.***

based program for 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade students. The program includes introductory and refresher training to teachers and school administrators, Curriculum Manual of 33 lessons, and Skills Bank of 160 learning activities. SFC aims to promote social and emotional learning, defined as “the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2015). In addition, SFC aims to promote 21<sup>st</sup> century skills (e.g., critical thinking, problem

solving, communication, collaboration, and leadership skills) as well as attitudes consistent with a healthy and drug-free lifestyle. The service learning component of SFC provides opportunities for students to participate in the life of the school and their community in ways that are meaningful to them, and that, according to prior research, can promote their personal and social responsibility and sense of connectedness to their school and community (Kackar-Cam & Schmidt, 2014).

With the generous support of the NoVo Foundation, LCIF partnered with Wood County in West Virginia in an initiative to promote social and emotional learning in elementary and secondary schools in the school district. American Institutes for Research (AIR) evaluated the

***The current evaluation aimed to expand our understanding of the effects of Skills for Action on high school students by examining changes in students' attitudes and behavior.***

implementation of Lions Quest programs in elementary, middle, and high schools. This report summarizes the findings from the evaluation of SFC. The current evaluation aimed to expand our understanding of the effectiveness of SFC by examining changes in students' attitudes and behavior after two years of program implementation.

## The Importance of School-Based SEL Programs for High School Students

The high school years coincide with a gradual lessening of teens' dependence on adult authority figures for support and an increased emphasis on the peer group in defining feelings of individual self-worth, as well as

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<sup>1</sup> Lions Clubs International members support the Lions Quest programs financially and through volunteer work. The Lions Clubs International Foundation has awarded implementation grants to promote positive youth development and help children grow in a positive direction, free from the dangers of drugs and violence and able to make positive decisions.

increased risk-taking and experimentation (Jaworska & MacQueen, 2015). At the same time, cognitive, social, and emotional development during the high school years enable adolescents to understand and appreciate different viewpoints, and to reflect more deeply about what they value about themselves, their friends, families, school, and culture (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Developmental researchers see this time period in young people's lives as important for shaping personal goals and future aspirations, and for finding the motivation to endure the challenges associated with achieving academic and social goals (Halpern, Heckman, & Larson, 2013).

Social, emotional, and behavior problems can negatively affect high school students' lives in the short and long term. For example, teachers tend to provide less guidance, less attention, and less positive feedback to disruptive and less socially skilled students, thereby contributing to these students' academic deficits and school disengagement (Hirn & Scott, 2014). Longitudinal research suggests that social, emotional, and behavior problems in high school can lead to high school dropout as well as problems later in life, such as reduced likelihood to persist in and complete postsecondary education (Finn, Fish, & Scott, 2008), substance abuse and violence (Cooper, Wood, Orcutt, & Albino, 2003), and lower level of aspirations and hopes among young adults for leading a healthy and successful life (Chen & Vazsonyi, 2013).

School-based SEL programs bear a special importance for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Economic adversity has been linked to high levels of family stress and instability, which in turn may lead to elevated risks of behavior problems, reduced social competence, and lower-levels of self-regulation of children and adolescents (Barnett, 2008). In addition, many adolescents, especially those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, do

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not have access to organized youth activities beyond the regular school day (such as community programs and extracurricular activities), which provide opportunities and conditions that may be particularly suitable to fostering positive youth development. Such organized activities can provide safe environments facilitated by trained adults in which adolescents build relationships that nurture and challenge them, build their competencies, and help them understand their impact on their environment as well as how they can leverage the

resources offered by their environment (Goleman & Senge, 2014). Universal, school-based SEL programs can ensure that all students received equal access to learning opportunities which are necessary for their academic, social and emotional growth and healthy lifestyle. In particular, when schools implement research-based programs that provide a comprehensive instruction of inter-connected skills, students can show visible improvements in their attitudes and behavior (Williamson, Modecki, & Guerra, 2015).

## **Program Description**

SFC has been widely used in the United States and internationally. The program materials have been translated into 36 languages and adapted for implementation in 90 countries around the world. SFC uses an approach that is consistent with the positive youth development framework. This framework integrates two key ideas. First is the belief that all students possess strengths.

Second, when students' strengths are further supported by the developmental assets in their environments, the students develop academically, socially, and emotionally, and have the skills to handle negative life events, difficult social situations, and academic problems (Lerner, Lerner, Bowers, & Geldhof, 2015). The developmental assets that schools can provide are a safe and caring school climate and opportunities for SEL through formal, age-appropriate curricula (Theokas & Lerner, 2006).

SFC aims to build the motivation, skills, and self-confidence that adolescents need to take active and meaningful roles in addressing the issues that affect their lives and their communities. SFC lessons focus on integrating service learning with character development, social and emotional competencies, workplace skills, and positive prevention in the context of a respectful learning environment and school-community partnerships. SFC includes a Curriculum Manual of 33 lessons and Skills Bank of 160 learning activities that can be taught separately or together in one semester, 1-, 2-, 3-, and 4-year models. Alternatively, the lesson plans can be integrated into existing curricula, such as health education, or used across the curriculum.

***Skills for Action uses an approach that is consistent with the positive youth development framework.***

SFC's design elements can be represented by the acronym SAFE: **s**equenced (activities are coordinated to a learning progression), **a**ctive (activities are interactive and hands-on), **f**ocused (emphasizing the development of personal and social skills), and **e**xplicit (activities target specific social and emotional skills). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has identified these design elements as empirically linked to improved behavioral and academic outcomes (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

SFC follows the principles of experiential learning – a framework for learning through interactive practices whereby the participants learn from their own and each other's' experiences, and are actively and personally engaged in the process. These interactive practices include personal

***SFC follows the principles of experiential learning – a framework for learning through interactive practices whereby the participants learn from their own and each other's' experiences, and are actively and personally engaged in the process.***

journals, reflective personal essays and thought questions, role plays and drama activities, games and simulations, relating to personal stories, empathy-taking activities, and discussions and reflection in cooperative groups. All of these activities contain a common element of learning from immediate experience by engaging the learners in the process both intellectually and emotionally. To be successful, teachers should serve as facilitators in order to enable learners to be directly in touch with the concepts and skills being studied, rather than just watching, reading, hearing, or thinking about them (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

SFC encourages teachers to include service learning as part of program implementation, and provides step-by-step instructions for service learning. LCIF offers schools support in identifying and forming partnerships with local businesses and community-based organizations to fulfill needs for supplies and materials and project opportunities. SFC's

approach to service learning is based on research that has shown that service learning, especially when conducted as part of a structured, well-guided process and continuous self-reflection, can have significant positive effects on academic, personal, social, and civic outcomes for adolescents (van Goethem, van Hoof, Orobio de Castro, Van Aken, & Hart, 2014; Lakin & Mahoney, 2006). SFC lesson plans on service learning provide structured time for students to plan, troubleshoot, consult with peers and adults, discuss, and write about what they did and saw as they participated in service learning activities. These service learning activities either place students into existing service agencies or involve students in planning and conducting a service project that meets actual school or community needs.

Lessons are intended to be taught by trained, Lions Quest–certified teachers. Curriculum materials are only available to trained teachers. Training consists of a two- or three-day workshop. According to the developer, a large range of targeted staff development inservice workshops and training-of-trainers programs, intended to prepare schools to conduct their own staff development, are also available.

Previous evaluations of SFC showed a mix of positive and null effects on students' attitudes and behavior. Laird, Bradley, and Black (1998) evaluated the effectiveness of a previous edition of SFC in a quasi-experimental design study that included almost 1,800 students from 25 high schools in seven states. The participating schools were broadly representative of U.S. public schools in terms of demographic composition and urbanicity. Outcomes for 473 students in classrooms using SFC were compared with outcomes for 257 students in comparison classrooms in the same or nearby schools. The study focused on SFC as implemented in classrooms rather than as a schoolwide intervention. The study authors reported no effects on student attitudes as measured by the Student Service Learning Survey.

A second study (Laird, 2009) evaluated the implementation of SFC by the Tennessee Department of Education in collaboration with Volunteer Tennessee, under the Learn and Serve grant. The study author reported positive program effects on the number of hours spent volunteering in the community as well as attitudes related to service learning.

A third study of SFC used a quasi-experimental design study to measure the effects of a subset of SFC lesson plans focused on preventing the use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs (ATOD; Ferrell & Lewis, 2006). In this study, which compared students in three intervention schools to four comparison high schools in Florida, SFC had a statistically significant positive effect on participants' reported number of friends who used ATOD. Together, findings from prior evaluations of SFC suggest that there is value in continued program evaluation to inform program development and implementation.

# Methodology

## Design and Sample

In this study we employed a pre-post, intervention-comparison group design. Since the students were not randomly assigned to the groups, this is a quasi-experimental design.

The study took place in Wood County Schools, a school district that serves the Parkersburg area—a small urban city and its nearby towns in west-central West Virginia, adjacent to the Ohio River. Of the three public high schools in the district, one school (“School A”) prepared for implementation in the first year of the initiative (2012–13) and implemented SFC for the subsequent two years (2013–14 and 2014–15). A second high school (“School B”) prepared for implementation in the first year of the initiative (2012–13) and implemented SFC for one year (2013–14). The third high school (“School C”) did not implement SFC.

School A is a large, comprehensive high school with nearly 1,900 students. The school serves a primarily White student population (94 percent). Nearly half of the students (49 percent) are eligible for the free or reduced-price lunch program. School B is a large, comprehensive high school with nearly 1,600 students. The school serves a primarily White student population (97 percent). Nearly half of the students (48 percent) are eligible for the free or reduced-price lunch program. School C is a small high school with more than 600 students. The school serves a primarily White student population (98 percent). More than a third of the students (37 percent) are eligible for the free or reduced-price lunch program. The three schools are comparable with regard to the percentage of students proficient in English language arts and mathematics. In School A and School B, SFC was delivered during the Developmental Guidance period (also called “homeroom”). Students received half a credit for their participation. Because the level of program implementation was more consistent in the ninth and tenth grades, this study focused on the implementation and outcomes of SFC in the ninth and tenth grades. Schools B and C did not implement other SEL programs.

## Measures

### *Student Social and Emotional Learning Survey*

Survey data from the three high schools in the district were available for the end of the second year of program implementation (May–June 2015). The student survey measured perceived social and emotional competence in the learning environment. The survey was anonymous and confidential; it included seven scales, further described below.

**Safe and Respectful Climate.** This scale was taken from the high school version of the Conditions for Learning survey (Osher, Kendziora, & Chinen, 2008). It was rated on a 3-point scale (yes, sometimes, no). The scale included six items, such as “Students at this school are often teased or picked on,” and “I worry about crime and violence in school.” Cronbach’s alpha ( $\alpha$ ), a statistic calculated to indicate how consistently sets of items measure an underlying construct, was equal to 0.70, which exceeds the What Works Clearinghouse minimum reliability standard of 0.50 (What Works Clearinghouse, 2014).

**Peer Social and Emotional Culture.** This scale was taken from the high school version of the Conditions for Learning survey (Osher, Kendziora, & Chinen, 2008). It was rated on a 3-point scale (yes, sometimes, no). The scale included four items, such as “Most students in my school try to work out their disagreements with other students by talking to them,” “Most students in my school stop and think before doing anything when they get angry,” and “Most students in my school try to talk to other students if they are having a problem with them.” Internal consistency was adequate (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.64$ ).

**Leadership Skills.** The items of this scale were taken from the Youth Leadership Skills Survey (Newman, 2008). Students rated each item on a 4-point scale (no ability, some ability, good ability, excellent ability). The scale included five items, such as “I can organize a group activity,” and “I can lead group discussions.” Internal consistency was high (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.86$ ).

**Community Service Self-Efficacy.** Four items were taken from the Community Service Self-Efficacy Scale (Reeb, Katsuyama, Sammon, & Yoder, 1998). Students rated their level of self-efficacy on a 5-point scale (quite uncertain, uncertain, moderately certain, certain, and very certain). Sample items include “I am confident that, through community service, I can make a difference in my community,” and “In the future, I will be able to find community service opportunities which are relevant to my interests and abilities.” Internal reliability was adequate ( $\alpha = 0.80$ ).

**Teamwork Skills.** The seven-item Attitude Toward Group Work scale of the Leadership and Personal Development Inventory (LPDI) was developed by Carter (1989) for youth ages 13–19. Students rated each item on a 7-point scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” Sample items include “I am confident in the ability of my group members,” and “I am able to communicate goals and objectives to group members.” Internal reliability was high ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ).

**Risk Behavior.** The nine-item Risk Behavior scale from the Individual Protective Factors Index (IPFI) was used in this study. Students responded to the prompt, “Please indicate how often these things happened to you within the last year...” using a 3-point scale (“three times or more,” “once or twice,” “not at all”). Sample items are “Skipped school for a whole day (without parents’ knowledge)” and “Got into a fist fight.” The IPFI was developed as a tool for evaluating prevention programs for youth in the 10-to-16 age range. Development of the IPFI included a pilot test with 642 youth (aged 10–16) in five sites nationwide, and a validation sample of 2,416 youths in 15 sites nationwide. The instrument has established reliability and validity. In this study, the scale showed adequate internal reliability ( $\alpha = 0.74$ ).

## ***Office Disciplinary Referrals***

Administrative records were obtained for the 2012–13 (baseline) and 2014–15 school years. We used the West Virginia Policy 4373 (expected behavior in safe and supportive schools) definition of inappropriate behavior: “*Behavior that disrupts the learning environment in a manner that effectively deters future incidents and affirms respect for individuals. Inappropriate behaviors include but are not limited to incidents of harassment, intimidation, bullying, substance abuse and/or violence.*” Using this guidance, West Virginia Education Information System (WVEIS) classifies inappropriate behavior into four levels:

- Level 1: Minimally Disruptive Behaviors—disrupt the educational process and the orderly operations of the school but do not pose direct danger to self or others (e.g., Disruptive/Disrespectful Conduct).

- Level 2: Disruptive and Potentially Harmful Behaviors—disrupt the educational process and/or pose potential harm or danger to self and/or others. The behavior is committed willfully but not in a manner that is intended maliciously to cause harm or danger to self and/or others (e.g., Physical Fight Without Injury).
- Level 3: Imminently Dangerous, Illegal, and/or Aggressive Behaviors—are willfully committed and are known to be illegal and/or harmful to people and/or property (e.g., Harassment/Bullying/Intimidation).
- Level 4: Safe Schools Act Behaviors—are consistent with those addressed in West Virginia codes (e.g., Possession and/or Use of Dangerous Weapon).

### ***Implementation Quality***

The evaluation team used four sources of data to examine implementation quality. The primary source was monthly implementation logs. The evaluation team requested that teachers implementing SFC complete online implementation logs throughout the school year. The purpose of the logs was to capture the scope of activities conducted in class during the allocated time for Lions Quest as well as any additional integration across the curriculum. Respondents could also complete optional questions in their logs, including a description of accomplishments and challenges and questions to the program developer.

Second, to supplement the data collected through implementation logs, the evaluation team conducted semistructured interviews with school principals and teachers. The interviews and focus groups collected information about changes to the original implementation plan and barriers to implementation.

The evaluation team conducted classroom observations to corroborate the information obtained through logs and interviews. The classroom observations gathered data on instructional time management and techniques. Finally, the evaluation team gathered information about training participation and overall commitment to social and emotional learning. Using the implementation information, the evaluation team identified the homeroom teachers who implemented SFC and homeroom teachers who did not implement SFC or who had an extremely low level of implementation (less than 20 percent of the SFC lesson plans).

### ***Student Characteristics and School Characteristics***

Student administrative records submitted by Wood County Schools and West Virginia Department of Education data were used to collect information on student characteristics (grade level, gender, teacher/classroom, absenteeism) and school characteristics (enrollment, percentage of students eligible for free/reduced-price lunch, school academic performance, percentage White students). These data were entered into the statistical analyses to control for variables that can be potentially associated with the outcomes of interest. For example, student absenteeism may reduce students' attendance in Lions Quest sessions. Absenteeism also may be associated with students' needs (e.g., social difficulties), which in turn may predict behavior at school.

# Results

## Skills for Action Implementation

### *Training, Participation, and Preparedness to Implement Skills for Growing*

Most of the invited staff from School A and School B (89 percent; 199 individuals) who were scheduled to implement the program attended the introductory training provided by Lions Clubs International Foundation (LCIF). Refresher training workshops and training were provided for new teachers were provided in subsequent years as required by the program. The training was delivered in accordance with the program specifications, including hands-on activities, opportunities to practice instructional strategies, and examples of lesson delivery. The remainder of this chapter focuses on School A, which implemented SFC for the duration of the initiative. School B had partial implementation in its single year of implementation, according to interviews and teacher implementation logs.

### *Dosage of Skills for Action*

Teachers scheduled Lions Quest lessons in correspondence with the scope and sequence determined by the school in consultation with the Wood County Board of Education and LCIF. Teachers varied in the number and duration of the SFC lessons delivered.

On average, students participated in 41 percent of the total number of lessons that were recommended in the schools' pacing guides (53 lessons) and 44 percent of the activities from the Skills Bank (57 activities). The average SFC lesson lasted 17 minutes – less than half the recommended time for a lesson. Most teachers skipped about half of the activities or spread a single lesson over two weeks. Teachers noted two main reasons for the shortened duration of the lessons. The first was low teacher buy-in. Teachers who did not believe it was part of their job responsibility to teach SEL were less likely to invest in preparation time in advance of their SFC lessons. The second reason was scheduling. SFC lessons were shortest during the first period of the day, when many of the students left the classroom for breakfast.<sup>2</sup>

### *Teachers' Feedback*

#### *Training*

The training was delivered in accordance with the program specifications, and included hands-on activities, opportunities to practice instructional strategies, and examples of lesson delivery. However, some teachers suggested that additional training was needed on the following topics: (a) how SFC relates to other districtwide and schoolwide initiatives, (b) how to respond when

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<sup>2</sup> In the school year after the end of the initiative, the high school extended its regular school day by 10 minutes to minimize scheduling conflicts with the second-chance breakfast, which gives students the opportunity to have breakfast at the end of the first period of the day.

students raise “tough issues” during whole group discussions, and (c) how to ensure coherence and continuity between SFC lessons and other resources used during the rest of the school week as part of the homeroom period. Some of the teachers felt that the timing of their refresher training (two days after the end of the school year) limited its effectiveness. They argued that refresher training delivered before the beginning of the school year or during the school year would have been more effective. As one teacher commented, *“We just all wanted out of here and instead we had to spend a day in training.”*

### **Content and Activities**

Teachers expressed a high level of satisfaction with the Skills Bank and the scripted lesson plans that SFC provided. In particular, teachers were satisfied with the large selection of activities and the creative ideas for hands-on activities. As a teacher commented, *“There are so many exercises you could just do with the kids in the classroom and get them up, out of their seats. There are just so many ways you can integrate what you have, and expand on it and go further with it, even.”*

Some teachers felt that the SFC program helped them involve those students who typically did not participate in class in peer group discussions and activities. As one teacher noted: *“The thing that I garnered from all of this is, in my mind, getting the kids out of their shell. Getting a kid out of his seat, getting him to decorate and write things then hand that to a younger kid and watch that younger kid go, ‘Wow, I’ve never gotten anything like this before, ever, especially from a big kid.’”*

At the same time, some of the teachers struggled to get students’ attention when starting each SFC lesson. Some teachers felt that connecting SFC lessons to recent events in the classroom or at the school could get more students to listen and participate. As one teacher noted: *“You need*

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*to know what’s on their minds and then you can talk about [SEL]. There is no [other] way. If a student feels like he has to defend his girlfriend’s honor and that’s what the kids are talking about – you talk about it as circumstances arise. Dealing with conflict and identifying your conflict style – I think that’s something that you can put in [SFC lessons] to let them think about.”* Teachers described creative ideas for introducing the SFC lessons. For example, three teachers formed a team that identified short video clips on YouTube and used these video clips to begin each SFC lesson.

## Implementation Challenges

### A Shared Vision for Program Implementation

***Teachers felt that they should have been part of the program implementation planning process, and had different opinions about the best implementation model.***

The school principal was very supportive of the program and encouraged teachers to take advantage of the many resources available to them. The Lions Quest coordinator created and followed an implementation plan, with support from district coaches who were trained by LCIF. Nevertheless, teachers felt that they should have been part the planning process. Teachers had different opinions about the best implementation model. While some teachers believed that staff buy-in would have been higher if SFC were integrated across the curriculum, others believed that homeroom time enabled teachers to follow the structure of the lesson plans with the highest fidelity. In addition, teachers reported not being told how the scope and sequence had been picked by their school and why the particular skills and their sequence were considered the best fit for this student population.

Teachers also noted that without close monitoring and SEL instructional leadership from school administrators, there is little motivation to adhere to the program as designed. As one teacher commented, *“No one has come around and really promoted Lions Quest and no one mentions it during school meetings.”* Another teacher highlighted the absence of schoolwide data to guide implementation: *“We have a good school and there isn’t a lot of bullying, but we don’t have a group that looks at the school’s climate data, although we probably should.”*

### Preparation Time

The schools allocated time for teachers to prepare for SFC instruction, but many teachers used this time for planning for academic instruction instead. As one teacher reported, *“I’m not going to devote any other time [to SFC]. I’m already spending too much time at home grading papers. When it comes to something like this [SEL], it’s not going to get the attention it deserves.”* Another teacher said, *“I think a lot of teachers are struggling with the idea of how they are going to incorporate that [SFC] class into their curriculum because a lot of them have, at least, two or three plans or preps that they have to do. With Lions Quest, I have six classes to prepare for. I’m extremely busy. This year, I go to bed about midnight every night.”* In addition to lack of time due to high workload, school closures led to reducing the time originally allocated to SFC implementation. On average, schools had 16 snow days per year during the initiative.

The teachers demonstrated knowledge of SFC’s resources for schoolwide implementation, which aim to promote a shared vision and language for youth development, partnerships with the community, and coordination of service learning projects across grade levels. However, the teachers reported a lack of time for working on implementation beyond the classroom. In addition, there was no time for school administrators or teachers to align SFC with the discipline policy of the school, schoolwide displays of posters and student art, events, or assemblies.

## **Teachers' Level of Comfort With Experiential Learning**

Of the variety of SFC activities, teachers tended to conduct the recommended whole group discussions and guided practice using the student workbooks. The more common activities could be described as intellectual discussions of skills and values. Common examples of

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implementation which teachers wrote in their logs were: *"We read through the articles together as a class and provided examples from our own lives of being responsible," "We talked about what makes us angry and what we can do to calm down a little,"* and, *"We had a class discussion on the types of stress that they have faced or are facing and types of stress relieving strategies."*

Teachers tended to minimize the time allocated for students' sharing of personal stories and hands-on, cooperative learning in small groups. Teachers reported that hands-on activities take more time to prepare. In addition, they were concerned about a lack of sufficient instructional time for hands-on activities. Some teachers felt that scheduling larger blocks of time (e.g., 90

minutes every two weeks rather than 45 minutes once a week) could make the SFC implementation more meaningful because the activities would feel less rushed.

Classroom observations revealed that some teachers felt uncomfortable managing discussions about traumatic experiences that students shared. Follow-up interviews confirmed that some teachers felt professionally unprepared for some conversations. As one teacher noted:

*I am a science teacher, so that's my training. I would rather spend longer class periods on my actual science lessons rather than doing the social and emotional stuff. The way that things are changing, I see where it [SEL] is needed, but sometimes I just kind of want to do my job and my job only.*

Another common reason for skipping some of the SFC classroom activities was the relationships among students, as perceived by their teachers. Several teachers noted that when students did not trust each other, they opted out of discussions and activities. As one teacher explained:

*My kids don't like to discuss, because what I have in that group is students who have nothing in common. They happen to all be sophomores at the same high school. Some of them don't like each other. They hide that very well in surface interactions. But, if you're going to do a discussion, they don't want to reveal their inner soul to their enemy. What I have been doing with the discussion things, I make them debate. I tell them: This side of the room – you agree; that side of the room – disagree. Okay, persuade each other. I get some participation from that.*

Similarly, teachers had different levels of comfort with service learning. While several teachers reported facilitating service learning projects that benefitted local elementary and middle schools, other teachers declined to implement this program component. Teachers noted that they were not held accountable for implementing service learning. Teachers who believed in the

importance of service learning were more likely to implement this part of the program. As one teacher noted: *“I put a lot of emphasis on service learning because my students don't do it otherwise. This gives these kids something that they desperately need and, secondly, it really looks good on their resume when they put it in for college.”*

Similar to teachers' suggestions to allocate a 90-minute period for SFC instruction, some teachers recommended allocating days in the school year for service learning. Conducting service learning throughout the school year, especially if it involved field trips, required parental consent and office paperwork. Teachers reported that they had limited time to coordinate such activities. As one teacher explained:

*Knowing you have like a 45-minute window, there's not a lot you can do. If we had a couple days in the year as service days, more teachers would buy in to doing some sort of project. But without that, really the possibility and trying to figure out how to get your kids out of the school on a community project, that makes it difficult to do that.*

## **The Effects of SFC on Students' Attitudes and Self-Reported Behavior**

This section summarizes the results of the student survey analysis. Survey data were available for 111 students from School A and 197 students from across both Schools B and C combined. The students from Schools B and C were considered “comparison group” because both groups did not implement SFC in 2014–15 and the School B students were in classrooms with extremely low level of SFC implementation in 2013–14 (fewer than 20 percent of the SFC lessons were taught).<sup>3</sup>

We conducted a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) to examine the effects of the program on students. Seven survey scales (Safe and Respectful Climate, Peer Social and Emotional Culture, Leadership Skills, Community Service Self-Efficacy, Prosocial Behavior, Teamwork Skills, and Risk Behavior) were included as the dependent variables. Analysis results showed a statistically significant multivariate effect for the study condition [Wilks' Lambda = 0.94,  $F(7,300) = 2.14$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ]. Follow-up univariate testing found statistically significant differences in leadership skills [ $F(1,306) = 3.13$ ,  $p = 0.07$ ] and teamwork skills [ $F(1,306) = 2.73$ ,  $p = 0.10$ ]. For both groups of skills, SFC students reported stronger skills than comparison group students. The effect sizes for all group differences were low. Exhibit 1 shows the details of the statistical analyses.

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<sup>3</sup> Baseline survey data were not available for the students; therefore, we could not establish baseline equivalence. Although the classrooms that took the survey were chosen based on scheduling reasons rather than program-related reasons, the low response rate (less than 40 percent) reduces the reliability of the findings. In addition, in protection of students' privacy, the school district prohibited the study team from linking survey records to administrative records.

### Exhibit 1. Comparison of the Study Groups at Posttest

|                                   | Group      | n   | Mean (SD)   | Effect Size |
|-----------------------------------|------------|-----|-------------|-------------|
| Safe and Respectful Climate       | SFC        | 111 | 2.57 (0.55) | -0.19       |
|                                   | Comparison | 197 | 2.68 (0.59) |             |
| Peer Social and Emotional Culture | SFC        | 111 | 2.51 (0.52) | -0.05       |
|                                   | Comparison | 197 | 2.54 (0.53) |             |
| Leadership Skills                 | SFC        | 111 | 2.86 (0.76) | 0.21*       |
|                                   | Comparison | 197 | 2.69 (0.84) |             |
| Community Service Self-Efficacy   | SFC        | 111 | 3.80 (0.75) | 0.19        |
|                                   | Comparison | 197 | 3.64 (0.91) |             |
| Prosocial Behavior                | SFC        | 111 | 1.99 (0.58) | 0.15        |
|                                   | Comparison | 197 | 1.90 (0.63) |             |
| Teamwork Skills                   | SFC        | 111 | 5.59 (0.95) | 0.19*       |
|                                   | Comparison | 197 | 5.35 (1.42) |             |
| Risk Behavior                     | SFC        | 111 | 2.82 (0.43) | 0.00        |
|                                   | Comparison | 197 | 2.82 (0.40) |             |

Source: AIR May–June 2015 student survey.

Notes: (1) The effect size (Cohen’s *d*) was calculated for each dyadic comparison (SFC versus comparison group) within grade level. A positive effect size indicates better outcomes for SFC students. (2) \* denotes a statistically significant effect.

## The Effects of SFC on Students’ Behavior

This section reports on the results of the analysis of students’ office disciplinary referrals for disruptive, aggressive, dangerous, and illegal student behaviors. The sample included 439 high school students who were in 10th grade in 2014–15. To be included in the analysis, the students had to be enrolled in the same high school in the 2013–14 and the 2014–15 school years and have complete administrative records for all school years 2012–13 through 2014–15. The statistical analysis compared 195 students whose homeroom teachers in ninth and tenth grade implemented SFC to students whose homeroom teachers did not implement SFC or reported an extremely low level of implementation of SFC (fewer than 20 percent of the lesson plans).

### Baseline Equivalence

We conducted a multivariate analysis of variance with study group classification as the independent variable and four levels of behavior problems as the dependent variables. Data were from the year prior to the beginning of implementation of Lions Quest in Wood County (2012–13, when students were in eighth grade). Analysis results showed a marginally significant multivariate effect [Wilks’ Lambda = 0.98;  $F(4,434) = 1.96, p = 0.10$ ]. Follow-up univariate analyses indicated a statistically significant group difference at baseline in Level 2 behaviors (Exhibit 2). However, the effect size associated with this difference was smaller than 0.25, which indicates that baseline differences can be controlled for statistically, according to the What Works Clearinghouse standards (2014). Therefore, this analysis establishes sufficient baseline

equivalence for further analysis of program impact. This means that we can be confident that the two groups were very much alike before the launch of the program.

**Exhibit 2. Comparison of the Study Groups at Baseline**

|  | Study Group | n   | Mean (SD)   | F(1,186) | Effect Size |
|--|-------------|-----|-------------|----------|-------------|
| Level 1: Minimally Disruptive Behavior                             | SFC         | 195 | 0.61 (1.38) | 1.35     | -0.11       |
|  | Comparison  | 244 | 0.78 (1.61) |          |             |
| Level 2: Disruptive and Potentially Harmful Behavior               | SFC         | 195 | 0.47 (1.03) | 4.86*    | -0.21       |
|  | Comparison  | 244 | 0.73 (1.39) |          |             |
| Level 3: Imminently Dangerous, Illegal and/or Aggressive Behaviors | SFC         | 195 | 0.12 (0.51) | <1.00    | 0.05        |
|  | Comparison  | 244 | 0.10 (0.35) |          |             |
| Level 4: Safe Schools Act Behaviors                                | SFC         | 195 | 0.02 (0.12) | 2.15     | -0.14       |
|  | Comparison  | 244 | 0.05 (0.26) |          |             |

Source: West Virginia Education Information System (WVEIS) 2012–13 and 2014–15 school years  
 Notes: \* indicates statistical significance at  $p < .05$ . The effect size was calculated as the standardized mean difference (Cohen’s  $d$ ).

***Program Effects on Behavior***

This section reports on results of an analysis of the effects of SFC on high school students’ behavior after two years of program participation. The multivariate effect of SFC was not statistically significant [Wilk’s Lambda=0.99,  $F(4,430) = 1.40, p = 0.23$ ]. However, the univariate analyses of variance showed statistically significant effect of SFC on two levels of problem behavior. First, SFC students had significantly less involvement in minimally disruptive behavior than comparison students [ $F(1,433) = 7.40, p = 0.06$ ]. Second, SFC students had lower involvement in dangerous, illegal, or aggressive behaviors than comparison students [ $F(1,433)=2.96, p = 0.05$ ]. The effect sizes associated with these differences were small and not substantively important, according to the What Works Clearinghouse (2014) standards (that is, smaller than 0.25). Details on the analysis of SFC effects on problem behavior are presented in Exhibit 3.

**Exhibit 3. Comparison of the Study Groups at Posttest**

|  | Study Group | n   | Mean (SD)   | F(1,186)          | Effect Size |
|--|-------------|-----|-------------|-------------------|-------------|
| Level 1: Minimally Disruptive Behavior                             | SFC         | 195 | 0.43 (1.06) | 3.71 <sup>a</sup> | -0.18       |
|  | Comparison  | 244 | 0.70 (1.81) |                   |             |
| Level 2: Disruptive and Potentially Harmful Behavior               | SFC         | 195 | 0.27 (0.88) | 1.80              | -0.12       |
|  | Comparison  | 244 | 0.41 (1.37) |                   |             |
| Level 3: Imminently Dangerous, Illegal and/or Aggressive Behaviors | SFC         | 195 | 0.30 (0.80) | 4.04 <sup>b</sup> | -0.18       |
|  | Comparison  | 244 | 0.47 (1.02) |                   |             |
| Level 4: Safe Schools Act Behaviors                                | SFC         | 195 | 0.01 (0.07) | <1.00             | 0.00        |
|  | Comparison  | 244 | 0.01 (0.11) |                   |             |

Source: West Virginia Education Information System (WVEIS) 2012–13 and 2014–15 school years

Notes: (1) <sup>a</sup> denotes a statistically significant difference at  $p = 0.06$ . <sup>b</sup> denotes a statistically significant difference at  $p = 0.05$ . (2) This table provides covariate adjusted means. (3) The effect size was calculated as the standardized mean difference (Cohen's  $d$ ).

Additional analyses of the effects of SFC on absenteeism and students' grade point average in English language arts did not find statistically significant differences between SFC and comparison group students.

## Discussion

Overall, the findings of the evaluation are promising. SFC showed positive effects on students' leadership skills, teamwork skills, disruptive behavior, and aggressive behavior. The combined evidence suggests that SFC prevents risk behaviors, and also promotes positive behaviors that are key to academic success in high school as well as to college and career readiness (Dymnicki, Sambolt, & Kidron, 2013). These results are impressive given that students' behavior represents a developmental trajectory influenced by social experiences at home and at school (LeBlanc, Swisher, Vitaro, & Tremblay, 2008) and therefore can be hard to change.

The positive effects of SFC on students' leadership skills are consistent with the program's overarching goal to help develop students as productive and contributing citizens. Scholars have argued that the development of leadership skills in adolescence establishes an important basis for successful service learning (Funk, 2002). In service learning projects, where students manage the entire process – from the planning to the execution and reflection stage – and adults play supportive roles as mentors and facilitators, students' leadership and teamwork skills may be necessary for effectively accomplishing the projects goals (Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005).

The findings also suggested that SFC may improve students' teamwork skills. The emphasis of the program on group work; positive, respectful communications; and acceptance of multiple viewpoints may have contributed to students' growing teamwork skills. These skills have been reported by teachers as essential for meeting behavioral expectations in the classroom (Lane, Pierson, & Givner, 2003). In addition, in light of modern leadership models, which portray the effective leader as focused on relationships and collaboration rather than as an authority figure, teamwork skills may also promote the development of effective leadership skills (Jenkins, 2005).

The study findings showed that participation in SFC reduces students' involvement in minor disciplinary infractions (e.g., defiant behavior and the use of inappropriate language in the classroom) as well as aggressive and harmful behaviors. These positive outcomes can serve as protective factors that may reduce health risk behaviors and school absenteeism in the long run (Eaton, Brener, & Kann, 2008). SFC did not impact school safety and peer social and emotional competence. This can be explained by lack of implementation of two important components of SFC. The first is the experiential or "learning by doing" nature of classroom activities recommended by the developer. Teachers often preferred classroom discussions over involving students in projects that could provide practice opportunities of a variety of skills such as communication, organization, conflict resolution, and perspective-taking skills. In addition, there was no attempt to integrate the program across the curriculum or to implement schoolwide practices that cultivate a positive school climate, such as events, family nights, and improvements of the physical campus environment. Therefore, the implementation did not reach the desired optimal level of involving all students and staff in the building. Prior research has demonstrated that schoolwide practices of positive climate building are an important part of effective violence prevention programs (Thompkins, Chauveron, Harel, & Perkins, 2014).

The implementation data collected as part of this study highlighted several key actions that school leaders can take in order to enable a comprehensive, schoolwide implementation of SFC. First, to gain teachers' buy-in, school principals should solicit the opinions of all teachers as part of the planning process and communicate back to teachers how their input affected the decisions made (e.g., the selection of SFC implementation model and pacing guide that best matches the needs of the school). Second, teachers expressed a need for information about the program's alignment with other curricula and resources used at the school. Finally, teachers reported a high level of stress and challenges associated with time management. School and district administrators can work together to identify solutions to implementation problems. Examples to solutions to the implementation problems identified in this study may include revisiting schedule for implementation, working with a community-based organization to enable service learning opportunities, providing additional access to professional development about SEL, and incentivizing teacher collaboration.

The findings of this study contribute to our understanding of SFC effects as well as to the larger body of research evidence on school-based prevention programs for high school students. Despite the growing awareness of the need for SEL programs in high schools, research on the effectiveness of SEL in high schools has constituted 10 percent to 20 percent of the research reviews of SEL programs (Durlak et al., 2011; Wilson & Lipsey, 2007; Guerra & Leidy, 2008). However, there is a need for future research to corroborate the findings of this study and to address the extent to which SFC may have long-term effects on students. Because the survey data reported here were based on comparing only one school that implemented SFC versus two high schools that did not implement SFC, the survey results cannot be regarded as conclusive. The positive effects observed in the one implementing school may be confounded with the strong school leadership as well as the positive climate of the school. Future research should include multiple high schools in each study group in order to rule out alternative explanations for the observed program effects. Finally, future research is needed for replicating the program effects with ethnically and racially diverse student populations.

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