Building connections, capacity, and community during a pandemic: Lessons from TPP19 grantees

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I. Introduction

Evidence-based programs (EBPs) designed to prevent teenage pregnancy are backed by research showing they have led to favorable outcomes for participants. However, these programs are tested in specific contexts and with specific populations. Organizations that are selecting an EBP should assess whether the model they are considering is relevant to the population they will serve. Program providers and staff should also assess their organization's capacity and readiness to implement the model as designed by (1) pilot-testing the program with their intended populations, (2) gathering data, and (3) using continuous quality improvement (CQI) processes to improve the program implementation.

In 2019, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Population Affairs (OPA) awarded 29 organizations two-year Teen Pregnancy Prevention (TPP19) Phase 1 Tier 1 grants. Grantees were expected to select EBPs, implement them, and refine them for their own contexts using process evaluations and CQI. OPA also asked grantees for feedback on implementing the EBPs more broadly and potentially conducting a separate Phase 2 impact evaluation.

Grantees were required to take the following steps during the two-year grant:

- Demonstrate that the communities they serve needed and liked the program;
- Demonstrate they were implementing the program with fidelity;
- Demonstrate it was feasible for them to implement the program in the desired sites; and
- Demonstrate the program was medically accurate, trauma-informed, age-appropriate, and culturally and linguistically appropriate.

OPA asked grantees to conduct process and implementation evaluations, which included collecting data on implementation and outcomes that concerned participants' experience and attitudes, using CQI to demonstrate ongoing improvement in their program implementation, and documenting lessons they learned on how to improve implementation.

To understand the lessons the 29 grantees learned while implementing their EBPs, OPA funded an external cross-site study to (1) document the process grantees followed to prepare their programs and staff to implement the EBP, and (2) identify lessons to help future grantees ensure their programs are ready and appropriate to implement in their communities. Figure I.1 describes the cross-site study's five data sources.

In March 2020, about three-quarters of the way through the first year of the grant, the COVID-19 pandemic forced grantees to manage significant challenges in their program implementation, data collection, and evaluation. School closures and the transition to remote learning delayed the start of program delivery for many grantees. Staff had to move program content and data collection online while maintaining program fidelity. They also worked with schools, implementing agencies, and other partners to re-define their implementation plans, adjust their timelines, and train staff to deliver content and engage with youth in new and often unfamiliar ways. During the rest of the grant period, staff managed all of these constraints while also dealing with their own stress and trauma from the pandemic. For most grantees, these challenges meant extending their implementation and evaluation timelines by six months to a year.

Figure I.1. Data sources for the cross-site study

The study team collected and analyzed data through five main sources:

- **Interviews** with leadership staff of 25 grantees roughly one year into the two-year grant period and with leadership staff of 26 grantees at the end of the two-year grant period.
- **Virtual site visits** with 7 grantees that included in-depth interviews with one grantee leader, frontline staff, one evaluation staff member, and community stakeholders or partner staff.
- An **online survey** taken by 94 of 110 staff members (facilitators or educators) across 28 of 29 grantees at the end of the first year of the grant.
- **Biannual status reports** in which grantees self-reported readiness on several program and organizational categories, including core components, standardized program operations, organizational context, implementation, CQI, and promising evidence. Additional information about the biannual status reports is in Appendix A.
- **Data on performance measures** submitted online by grantees in each year of their grant.

This report presents findings and lessons learned from the cross-site study of the TPP19 grantees as they navigated program implementation and evaluation in an unprecedented landscape for their communities, organizations, and staff. Box I.1 summarizes key lessons from the TPP19 grantees. In Chapter II, we describe characteristics of the 29 grantees. In Chapter III, we discuss the overarching lessons from grantees' experiences refining and implementing their programs and share tips for future grantees that implement TPP programs. Chapter IV presents key takeaways and implications for future grantees, developers, and funders.

Box I.1. Key lessons from the TPP19 grantees

1. To engage participants successfully, grantees should tailor programs to meet participants' needs and those of the community.
2. Multipronged, creative approaches are key to recruiting and engaging youth participants and parents. Grantees can use various approaches to promoting their programs, including building and leveraging relationships and direct outreach.
3. Strong staffing, training, and management processes help programs thrive. Hiring appropriate staff, investing in ongoing training, and outlining a clear management structure can support implementation.
4. Strong evaluators and regular communication between evaluators and grantees support rapid and ongoing program improvement. Grantees can set themselves up for success early by holding regular meetings and setting clear expectations for conducting the evaluation and communicating about it.

II. Key characteristics of TPP 2019 grantees

The TPP19 cohort had 29 grantees from community-based organizations, hospitals or health care organizations, state agencies, and universities. Grantees served all regions of the continental United States and Hawaii. More than half the participants were in urban areas (57 percent), and about one-fifth were in rural (22 percent) or suburban areas (21 percent). Although most grantees served youth participants in school settings, 13 delivered programming in community-based settings. One grantee worked in juvenile justice and residential settings for foster youth, and another only provided programming virtually due to the impact and timing of COVID-19.

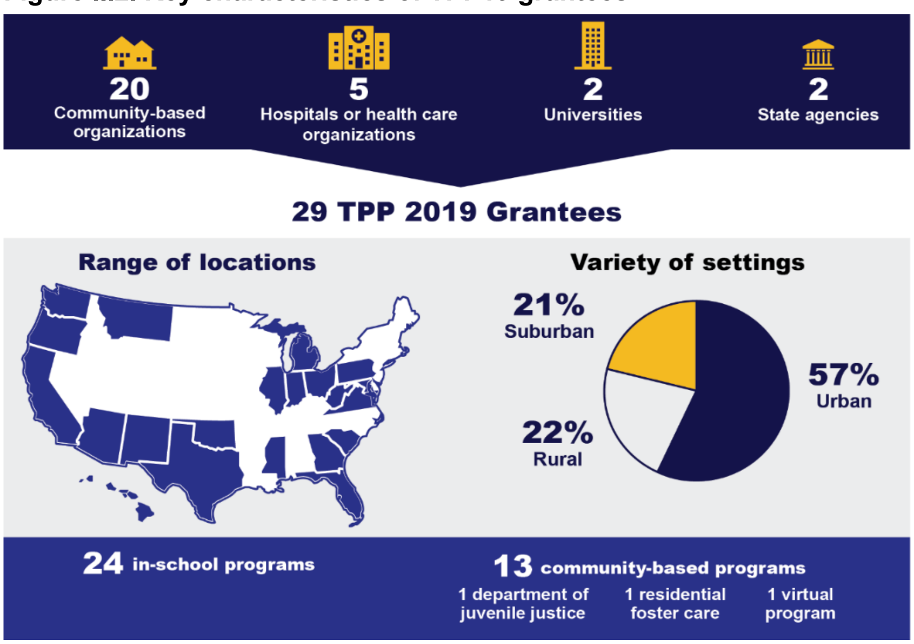
Over the two-year grant period, grantees served a total of 31,592 youth participants and 2,814 caregivers. In most cases, these numbers were lower than their recruitment goals. The condensed timeline of the two-year grant and COVID-19-related shutdowns were partially responsible, because they made it challenging for grantees to refine their chosen curriculum, get necessary approvals, develop or strengthen community partnerships, and meet recruitment goals. In addition to providing TPP curricula, some programs included case management or parent components. Figure II.1 outlines the programs delivered for the TPP19 grant, Figure II.2 describes the key characteristics of the TPP19 grantees, and Figure II.3 describes the characteristics of TPP19 program participants.

Figure II.1. Evidence-based programs delivered by the grantees

- Families Talking Together
- Botvin LifeSkills Training
- Love Notes Sexual Risk Avoidance Edition
- Making Proud Choices!
- Positive Prevention Plus
- REAL Essentials Advance
- Reducing the Risk
- Respecting the Circle of Life, Mind, Body and Spirit
- Teen Outreach Program

Source: TPP19 grantee applications.

Figure II.2. Key characteristics of TPP19 grantees



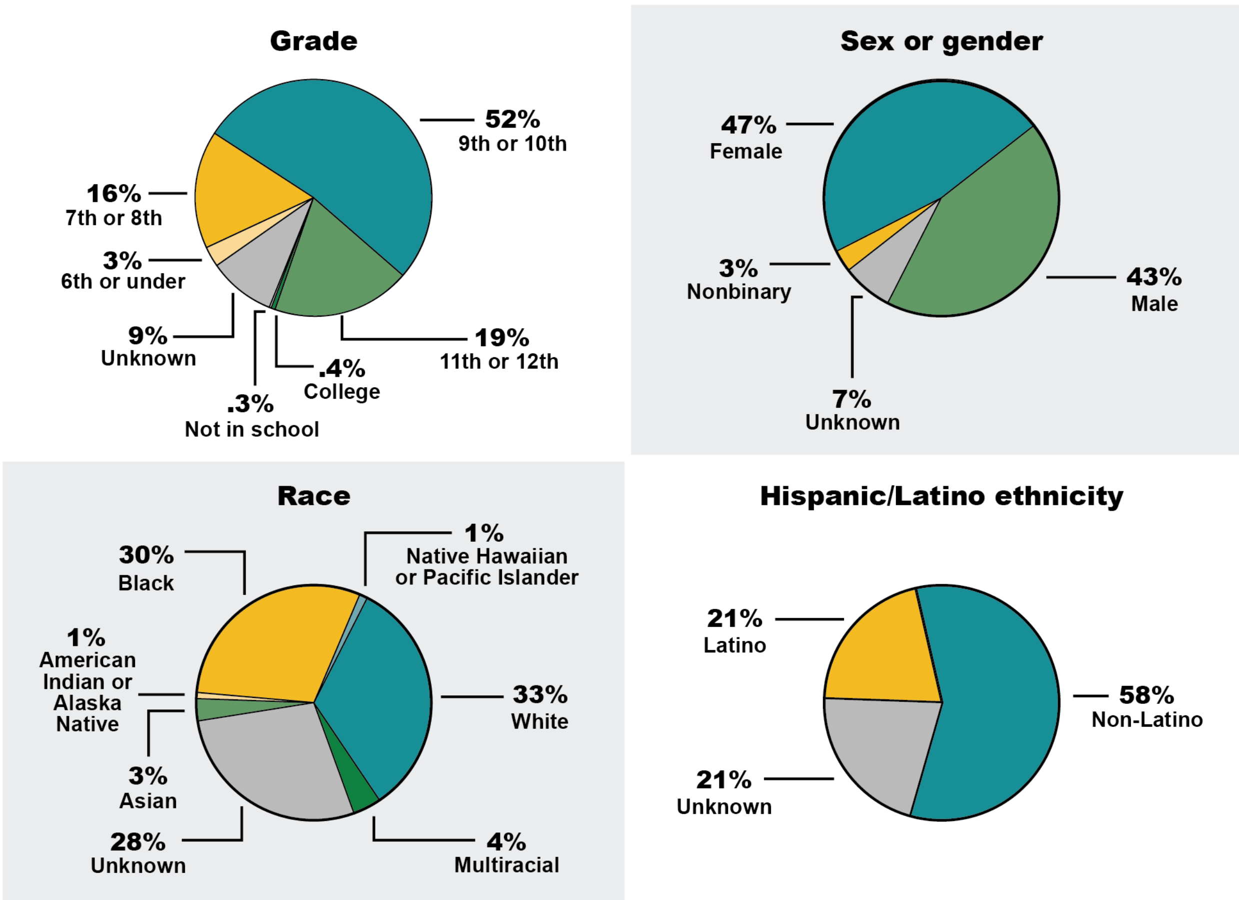
Source: TPP19 grant applications and interviews with leaders.

Note: Of the 13 community-based programs, one program was within the department of juvenile justice, one was within a residential foster care system, and one program was fully virtual.

Figure II.3. Characteristics of TPP19 program participants

During the two-year grant period, grantees served a total of 31,592 youth, 2,816 parents and caregivers, and 1,159 youth-serving professionals.

Demographics of youth



Source: TPP19 frontline staff survey.

III. Lessons learned

Grantees identified four key lessons from implementing their EBPs: (1) participants were more engaged when grantees tailored EBPs to better represent participants' identities and meet their needs; (2) using a variety of creative approaches enhanced recruitment and engagement; (3) strong staffing, training, and management processes helped programs thrive; and (4) solid relationships between evaluators and grantees supported rapid and ongoing program improvement.

Lesson 1: Grantees had more success engaging participants when they tailored programs to be representative of youth's identities and meet their needs

Grantees selected EBPs that had been proven effective through rigorous evaluation to reduce teenage pregnancy, behavioral risk factors underlying teenage pregnancy, sexual activity, or other sexual risk behaviors. Grantees were expected to closely follow the program design but could make adjustments to ensure models were medically accurate, culturally and linguistically appropriate, trauma-informed, and met the needs of the populations they served. All grantees surveyed or spoke with participants and community stakeholders to understand whether the programs were appropriate for their participants. Grantees also had experts review their programs to determine whether the models met the grant criteria.

If grantees found they had to adapt their program, OPA asked them to document and evaluate the changes to determine whether they improved the accuracy and fit of the program for the intended populations. If the adaptations changed the program's content or core components, the grantees needed to obtain approval from OPA and feedback from the program developer to ensure the fidelity of the program or its core components were not compromised.

In addition to updating statistics or laws to match those of the state they worked in, all but one grantee made slight adjustments to ensure the program addressed participants' needs. These grantees reported their participants were more engaged and learned a lot from their programs. Box III.1 summarizes strategies TPP19 grantees used to tailor programs to their participants' needs. These strategies build on OPA's guidance for identifying adaptations. Ideally, the strategies should be practiced before implementation (through a pilot or with an advisory board), and grantees should continue to refine the programs in response to feedback during implementation.

Box III.1. Tips from the field: How to work with stakeholders to tailor programs to participants' needs

- ☑ Have a community advisory board or youth advisory board review programs to make sure they are culturally and linguistically appropriate and LGBTQ+ inclusive.
- ☑ Pilot program with participants in each of your settings; survey and interview them to learn what is appealing or unappealing about the program.
- ☑ Have facilitators take notes during lessons on words, phrases, references, or examples that participants say are outdated.
- ☑ Engage in CQI after each lesson so you can improve the program on an ongoing basis.
- ☑ Ask the developer and grant agency about the types of modifications they will approve, and ensure you get approval from the developer and grant agency, as needed, before making any changes.
- ☑ Collect implementation data and participant feedback on the edits you made to determine whether they met participants' needs.

Grantees adjusted program content to ensure it was inclusive and representative of participants' identities and interests

One-third of the grantees highlighted the importance of updating or adding images, videos, and references so participants would find the program relatable and want to fully engage. Two grantees noted the developers did not allow them to change the programs themselves (for example, the lesson scripts, presentation slides, or textbooks and handouts), but approved minor changes like showing supplemental images or videos and updating references verbally. Box III.2 highlights one grantee's description of the importance of having images that reflect the participants.

Box III.2. Integrating representation and reflection

"We've had years, and years, and years, over 10 years of healthy marriage and healthy relationship classes, which we also did for youth in schools, outside of schools, in prisons, in youth detention facilities. And what always needs to be done, is no matter how good the curriculum is, we still have to change all of the visuals, because if all that [participants] see are [people who do not represent them], they cannot relate, and they just turn off, so then [we change the visuals so participants] see themselves in [the program]."

Grantees also described the importance of updating references to popular culture, especially music, to align with participants' interests, which many developers recommend. As one grantee put it, "We wanted to make sure that the youth recognize the person in the photo that they show. [Our program was written] six years ago … maybe those people six years ago were popular, but they may not be popular now."

In addition to tailoring the images, visuals, and references to reflect participants and their interests, two grantees raised the importance of reviewing programs to ensure they do not reinforce negative stereotypes. For example, one grantee noted the program only included people of color in negative roles, which might make their entirely White participant group believe people of color typically engage in negative behavior. Another grantee reported that some of the material in the lessons was not only outdated, but also reinforced stereotypes of people with HIV and AIDS. Box III.3 highlights how grantees described the importance of reviewing content so it does not reinforce negative stereotypes.

Box III.3. Countering damaging myths and stereotypes

"One aspect that I continually think about is solely utilizing videos portraying minorities in negative stereotypes, specifically because our population mainly identifies as White. The videos can reinforce negative stereotypes that students may have [about] minorities, including that they are extremely sexually active, prone to become pregnant, and are criminals."

"The lesson about myths and stereotypes about HIV is not necessary as youth are not aware of these myths or stereotypes anymore. I feel that the lesson only provides them with these stereotypes because they have no prior knowledge of them, and we are only reinforcing/educating people that there are stereotypes of people with HIV/AIDS."

In both of these cases, grantees revised the images, visuals, and references so they would not reinforce negative stereotypes.

Grantees fine-tuned language to help participants understand and engage with the lessons

More than half of the grantees said they had to change the language in their program so participants could understand it. Two grantees reported translating all or parts of their programs to integrate the languages participants spoke at home. One of these grantees selected an EBP based on program quality and content, but it was not available in Spanish. As a result, this grantee's staff had to translate the entire program from English to Spanish for their Spanish-speaking participants, including adding captions to the videos. The grantee noted the developer was unable to provide this service, and it was quite labor- and time-intensive for the staff members.

Three grantees mentioned that the literacy or vocabulary levels of the program were too demanding for their participants and needed to be changed so participants could understand the lessons. One of these grantees adapted literacy-based activities to a discussion format. The other two grantees replaced inaccessible vocabulary (such as scientific terms or words like "abstinence") with easy-to-understand words. Box III.4 highlights how two grantees updated program language to increase program engagement.

Box III.4. Increasing engagement by adjusting language

Two grantees updated program language to replace formal wording with words participants commonly used: "There is a huge disconnect between what [the program] teaches us to say and what the students actually will respond to and what … reaches them. [The program] would give us … a very professional script. And the students are not really going to respond to that. They want to hear words that they relate to. They want to hear the word 'toxic,' because that's something that they say all the time, and that's a word that kind of brings them like, 'Okay, okay, they get it. Like they understand what we're going through too.' So, I definitely feel like we have to adjust the language a lot and do a lot of work to make it a lot more relatable to the students that we teach."

Grantees adjusted programs to ensure they were LGBTQ+ inclusive

About one-third of grantees said their programs needed to be more LGBTQ+ inclusive. Although this was not required by the grant, these grantees infused LGBTQ+ inclusivity in their programs by integrating more comprehensive language and examples throughout lessons. Grantees said they avoided relying on heteronormative pronouns and examples. This included facilitators dropping gendered titles (such as "Ms." or "Mr."), introducing themselves with their pronouns and asking students to do the same, changing names in the program to gender-neutral names like Jordan and Riley, and including pictures and giving examples of LGBTQ+ couples in the lessons.

Four of the grantees that infused more LGBTQ+ content said participants would be offended if their programs lacked LGBTQ+ inclusive information or examples. School leaders informed one grantee they would not be able to use the chosen program if the grantee did not make updates to promote inclusivity. These school leaders stated that, without those changes, the program would not be able to serve all of their students. However, two grantees received pushback from the communities they served or from the developer, and were unable to make the inclusive changes they desired. A grantee that serves participants in a religious and rural community said the schools and community leaders did not view LGBTQ+ issues as relevant. A leader in this community stated, "We're not gonna deal with it. It's not here, we're not going to deal with it." This grantee believed this attitude was a disservice to their participants, especially LGBTQ+ participants. A second grantee faced resistance from the developer when they asked to revise some content to make the program more LGBTQ+ inclusive, even though participants and school leaders said changes needed to be made.

Grantee Spotlight 1. Using student feedback and analytics to refine the program

One grantee described using data from student focus groups and analytics obtained from a virtual implementation platform, such as YouTube analytics, to improve program delivery. In the focus groups, the grantee's evaluators learned that, even though youth participants valued the programming, they were bored with the lectures and thought there was too much content.

Using the analytics from the virtual implementation platform, the evaluators learned the session most participants watched from start to finish was a 15-minute session featuring a condom demonstration. The evaluators presented this information to the grantee team and grantee leadership, and the facilitators and grantee leaders focused on tweaking their lessons by adjusting the amount of time spent on lectures versus interactive activities and adding more visuals.

The evaluators continued to examine analytics and get feedback from youth participants to understand whether any updates to their lessons made them more engaging and easier to understand. They also examined implementation fidelity data to ensure that, even with these tweaks, the program stayed true to the evidence-based model.

Lesson 2: Using multipronged, creative approaches helped grantees recruit and engage more participants

Grantees said they had to be creative in designing new approaches to recruit and engage participants, especially when facing COVID-19-related challenges as well as the short two-year grant period. Partners of most grantees played significant roles in recruiting youth participants, either by leading recruitment or finding participants. However, during the pandemic, partners were less able to help with recruitment and support TPP programs than they were expected to be.

Many grantees tried other recruitment strategies, such as social media and door-to-door recruitment, to reach youth. Some of these strategies were planned ahead, but others were developed in response to pandemic-related constraints. In addition, 10 grantees reported that youth participants preferred in-person programming, and virtual facilitation was more difficult because youth were tired after being online for school and extracurricular activities. However, grantees did devise creative strategies to improve virtual facilitation, some of which could also be useful in person. Box III.5 includes lessons learned from virtual implementation that grantees can use after the pandemic.

Box III.5. Tips from the field: How to engage youth virtually

- ☑ **Give youth nonverbal ways to participate.** Delivering the program virtually created a participation space for those who were not comfortable speaking. Participants readily used the chat feature or other virtual methods of sharing ideas and questions. In addition to discussions, grantees should consider providing chart paper with sticky notes or a Google form for participants to leave anonymous questions.
- ☑ **Record sessions for participants who have conflicts.** Offering make-up sessions helped keep participants engaged. Recording sessions for participants to watch asynchronously gives them flexibility to participate when they can.
- ☑ **Consider co-facilitation.** When delivering content remotely, one facilitator can lead content delivery, and another can monitor the chat and troubleshoot technology challenges. In person, grantees could also consider pairing facilitators: one could present while the other monitors energy in the room and enters the conversation if they need to reset the energy level.

Thirteen grantees said they struggled to engage parents and caregivers. Challenges included parents' burnout, competing priorities, and increased caregiver duties resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Strategies some grantees used to recruit and engage parents and caregivers are in Box III.6.

Box III.6. Tips from the field: How to recruit and engage parents and caregivers

- ☑ **There is no one-size-fits-all approach.** Be prepared to use a variety of strategies to recruit parents and caregivers. Consider building a competition for partners to see who can enroll the most people. Use word of mouth, connect with parent and caregiver groups, offer information sessions, and recruit via multiple media such as texting apps or flyers.
- ☑ **Build in parental buy-in from the beginning.** Offer friendly, engaging orientations; attend events parents will be at (like school family nights), and carefully consider how to frame the program. For example, one grantee made sure potential participants knew they would not be tested on the program content and that the program focused on relationships.
- ☑ **Provide incentives.** To encourage participation and mitigate the negative impacts of COVID-19, grantees used incentives such as gift cards, care packages, or food and toy drives. Keep in mind that these incentives may not be applicable under normal circumstances.
- ☑ **Adjust program delivery to meet participants' needs.** Grantees should schedule programming at times that are convenient for parents and caregivers. Similarly, offering asynchronous or virtual live programming may help parents fit the program into their schedules.

Grantees developed multipronged recruitment strategies based on their experience with participants and communities

Grantees promoted their programs through word of mouth and by hosting community events. Some used existing relationships to promote their programs. For example, staff of one grantee with deep social networks in the community reached out to family members of youth participants. In a separate strategy, they encouraged youth who had completed the program to tell their friends about it. Staff of another grantee said, "Word of mouth works really well [in our state] and elsewhere. But here, we found that we're getting a lot of residuals [from] students who previously took classes, and are telling their friends or their cousins, and then they're coming our way."

Some grantees conducted door-to-door recruitment. In one case, a staff member went door-to-door to meet parents, build rapport, and get parents' feedback on the program. The grantee reported youth were more engaged in the program and the program had stronger relationships with parents as a result of these efforts. Box III.7 describes some recruitment strategies grantees used.

Box III.7. Recruiting through shared connections and celebrations

One grantee recruited 75 parents—a population that is typically difficult to recruit—by going door-to-door and handing out gift bags of pandemic necessities (like toilet paper, face masks, and dry foods). Another grantee used celebratory community events, such as a partner school's senior certificate day, to celebrate youth who had completed the program and inspire other youth to participate.

Grantee Spotlight 2. A multipronged approach to recruitment in action

One grantee's partners faced recruitment challenges from COVID-19. In addition, during the initial months of the pandemic, the grantee was unable to serve any youth.

To overcome these challenges, the team tested different recruitment approaches, including offering gift cards and an opportunity to paint and design tennis shoes. They arranged for local celebrities to meet with youth. They reached out to potential participants by cold calling, sending email blasts, using social media, and sharing flyers. They even contacted leasing offices in apartment complexes and asked them to promote the program to residents. Although the grantee was unable to reach as many participants as it hoped to, it served more than 500 youth participants in two years (compared with about 2,000 originally proposed).

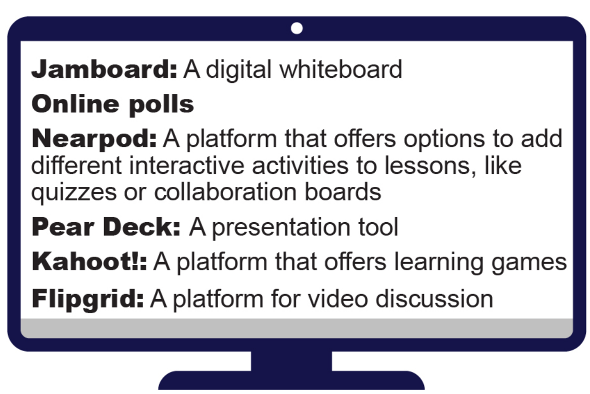
Fourteen grantees used traditional marketing methods to promote their programs and resources. This included distributing flyers; running newspaper, radio, and billboard ads; and using social media. For example, one grantee worked with a radio station and on social media to publicize websites with information on teen health, including how to ask a health educator questions anonymously. This allowed the grantee to share TPP content with youth and parents virtually and drive traffic to the website.

Grantees used their experience with youth and communities to design creative engagement strategies

Grantees stressed the importance of delivering the program in a fun, exciting, and engaging manner, particularly when participants have competing priorities, are not receiving the program in person, have virtual-meeting fatigue from being online for school and other activities, or are experiencing personal or familial hardship. Grantees accomplished this by using social media tools their participants used, along with online teaching tools and interactive activities.

Grantees learned which platforms or features youth used and integrated them into programming. For example, some grantees created short TikTok videos about program content—acting out scenarios or describing information in the program—that successfully engaged their participants. Two grantees shared videos on TikTok that went viral. Some grantees used online teaching tools, including those listed in Figure III.1. Classroom teachers use some of these tools, so future grantees might find participants are familiar with them.

Figure III.1. Online teaching tools grantees used



Seventeen grantees also offered participation incentives including food, T-shirts, extra credit in class, and scholarships or memberships to organizations like the YMCA. For example, one grantee offered a goody bag and a $25 gift card to youth participants who completed 5 of 14 lessons, a second goody bag for completing 10 of the 14 lessons, and a second gift card for completing all 14 lessons. Given the impact of the pandemic and many competing demands on youth's attention and time, these incentives were critical to recruiting and retaining youth.

Some grantees reported their incentives were successful, but others said they were not. For example, three grantees thought the incentives were not enough to overcome participants' other priorities or challenges. Grantees also faced logistical problems, such as how to deliver incentives to participants during periods of virtual services. Leaders of two grantees encouraged other grantees to use a youth advisory board to understand youth's needs so they could adapt their program to maximize engagement.

Grantee Spotlight 3. Increasing engagement using online teaching tools

Eight grantees used online teaching tools to change in-person activities into games. For example, they converted quizzes to polls using the website Menti.com, or integrated a "Choose Your Own Adventure" activity in which participants made hypothetical decisions about sexual health and relationships.

In one Choose Your Own Adventure scenario, a hypothetical character finds out they are pregnant and must make a difficult life decision. With each decision, participants receive more information to help them make their next decision in the same hypothetical scenario. After a series of decisions, participants find out where those decisions lead them.

Participants had an overwhelmingly positive reaction to these activities. One frontline staff member said that when a student was answering multiple choice questions, they said, "I love this! I [feel] like I am on a game show, and I am winning a million dollars!" One grantee that used an online polling tool said it increased engagement, because all students could participate, including those attending virtually. The grantee found this strategy increased participation among youth who were not engaged in class before.

Lesson 3: Strong staffing, training, and management processes helped programs thrive, even during a pandemic

To implement programming with fidelity, grantees needed (1) staff members who would deliver the programs and engage with participants; (2) trainings to teach staff how to implement the program with high quality and fidelity to its model; and (3) management processes to support staff and maintain a cohesive team.

At the start of the grant, grantees varied in how ready they were in terms of staffing, training, and management. Although some grantees had not hired any staff (for example, because they needed the TPP19 grant funds to hire staff), there were also grantees that had established teams of managers and staff members who were already trained and had implemented the selected EBP a number of times.

The following lessons showcase what grantees learned at different stages, including the characteristics of staff members that were particularly helpful; the time it takes to assemble a team; the importance of early and ongoing training for program implementation; and the types of management processes that supported staff members.

Grantees considered several staff skills and traits critical to program success

Nineteen grantees said staff quality was one of the most important contributors to their program's success. The most important traits for a strong facilitator, as cited by the most grantees, include someone who is

(1) passionate about empowering, educating, or working with youth; (2) rooted in the community; and (3) able to relate to and engage youth. Figure III.2 highlights the traits or skills TPP19 grantees considered most important. Two grantees said passion or a commitment to working with youth were as important as implementation experience. They noted these traits increase a facilitator's "teachability," and facilitators with these skills can learn what they need to quickly. One grantee said, "I think it's important that your staff cares about young people. They can learn the curriculum, but if they don't care who they are presenting to, it's useless."

Four grantees highlighted the value of teams with young facilitators, saying they could easily connect with or engage participants. For example, one grantee said their youngest facilitator was Gen-Z and consequently could build organic relationships with participants by comparing streaming queues or musical tastes. Another grantee's young team of facilitators used TikTok to connect to youth. The TikTok account, which has more than 220,000 likes and 12,000 followers, was initially launched to promote the program and dive deeper into various educational topics on relationships or sexual health. Facilitators said they also used TikTok to find trends they could incorporate into lessons to make them more engaging or relatable to participants.

Figure III.2. Important facilitator traits or skills highlighted by TPP19 grantees

Source: TPP19 leadership interviews and virtual site visits.

Grantees learned it can take time to assemble the right team

Grantees said it was important to have staff hired or ready to be hired at the beginning of the grant period. However, 13 grantees thought there was not enough time to recruit and onboard the "right" staff —staff who were passionate, qualified, and trained—within the two-year grant structure because their roles were seen as temporary, and 10 grantees used part of or the entire first year to recruit and train staff or recruit and finalize agreements with implementation partners.

Two grantees said they felt rushed to recruit staff because the starts of the grant and the school year were within two months of each other. These grantees were not able to interview as many facilitators as they would have liked, and hired facilitators who were not the right fit. In one case, the facilitator required consistent monitoring and oversight, and in the other, the facilitator was replaced. Other grantees shared how they could not afford to start hiring staff before receiving funding, and sometimes qualified candidates were not interested in a temporary position tied to a two-year grant.

Two grantees described how bureaucratic delays outside their control prevented them from quickly forming their teams. One grantee's hiring and onboarding process takes at least nine months. A respondent from another grantee shared how, in hindsight, they wished they had communicated the grant's short timeline to their HR department to explore options to expedite the hiring and onboarding process.

Early and ongoing training and planning for professional development strengthened grantees' preparedness and ensured strong implementation

Grantees stressed the importance of program staff receiving curriculum training as soon as possible, but this proved challenging or difficult for some. For example, five grantees reported receiving curriculum training from the developer late in the grant period. These grantees said they did not realize how long it would take to get on a curriculum developer's calendar. One grantee thought the developer delayed their in-person training so it would coincide with other travel plans. This delay in curriculum training resulted in a grantee starting implementation in Year 2, even though staff were hired and ready to go in Year 1.

In addition to receiving timely curriculum training, grantees described the importance of investing in ongoing staff development. Two grantees shared how they encouraged their staff to be proactive about building and strengthening staff skills through ongoing training opportunities. One grantee launched monthly professional development sessions with discussions of topics such as trauma-informed principles and classroom management. Another grantee paid for relevant trainings facilitators expressed interest in.

One grantee shared how implementation delays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic gave its team time to focus on professional development. Instead of going into the classroom immediately, facilitators used the downtime to attend virtual trainings on a variety of topics including sexuality, presentation skills, and strategies for virtual implementation. Figure III.3 outlines the trainings grantees received over the two-year grant period.

Clear management structures facilitated regular communication and a good understanding of roles and responsibilities

Supervision and management are critical in developing or maintaining a strong team. Grantees stressed that a clear management structure—described by one grantee as a system in which staff know their own role and the roles of their colleagues—produced a positive team environment and promoted successful program delivery. One grantee said, "We've made sure that the team knows … what everyone does and how it impacts the big picture."

Figure III.3. Trainings received by TPP19 grantees

Many grantees stressed how regular communication was integral to their program's success. Program leaders of five grantees described how regular communication created an environment where staff felt connected as a team and were comfortable sharing challenges or asking for support.

Grantees said their teams communicated through a mix of team meetings, one-on-one meetings, and regular observations. Two grantees reported pairing regular team meetings with an open-door policy to create an environment where staff knew program leaders were always available to support them.

The COVID-19 pandemic created an opportunity for some program leaders to revisit their communication and supervisory structures. Four program leaders described how, as a result of the stress brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, they carved out time to check in on each other personally and created systems to prioritize self-care. For example, one grantee instituted a policy of celebrating all staff birthdays. Other grantees encouraged their staff to use vacation days or take breaks during the workday.

In addition to prioritizing communication, strong supervisors and managers created defined processes for their staff. One grantee shared, "Structure is important for the program. Establish clear guidelines with staff about their roles and responsibilities … but also give them space to be creative and innovative and feel like they're trusted." Some of the processes grantees highlighted included clearly defined data collection processes, onboarding procedures for new hires, and manuals and protocols to support staff during implementation. Grantees with well-defined processes, protocols, and manuals were equipped to manage staff recruitment or turnover. For example, one grantee said these materials allowed them to smoothly onboard new staff and made for easy transitions if staff needed to substitute for each other. Box III.8 has some strategies grantees can use to strengthen their program's infrastructure.

Box III.8. Tips from the field: How to strengthen your program's infrastructure

- ☑ Identify the traits and skills you need on your team, and start recruitment as early as you can.
- ☑ Start planning your approach to training as early as you can. Identify the types of professional development your staff need to prepare for implementation, working with youth, and program delivery.
- ☑ Establish a clear plan for supervision. Outline how often your team will communicate, how your team will communicate, and the types of professional development or training supports available to them.

Lesson 4: Strong relationships with evaluators, and regular communication between evaluators and grantees, supported rapid and ongoing program improvements

As part of the TPP19 grant requirements, grantees conducted process and implementation evaluations to learn the needs of their participants and communities and thus guide program selection; learn how to adapt the program for their participants and improve program implementation; and learn about participants' satisfaction with and attitudes about the program.

All of the grantees partnered with evaluators to collect and analyze various sources of data. Evaluators worked with grantees to develop data collection instruments (such as surveys and focus group protocols), manage and analyze the data, and prepare dissemination materials to share lessons learned. In some cases, grantee leaders and program staff did not have experience with evaluation and data collection and relied on their evaluators to oversee and lead this work.

Evaluators used the following data sources: surveys of participants, parents, and facilitators; interviews and focus groups with participants, parents, program facilitators, the youth advisory board, and community advisory boards; logs and self-evaluations that facilitators completed after sessions; and participant exit tickets after sessions, attendance information, and observations of lessons as they were implemented.

To form strong relationships with evaluators, grantees relied on ongoing communication about how to use data to improve programs

Most grantee leaders (22 of 29) described having standing meetings with their evaluators and the program team—typically once or twice a month, but sometimes as often as daily. Grantees also said they communicated with evaluators through emails and impromptu phone calls. During their regular meetings and calls, evaluators provided grantees with updates on early lessons to improve the program and the implementation of the program. These lessons were based on the data evaluators collected. Figure III.4 provides a sample agenda that program teams and evaluators could use during regular meetings.

Staff described how ongoing communication built strong relationships with the evaluators, such that grantees felt comfortable asking their evaluators to re-explain technical information when grantees were confused. For example, when evaluators used technical language, staff would stop them and ask them to translate what they were saying into easy-to-understand language; this would help grantees ensure they understood how to interpret the data, how well they were progressing on their goals, or whether there were areas that needed improvement.

Figure III.4. Sample agenda for grantee and evaluator meetings

Grantees appreciated collaborating with evaluators they had worked with before

When working with a new evaluator, grantee leaders suggested setting expectations early on for conducting the evaluation and communicating about it.

Six grantee leadership staff noted they had long-standing relationships with their evaluators and had partnered with them on multiple evaluations. One grantee had worked with the same evaluator for more than 20 years, including on other TPP grants. Box III.9 highlights one grantee leader's description of how they engaged with their evaluator during the TPP19 grant.

Box III.9. Engaging intentionally with evaluators

"We have monthly meetings and talk about what our strategies are, what our successes are, any of the data that [the evaluator] has cleaned since the last time we met, any feedback from programming.

"Once [we're] done with one of our programs, and the evaluator has pre and post data, and he's got the fidelity forms all read through and ready to go, then he meets with all of us again, the full team. And [the evaluator] says, 'Okay, here's what we learned, here's some feedback. Here are all of the kids' comments, here are all of the teachers' comments,' and we read through every one of them.

"And then if we see something's not shifting, we say […] 'What can we try to do a little bit differently? Do we need to spend more time here? Do we need to ask more questions and seek more student engagement so they're really hearing? Do we need to change our slides?' So, the program is tweaked all the time, all the time."

The five grantee leaders that worked with new evaluators reported struggling with defining and communicating expectations for meeting regularly and sharing findings, particularly when they were onboarding the evaluators. Because these were new relationships, it took time for grantees to recognize the need for change and to make adjustments when the evaluator was not meeting their expectations—in some cases, nearly a year into the grant period. Box III.10 describes strategies grantees can use for choosing a strong evaluator.

Box III.10. Tips from the field: How to choose a strong evaluator

If possible, choose an evaluator:

- ☑ With whom you already have a positive relationship
- ☑ Who understands your program and the communities you serve
- ☑ Who has experience conducting evaluations of programs similar to yours, and who ideally has experience conducting evaluations for similar types of federal grants
- ☑ Who can translate complex research language and results into easy-to-understand language
- ☑ Who has enough time for the required evaluation activities
- ☑ Who is available for regular standing meetings (for example, once or twice a month)
- ☑ Who is open to sharing findings with your team on an ongoing basis

IV. Conclusion

In 2019, OPA funded 29 organizations to choose, implement, and refine EBPs as needed over a two-year grant period. Despite significant challenges brought on by the global pandemic, which began about halfway through their first year, the grantees used process and implementation evaluations to document the successes and challenges of preparing for full implementation. Grantees also shared lessons they learned in implementing EBPs, particularly related to the populations they served and their community contexts. Overall, grantees reported they were ready to deliver their EBPs by the end of the first year of the grant period. However, the combination of the two-year grant period and the challenges resulting from COVID-19 made it difficult for them to reach participants, achieve recruitment goals, hire staff, and build or strengthen partnerships in the given time frame.

This report highlights four important lessons for current and future TPP grantees:

1. To engage participants successfully, grantees should tailor programs to meet their participants' needs and the needs of the community. Grantees can use their experience in the community serving participants to ensure programming is inclusive and relevant to participants.
2. Multipronged, creative approaches are key to recruiting and engaging youth participants and parents. Grantees can use various approaches to promote their programs, including building and leveraging relationships and direct outreach.
3. Strong staffing, training, and management processes help programs thrive. Hiring well-suited staff, investing in ongoing training and professional development, and outlining a clear management structure can support implementation. Staffing shortages resulting from COVID-19 and the temporary nature of the two-year grant period made it challenging for some grantees to hire and retain staff.
4. Strong evaluators and regular communication between evaluators and grantees support rapid and ongoing program improvement. Grantees can set themselves up for success early by holding regular meetings and setting clear expectations for conducting the evaluation and communicating about it.

These lessons illustrate the importance of grantees' (1) understanding and strengthening their selected EBP, (2) engaging with populations they wish to serve, and (3) developing strong relationships with staff and evaluation partners before implementation and evaluation. Keeping these strategies and lessons in mind will help grantees choose the most appropriate EBPs for their context, better prepare their staff to engage and retain participants, and make it easier to obtain buy-in from partners and participants to support successful implementation and evaluation.

Appendix A. Biannual readiness status reports

A key objective of the cross-site study was to understand how prepared grantees were to implement and evaluate their programs at the start of the grant period. The study also examined the steps grantees took to prepare their organization or EBP for implementation or evaluation.

Drawing on existing literature and models, such as those developed by the National Implementation Research Network, the cross-site study team organized the concept of readiness into specific domains: program readiness, organization readiness, and the readiness of evidence to support program implementation and evaluation. Figure A.1 illustrates the conceptual framework for the cross-site study, and Table A.1 describes the readiness domains measured in the readiness status report.

Figure A.1. Conceptual framework for the cross-site study

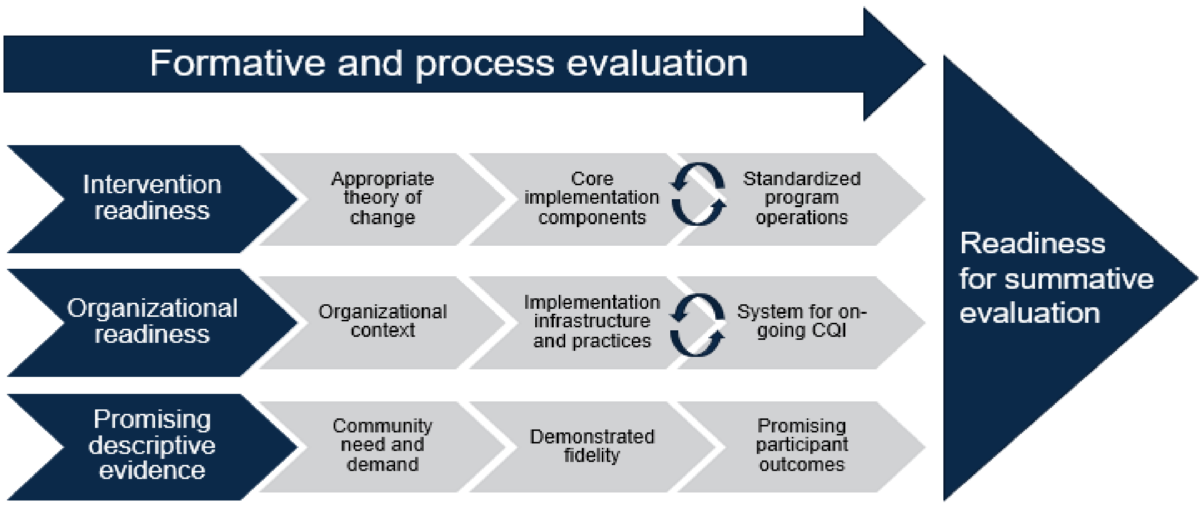


Table A.1. Readiness domains measured in the readiness status report

Program readiness indicators	Organization readiness indicators	Evidence to support program implementation and evaluation
Content, staff requirements, dosage, or duration	Changes to staff selection or hiring process, training, coaching, leadership, or data systems	Indicators of community demand, fidelity, or promising youth outcomes

Readiness status report

The cross-site study team developed the readiness status report to document and monitor the steps grantees took to prepare their programs and organizations for implementation and evaluation. The readiness status report was an Excel tool grantees used to document their progress and the refinements to improve their program and organization readiness during their grant.

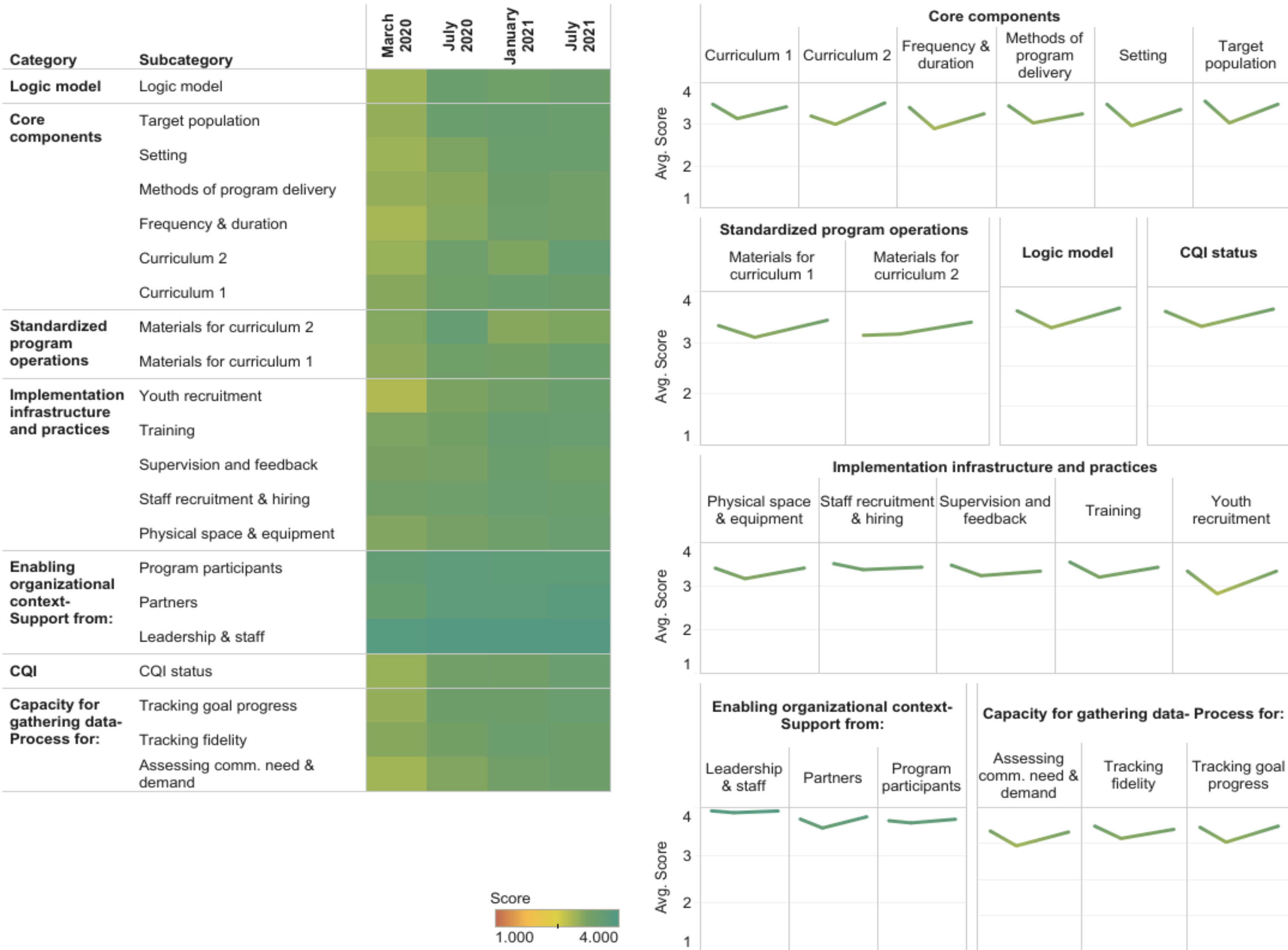
The readiness status report included data on the readiness of the following key sub-domains: (1) the program's theory of change, (2) core components of the program model, (3) standardized program and operation materials, (4) organization context, (5) implementation infrastructure and practices, (6) continuous quality improvement (CQI) processes, and (7) promising descriptive evidence for the program being implemented. Grantees used the ratings in Table A.2 to self-report their readiness on each key sub-domain.

Table A.2. Readiness ratings for each key sub-domain

Rating	Description
(1) Partially developed	Some materials, guidance, or benchmarks associated with this component have been defined but need to be refined before implementation.
(2) Developed	Materials, guidance, or benchmarks associated with this component have been defined or were provided with the selected curriculum, but have not been used yet.
(3) In use but needed refinement	Grantee is using what was developed and may make or is currently making adaptations to improve fit for different context(s)
(4) Ready for implementation and evaluation	Grantee refined this component based on early implementation and/or process evaluation, and it is ready for full implementation and rigorous evaluation.

Figure A.2 summarizes the readiness status across all grantees during the two-year grant period. All grantees reported being closer to implementation and evaluation readiness for all sub-domains at the end of the two-year grant period compared to the beginning. Grantees also reported the greatest progress in youth recruitment, setting, their process of assessing community need and demand, and their ability to conduct CQI.

Figure A.2. Summary of readiness status averaged across all TPP19 grantees, Years 1 and 2



Note: Readiness data on additional components are excluded because not all grantees had additional components. Grantees reported whether core components of their programs, their organizational capacity, and their systems for gathering data were (1) not started, (2) in development, (3) in use but needed refinement, or (4) ready for implementation and evaluation. Grantees submitted these reports twice a year starting about six months after the award.

Source: TPP19 grantees' self-reported readiness on a number of dimensions.

Table A.3 summarizes the information portrayed in the figure by the color gradient. It reports grantees' readiness status during the grant period for each category and subcategory.

Table A.3. Summary of information portrayed by the color gradient in Figure A.2

		Average readiness rating across TPP19 grantees			
Category	**Subcategory**	**March 2020**	**July 2020**	**January 2021**	**July 2021**
Logic model	Logic model	2.9	3.5	3.4	3.5
Core components	Curriculum 1	3.1	3.4	3.5	3.4
	Curriculum 2	3.0	3.4	3.2	3.6
	Frequency and duration	2.9	3.1	3.4	3.4
	Methods of program delivery	3.0	3.1	3.4	3.4
	Setting	3.0	3.2	3.5	3.5
	Target population	3.0	3.5	3.5	3.5
Standardized program operations	Materials for Curriculum 1	3.1	3.4	3.3	3.5
	Materials for Curriculum 2	3.2	3.6	3.1	3.2
Implementation infrastructure and practices	Physical space and equipment	3.2	3.3	3.4	3.5
	Staff recruitment and hiring	3.4	3.4	3.5	3.5
	Supervision and feedback	3.2	3.3	3.5	3.4
	Training	3.2	3.3	3.6	3.5
	Youth recruitment	2.8	3.2	3.3	3.5
Enabling organizational context	Leadership and staff	3.9	3.9	3.9	3.9
	Partners	3.6	3.8	3.8	3.8
	Program participants	3.7	3.8	3.7	3.7
CQI	CQI status	3.0	3.4	3.4	3.5
Capacity for gathering data	Assessing community need and demand	2.9	3.2	3.3	3.4
	Tracking fidelity	3.1	3.3	3.5	3.4
	Tracking goal progress	3.0	3.4	3.4	3.5

Appendix B. Methods

Findings from the cross-site study are based on five data sources: (1) interviews with grantee leaders; (2) site visits to a subset of grantees that involved interviews with grantee leaders, frontline staff who delivered the programs to participants, and evaluators; (3) a survey of frontline staff; (4) performance measures; and (5) a grantee readiness tracker. Details about the data sources and format, timing of data collection, analysis methods, and sample sizes are in Table B.1.

Table B.1. Data and analyses that informed this report

Data source	Timing	Format	Analysis method	Sample size
Initial and follow-up interviews with grantee leaders	Initial: summer through early fall 2020 Follow-up: spring through summer 2021	Virtual video interviews, transcriptions	Qualitative coding of transcripts using NVivo	Initial: 25 grantees Follow-up: 26 grantees
Site visits	Winter 2020; Spring 2021	Virtual video interviews or focus groups, transcriptions of virtual video interviews or focus groups	Qualitative coding of transcripts using NVivo	7 grantees
Frontline staff survey	Fall through winter 2020	Online survey	Descriptive statistics of quantitative questions; qualitative coding of open-ended responses using NVivo	28 grantees, 94 of 110 frontline staff (85 percent response rate)
Performance measures	Summer 2019 to summer 2020	Online form	Grantee and participant information expressed in frequencies	29 grantees
Readiness status reports	March 2020, July 2020, January 2021, July 2021	Online form	Summaries of grantees' ratings of their readiness to implement programming	29 grantees

Initial and follow-up interviews with grantee leaders. We conducted two sets of 60-minute, virtual interviews with grantee leaders during the grant period. The first interviews were conducted in summer through early fall 2020 to learn about grantee leaders' experiences planning and refining their programs. Twenty-five of the 29 grantees participated in the initial leadership interview. The second interviews were conducted in spring through summer 2021 to gain a deeper understanding of grantee leaders' experiences during implementation. Twenty-six of the 29 grantees participated in this follow-up interview.

To analyze the interview data, we transcribed data from each interview and trained staff to use NVivo to code the transcripts. To identify themes, we pulled relevant data for each discussion topic, then looked across respondents and summarized themes for each grantee. We then summarized overarching themes and insights across grantees and within each discussion topic.

Site visits. To select the seven grantees for site visits, we first identified key learning goals for the visits. These included areas such as designing and selecting programs, collaborating with partners, assessing the fit of the program, and engaging parents and caregivers. We then compared our knowledge of grantees' TPP programs (using sources such as initial leadership interviews, grantee applications, and readiness trackers) to the learning goals.

To analyze the data from site visits, we transcribed data from the site visit discussions and used NVivo to code them. To identify themes, we pulled relevant data for each discussion topic, then looked across respondents and summarized themes for each grantee. Next, we recorded overarching themes and insights across grantees in Excel.

Frontline staff survey. At the end of the first year of the grant, 94 of 110 facilitators and educators across 28 grantees completed the web-based survey for frontline staff (85 percent response rate). The survey included 63 questions about (1) the program and its intended population; (2) the staff's role, background, and experiences; (3) trainings or preparation they received; (4) their experiences with implementation and data collection for evaluation; and (5) key lessons learned. The survey took respondents an average of 30 minutes to complete. We sent two reminder emails to respondents asking them to complete the survey, and we reached out to program directors to encourage nonrespondents to complete it. We conducted descriptive analyses to examine staff characteristics and staff perceptions of training, program readiness, and program delivery, and we integrated key findings into our thematic analyses for the study.

Performance measures. TPP19 grantees reported performance measure data in 2020 and 2021 as part of their OPA grant reporting requirements. We conducted descriptive analyses on program reach, demographic characteristics of participants, dosage, fidelity and quality, training and staffing, and dissemination.

Readiness status reports. The purpose of the readiness status reports was to capture grantees' assessment of their progress on important dimensions of readiness over time. (Appendix A has more information about the readiness status reports.) Starting about six months after grant award, and every six months thereafter, TPP19 grantees indicated whether key domains of their program, organizational capacity, and systems for gathering early data were (1) partially developed, (2) developed, (3) in use but needed refinement, or (4) ready for implementation and evaluation. A domain might be considered ready for implementation and evaluation if refinements and adjustments identified through early implementation were completed, and grantees were beginning to see preliminary evidence of promising outcomes. In their status reports, grantees rated their readiness on the following six domains: core components, standardized program operations for the curricula and additional components, organizational context, implementation, continuous quality improvement, and promising evidence.

Technical assistance liaisons from the cross-site study team conducted individual trainings on the tracker with grantees. For each reporting cycle, grantees received email reminders to complete the tracker. The team monitored tracker completion rates for each round of reporting and analyzed readiness data after each round. When grantees submitted their final trackers, the team compiled and analyzed readiness data for all grantees in the cohort and averaged the data across all reporting years. The team prepared data visualizations of the reported readiness status. The data visualizations of grantees' reported readiness status are in Figure A.2. The colors in the data visualization map to the stages of readiness domains described above. Red represents a score of (1) partially developed, and dark green represents a score of (4) ready for implementation and evaluation.