

# Spreading the Message of Peace: Peacemakers Initiative

After School Matters Research Brief

Brief No. 3 | December 2018



## Background

In 2017, After School Matters (ASM) implemented the Peacemakers programs. These programs were created in partnership with Civic Leadership Foundation (CLF) through generous funding from Chicago Creating Real Economic Destiny (CRED). Peacemakers programs take place largely in neighborhoods with high violent crime rates and provide teens an opportunity to design and implement a project to bring peace to their community. The program aims to build teens' competence in 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, conflict resolution, collaboration, civic engagement, critical thinking, and self-management. A strategic goal of the initiative is to serve at least 60% male participants, who are disproportionately affected by violence<sup>1</sup>.

To evaluate program impact and better understand teen and instructor experiences, the Research & Evaluation Department conducted a mixed methods study in Summer 2018. Data was collected from teens and instructors through focus groups, interviews, and surveys.

41  
Programs

1,077  
Peacemaker  
Teens

*"I greatly enjoyed this program. The conversations that I've had with the other Peacemakers have further motivated me to serve communities in need around Chicago." - Peacemaker Teen*

For the qualitative research, teens and instructors were purposively selected from the community areas of North Lawndale and Roseland, as they were the focus of recent program expansion efforts. Eighteen teens participated in focus groups, and five instructors participated in interviews. Overall, Peacemaker participants were 88.9% Black/African American, 4.8% Hispanic/Latinx, and 3.8% Two or More Races. Additionally, teens were 65.8% male and 33.7% female. Teen research participant demographics are provided in the Appendix. Similarly, instructors were 60.0% male and 40.0% female, however race/ethnicity is not available for instructors. Teens and instructors shared their unique insights into what worked well and recommended changes for improvement.

For the quantitative research, 957 teens were surveyed using a retrospective pretest/posttest design. The survey was administered online during scheduled program time. Participants assessed their pre-program and

<sup>1</sup> University of Chicago Crime Lab. (2016). Gun violence in Chicago, 2016. Chicago, IL: Author.

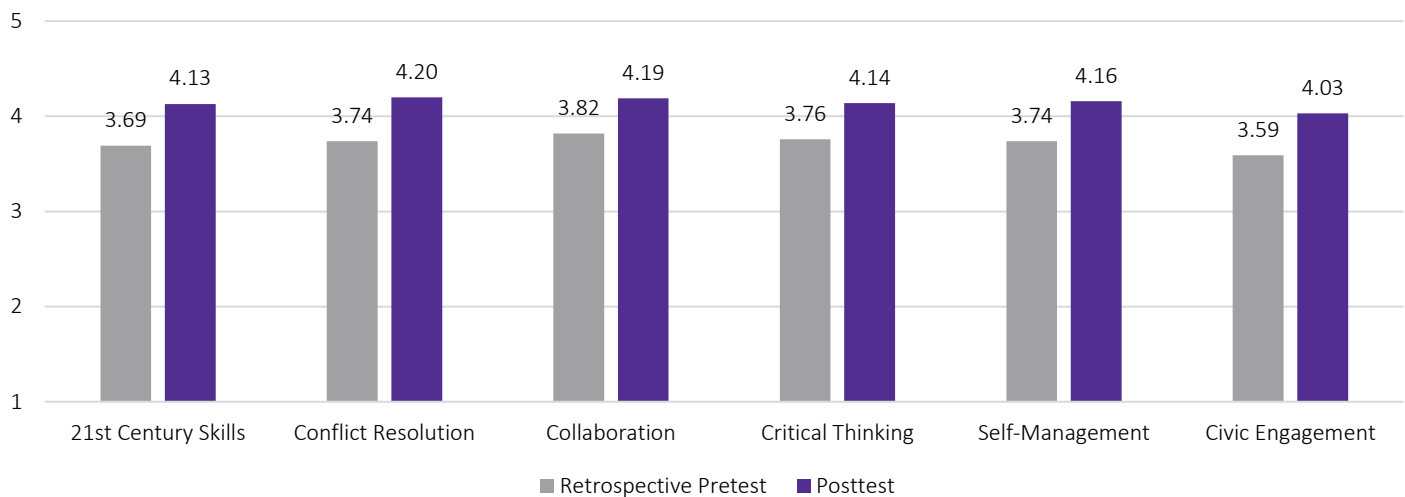


post-program skill confidence on constructs related to the Peacemakers framework. Constructs include 21st century skills, conflict resolution, collaboration, civic engagement, critical thinking, and self-management. A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare teen skills before and after program participation. Instructors were also sent an optional online survey to provide feedback.

## Results

**Improvement in Skills.** Peacemaker participants reported statistically significant gains from retrospective pretest to posttest in all skills, including conflict resolution, collaboration, critical thinking, self-management, and civic engagement. Figure 1 provides the relevant statistics.

Figure 1. Teen Survey Domain Scores\*



\*Indicates statistically significant change,  $p < .001$ .

These findings were supported by the focus groups. In particular, teens emphasized the importance of civic engagement and communication skills. Participants shared in focus groups what civic engagement means to them. Many teens shared that civic engagement means speaking up for the rights of people in their community. Other responses included setting an example for others to bring the community together, and to “be different than what you are pressured to be.” One teen described civic engagement as “being a part of your environment, making a change in your environment, being a leader.” Many youth said they believe that each person has a “duty to their community.” Survey respondents reported gains in civic engagement as a result of their participation in Peacemakers programs. Each Peacemaker program allowed the teens to design and implement a peace project in their own community, showing them the benefits and importance of civic engagement.

One instructor shared that teaching civic engagement to teens is very important because, “on a personal scale, I’ve been in a situation where I needed services from others...civic engagement makes the world go ‘round.” Many instructors noted the youth were not just there to listen and get paid, they were passionate. Teaching civic engagement, “allows you to help and give back to those ‘behind’ you.”

One emphasis of the program is to incorporate teen voice and choice, empowering teens to make decisions that positively impact their communities. One instructor shared how proud they were of the ways in which youth were able to identify the biggest challenges in their own community, while another discussed pride

in seeing the teens “look out for each other outside of the classroom, when they didn’t even know each other [on the first day].”

Teens said that the Peacemakers program showed them how to “be open” through engaging in meaningful conversations with their peers. Teens also expressed a further interest in being actively involved in their community, as well as some reporting that they now have more confidence when applying for a job. The most common skill teens said they gained was communication. Teens feel they now know how to express their opinions more effectively. The teen survey supports this idea with 74.2% of teens feeling confident in their public speaking skills after the program compared to only 50.0% before the program. Teens also believed they built leadership skills, problem solving skills, and the ability to look at situations from “someone else’s perspective.”

Instructors were excited to share the transformation their teens underwent during the program session. Most instructors reported that their students found the program enjoyable and valuable. One instructor said, “I had five or six teens who wouldn’t talk [at the start] but once they got comfortable they talked a lot more and opened up.” According to instructors, most teens really liked the program and established themselves as leaders.

**Safety.** Another common theme across focus groups and survey responses was feelings of safety, both physical and emotional. Teens enjoyed icebreakers that asked them how they were feeling because it felt like a “support system.” Instructors were most proud of their ability to “get students to respect each other, and boundaries, and how other people feel.” Many felt as if they were able to create “a safe haven for kids.”

Another instructor discussed how the group held a peace circle after a conflict and, in keeping with the emphasis on youth choice, the teens decided to hold one every day after, which completely changed the group dynamic. The peace circles were a place where teens could say, “I’m having a great day and I’m excited to be here” or “I’m having a bad day and I want to be left alone.” This provided a safe space for teens to be open and honest about how they were feeling.

Teen and instructor surveys also suggested a safe environment, with 80.2% of teens reporting they feel safe in the program and 88.2% of instructors agreeing their program is a safe space for teens.

**Instructor Support.** All instructors found the training and support they received from ASM satisfactory. An instructor noted how helpful it was to hear “different perspectives and knowing how different people would approach different situations.” Two instructors noted that their inability to leave their program sites was a challenge. This restriction was due to safety and liability concerns when leaving a designated program site. However, overall, instructors felt supported and that their program support staff were responsive to their needs. These responses are also supported by the instructor survey in which 96.9% of instructors felt program staff were helpful in resolving issues and 87.9% said program staff provided guidance in integrating best practices for youth development into the program.



*Peace posters created by Peacemaker teens.*



**Satisfaction.** Every teen across all focus groups said they would recommend their friends to join the program. Some teens said that this would be a great opportunity for their friends to talk about their experiences, helping them find their voice. In the teen survey, 79.9% of teens said they would recommend After School Matters to a friend. Instructors also said they would recommend Peacemakers to a friend or colleague, noting that, “it’s one of the only programs I’ve seen that really helps kids and helps the community.” They would advise future Peacemaker instructors to “Be prepared. Stay patient. Be ready to hear some amazing stories.”

**Challenges.** Teens said many people felt uncomfortable when they would discuss some controversial topics in the classroom. Teens in one focus group said when an extremely controversial topic was discussed, some of the teens would be much quieter instead of embracing the conversation, which proved to be a challenge. Another challenge was that teens and instructors said that they would like to do more to help the community and be less restricted to classroom activities.

Instructors felt challenged with keeping teens engaged and motivated for hours each program day. One instructor survey response stated, “My greatest challenge as an instructor was ensuring that each student remained engaged and invested in the program from start to end.” Due to a 21.9% retention rate, some students had participated before. Other instructors reported challenges in adjusting the framework to fit a new group of teens. They felt that the framework was well-crafted but needed adjustments, noting they did not feel the framework “matched up to the kids.” One instructor was happy to take on this challenge, saying in their survey, “[The program is] different every year because you have new kids who have all lived different lives and life styles. It challenges me for the better because as they are learning, I am too.”

## Recommendations

Instructors believed that Peacemakers is a wonderful idea, but a “work in progress.” One instructor responded, “Peacemakers is a good start, but should continue throughout the school year to monitor or follow up. I think it could be different/have a less strict framework.” In school year 2017-2018, a select number of Peacemaker programs did continue into the fall and spring although the majority were summer only. Instructors feel it is important to continue the program throughout the school year as well to reinforce the skills learned. It is recommended that school year programs continue, particularly in areas with high violence. Programs should be monitored to ensure that the framework is successfully adapted to school year sessions which differ from summer programs.

*“Every day of the program I would tell [the teens] that ‘Your voice matters, your story matters, and you never know who you are impacting positively. You can reach someone and impact them for the better.’” - Instructor*



## Appendix A

## Comparison of Population, Quantitative Sample, and Qualitative Sample Participant Characteristics

Characteristic	Population (n=1,077)	Quantitative Sample (n=957)	Qualitative Sample (n=18)
<b>Gender</b>			
Female	33.70%	36.65%	38.89%
Male	65.83%	62.86%	61.11%
Another Gender	0.28%	0.24%	0.00%
Choose Not to Identify	0.19%	0.24%	0.00%
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>			
American Indian/Alaskan Native	0.37%	0.36%	0.00%
Asian	0.56%	0.61%	0.00%
Black/African American	88.95%	90.29%	88.89%
Hispanic/Latinx	4.83%	3.16%	5.56%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0.09%	0.12%	0.00%
Caucasian	0.65%	0.73%	0.00%
Two or More Races	3.81%	4.25%	5.56%
Not Reported	0.74%	0.49%	0.00%
<b>Grade</b>			
8th	0.37%	0.36%	0.00%
9th	24.51%	25.00%	22.22%
10th	31.10%	32.04%	22.22%
11th	23.68%	23.42%	27.78%
12th	16.81%	16.02%	16.67%
College Freshman	3.34%	2.91%	11.11%
Not in School	0.19%	0.24%	0.00%