



Exploring the Strengths, Impacts, and Challenges of Fourth R Partnerships: Lessons Learned from Stakeholder Interviews

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Overview

Community-university partnerships are an integral part of research and practice. Building and sustaining effective community-university partnerships for prevention programming and research are essential for the adoption and spread of evidence-based programs in schools and communities. Ideally, these collaborative relationships involve a mutually beneficial exchange of goals and outcomes. In the real world, there are numerous challenges to developing and sustaining these partnerships. The purpose of this report is to describe the benefits, impacts, and challenges of partnerships experienced by local and national Fourth R partners. The findings presented in this report are based on interviews with a wide range of stakeholders.

Fourth R partnerships are unique and different and have been established for a variety of needs. Some partnerships are pursued for acquiring resources to fill a gap in school-based health curricula, others through collaboration on a research grant, and some by hearing or seeing a presentation of the Fourth R at a conference or meeting. While the level of commitment of each type of partnership varies, they are all based on a recognition that through forming such partnerships we can achieve more than any individual organization can achieve on its own.

During the interviews, Fourth R partners did not readily distinguish between the relationships with individuals from the Fourth R team and the Fourth R program itself. Partners often talked about the program and partnership interchangeably. This was particularly the case when partners were asked to describe barriers and challenges to the partnership which in many instances were described as barriers and challenges to Fourth R implementation (versus the partnership itself). In essence, barriers of the program or challenges experienced during implementation can impact the partnership in a variety of ways and both are important to capture and consider. In this report, the community partners to which we refer includes schools, school districts, community organizations, and government agencies.



Methodology

Participants. Thirteen Fourth R partners were invited by email to participate in a telephone interview about the benefits, challenges, and impact of their Fourth R partnership. Fourth R partners who were invited to participate in interviews had either individual or organizational involvement with the Fourth R ranging from two to more than ten years. Of those 13 who were invited to participate, 11 were available to be interviewed. The partners who were interviewed were selected because they had varying degrees of collaboration with the Fourth R and the partnership reflected diversity in areas such as goals, priorities, and experiences with and level of commitment to the partnership. Partner organizations included school districts, government, universities, and community organizations.

Measures. Interview questions were semi-structured and were developed to answer the following broad questions:

1. What are the factors that contribute to successful Fourth R partnerships?
2. What are the barriers that interfere with successful Fourth partnerships?
3. What type of impact on individuals or organizations has resulted from a partnership with the Fourth R?
4. What ideas or recommendations can build future Fourth R collaborations and partnership?

Procedure. Interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes and were audio-recorded. All interviews were conducted by one member of the Fourth R team. Interviews were transcribed using a transcription program called Trint, and reviewed for accuracy by a Fourth R team member. Interviews were analyzed using a qualitative web-based program called Dedoose. An initial codebook was created that identified preliminary codes to the interview questions based on the responses of the interviews, and our knowledge and experience with Fourth R partnerships. The first cycle of coding applied the preliminary codes to the transcripts. During the first cycle of coding, we identified additional codes that were missing, and removed any codes not applied to the data. The transcripts were reviewed again during the second cycle of coding to ensure completeness of coding. Themes that emerged from the coding were given a descriptive title to capture the content of the statements. In some cases, meta-themes were created that combined conceptually similar themes. Specific quotes were identified to exemplify themes and partner names were removed for anonymity.

Findings

Initial intentions and motivations for pursuing a partnership with Fourth R

Fourth R partners were asked to describe how and why their organization became involved with the Fourth R and their initial motivations and intentions in developing the partnership. Participants indicated that Fourth R partnerships had been formed for a variety of reasons, ranging from acquiring school-based resources to collaborating on a research grant or funding proposal. Four broad themes emerged from their responses, with several sub-themes.

Filling a gap in evidence and school-based health resources.

In general, Fourth R partners described their motivation to pursue a partnership with the Fourth R as stemming from a lack of evidence- and school-based resources for health education (Fourth R notwithstanding). In addition, one partner noted that their initial motivation for seeking a partnership with the Fourth R was because their school board had a strong mandate to include social and emotional curriculum for health education and the Fourth R program met this need.

“We rolled out a new curriculum in our region last year and our redesigned curriculum made physical health education into a more holistic model that included the social and mental components of health... And our Physical and Health Education teachers were feeling really at a loss to teach around the health, the social and mental health parts of health. They had the physical part down pat. They knew how to be Physical and Health Education teachers. But this was all quite new to them. So it was very appealing that there was a program that covered all of the components that they didn't know how to teach and did it in a really simple, clear, tried and true kind of way” (Partner #1).

Meeting the requirements of school board legislation and curriculum expectations.

A few partners noted that their initial motivation in seeking out a partnership with the Fourth R was because their school board had recently developed safe schools legislation that required teachers to implement evidence-based healthy relationship or violence prevention programs.

“Truthfully it stems from our safe school legislation and the regulations that accompanying that legislation. Healthy relationships programming is a requirement for all schools in our region and so this partnership was a godsend and helped us make it possible for schools to do just that with evidence-based programming” (Partner #2).

Several partners also noted their initial intentions in developing a partnership was because the Fourth R program meets curriculum expectations for health education and other subject areas in their region.

“I think that the benefit of it is the opportunity that it touches on a variety of different curriculum. So from Health and Physical Education to English but then also healthy relationships with the Healthy Relationships Plus Programming” (Partner #3).

“We very much like the Fourth R materials because it does directly align to curriculum so it's not an add on for teachers” (Partner #4).

Importance of teaching healthy relationship skills to youth.

Partners noted that their initial intention of pursuing a partnership with the Fourth R was based on their organization recognizing the importance of teaching healthy relationship skills to youth and the Fourth R was a program that met this need.

“The skill development piece is something that we as a board still think is very beneficial to students” (Partner #4).

“The Fourth R did provide the foundational skills which seemed to be deficits with a lot of the population [youth]. In other words a lot of them don't understand the boundaries around appropriate sexual relationships and they don't understand interpersonal communication. That led me to follow up with the Fourth R” (Partner #5).

In addition, one partner noted their initial motivation to partner with the Fourth R was because the program was able to address multiple and overlapping risk behaviours as one curriculum versus individual programs that address each behaviour independently from one another.

“More so than anything else the fact that it was an efficient way to target a whole bunch of problem behaviours with one program as opposed to having a single program for each problem behaviour” (Partner #6).

Heard positive feedback about the Fourth R program.

The positive reputation of the Fourth R program was also identified as a reason for seeking the partnership: *“We’ve heard really good things about the Fourth R and the impact it was having with students” (Partner #7).*

Benefits of Fourth R Partnership

Fourth R partners were asked to describe strengths and benefits of the Fourth R partnership. Strengths and benefits were classified into five broad themes with several subthemes in some areas.

The Fourth R team

Several partners discussed benefits of the partnership related to the characteristics of the Fourth R team and its members and included the availability of team members, the flexibility and willingness of the Fourth R to meet the needs of organizations, and the diversity in skill and expertise of Fourth R team members.

Availability of team members.

Partners described the availability of Fourth R team members to answer questions, assist with trouble shooting concerns, and generally supportive as a strength of the partnership.

“To have direct communication with the team at the Fourth R, sort of nonstop, at any point and to be responded to immediately and to be heard and then for our needs to be met without exception every time. I can’t imagine something more supportive than that” (Partner #2).

“The team was so good about answering questions right away. You never felt left out or adrift if you had concerns about something” (Partner #8).

Flexibility and willingness to meet the needs of organizations.

Partners talked about the flexibility and willingness of the Fourth R to meet the needs of individual organizations around programming and implementation.

“What I like about it is I get the sense that it’s not like we’re just purchasing a program and there’s no wiggle room. I very much enjoy how well the team is willing to work with our board to make sure that the programming actually suits the needs of our organization. And so in that way very flexible” (Partner #4).

Diversity of skill and expertise of team members.

Fourth R partners noted that a benefit of the partnership was the diversity of skill and expertise of Fourth R team members. Partners noted the benefit in having Fourth R educators deliver the training to other educators, and a team of researchers to support the evidence-based components of the program.

“Having teachers do the in-servicing is always good, real teachers, teachers who've been through the work, that makes it work in terms of the partnership” (Partner #8).

“I like the model that a lot of people on your team have experience working in the classroom but then your team also has the research expertise as well. And so we know that when we're talking to your team it's obviously evidence-informed, but it also suits the needs of actual teachers on the ground” (Partner #4).

Fourth R Curriculum and Resources

Fourth R partners described the Fourth R curriculum resources as a benefit of the partnership. Three subthemes emerged from their responses: Relevant and well-packaged curriculum, programming that can be tailored, and programming that is available at little to no cost.

Relevant and well-packaged curriculum.

Partners noted the comprehensiveness of the program with all the materials and resources that teachers would need in one resource, as well as the content of the Fourth R's lessons as being relevant to today's youth.

“Timely, it's always important when things are relevant to students” (Partner #8).

“You had something packaged really well and it made it easier for us to sell it to the teachers and to the district's administrators” (Partner #6).

Adaptable programming.

Partners expressed the adaptability of the Fourth R program to be tailored to meet the needs of regions either through language, curriculum expectations, or religion as a benefit to the partnership.

“The Fourth R was willing and able to revamp a unit for us to make sure that it would be approved by our Bishops so that we can move forward and teach that in our classrooms and you know not every organization would take that upon themselves” (Partner #1)

“To tailor the program to meet our specific needs working with high risk kids in our setting is over the top” (Partner #5).

Program available at no cost.

Partners noted that a benefit of the Fourth R partnership was that for the most part, the program and often the training was offered at little to no cost. Partners who identified this as a benefit worked in organizations where program resources and training were covered through research and/or other sources of funding.

High-quality training and technical assistance

Partners commented on the training that is offered by the Fourth R to educators and other professionals as a benefit of the partnership. In addition, several partners also discussed the technical assistance provided by the Fourth R in terms of trouble shooting concerns, consulting, and advising on program and implementation needs.

“What's pretty remarkable for us is that training is offered in regions versus always centrally in a big city and that's tremendously appreciated. Our educators often have to travel a far ways to receive training. And so that usually requires them to be out of their schools that much longer. For them to be able to focus on a training with colleagues from their own region, with realities from their own region, and sometimes actually within their own schools if they are so lucky to be hosting the training makes a big difference. We would not have been able to do that without this partnership” (Partner #2).

“Your experience building the program has also benefited us by the lessons learned and guiding us through the process has been very helpful. Adding to that especially as we're getting into relationships with districts or schools that aren't part of a research project, you all have been incredibly valuable in terms of helping” (Partner #6).

Strengthening organizational capacity and sustainability.

Partners discussed the benefits that are derived from the Fourth R master training model where educators could be trained in their region to further build capacity to deliver the training long term.

“The aspect of the model that empowers us to have master trainers of our own so that we don't have to be relying forever on folks from outside our region, that's extremely appreciated so that we're growing capacity” (Partner #2).

Barriers and Challenges of the Fourth R Partnership

Fourth R partners were asked to describe barriers and challenges of the partnership. Barriers and challenges were classified into three themes with several sub-themes.

Distance of the partnership

A few partners noted the significant distance from their organization and the office of the Fourth R and that the distance can make collaboration and meeting face-to-face difficult. Related to this was the concern with the cost of travel and needing materials delivered on very short notice.

“Having a local contact, someone who could be more readily and immediately available would have been good because of the logistics of flying out from Ontario have been problematic at times. And it's always difficult to coordinate” (Partner #5)

“Some of the costs associated with travel and the logistics of dealing with travel, while the Fourth R has made it really easy, it's expensive and scary when we need something in the next few weeks and we don't have that here.” (Partner #6)

Timely access and delivery of curriculum materials

Two partners discussed barriers of the partnership related to receiving the curriculum materials either because they had received wrong versions or new adaptations were made to the curriculum and they did not have immediate access to them. Related to this, one partner noted a barrier to the partnership was limited access to French language Fourth R trainers.

“The only thing that was complicated was the material delivery part. I don't know how to even suggest what could be better. It just got complicated. When we got our materials, it was like, is this a grade 7 one? Is this a grade 6 or grade 8 version? We ordered one version but they sent a different version then they said they were sending. I found it quite complicated” (Partner #1)

“Well I always felt one step behind. So if we were ready to print an actual curriculum which we had the printing rights to print, then we would learn later that there were revisions made. And so I always felt like we were one step behind especially in the revisions” (Partner #9)

“It has been challenging to find French training. We don't have a lot of French schools but we do have a couple and we have French immersion schools. But in the French first language world sometimes our teachers are significantly more comfortable in French than they would be in English...It has been challenging to find a French trainer for sure” (Partner #2)

System-level barriers

Partners identified a number of system-level barriers that were related to program implementation that impact the partnership.

Not liked by all teachers.

One partner noted that there are times when a teacher does not like the program and that can impact the success of the partnership: *“Occasionally there are some teachers who haven't loved the program. That's the reality and not everybody loves it” (Partner #7)*

Resistance from facilitators to the underlying principles of the Fourth R.

One partner talked about some resistance from Fourth R facilitators in their organization who deliver the program to very high risk youth who don't readily see the benefits of prevention programming.

“There's been some resistance on behalf of some of the staff who still believe if you've got a sex offender, you need a sex offender program and if it doesn't have the label sex offender on it, then the program is of limited value. So with those people we've had a little bit of resistance to embrace the initiative the Fourth R” (Partner #5)

No local program champions.

One partner noted that in their region, there isn't a Fourth R champion who can help to facilitate the implementation of the program and be more available to staff locally.

“If there was local champions who could be ambassadors of the program, I think it would have helped although there’s something to be said about experts traveling from great distances” (Partner #5)

No ownership of the program at a district level.

One partner discussed less success with the implementation of the Fourth R in larger school boards where there was no ownership at a district level for the Fourth R.

“The program never did work with some of our larger boards. So it’s hard to set up partnerships when there isn’t somebody who takes ownership of the program” (Partner #8)

School boards not willing to release teachers from the school day to do training.

One partner as a coordinator of Fourth R in her region discussed challenges working with larger school boards to release teachers during the school day to do Fourth R training.

“Some of the larger boards, I have worked with as their coordinator have always looked at it as ‘We can’t pull that many teachers out. We expect teachers to do the in-servicing on their own’. There’s less support in some of those bigger boards” (Partner #8)

Impact of the Partnership

Fourth R partners were asked how the partnership with the Fourth R has impacted the work of their organization or the individuals with whom they work. Several themes were identified (more than ten different impacts of the partnership) but we have described six of the most common themes in more detail.

Fourth R as a primary health resource.

Several partners said that as a result of the partnership, the Fourth R has become a primary resource in their schools and in some cases, the official health curriculum in their district. Related to this, several partners noted that being involved with the Fourth R has brought a higher prioritization of health education to their region.

“Our goal is for all of our schools to be implementing Fourth R. That’s the long term goal. Right now, we have several school districts over 10 school districts are implementing Fourth R. A couple of them are making it their official health curriculum and more and more are wanting it and probably more than we have the capacity to deal with” (Partner #6)

“Health is becoming a greater priority. The teaching of the health curriculum has become a greater priority for our board.” (Partner #10)

Strengthening capacity and sustainability

A few partners noted an impact of the Fourth R partnership was related to building capacity in their region by having master trainers who can train local teachers to deliver the program.

“We now have a few teachers who are able to train other teachers. That was an important step that we wanted to take” (Partner #6).

Developing safe schools and healthy relationship legislation

Several partners noted an impact of the partnership was instrumental in developing legislation and other state laws that promote prevention, safe schools, and healthy relationships.

“The influence has been getting us to develop safe schools legislation because we had a relationship with the Fourth R” (Partner #2)

Increasing teacher comfort and skill in health education

Fourth R partners discussed one impact of the partnership as removing the fear that some teachers have in teaching health education. For example, some partners mentioned that some teachers are less comfortable teaching youth about healthy relationships, healthy sexuality and other interpersonal topics. Related to this was the notion that teachers trained in Fourth R develop a greater sense of comfort in teaching health than they may have had prior to the Fourth R.

“It has really helped the physical education teachers to feel empowered that they can handle this content. It's taken away that fear because a lot of them were just sort of 'just tell me what to do. You know I don't know anything about this, I'm not sure I can teach this stuff.' And once they took that training and used the materials they now understand that it's really not that scary to teach and that they are capable of teaching it. I think that's the power” (Partner #1)

“It's definitely given some teachers an opportunity to learn really important skills and concepts that might initially be outside of their comfort area” (Partner #6)

Uniformity to the teaching of health education

A few partners noted an impact of the Fourth R partnership was giving teachers a common language and way of teaching health education as well as providing consistency across all teachers in delivering health curriculum.

“We clearly felt that the Fourth R gave teachers something to make health education more consistent and to give the teacher something that they could turn to and do a good job without being up all night trying to figure out what to do that next day” (Partner #8)

Engagement of youth in health education

Finally, a few partners noted that an impact of the partnership was related to the engagement and responsiveness of youth receiving Fourth R curriculum.

In some schools, there was a response from kids who would say “Are we doing the Fourth R stuff or our regular health. They were actually recognizing a difference in the lessons that they were getting. And the youth would say 'yeah let's do Fourth R today” (Partner #8)

Suggested Improvements for Future Fourth R Collaboration and Partnership

Fourth R partners were asked what aspects of the partnership could be improved for future collaboration and work. Some partners noted that they did not have any suggestions for improvements to future Fourth R partnerships and were satisfied with the current model. For those that identified suggestions, five themes emerged from their responses.

Additional training opportunities

One partner suggested that additional training opportunities for educators as an area for future Fourth R collaboration.

“The Summer Institute that Fourth R offered a couple summers ago, it would be amazing if that could be repeated, and I could send a few more teachers down to do more training.” (Partner #7)

More regular check-ins from the Fourth R team

One partner suggested it would be helpful to have more regular check-ins from the Fourth R so that both partners could be more proactive in addressing issues that may arise with implementation or delivery of materials.

“I think setting up a regular check-in. It's hard to carve out that time but to be more proactive than reactive.” (Partner #9)

Opportunity for printing licensing agreements

One partner raised the suggestion to have the opportunity to do all their own printing with a license agreement from the Fourth R to have access to curriculum materials faster. While licensing agreements exist when a school district wants to implement a Fourth R program across all schools in their board, this was not possible at the time of the partnership for this partner's organization.

“I think with us it's getting the resources, right? So if we had a licensing agreement where I could print them so there wouldn't be as much of a lag time. For myself when I do professional development (PD) for my teachers, oftentimes the need is so great that I'll just do a last minute PD and only have a week's notice and that's not enough to get the binders from the Fourth R. But if we were able to have a licensing agreement where the binders could be printed in-house then I'd be able to get the binders, the resources, out to my teachers much quicker” (Partner #10)

More expert content review of program materials

One partner noted that while the interpersonal units of the Fourth R curriculum are strengths of the program, the Fourth R content for healthy sexuality and substance use could benefit from additional expert review.

“The Fourth R strength of course is in the interpersonal communication, role-playing, communication strategies, etc. But some of the content such as the sexual health, the more medical, and the substance abuse could benefit from more content expertise review” (Partner #9).

Additional opportunities for local adaptations

Finally, one partner spoke about wanting to continue adapting the program to the needs of their region in the coming years. *“We’d like to adapt the Fourth R better to our region throughout the next couple of years” (Partner #6).*

Promising Practices for Future Fourth R Partnerships

In summary, partners identified several strengths, challenges, and impacts of Fourth R partnerships. Over the years, we have developed structures for collaboration that have allowed ourselves and our partners to work together effectively. Fourth R partnerships, whether emerging or established, can take a number of steps to increase their likelihood of a successful, mutually beneficial relationship and collaboration. Based on the interviews conducted and our experience we have developed several promising practices for future Fourth R partnerships:

Establish and maintain partnership infrastructure.

Many Fourth R partners discussed the immediate availability and willingness of Fourth R team members to provide support, answer questions, troubleshoot, and help carry out the day-to-day operations of implementation in their region. Time and resources need to be devoted to having staff who are skilled, knowledgeable, and available to build relationships and foster communication among partners.

Address issues of sustainability.

Fourth R partners talked about the ways the partnership had become sustainable beyond a single grant or funding period by building local capacity through a train-the-trainer model and a strong commitment to developing local master trainers.

Partnerships take time.

Our partnerships all began by first establishing common ground and then building a trusting and beneficial relationship, none of which happened overnight. Perhaps equally important is the recognition that there are setbacks and barriers to any partnership but learning from their missteps can help move the partnership forward.