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Houston Harris County Youth LEAD: A Houston Health Department Initiative

The term “school-to-prison pipeline” refers to the process of pushing youth out of school and into the justice system, often as a means of responding to behavior within the school setting. In recent years, educators, juvenile justice personnel, law enforcement officers, community-based organization staff, and others in the youth-serving arena have recognized the problems associated with this phenomenon, namely that it results in youth becoming disconnected from educational opportunities and unnecessarily involved in the juvenile justice system. To counter this trend, jurisdictions across the United States have sought to re-shape their approaches to school discipline and justice system referrals. This includes system staff and partners in the Sunnyside community in Houston, located in Harris County, Texas, which historically has struggled with high rates of school suspension, expulsion and referrals into the juvenile justice system.

To mitigate the number of Harris County youth entering the school-to-prison pipeline, local community stakeholders collaboratively developed the Houston Harris County Youth Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD) Program. Harris County leaders and community stakeholders recognized the challenges that students were facing and created LEAD to provide them with additional developmental supports, while enhancing relationships between law enforcement and the Harris County community.
Diversion

Juvenile diversion is defined as the practice of routing juvenile offenders away from formal involvement in the juvenile justice system in order to reduce the negative effects and collateral consequences associated with that involvement (Ray, 2017). For instance, labeling a young person “delinquent” can encourage him or her to internalize the term and engage in behavior that characterizes that label (Nance, 2016; Ray, 2017).

Additionally, diverting youth away from the juvenile justice system reduces the possibility of further exposure to delinquent behavior and attitudes through increased contact with delinquent peers. The consequences of formal processing, therefore, may actually increase the likelihood of future offending, and flies in the face of the juvenile justice system’s goal of rehabilitation.

Further, because many diversion programs aim to promote positive youth development and reduce the risk of reoffending, they can reduce total system costs in the long term. There is also a hefty price associated with formal juvenile court processing when one considers the inclusion of court costs, monitoring of youth on probation, and the housing of youth who are placed residually. Diversion programs are preferable from a cost perspective in both the short and long term. First, by appropriately keeping the youth out of the system, they save the costs of court involvement and supervision. Second, by responding more effectively to the behavior in question it avoids the iatrogenic effect noted above.

Diversion from formal juvenile justice processing can occur in various ways. For example, diversion can be used informally at the youth’s initial point of contact whereby a law enforcement officer decides to release the young person with a verbal warning and makes no official report. Other more structured juvenile diversion programs often include a written contractual agreement between the youth and the entity operating the diversion program (e.g., law enforcement), the school or the probation department. In the case of Harris County, this is the school. The diversion agreement often includes a variety of requirements placed on the youth, as well as the services and supports designed to meet the needs of the youth.

These requirements hold youth accountable for their actions and facilitate the development of prosocial behaviors through activities such as making formal apologies, completing community service, attending mediation meetings with persons affected by the youth’s behavior, attending mandatory meetings with positive mentors, and engaging in treatment for mental health or substance abuse. The activities that youth are required to participate in serve the purpose of teaching effective strategies for resolving conflicts and overcoming hurdles that youth may face.

Diversion Best Practices

The common finding across juvenile justice research is that diversion is more effective at reducing recidivism than formal processing for certain youth. For example, programs that target low-risk youth before they are formally charged were found to have significantly greater effects, i.e., higher rates of completion and less recidivism, than those that diverted low-risk students following the filing of a formal charge (Schlesinger, 2018). It is clear that preventative practices, or programs that focus on youth early in their timeline of offending, are worth the investment.
Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion

The Harris County Youth Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD) program is based upon a diversion program designed for adults that takes a community-centered approach to reduce unnecessary justice system involvement and improve public safety and order. An aim of the program focused on adults is to reorient the community’s responses to disorder with the assistance of law enforcement. In doing so, LEAD targets the following societal goals:

- **Reduce** the number of people entering the criminal justice system for low-level offenses related to drug use and mental health;
- **Undo** the racial disparities at the front-end of the criminal justice system; and
- **Strengthen** the relationship between law enforcement and the community.

LEAD outlines principles specific to the role of law enforcement and policing. It requires close adherence to operational protocol as well as documentation of decisions to allow for review, evaluation, and quality assurance. Perhaps more importantly, because of the discretionary decisions enabled by offering diversion in lieu of arrest, the success of the program hinges largely on the buy-in and ownership of the method by frontline officers and all who have the power to make LEAD referrals. Collaboration across stakeholders and adherence to LEAD protocols has been shown to produce positive results for adult offenders.

For instance, evaluations of the original adult-focused LEAD program in Seattle, Washington in 2015 revealed that the program reduced both short-term and long-term recidivism with low level offenders, compared to a control group of persons who faced formal consequences for the same offense (Wilson & Hoge, 2013).

A second evaluation of the same adult program in Seattle considered costs associated with formal processing compared to those associated with using LEAD. The evaluation revealed that the costs for LEAD participants were reduced due to a concurrent reduction of system utilization compared to a control group of those facing formal consequences. Although the cost per participant was initially inflated as a result of the program’s startup costs, the cost per person decreased from $899 to $532 per month once the program was ongoing (Collins, Lonczak, & Clifasefi, 2017).

Efforts can be made to sustain these practices by using the savings from a reduced reliance on the criminal justice system and reinvesting that money into alternative interventions.
Integration of LEAD in Harris County

LEAD was implemented in Harris County after being raised as a suggestion during a meeting of the Youth Justice Council (YJC). The YJC is a component of a separate City of Houston Health Department program, My Brother’s Keeper Houston (see insert below), which builds opportunities for historically underserved youth.

The YJC recognized a need for programming that targeted youth at risk of becoming involved in the juvenile justice system. In the 2017-18 school year, the rate of offenses that resulted in in-school and out-of-school suspensions among the Houston Independent School District (HISD) was 22.03 incidents per 100 students (Stevens, n.d.). The correspondingly high number of charges formally referred into the court system by HISD led the Harris County District Attorney to explore juvenile justice reform initiatives targeting these referrals.

Upon identifying the need to support youth in Harris County and being familiar with the successful implementation of LEAD in other jurisdictions, the Harris County District Attorney and the Houston Health Department made the decision to implement LEAD within a school setting. After contacting the LEAD National Bureau to request their support in training for a formal program, Harris County received approval and assistance to become the first site nationwide to implement a youth focused LEAD program.

My Brother’s Keeper – Youth Advisory Justice Council

The Youth Justice Council (YJC) began in 2016 in response to the recommendation made by the My Brother’s Keeper (MBK) Milestone 6 work group. The YJC aims to examine strategies, including policy and system changes, to support MBK Milestone 6 which is to reduce the prevalence of youth violence and the number of youth involved in the juvenile justice system -- and provide second chances for successful re-entry to youth aged 10 – 24. The workgroup brainstormed strategies for improving police and community relations, exploring alternatives to exclusionary discipline, understanding disproportionality in school discipline and entry into the juvenile justice system. The YJC membership includes representatives from city and county agencies, non-profits, and educational entities who meet every other month with an agenda that includes cross training, data sharing, and problem solving to provide better outcomes for area youth, especially those in underserved communities.
The LEAD Team & Agency Support

The LEAD National Support Bureau provided training to the core implementation staff of agencies spearheading the effort at the chosen pilot site. The agencies included the Houston Health Department, Houston Independent School District (HISD), the HISD Police Department, Harris County Juvenile Probation Department, Houston reVision and Harris County Protective Services for Children and Adults (HCPSCA). It was determined that the service array to be offered through the program would be provided by a team consisting of a Houston reVision Youth LEAD Liaison and a HCPSCA Case Manager, who comprise the official Youth LEAD Team. The primary function of the team’s work involves supporting youth throughout the school day and facilitating the LEAD activities. The Youth LEAD Team and many of the agency representatives who received training had prior experience with juvenile justice and working with youth to address their needs.

Administrative Functions

The Houston reVision Liaison and the HCPSCA Case Manager support the administrative function of the program by participating in students’ school meetings, serving as advocates for the students, and promoting the program on campus. This also includes being present for Disciplinary Alternative Education Program (DAEP) appeals, attendance removal and dismissal meetings, bi-monthly leadership meetings, and monthly school faculty meetings.

Ultimately, the staff within the school serve as liaisons between the school, law enforcement, the student’s family, and the LEAD program itself.

LEAD youth in Harris County participate in a community talk circle.
Programmatic Structure

Youth become involved in the LEAD program through referrals from school law enforcement and social referrals from the principal and assistant principals as a result of the youth’s conduct at the school, with the intention of avoiding the escalation of negative behavior and when appropriate, a formal referral into the juvenile justice system. Probation officers, who may be present in the school in support of a youth on probation, may also refer students to the program. Student participation in the program is entirely voluntary, and depends on the consent and support of the student’s parents. In the event that a student chooses not to participate in LEAD, he or she may be referred to more formal processing as a result of their alleged offense.

In the 2018-19 school year, 55 youth participated in the LEAD program. During this time, there were only three school-based arrests compared to the 32 arrests that occurred the year prior (Houston Independent School District Police Department, 2019).

2018-19 LEAD Referral Sources

LEAD participants’ engagement in the program is determined through a tiered approach. The tier system provides a preventative aspect for youth who are not yet system-involved, but who demonstrate a need for additional support in school. LEAD helps achieve the goal of assisting and not punishing youth who require some additional support and attention. Students classified as Tier I may be experiencing minor issues at school, such as behavioral or academic struggles. These students participate in restorative justice and/or conflict or community talk circles. These staff-facilitated circles are held weekly.
Students in Tier II have demonstrated behavioral and academic struggles and may have a history of in-or out-of-school suspension. In addition to participating in weekly restorative justice circles, Tier II students are paired with a mentor from reVision Houston to support their prosocial behavior and development and are guided in setting their own achievement goals. The LEAD staff then help to monitor and assist the young person in attaining these goals.

Tier III students are identified as experiencing the same behavioral challenges as students in the lower tiers, but have also indicated a need for additional family support outside of the school setting. Students in Tier III are provided with the same supportive services as those in the lower tiers, but are also eligible to receive family-based services to address some challenges that the youth may be facing outside of school, such as food insecurity or family dysfunction. The case manager evaluates Tier III students and their caretakers using the Harris County Prevention Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths assessment (HCP-CANS 1.0) to identify their areas of need.

In the 2018-19 school year, there were 50 students in Tiers I and II, and five students in Tier III. Of these students, 49 were African-American, four were Hispanic, and two were Caucasian. There were 29 male students and 26 female students.
Restorative Justice and Conflict & Community Talk Circles

Restorative justice circles help students form a sense of community and a stronger bond with their school, which in turn improves their behavior and academic achievement. The purpose of conflict circles, which are held in response to an incident or upon request of the students, is to provide a positive method for the youth to resolve conflicts and to facilitate a safe environment where students are able to communicate with another. The goals of community talk circles are to teach the youth empathy and communication skills to heighten their awareness of the different perspectives of those around them. Overall, these exercises focus on the impact of harm occurring to each other as both an individual and as a larger part of the school culture.

2018-19 Restorative Justice and Conflict Circles

![Graph showing the number of restorative justice and conflict circles held each month from November to May 2018-19. The restorative justice circles peaked in February, while the conflict circles remained consistent throughout the year.]
Acknowledging Youth Accomplishments

In working with youth, LEAD recognizes the need for positive reinforcement to support continued improvements. As such, the youth’s developmental achievements are highlighted through “LEAD Stars,” a paper star that is displayed on a bulletin board in the LEAD classroom with the student’s name and the milestone they have achieved. For example, highlighted milestones may include “Peer Leadership,” “Consistent Participation in Restorative Justice Circles,” or “Asking and Getting Support.”

One of the goal-setting activities includes creating vision boards with the youth to illustrate positive images of themselves and the goals toward which they are working. These activities serve as reinforcement of the youth’s positive behavior, and the emphasis on celebration of improvements throughout the program provides a tangible recognition of progress for the students.

Sample Student LEAD stars

Vision Board created by a Youth LEAD student
LEAD participants who completed a satisfaction survey regarding the program reported largely favorable experiences with the program and its staff. In impact statements written by program participants, many of the students self-reported improvement of their interpersonal skills, a greater ability to express themselves during difficult situations, and fewer negative interactions with adults and teachers. Many students also expressed experiencing a decline in suspensions and incidents of fights and classroom disruption.

Caregivers of LEAD students, who also submitted impact statements, affirmed that LEAD has allotted them better opportunities to communicate with school personnel and understand what is happening at their child’s school. This is evidence of the positive impact that LEAD can have in improving relationships between the youth and their educators, the youth and their peers, and the youth and their families and supporters. These relationships are essential to proactively reduce the number of young people feeding into the school-to-prison pipeline.

“K.T.’s mother has been consistently communicating with the LEAD team concerning behavioral matters. She has expressed that she has seen improvements in K.T.’s attitude and a willingness to talk more instead of reacting with anger. She feels like LEAD gives her an opportunity to ask questions about the school. She believes that she has learned to communicate better with the school personnel. She really appreciates that LEAD was able to help K.T. avoid the DAEP placement and believes K.T. is doing better because of the second chance.”

“V.E. is a 7th grader who was referred for constant disruption and disrespectful behavior. She has improved tremendously and has reduced the number of referrals, suspensions, and negative interactions with peers and adults. Her attendance in school has remained constant and she is more focused on her academic success. Her communication skills and ability to express herself during difficult situations has improved.”
Conclusion

Youth LEAD, as adapted by the City of Houston, HISD Police Department and their Harris County partners, has demonstrated a considerable positive impact on the students it has served. Through activities facilitated by the program, youth have learned strategies to enhance their relationships with their peers, teachers, and caretakers, and, in turn, improve their attitudes toward school and authority figures. These positive relationships have encouraged youth to seek support for challenges they face, which has created a welcoming environment and motivated them to improve their behavior and school achievement. The tiered structure of the program is both proactive and reactive, in that it identifies youth at an early point in time who need additional support, as well as providing varying levels of services and supports to students (and their families) with more elevated behavioral challenges.

The need remains, however, for additional evaluation of the impact of the program. Does it help reduce incidents of negative behavior in the school, school suspensions and expulsions? Is it associated with improved academic performance, and for those youth involved in LEAD who are already formally involved in the juvenile justice system, does it help to reduce recidivism? The existing anecdotal evidence and arrest data to date indicate that Youth LEAD has the potential to achieve these more quantifiable outcomes and provide a positive alternative to the traditional, stigmatizing practices of exclusionary discipline and juvenile justice system referral that feed the school-to-prison pipeline.
References


