

SACRAMENTO'S MY EMPOWERMENT PROJECT: DESIGN HIGHLIGHTS



Prepared by MEF Associates:
Ashweeta Patnaik and Becca Heilman

Introduction

In 2021, the Office of Child Support Services (OCSS) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families (ACF) awarded demonstration grants to child support programs in seven states and two tribes: California, Colorado, Louisiana, Minnesota, Ohio, Virginia, Washington, Blackfeet Tribe of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, and Lac Courte Oreilles Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians. These grantees formed the second cohort of the *Charting a Course for Economic Mobility and Responsible Parenting* grant program. The goal of these Responsible Parenting demonstration grants was to educate and motivate teens and young adults to postpone parenthood until after they complete their education, start a career, and engage in a committed relationship. Grantees also planned to collaborate with youth job development programs, foster care transition services, juvenile justice agencies, teen pregnancy prevention programs, community colleges, and public schools to integrate child support and responsible parenting education into a wide range of youth-centered systems.

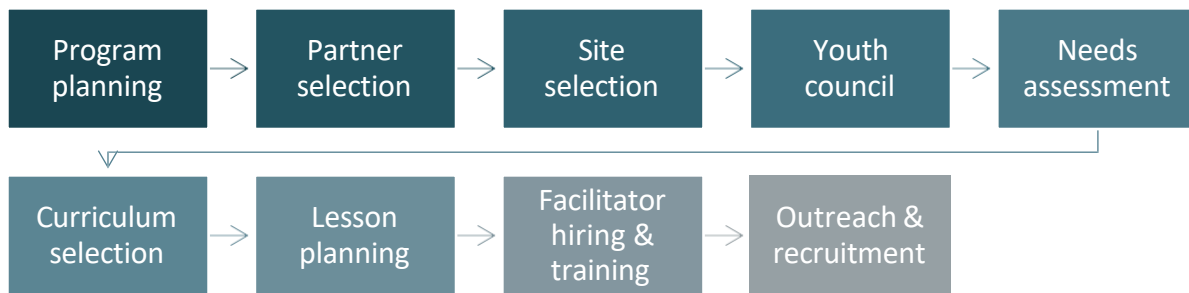
OCSS awarded one of the nine grants to Sacramento County's Department of Child Support Services (DCSS) to implement the My Empowerment (M.E.) Project, *My Life, My Journey, My Choices*. The goal of the project is to educate teens and young adults about the financial, legal, and emotional responsibilities of parenthood. DCSS is collaborating with a community partner, the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Sacramento, to provide education and support for youth so they can make informed decisions about success sequencing, a series of milestones that help young adults achieve self-sufficiency and avoid poverty. MEF Associates is conducting a mixed-methods implementation and outcomes evaluation of the M.E. Project.

The demonstration grants were designed to cover three years with the first year designated as a planning year to develop and design the program (Exhibit 1). This design summary brief describes how DCSS and its partners worked together to design the M.E. Project and the lessons learned from the planning period.

Program design

The project team began designing the program in October 2021 and began implementing the program in September 2023.¹ The design included eight phases (Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1. Program design phases



Program planning

DCSS envisioned a peer-to-peer, youth-centered, and youth-designed program that incorporated a youth advisory council and educated youth about the financial, legal, and emotional responsibilities of parenthood. DCSS began program planning in October 2021 with help from MEF. Program planning included engaging with potential partners, strategizing service delivery, and reviewing evidence-based curricula related to parenting and healthy relationships. No youth participated in this initial planning phase.

DCSS planned to engage a community-based organization to develop the M.E. Project curriculum and design and to deliver education and outreach to participants. DCSS intended for the M.E. Project to focus on African American and Hispanic youth since the adolescent birth rate among African-American and Hispanic adolescents in California in 2015 was 27 percent and 19.7 percent respectively, compared to 6.9 percent for their White counterparts.² DCSS asked for letters of interest from community organizations serving African-American and Hispanic youth. DCSS met with several potential partners during the planning stage to discuss their organizational structure, goals, and existing community relationships.

Partner selection

Through a competitive procurement process that began in April 2022, DCSS selected the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Sacramento (BGCSAC) as the community partner to implement the

¹ Although DCSS intended to complete the program design in one year, unexpectedly long delays in the procurement of the implementation partner contributed to the design being completed over two years.

² California Department of Public Health (2017). *California's adolescent birth rate drops to another record low.* <https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/OPA/Pages/NR17-082.aspx>

M.E. Project. DCSS contracted with BGCSAC in August 2022; implementation to begin in September 2023 and continued through June 2025.

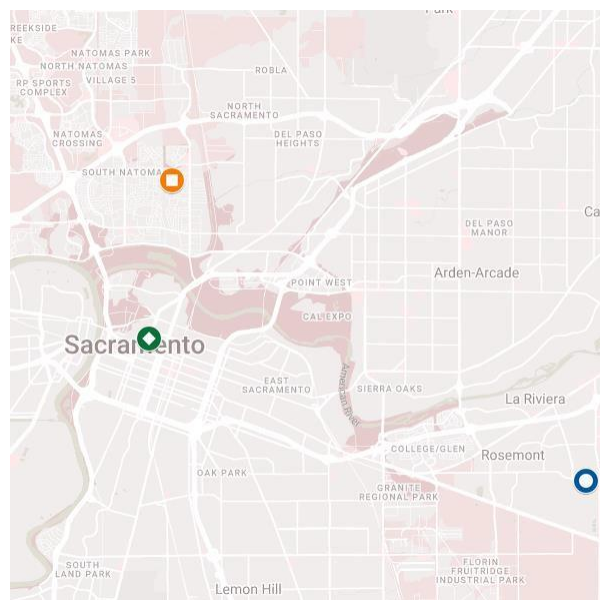
DCSS selected BGCSAC because of its experience working with youth and collaborating with community partners and their organizational capacity, data collection, data reporting practices, service delivery models, and processes for planning, developing, and executing a new project. BGCSAC is a non-profit that offers programs to youth through after-school and summer programs at twelve locations in the Greater Sacramento area. Their mission is to inspire and enable all young people, especially those who need them most, to reach their full potential as productive, caring, and responsible citizens. In general, programs at clubs cover education and learning, the arts, health and wellness, character and leadership, sports and recreation, and workforce readiness.




Site selection

BGCSAC offers its programming to youth aged six and older at twelve locations in Sacramento County. BGCSAC implemented the M.E. Project at three locations that served youth in the age range chosen by the grant – 13 and older (Exhibit 2).

1. Opened in the Northgate neighborhood of North Sacramento in 2021, the **Rio Terra Junior High Club** serves youth ages 6 to 18 with activities operating before and after school, Monday through Friday.
2. Opened as the first freestanding club in September 1999 in the Alkali Flat neighborhood in downtown Sacramento, the **Thomas P. Raley Teen Center** originally served youth ages 6 to 18 but was converted into a full-service teen center serving youth ages 13 to 18 in 2012 with activities operating after school, Monday through Friday.

Exhibit 2. Map of program sites



-  **Thomas P. Raley Teen Center**
-  **Rio Terra Junior High Club**
-  **Juvenile Hall Club**

3. Opened in the **Youth Detention Facility (YDF)** managed by Sacramento County Probation in June 2014, the **Juvenile Hall Club** serves all the facility's juvenile residents with activities operated after school, Monday through Friday, and on Saturdays. The YDF is about ten miles east of downtown Sacramento and is the first point of interaction for most youth who enter the County's juvenile justice system – youth who have been arrested, booked, and assessed as at-risk to the community are detained at the YDF.

Youth Council

The project had envisioned a youth council that would meet monthly during the program design phase. BGCSAC polled youth at all locations serving youth age 13+ to assess members' interests and preferences for activities to include in their college and career portfolios. Using the poll results and a committee of teen-serving management staff, BGCSAC developed a plan for the youth council, considering youth's preferences and the M.E. Project's needs.

BGCSAC incorporated the youth council into the Keystone program, an existing BGCA teen program that allows teens to gain leadership and service experience through activities related to academic success, career exploration, community service, and teen outreach. The youth council was included as a required service-learning component of the Keystone program. Youth could count hours spent participating in the Keystone program and the youth council toward their academic hours and a district Diploma of Excellence Award. Local schools distributed flyers about the Keystone program and shared the opportunity during daily school announcements. BGCSAC staff also visited schools to promote the program, share information, and answer questions.

BGCSAC held weekly youth council meetings during the design phase. Although the team envisioned a consistent group of youth who would meet regularly to contribute to program design, only a single youth advisor remained connected to the team throughout the design phase and provided feedback. However, BGCSAC also solicited feedback from youth attending other BGC programming on youth council meeting days. BGCSAC also leveraged high school students participating in paid internship opportunities at BGCSAC; the interns attended youth council meetings and helped print and assemble the curriculum binders for sites. Factors contributing to the youth council participation challenges included transportation barriers and time conflicts with other clubs and sports.

Needs assessment

The M.E. Project sought to develop intervention materials aligned with the specific needs and perspectives of the population it intended to serve. The project team designed and implemented a needs assessment survey to better understand the needs and interests of the youth they

planned to serve. In November 2022, the team developed survey questions by compiling lists of topics commonly covered in youth curricula, including *Love Notes 3.0*, *Parenting and Paternity Awareness (P.A.P.A.)*, *No Kidding Ohio*, and *Parenting: It's a Life*. As part of its ongoing effort to include youth input in program design, the team included youth representatives in the survey design. BGCSAC shared the draft survey instrument with five youth to solicit feedback on the survey questions. Based on the youth's feedback, we adjusted the survey wording for a few questions to improve clarity and relevance.

The project team administered the survey to youth at the Thomas P. Raley Teen Center, Juvenile Hall Club, and Teichert Branch Club in January 2023. BGCSAC planned to implement the program at the Teichert Branch Club. Due to winter storm damage in early 2023 resulting in ongoing construction at Teichert, BGCSAC changed the location to the Rio Tierra Junior High Club, which also serves youth eligible to participate in the M.E. Project.

Seventy-eight youths responded to the survey. Most respondents were male (88 percent), nearly two-thirds were aged eighteen or older (63 percent), and more than half were African American or Hispanic (52 percent). More than 60 percent of all youth surveyed expressed interest in learning about the topics in Exhibit 3. Once we concluded the survey and analyzed the data, BGCSAC shared the results with a few youths to help synthesize the findings. The project team used these findings to inform the selection of curriculum and modules.

Exhibit 3. Topics commonly requested by youth in the needs assessment

Romantic relationships	Building and maintaining healthy romantic relationships
	Understanding the effects of self-esteem and self-image on relationships
Parenting	Understanding effective parenting skills
Child support	Understanding the legal rights, responsibilities, and benefits of establishing paternity
Communication skills	Managing anger/emotions
	Communicating clearly and effectively
Mental health	Building self-esteem
Financial literacy	Budgeting
	Saving
	Understanding taxes
College and career readiness	Applying for jobs

Curriculum selection

Following the needs assessment, the project team reviewed available curricula for youth that focused on parenting, healthy relationships, mental health, financial planning, higher education, and career planning. The project team also met with other Responsible Parenting grantees to learn about their curricula and experience with program implementation.

Next, the project team identified six curricula that most closely addressed the needs expressed by youth in the needs assessment survey (Exhibit 4). The project team then identified lessons within each curriculum that would best address the interests of the youth they serve.

The team considered the cultural relevance of the curricula and the lessons but was unable to fully incorporate youth feedback on curriculum selection through the youth council. Due to the reasons described above, the youth council was inactive in the curriculum selection phase and feedback was only received from one youth advisor.

Exhibit 4. Selected curriculum

Parenting: It's a Life	Parenting: It's a Life (PIAL) is a curriculum developed by Iowa State University for grades 7-12. It introduces teens to the financial realities of being a parent, responsible decision-making, healthy relationships, peer pressure, and concepts related to paternity and child support. Its mission is to equip youth and emerging adults with life skills and introduce them to the emotional, social, and financial realities of being a parent through a free, relevant, and research-driven curriculum, and its vision is to empower youth and emerging adults to be good stewards of their decision-making responsibilities across their lifespan.
Love Is Not Abuse	Love Is Not Abuse was created by Fifth & Pacific Companies, Inc. (formerly Liz Claiborne Inc.) in conjunction with Education Development Center, Inc. Many young people begin to form their first romantic relationships during their teenage years, when they are no longer children, but not yet adults. Without an understanding of healthy and unhealthy behaviors in dating relationships, teens are especially susceptible to becoming targets of dating violence and abuse. Love Is Not Abuse blends literacy with health education, draws on the motivating power of literature to build students' reading, interpretation, and writing skills, and introduces skills for preventing and responding to dating abuse.
Diplomas to Degrees	Diplomas to Degrees, a curriculum developed by Boys & Girls Clubs of America, is geared toward high school graduation, goal-setting, and postsecondary readiness. The program is designed with these three objectives in mind: to encourage teens to explore their interests, potential careers, and postsecondary options leading to degrees or credentials; to support teens in planning and preparing to enter a postsecondary institution after graduating high school; and to help youth develop the skills and attributes (e.g., communication, collaboration, critical thinking, decision-making, perseverance, and self-direction) they will need to succeed in postsecondary education, work, and life. The Diplomas to Degrees program focuses specifically on gaining entry to two- or four-year colleges and universities, community colleges, vocational/technical schools, and U.S. military colleges.

Money Matters: Make It Count	Money Matters, a curriculum developed by Boys & Girls Clubs of America, promotes financial responsibility and independence among Club members ages 13-18 by building their basic money management skills. The curriculum is geared toward financial health through behavior change and the building of decision-making skills and confidence.
Career Launch	Career Launch, a curriculum developed by Boys & Girls Clubs of America, encourages Club members ages 13 to 18 to assess their skills and interests, explore careers, make sound educational decisions, and prepare to join our nation's workforce. The curriculum helps teens build their job-search skills and job readiness and provides career exploration opportunities, college and job search information, and interactive activities. Mentoring, job shadowing, and training opportunities round out the program.
SMART Moves	SMART Moves, a curriculum developed by Boys & Girls Clubs of America, helps young people develop and build foundational social-emotional skills to make healthy decisions and avoid risky behaviors. This targeted program focuses on self-regulation, impulse control, and stress management as positive coping strategies linked to helping youth avoid negative thought patterns and negative behaviors. The program also focuses on building social-emotional skills such as effective communication, decision-making, and refusal skills. The program addresses many of the risk and protective factors that may determine whether young people engage in risky health behaviors such as e- cigarette and opioid use.

Curriculum Schedule

After selecting the curricula, the project team developed a schedule for delivering the lessons weekly during the school year. BGCSAC structures its programming in four quarters over the school year. The project team designed the lesson schedule to focus on a specific topic area in each quarter. The Fall Quarter focuses on parenting, the Winter Quarter focuses on higher education, the Spring Quarter focuses on job readiness, and the Summer Quarter focuses on financial education (Exhibit 5). BGCSAC sought and incorporated input on the sequencing of the lessons from youth summer interns.

Exhibit 5. Curriculum schedule for 2023-24

Quarter	Curriculum	Session	Lesson
1	Parenting: It's A Life	1	Peer Pressure
		2	Healthy Relationships
		3	Risk and Protective Factors
		4	The Cost of Raising a Child
		5	Managing Money
		6	Establishing Paternity
		7	Co-Parenting
		8	Child Support

Quarter	Curriculum	Session	Lesson
2	Love is Not Abuse	1	What is Dating Violence
		2	Lifestyle Reality
2	Diplomas to Degrees	3	Exploring Types of Postsecondary Education
		4	My College Planning Checklist
		5	Show Me the Money
		6	Culture Shock
		7	Planning A College Budget
		8	Time Management in College
		3	Career Launch
2	What Are Potential Careers?		
3	Where Do I Begin?		
4	How Can I Improve my Communication Skills?		
5	How Do I Prepare for an Interview?		
6	What Is Appropriate Work Behavior?		
7	How Do I Create a Resume?		
8	How Do I Deal with Workplace Challenges?		
4	Money Matters	1	How Does Budgeting Help Me Reach My Goals?
		2	How Does Saving Help Me Reach My Goals?
		3	How Do Post-Secondary Costs Impact My Goals?
		4	How Does Using Credit Wisely Help Me Reach My Goals?
		5	How Can Investing Help Me Reach My Goals?
	SMART Moves	6	Healthy Boundaries
		7	All the Feels
		8	Steps to Say No

Curriculum facilitators

The project team hired three Youth Development Professionals (one per implementation site) to deliver the curriculum and facilitate implementation. The project team provided a day-long training to all facilitators and site managers using training materials provided by the curriculum developers.

Outreach and recruitment

The project team conducted outreach in the community to recruit participants at the Rio Tierra branch through presentations and flyers at back-to-school events. At Rio Tierra Junior High and other schools that serve youth eligible to participate in the M.E. Project, the team met with principals and health and life skills teachers to introduce the program and build partnerships for referrals. The Thomas P. Raley Teen Center hosts a charter school on its premises during the school day; the project team conducted outreach and recruitment with students enrolled at the school through presentations, flyers, and social media. The project team did not conduct outreach or recruitment at its Juvenile Hall Club location since the Youth Detention Facility staff selected a youth cohort to participate.

Discussion and recommendations

During this first year of program design, the project team worked collaboratively to design and plan for implementing of the M.E. Project. During the 2023-24 school year, BGCSAC will deliver the curriculum to youth while seeking feedback from youth and staff to support continuous improvement. In Summer 2024, the project team will revise the program design as needed and prepare to implement the revised program in the 2024-25 school year. Below, we reflect on lessons learned during this initial program design phase and offer suggestions for supporting program redesign for the second year of implementation.

Incorporating youth voice in program design

DCSS wanted the M.E. Project to be youth-centered in every aspect of the design and intervention. DCSS believes young people are the experts at knowing what they need, how to best deliver the information, and how to effectively engage with their peers. DCSS and BGCSAC tried to ensure youth voice in the design process during the planning year but faced challenges in engaging youth and only partially succeeded in incorporating their feedback.

BGCSAC and DCSS have an opportunity to address these challenges intentionally during the program redesign next summer. [We recommend that the project form a youth council that plays an active role in program redesign for the second year of implementation.](#) The youth council should reflect the demographics of the youth participating in the program. Below, we offer strategies to support the creation and continuation of an engaged youth council.

- Invite youth who participated in the first year of program implementation to serve on the council.
- If only a few youths are initially interested in participating in the council, have them serve as consultants or leaders of the recruitment process and offer stipends to support them in these outreach roles.

- Use more non-cash incentives for recruitment events and council meetings, such as free food, fun activities, and giveaways like T-shirts.
- Offer financial incentives to youth for their participation in the council.
- The council should meet regularly at dates, times, and locations convenient to members. Virtual meetings should be offered as an option.
- Meetings should have an agenda with notes and next steps shared after each meeting.
- The youth council should be invited to provide feedback on all aspects of program redesign, including lesson topics, outreach, data collection (surveys and focus groups), and incentives.

Collaborating on outreach and recruitment

BGCSAC conducted outreach and recruitment for the 2023-24 school year cohort. DCSS created a website to inform parents about the program and its features. However, due to implementation delays, the website was not launched in time to support outreach. DCSS partnered with Accelerated Video to produce video content for the M.E. project, including an introductory video informing the community about the M.E. Project. However, due to scheduling difficulties and the added challenge of COVID-related county restrictions in early fall, the video was not completed in time for the grant's launch.

We recommend that project partners coordinate and support each other in conducting outreach and recruitment for the second year of implementation. The DCSS outreach team engages with youth through community-based organizations and schools and regularly makes presentations in schools and the community. These events offer an opportunity for the DCSS outreach team to also present material about the M.E. Project and support BGCSAC's recruitment efforts. For example, the outreach team could pass out a flyer with information about the M.E. Project and how to sign up or has the QR code to the project website.

We recommend that project partners leverage the use of their social media for outreach and recruitment for the second year of implementation. This could include posting about the project and sharing stories during the school year to build awareness about and cultivate interest in the project.

We recommend closer collaborations with local schools using multiple modes of outreach. In addition to participating in in-person back-to-school events, other strategies include physical flyers in welcome or orientation packets as well as electronic links and flyers on the school website, school newsletters, PTA newsletters, and school-specific apps. Using multiple outreach methods will allow the team to reach more parents and guardians is an equitable approach to caregiver outreach.

Outreach and recruitment for the 2023-24 school year cohort did not incorporate youth feedback. We recommend conducting focus groups and surveys with youth to identify avenues for outreach and solicit input into recruitment materials.

Serving more youth

The M.E. project plans to serve 60 youth in the 2023-24 school year. This sample size is suitable for the first year of a pilot and will provide valuable initial insights that the project team can use to refine the program. We recommend that the project expand its reach and serve more youth in the second year of implementation, if resources allow, which will allow us to delve deeper into the diverse experiences of participants and enrich our understanding of the program.



About this Brief

The Sacramento County Department of Child Support Services contracted with [MEF Associates](#) in 2021 to evaluate the My Empowerment (M.E.) Project, *My Life, My Journey, My Choices*. Funded by the Office of Child Support Services, this grant studies whether providing interventions such as educational support, career training, and healthy relationships curriculum will change the attitudes and behaviors of youth around parenthood. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Sacramento County Department of Child Support Services or the Office of Child Support Services.

MEF is conducting a process evaluation of the M.E. Project. This design summary describes how the County and its partners worked together to design the M.E. Project. The authors thank Shaun Edwards at DCSS and Lisa Spiegler at BGCSAC for their collaboration on the evaluation as well as Asaph Glosser, Sundjata Aya, and Imani Hutchinson at MEF for reviewing and providing feedback on the brief.

Early work on this project would not have been possible without the contributions of Dr. Bright Sarfo, who unexpectedly passed away in early 2023. Dr. Sarfo's voice was critical in charting a course for this project and ensuring that the approach elevated the perspectives of the communities served.

Suggested citation: Patnaik, A., and Heilman, B. (2023). *Sacramento My Empowerment Project: Design Highlights*. Arlington, VA: MEF Associates.

Photo on page 1 by [Jeremy Bishop](#) on [Unsplash](#)