Promising Practices:
Scale-Up of school-based programming

Fourth R Overview

The Fourth R includes a range of healthy relationships programs that have been shown to promote positive peer interactions and reduce dating and peer violence. There are different components for different grades, as well as community-based versions. Some of the recent program components have a particular emphasis on promoting positive mental health. In addition, we have developed strengths-based programming that is uniquely designed to meet the needs of Indigenous youth, LGBT2Q+ youth, and vulnerable youth. Between 2010 and 2018 we were funded through the Innovation Strategy of the Public Health Agency of Canada. Across three project phases we developed new programming components, evaluated programs, made regional adaptations, and scaled up nationally. By 2018 Fourth R programs were implemented in more than 5000 schools and community organizations nationally.

Fourth R Scale Up

Scaling up is an intentional process whereby evidence-based programs or promising practices can be implemented and delivered to more people or places. Given the complexity of scaling up within educational settings, there is no single approach that can be universally applied to all settings, and any approach will need to be tailored to the local context. When scaling up an evidence-based program, it is important to identify and maintain the key features or core components of the program that are needed for success while tailoring the approach to the local situation.

Since 2001, the Fourth R program has been scaled across Canada, the United States, and internationally in a variety of ways. In some settings, the program was institutionalized through structural system changes (e.g., safe schools legislative policy) designed to support and sustain the program (i.e., vertical scale up). Other paths to the scale up of Fourth R have been more focused on geographic reach through replication in other sites (e.g., horizontal scale-up). Our scale-up work in the Northern communities of Canada has also taken the approach of functional scale-up, where new versions of the Fourth R were developed based on local culture groups. Finally, scale-up of the Fourth R has also been spontaneous in areas where the program was taken up in new sites without any intentional guided efforts by the Fourth R team.

The purpose of this summary is to identify promising practices in the area of scaling-up school based programming. It is one of eight issue-specific summaries designed to share actionable, positive strategies to improve effectiveness in the mental health promotion and violence prevention efforts.

Promising Practices

Strategic planning for the scale-up of evidence-based programs is essential

Strategic planning for scaling-up programs is essential but often does not happen. As a result, effective programs have difficulty being implemented on a larger scale and do not achieve broad impact. It might be difficult to resist the pressure to rapidly scale-up a program, especially if the program is effective and feasible to implement. There is an advantage to systematically creating an implementation team that develops a long-term strategy for implementation and wide-spread scale of the program. This will ensure that the careful balancing act between desired outcomes and the practical realities and constraints of the setting can be considered and planned for ahead of time.

Align programs with existing school and district-level priorities, frameworks, and contexts.

Integrating and aligning the Fourth R with curriculum outcomes and district-level priorities provides the opportunity to demonstrate that the program is not an add-on to existing work. Rather than seeing the program as competing for time with academic priorities, the alignment with academic achievement outcomes, legislative frameworks, and social and emotional learning has facilitated the buy-in and adoption of the program from school-board officials and decision-makers.

Understand local context to increase the potential for scale-up success.

Understanding the diverse contexts and environments within which the scaling-up of programs occurs helps to establish realistic expectations about the pace and scope for scaling up, as well as about other aspects of the process that should be considered. For example, our strategy for scaling-up the Fourth R in urban centres is different than in rural areas because the buy-in at a district level by senior leadership is sometimes more important in urban centres than it is in rural areas. In rural schools, one champion teacher might have significant decision making power to implement and scale the program in his or her board.

Consider school and district readiness and capacity before scaling up.

Even the most comprehensive, well-designed programs can suffer from limited effectiveness if schools are not ready to adopt them. Successful scaling-up of the Fourth R is facilitated when schools and districts perceive a need for the program and are motivated to implement it. In some cases, the scale-up of the Fourth R has been successful because the timing and circumstances were right, such as in the case of the introduction of a new safe schools legislation that required all schools to implement evidence-based programming to address healthy relationships. It is also helpful if there is a general understanding of evidence-based practice within a board. Rushing the scale-up process before considering factors such as leadership buy-in, the availability of training, or understanding the need and values supportive of the program, may result in underutilized or even abandoned programs.

Consider technology to meet training needs

Training is an important part of scaling up evidence-based practice, but it can be expensive, particularly in a country as vast as Canada. In the first few years of Fourth R implementation and scale-up, the Fourth R team travelled to every district across the country to offer training to facilitators. Understanding that is approach is not always feasible or scalable, in subsequent years, we developed a Master Trainer Model where local trainers offered training to program facilitators strengthening local ownership of the program. More recently, we have developed online training modules to provide additional opportunities for training in remote and rural areas, as well as low-resource settings. It is not clear that online training replaces in-person training with respect to impact or even educator preference; however, it might be an important substitute or adjunct in certain situations.

Scale-Up of School-based Programming: Fourth R Research and Resources

Over the course of this project we have developed numerous resources that include information and guidance about implementation. We have also published several research articles and chapters for edited books.

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