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**Policy Report**  
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**Evaluation of  
the Personal  
Responsibility  
Education Program  
(PREP) in Iowa:  
Focus groups with  
participants**

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# Introduction

## Background

The Personal Responsibility Education Program (PREP) is a federally-based initiative in the United States to educate young people on abstinence and contraception with the desired outcome of preventing unintended pregnancy and transmission of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS. PREP programming targets at-risk youth ages 10-19 that are homeless, in foster care, live in rural areas or in geographic areas with high teen birth rates, or come from racial or ethnic minority groups. PREP programming models are based on evidence-based practices that have shown to be effective in delaying initiation of adolescent sexual activity, increasing contraceptive use, and reducing rates of unintended pregnancy. PREP curricula may also address topics related to healthy relationships, adolescent development, healthy life skills, parent-child communication, financial literacy, and educational and career success.

The U.S. Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) awards individual states with funding for implementation of PREP programming. States may choose which programs are implemented under PREP from among 35 evidence-based programs selected by the federal government. In the state of Iowa, the Iowa Department of Public Health (IDPH) is the administrator of state PREP funding. IDPH awards contracts to community-based organizations and agencies through a competitive grant process. Each site must demonstrate the need for PREP funding in their community and their capacity to deliver an evidence-based program to the adolescent population. The state of Iowa currently offers funding for the implementation of two PREP curricula: the Teen Outreach Program (TOP) and Wise Guys, described in more detail below.

### *Teen Outreach Program (TOP)*

The Teen Outreach Program® (TOP) is a comprehensive, evidence-based youth development curriculum that promotes the positive development of adolescents ages 12–18 years through a combination of group discussion and community service learning. Core activities across the curriculum include values clarification, healthy relationships, communication, goal setting, decision-making, development, and sexual health. The most unique aspect of TOP is the community service learning component, in which youth engage in 20 hours of service over the nine-month implementation period. These service projects have included making dog toys for animal shelters, helping to organize a community-wide AIDS walk, and working on a bullying awareness project.

### *Wise Guys*

Wise Guys is a 12-week curriculum designed to prevent adolescent pregnancy by educating and empowering 11–17-year-old males to make informed sexual decisions. The evidence-based program is designed to empower young male participants with the knowledge and skills needed to make educated decisions, encourage participants to respect themselves and others, helping participants to understand the importance of male responsibility, and improving communication with parents, educators, peers, and others.

## Methods

As part of a larger evaluation of PREP programming in the state of Iowa, the University of Iowa conducted focus groups with TOP and Wise Guys participants in Iowa. The goal of this evaluation was to explore the successes and challenges related to program participation as perceived by the participants themselves, identify areas for improvement, and gain insight into the impact of PREP programming on participants. The study outlined in this report

describes the findings of these focus groups with adolescent TOP and Wise Guys participants.

Trained moderators from the University of Iowa lead each group based on a semi-structured qualitative instrument. Participants were asked about their attitudes toward the program, reasons for participation, facilitators and barriers to program participation, expectations for the program, and knowledge and skills gained as a result of program participation. TOP participants were asked additional questions related to the service learning component of the program.

All focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed. A total of 10 focus groups were conducted with a total of 67 adolescents at three locations in Iowa. The breakdown of the focus group participation by site is outlined in the table below.

#### Focus group locations, counts, and type of program evaluated

Location	Number of groups	Number of participants	Program
Mason City	2	11	TOP
Sioux City	2	9	TOP
Council Bluffs	6	47	Wise Guys

## Summary of Findings

### Changes

There was very little explicit negative feedback about the programs. Most of the changes that respondents said they would like to see centered on continuing or expanding the components they liked about the programs. For instance, respondents suggested that:

- The program should be expanded and made available (or mandatory) for other students.
- The groups should meet more often (usually 2x a week instead of one).
- The program should be more accessible by providing transportation, moving the location, or changing the time.

Participants expressed near universal agreement that they would recommend the programs and/or its content to other people, including not only peers but also adults.

Some participants in both the Wise Guys and TOP groups mentioned being interested in spending more time covering issues related specifically to mental health and suicide prevention.

Information that participants shared about how they decided to start coming to the program indicated the effectiveness of in-person individual recruitment by someone trusted and/or in a position of power. While some students indicated that they were required to participate, those who were not mentioned that they came to the program because they had friends there, other students recommended it, or school counselors recommended it. While there was some disagreement about the effectiveness of other recruitment methods like posters, face-to-face recruitment seemed to have been quite effective for the respondents.

### Likes

Key components of both programs that respondents mentioned liking included:

- Hands-on activities, interactive learning, and experiential learning

- o Flexibility of activities and content
- The quality of the instruction and content
- Incentives
- Safe environment for community-building

### *Interactive Learning & Flexibility*

Responses to questions about whether they would recommend the program for other people or would do it again themselves in the future were unanimously positive. By far the most common general response about both Wise Guys and TOP programming was that it was “fun” or “entertaining.”

One of the most frequently mentioned positive aspects of the program centered on the hands-on activities, interactive learning, and experiential learning (i.e., service learning). These types of activities were mentioned explicitly at least 11 times by Wise Guys participants and eight times by TOPs participants. One Wise Guys participant said, *“I like how we did a lot of the movement. Like we didn’t just sit around the desk all day.”* Another Wise Guys participant shared that *“it wasn’t like all the other classes. It was like more fun to, like it wasn’t as hard to like focus, because, like it was fun.”* A third Wise Guys respondent said, *“I feel like when we learned, it wasn’t like—class class. Where you had someone teaching you and they’re just talking to you and it gets boring. We actually interacted and participated—or actively participated in discussions and stuff like that. So I feel like that made it more interesting, and made me want to come more often.”* Similarly, one TOP participant said *“I liked how interactive it was”* while another liked that *“We don’t just sit in the classroom all day and just talk about stuff.”*

Additionally, five Wise Guys respondents and at least two TOP respondents mentioned that they appreciated the flexibility of activities or content in the program. One Wise Guys participant liked that *“you move at your own pace”* in the program while another shared that, *“I liked how it was new learning every week. And like, how we can apply that to our lives.”* One TOP participant made this observation: *“It seemed like we were able to, you know, build our own activities rather than you know, just in class—we do this, like, prison-style. Do it, get done. We have a choice here.”* Another TOP respondent in a separate focus group noted that, *“It’s very diverse in the way that it is set up...you can kinda talk about anything.”* Similar to the respondent who used a reference to prison to describe some kinds of classroom experiences, some respondents contrasted the flexibility of Wise Guys or TOP programming with the rigidity or regimented nature of other school classes. For example, a Wise Guys participant described the program as, *“it’s just funner [sic] than the other classes,”* while a TOP respondent said that the program *“helped break the monotony of school.”*

Overall, respondents in both Wise Guys and TOP programs expressed feeling like they could “talk about anything” and enjoyed the variety of kinds of activities they participated in during the program. At least two respondents specifically mentioned enjoying an activity about Agreement and Disagreement. Although respondents in programming that included service learning struggled to articulate their understanding of service learning, they expressed appreciation for the flexibility and interactive nature of these activities as learning opportunities.

### *Quality*

Six Wise Guys participants and two TOP participants mentioned appreciating the quality of the instruction associated with the respective programs. One Wise Guys participant stated emphatically, *“She [the facilitator] covered all the stuff and did better than my other teachers,”* while one TOP respondent said, *“In here we get to diverge into other things besides the bare minimum because sometimes that doesn’t help.”*

*So this is really helpful because we learn new things here too."*

## **Incentives**

Respondents answered questions about both why they liked their respective program or what made them come to the program by referring to the various kinds of direct incentives associated with each. *Food* was mentioned in numerous places throughout the focus groups as a key "hook" for participants. Respondents also mentioned incentives like *course credit*, *service learning hours*, and *gift cards* as effective mechanisms for encouraging their participation and as important ways to recruit potential participants generally.

## **Safe Environment for Community-Building**

Nine separate times in the Wise Guys focus groups and three times in the TOP focus groups, respondents pointed to the safe or confidential environment of the program as an aspect of the program that they particularly liked. For example, one Wise Guys respondent said that he liked, *"how we could all talk about stuff and it wouldn't leave the room."* One TOP respondent shared that, *"We really feel like we can be open and say what we feel without feeling like we are being judged by others because we all understand what life is,"* while another respondent in a separate TOP focus group said, *"If you had any questions...you could ask them without kind of feeling embarrassed or anything."*

This feeling of safety and understanding of confidentiality (even when focus group participants did not use that word explicitly) seemed to have facilitated an environment where participants felt comfortable establishing and maintaining positive relationships with one another. One TOP respondent highlighted the connection between confidentiality and community when she said, *"I guess it's like we have each other's back. We all got attached to each other after this because you could trust each other."* One Wise Guys participant noted, *"I really liked being able to see these guys once every week. Cuz a lot of these guys are my friends, and I just don't get to see them as much. It's nice to know that I'm not by myself and these people actually want to learn what they have to do."*

Another Wise Guys respondent mentioned liking the opportunity to meet new people through his participation in the program. One TOP participant said, *"I think that our environment of people is really welcoming and we are not...okay honestly some of us are not friends outside of this type of thing. You know, we may see each other in the hallways, but it's not like we make plans to spend Saturday night with each other. Just the diversity of people and the different opinions and advice that we can give each other...that is nice."* As these statements illustrate, respondents felt that both the Wise Guys and TOP programs provided a safe space where participants felt able to build positive relationships with one another.

## **What Participants Learned**

Among the Wise Guys program focus groups, participants mentioned specific instances of things they felt they learned fifty-four times while TOP participants did so twenty-two times. When asked directly what they felt they learned, no participants responded negatively or said that they did not learn anything in the program, although some respondents (especially in the Wise Guys program) struggled to articulate specific examples. Significantly, no respondents said they would *not* recommend the program to others or verbalized situations in which they thought people would *not* benefit from the program.

## **Wise Guys**

Of the fifty-four times Wise Guys respondents mentioned learning something, twenty dealt with issues around safe sex including contraceptives and sexually

transmitted infections (STI's). In nine distinct cases, Wise Guys program respondents cited having learned about consent; furthermore, consent was mentioned specifically in every focus group except one. In eight instances, respondents mentioned having learned about decision-making, healthy interpersonal relationships, or leadership.

Although some respondents hesitated to cast themselves as experts, participants in every Wise Guys focus group discussed either how they felt they had learned useful things that could make them a resource for others or how others would benefit from the information provided by the program. Respondents explicitly mentioned learning about specific resources in their community or feeling like they could be an information resource themselves (based on their participation in the program) thirteen times.

Some illustrative examples from the Wise Guys focus groups include:

*“The STD topic and the safe sex topic was a big one. Just because I know I have a bunch of friends—like, not a bunch but my close friends—they’re, like—they do stuff but then they’re like, I don’t want to get pregnant and stuff. But then yet they don’t use protection. So it’s like...so that—I don’t know, that helped me give better advice to them.”*

*“I can talk to my friends about sex.”*

*“I can try to help a friend out there with depression and everything”*

*“Yeah, get checked regularly. And like, not even about like, sex ed or anything—like, healthy, like how you keep a healthy relationship and how to like, keep yourself positive and like, what to do.”*

*“I think it really opened up my eyes into um, actually understanding what was like, what was really happening. Like, um, it’s hard to explain but I feel like it, I understand, I have a grip around things more than I did before.”*

### TOP

Of the twenty-two times TOP participants specifically discussed what they had learned, nine related to safer sex including contraceptives and STI's. Participants in every focus group mentioned having learned something about safer sex. In fifteen separate instances and in every focus group, TOP respondents noted that they felt capable of sharing information with others (being a resource) or knowing about specific resources in their community. Five times, respondents mentioned decision-making, mental health, or skills for having healthy relationships as things they had learned. Some examples of how TOP respondents discussed what they felt they learned include:

*“I’ve told my family about things that we’ve, like, gone over in class. Like the whole, um, suicide thing, STDs and all that.”*

*“I didn’t really know where I can go to get all the certain things, like the-- public health, where she works, or the family planning and all that stuff. Where to go to get checked and all the testing and everything, I didn’t really know anything about that until I came here.”*

*“How to deal with pressure from a partner, and if you have a manipulative partner. So that one was really interesting because it helped me realize that some of my friends, because I wasn’t with anybody but I think some of my friends had that type of partner and I kinda helped them so it didn’t get any worse.”*



[The following is an exchange between two focus group respondents.]

A: *She gives us all the numbers to the hotlines, and where they are.*

B: *Who to talk to if you have any kind of problems.*

A: *And the people who came in, like the mental health lady, she came in, I don't remember but she gave us like the numbers that we could call and how we can go get information.*

## Service Learning

TOP included a service learning component and participants in the focus groups were asked to define or describe service learning as well as how they felt about doing it. Some of their definitions included the following:

*"Doing things for the community to help out without getting anything"*

*"Helping for nothing in result"*

*"Learning through action"*

Although out of context, the first two quotes might sound somewhat negative, in the context of the focus group discussion, the respondents appear to have meant their definitions with positive rather than negative connotations.

When describing how they felt about their service learning experiences, the overwhelming majority of responses were positive, although some respondents pointed to struggles with logistics such as getting the whole group together for a project or scheduling and transportation. The following exchange between two respondents about the possible benefits of service learning illustrates how program participants recognized the connection between service learning and community-building or interpersonal relationships:

A: *I think, if we were maybe middle schoolers, um, exposing younger generations to more positive things, like volunteer work, um, association with friends, putting them in a smaller group rather than a 400, 500 kid class. That would give them the time to—*

B: *Get to know each other.*

A: *Yeah, make more friends, um, expose them to extracurricular activities, like tree planting or volunteering their time at the community kitchen, and other things rather than going smoking.*

Several respondents in one TOP focus group discussed the interactive, outside of the classroom nature of service learning as one of the benefits of doing it. One respondent said, *"It kinda gets us out in the world,"* while another said, *"It helps us figure out how we can go out and help people."* Perhaps one of the most poignantly articulated experiences of service learning cited by a TOP respondent was,

*"I feel like it kind of like, shows people out in the community that we're really not what they think we are. Cuz we're not—I feel like when people think of the alternative school they think we're all bad kids."*

## Conclusion

The feedback about both Wise Guys and TOP was overwhelmingly positive with suggestions for changes centering on expanding access to more people, increasing the amount of time participants spent doing the program (e.g., more meetings per week), and logistics such as transportation or scheduling. By far the most frequently mentioned change desired by participants was to increase the amount of time spent discussing issues related to mental health such as depression and suicide prevention. Respondents appreciated the interactive nature of the activities and the flexibility of the programming, which some respondents contrasted to more regimented coursework they experienced outside of the program.

Focus group respondents in both Wise Guys and TOP programs mentioned the high quality of instruction and content. Participants responded positively to the various kinds of incentives available to them. Responses to focus group questions also indicated that participants felt the respective programs created a safe, confidential space for them to discuss sensitive issues and build trusting relationships with one another. Participants were also able to discuss in detail some of the kinds of things they had learned through the program including information about having healthy relationships, safe sex, and decision-making. TOP participants who engaged in service learning articulated feeling positive about those experiences.

## Recommendations

1. Continue the use a variety of incentives for participants.
2. Consider augmenting the amount of meetings.
3. Explore ways to engage the students after programing has ended (e.g., booster sessions, reunions)
4. Explore ways to expand access to more students.
5. Ensure that future programming continues to do whatever possible to overcome logistical barriers to participation, such as transportation and scheduling.
6. Consider expanding content related to mental health including suicide prevention and depression.
7. Emphasize in-person individual recruitment by program participants and by authority figures such as school counselors.
8. Continue the hands-on, interactive activities and service learning components.
9. Maintain the existing emphasis on establishing the program as a safe and confidential social space.
10. Maintain the high quality of both the instruction and content.
11. Continue to provide accurate and detailed information about local resources available to participants and their social networks.

