

UP for Learning's 'Great Expectations' Program:  
Evaluation of the Middle School Pilot Program, 2013-2014

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**Introduction:**

Schools face many challenges in remodeling their cultural and pedagogical practices to meet the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century learners, including the maintenance of high expectations that students feel ready and able to meet. The organization UP for Learning helps schools to tackle these challenges through cultivating the practice of involving both youth and adults working together as equal partners in devising solutions and proposing new practices. Through a variety of programs that range from long-term multi-year commitments involving intensive site-based support to small one semester action-research projects, UP for Learning brings school groups of youth and adults together to train them in the art of respecting each other's unique perspectives and working together equitably in pursuit of the common goal of school transformation to increase student engagement in learning.

UP for Learning's Great Expectations program, now in its third year, invites youth and adults to work together as partners to change their school culture around expectations for learners. The program aims at training youth-adult groups to become messengers to their school communities of the latest research around the relationship between learning and the brain, the role of self-expectation and others' expectations on academic performance, and a critical examination of both youth and adults ingrained beliefs about ability. UP for Learning sees changing beliefs and assumptions about these topics as key to improving student engagement within school. After receiving training from UP for Learning, youth and adults return to their schools to facilitate activities and public service campaigns to teach others in their school about the power of expectations and brain research. Originally created for high school youth, the program has been rolled out at five high schools in the past two years.

In 2013, UP for Learning decided to redesign this program for the middle school level in order to both expand their middle level program offerings and to support the development of youth-adult partnership relationships earlier in students' school experiences. The program is a natural complement to UP for Learning's flagship high school program, Youth and Adults Transforming Schools Together, which seeks to cultivate on-going youth-adult partnership relationships at the high school level to conduct action-research aimed at increasing student engagement. As mindset and self-expectation are critically related to engagement, the desire to expand this program offering to younger grade levels was thought to empower youth to maintain higher self-expectation and critically understand the signals about their ability that they receive from others at school at younger ages.

To participate in the program, groups of youth and adults from participating schools attend a one day training, during which these groups work together to participate in a variety of activities that introduce them to key concepts regarding the brain's role in learning and the power of expectations. For the 2013 pilot of the Middle School Great Expectations training, the sessions were co-facilitated by high school youth who had participated in the high school program in partnership with an adult facilitator. Working together, these session leaders both modeled effective facilitation techniques and equipped attending youth-adult groups with knowledge of a variety of possible activities that can be used to teach these concepts back to both youth and adults within their home schools. Through a constructivist pedagogy that includes small group activities, discussions, videos, and reflective writing, youth and adult groups engage with these concepts in order to both observe a variety of activities for communicating this information as well as to engage with the concepts themselves.

After attending this training, groups return to their schools to plan and carry out a school-based action project (often, a presentation of some kind) aimed at educating youth and adults in their schools about the power of both self-expectation and other's expectations on teaching and learning. The goal of these projects is to increase awareness about the power of expectations and to familiarize youth and adults with the brain's needs to optimize its ability to learn. In the high school program, these projects have taken a variety of forms, including a skit on the way in which the brain processes information presented at a faculty in-service day, the facilitation of classroom activities with peers on the idea of fixed and growth mindsets, the creation of posters hung around the school promoting growth mindsets, and conducting classroom based activities about the power of stereotyping and the role that this can play in lowered expectations for some groups.

*'Great Expectations' theory of action:*

The Great Expectation's program draws heavily on neuro-psychological research on learning, including Dweck's (2006) book *Mindset: The Psychology of Success*, as well as the work of Hattie (2009), Baksh and Martin (1984), Brophy (1985), Ormrod (1999) and Sousa (2006). The first objective of the Great Expectations training is enhancing participants' understanding of how the brain processes information based on Sousa's (2006) information processing model, so that participant's understand the relationship between an individual's self-belief and his or her ability to take in, process and store information in their long-term memory.

Secondly, the training seeks for participants to understand the difference between a "fixed" mindset and a "growth" mindset. A fixed mindset is one that sees an individual's abilities as innate and unable to be changed, and therefore perceives failure as evidence of a lack of ability in a particular area. A "growth" mindset, on the other hand, is one which sees ability as

something that can be built and grown through practice and the treatment of failure as an important opportunity for helpful feedback to aid growth.

Lastly, the training focuses on helping participants to understand strategies that support the maintenance of high expectations in school-based settings, including self-talk which reframes failure in terms of growth, as well as recognizing the way in which peer and teacher behaviors may subtly communicate low expectations to specific individuals or groups. In addition to Sousa's (2006) information processing model and Dweck's (2006) growth and fixed mindset framework, students participating in the program learn about other key neuropsychological theoretical concepts such as the Pygmalion effect, which focuses on the ways in which teacher perception affects the type of feedback that they give students (and subsequently, student self-expectation), as well as the effects of teacher and peer stereotyping on students self-expectations.

*Evaluation objectives:*

The objective of this evaluation was understanding the answers to the following focusing questions with regard to the Great Expectations Program:

- a) What did school teams do as a result of their participation? How did their action plans align with the objectives of the Great Expectations curriculum?
- b) What were the short-term understandings that their classmates and non-participating teachers achieved as a result of their plan?
- c) What changes in attitude, beliefs or behaviors of students or staff resulted from the implementation of teams' action plans?

In this report, we use detailed case studies of Great Expectations middle school youth adult partnership teams in order to illustrate the ways in which the Great Expectations program

challenges the conceptions of both students and teachers about ability, expectations, and the assumed passivity of young people as participants in teaching and learning.

**Methodology:**

Six schools participated in the fall facilitator's training for the Great Expectations program. All six schools were asked to participate in the evaluation. Of these, five schools fully participated in the evaluation, with one school providing an email overview of why they were unable to implement the curriculum. In order to gain a complete picture of the training and resulting projects, this evaluation draws from a variety of data sources collected during the 2013-2014 school year, including interviews, small focus groups, observations and document review.

*Interviews and focus groups:* Three phone-based focus groups were conducted with both youth and adults participants, ranging in size from three to five participants. In total, 11 students participated in these focus groups. Additionally, one to two individual interviews were conducted with adult advisors at each participating school, resulting in a total of six individual interviews. Interviews focused on understanding what action plans groups made on returning to their schools, the opportunities and challenges of translating the training they received into action plans, assessing youth facilitators' learning from the training offered by UP for Learning, and topics involving the experience of working within youth-adult partnerships to complete this work.

*Observations:* In addition to interviews, observations of both the UP for Learning Great Expectations training and the resulting facilitation of programs at participants' schools were conducted. Observations at participants' schools included youth and adults co-facilitating activities that were taught at the UP for Learning Great Expectations training for students at their

schools. These observations lasted from half an hour to two hours and were conducted at two of the participating schools. During this time, the researcher did not participate, but sat separate from the activities and took detailed field notes.

Great Expectation's curriculum documents as well as other materials such as videos and handouts designed to support implementation were reviewed. The data was analyzed using a constant comparative method, where unique concepts discussed by the participants were assigned codes and then as new codes were created, those codes were compared with previous codes, added to and revised to reflect the evolving nature of that concept (Saldana, 2013). These codes included categories related to conceptual understandings, the process of translating the training into action, as well as working in youth-adult partnership. Using these, detailed case narratives were constructed for three of the six middle schools, resulting in comparative cases that could be used to both demonstrate the diversity of, as well as the similarities in, conducting and implementing the Great Expectations work across school contexts.

### **Findings:**

Findings from this evaluation are organized around three case studies of participating schools in order to show the variety of implementation strategies employed by the groups and to understand the diversity of opportunities and challenges that the youth-adult groups implementing this work faced. In addition to these three case studies, the content of the training is discussed in order to provide a fuller picture of the process of moving from training to implementation. Finally, the circumstances of schools that were unable to implement the curriculum are discussed in order to highlight the role of momentum, organizational stability, and committed, well supported faculty in facilitating the success of this work.

### *Great Expectations Program Training:*

The one-day training provided by UP for Learning is the central and most important support for the implementation of the Great Expectations program by youth-adult groups at their school sites. The facilitation methods used in the training serve to model two central components of the Great Expectations program: a) activities from the Great Expectations curriculum that groups then could in turn facilitate with both students and teachers on returning to their schools; and b) equitable youth-adult partnership in facilitation. Youth-adult co-facilitation was modeled by three high school facilitators with experience presenting the program at their own school as well the director of UP for Learning, Dr. Helen Beattie.

The training was done using a loop input method (Woodward, 1988) in which middle school groups participated in the activities that they might use at their own schools. As one facilitator said to the groups, “Today is like a buffet meal for you. You are tasting the different offerings.” Youth and adults were urged to be critical consumers of the activities and to think about which ones they enjoyed and which ones they felt they could facilitate for their peers. Throughout the day, facilitation tips were presented by both the adult and youth facilitators for the participants to consider, such as how to make people in a discussion feel safe, and how to encourage a diverse cross-section of one’s audience to engage with the content in active ways. At the end of each activity, participants were given a short time to reflect on both the concepts that they learned as well as the way in which they might use an activity themselves. The opportunity to participate in and critically reflect upon each activity was an important practice which supported the work that the groups later undertook at their schools.

In addition to these on-going reflections on how to use the activities as a facilitator, the training included a panel with the youth facilitators of the Great Expectations Training itself



where they could answer questions regarding facilitation and preparation to facilitate. During this time, the high school facilitators reflected on the amount of preparation it had taken to simply prepare for this training. “They spent four hours over the weekend going over the powerpoint and practicing,” one of the adult facilitators shared with the group about the youth facilitators.

With two exceptions, the groups of seventh and eighth grade students who participated in the training were largely pre-existing groups involved in on-going leadership activities within their school. The advantage of having pre-existing groups come to the training was a previously established group dynamic amongst the youth and adult participants, as well as an existing structure (including meeting space and time) at the school on returning back to the school from the training. The nature of these groups varied between the schools. In some cases, the seventh and eighth grade participants were part of a middle school leadership team, like a student council. In other cases, the groups were part of student leadership groups interested in helping middle school youth make healthy life choices. In the case of one small school, the group consisted of the greater part of all seventh and eighth grade students in the middle school.

Student feedback around the training indicated that the activities and their content (particularly the concept of “mindsets” and the role of expectations in student engagement) made the greatest impression on them. Many students cited specific videos that they saw as having made an impression on them and could identify clear examples from their own lives that connected with the idea of effect of low self-expectation or low expectations for others. Additionally, a few students pointed to the facilitation strategies as the most important takeaway for them from the training, saying that what they liked best was that “everyone got to say their opinion” or that everyone got to participate in the conversations that happened at the tables. For

adults, some wrote that their greatest learning from the day was that “student leadership is integral and needed.”

Key lessons from the Great Expectations training include:

*Positioning youth as the “messengers” of educational research:* By being explicit about the role that middle school youth will play as messengers to their peers about the power of expectations to affect learning and student engagement, the Great Expectations training consistently provides a message to participants that youth are important and ought to be involved in the transformation of their school’s teaching and learning processes. This message is important not only for the participating middle school youth who are developing their nascent leadership ability, but also for the adults with whom they work on this project or as part of their established middle school leadership teams. It is possible that, although adult advisors may be committed to the idea of creating leadership opportunities for youth, they may be unfamiliar with the unique relationship dynamic between youth and adults that is called for by youth-adult partnership. Effective modeling of this dynamic helps to provide a tangible picture of what such a relationship looks like.

*Creating opportunities for youth to reflect on the way in which activities are facilitated:* Reflection on what it means to facilitate well is supported by the training that is provided by UP for Learning in two ways: First, through modeling youth-adult partnership in the facilitation of the training between high school youth and the UP for Learning director, middle school youth are able to see themselves in a facilitation role. Through having a panel in which the high school facilitators explicitly discuss the challenges of preparing for the facilitating the Great Expectations training, middle school youth are given the opportunity to have a dialogue about these challenges and to ask questions. Secondly, the practice of ending each activity within the

training day with the opportunity for both spoken and written reflection on youth's reactions to the activities and their thoughts on facilitating these activities for their peers.

*Case studies of action plans:*

On returning to their schools, school-based groups chose to focus their efforts to share what they had learned around the concepts that they had found the most interesting from the training. The amount of time that it took groups to organize a presentation to stakeholders within their schools varied by several months from school to school and in the end, took a variety of forms. In the following section, we describe and discuss a number of the different programs that groups organized for both youth and adults at their school, using three schools as case studies of different approaches with different subsets of challenges.

***Case – Middle School A:***

Middle School A provides an example of a school that successfully completed an action plan that was targeted to both youth and adults. At Middle School A, planning for a presentation based on the activities that students experienced in the training commenced shortly after this group returned back to their school. The group had consistent membership, made up of seventh and eighth grade students who constituted a student leadership team meant to address the “academic, social and physical needs” of the middle school, according to one of their partnering teachers. Prior to attending the Great Expectations, this group had established a regular half-hour meeting time once a week and these regular meetings continued throughout the planning and execution of the Great Expectations presentations.

A planning sub-committee was created to work specifically on the Great Expectations presentation. This sub-committee, made up of several youth and an adult advisor, decided that

they would do one presentation for the entire middle school and another presentation for the faculty. In planning to bring the concepts that they had learned at the Great Expectations training to both youth and adults in their school, the students on the sub-committee said that they were drawn to activities that they themselves felt that they liked or connected with. They said they were especially drawn to the activities that had a hands-on component to them. They then thought through how they felt those activities would work with their peers and decided to use the hands-on activities for their peers and to do a slide-show presentation for the faculty.

The student presentation was conducted during a middle school wide community meeting and because of this, groups had about ninety minutes to work with to present their activities. The group opened the experience with upbeat, energizing music played over the cafeteria speaker, leading many students or teachers to dance their way into the cafeteria to take their seats. As students entered, they were given playing cards that matched playing cards that had been previously placed on cafeteria tables, allowing students to be mixed up with others not necessarily in their normal social groups. The whole-group facilitation responsibilities were shared between the advising teachers and the student leaders, who took turn presenting the slides of a powerpoint introducing the idea of “growth” and “fixed” mindsets.

A few students and an adult then performed a short skit based on the “Mindset Choices Matching” activity in the Great Expectations curriculum of a student speaking with their teacher about course planning for the following year. The purpose of the activity was to demonstrate the difference between growth and fixed mindsets in practice. The small groups of students sitting at individual tables were then given envelopes with small pieces of paper while a student facilitator explained the directions for the activity. The students from the cabinet then spread themselves out amongst the tables in order to help assist with the activity. However, it was clear that there

were some peer to peer dynamics at play at some of the tables. For example, at one of the tables, the female student facilitator did not speak to or interact with the three male students who demonstrated a lack of interest in the activity at hand by laughing and discussing many topics that were not the activity at hand. After several minutes, an adult joined this table and was able to re-direct the male students to work on the activity.

The students were then given posters with characters illustrated on them by a student cabinet member and were read scenarios (based on the “Getting into the head of a mindset” activity). They were asked to generate statements that a person in that scenario might say that demonstrated a fixed mindset or a growth mindset. Students demonstrated a variety of understandings of the ideas of growth and fixed mindsets within the practice of this activity. It was clear that students understood the idea of positive and negative self-talk, but it was less clear if this understanding was undergirded by a grasp of the concept of failure as an opportunity to improve versus a manifestation of one’s fixed ability. For example, in a scenario regarding a student’s poor performance at a swim meet, students at one table wrote that a fixed mindset statement would be that “the coach yells at me” whereas a growth mindset would be “the coach tells me good job.” However, again, different tables demonstrated different levels of understanding. Faced with a different scenario regarding doing poorly on a test, students at another table wrote that a fixed mindset would be saying “I failed epically and now she’s going to yell at me,” versus a growth mindset of “I should accept feedback from my teacher.”

In addition to this presentation to their peers, the students presented the ideas of “growth” and “fixed” mindsets at a middle and high school faculty meeting which was held several weeks after their initial presentation. At this meeting, the students focused on helping adults to understand the difference between these two concepts through a nine slide slideshow

that included a short video, examples of both mindsets, and the importance of both self-expectations and the expectations of others on our mindset.

The adults and students involved reflected that the planning process allowed students to take leadership roles in the sub-committee in a variety of ways. Students who felt more comfortable with public speaking were able to take active facilitation roles on the day of the presentation, while preparing the materials for the activities led some students to contribute their talents in others ways that were personally empowering and meaningful. One student who did not feel comfortable with public speaking used her artistic ability to draw the characters on the posters that were used for students to change fixed mindsets into growth mindsets. These posters were then hung around the hallways of the school and many of the students identified these as the most lasting and important product from their student presentation.

One adult advisor working with the group said that it was possible that the group had spread itself too thin since it had taken on several other formal initiatives concurrent to the creation of the Great Expectations presentation. It was difficult for them to continue working with the students and the faculty to change the language that was being used around growth and fixed mindsets in the school more generally. Following the trainings, the focus group participants reported that they did not hear their peers discussing or using these ideas. However, the students who participated in the UP for Learning training felt that they had benefited from being exposed to these concepts and found them extremely interesting and useful.

Key lessons from Middle School A's successful implementation of their action plan include:

- *A pre-established leadership group can help support implementation:* The implementation of this work by an established middle school leadership team meant that the group had regular opportunities to plan, allowing them to maintain momentum following their participation in the training. Additionally, the established dynamic of the group meant that the division of labor in assigning leadership roles to youth participants could happen more easily as group members were familiar with each other's unique strengths.

- *The loop-input training method presents both opportunities and challenges for middle school facilitators in practice:* For all of the middle school youth participants in the Great Expectations training, the most successful method of engaging with the material were the training's hands-on activities. These activities were the most commented on in the feedback forms after the training and pointed to as the activities which scaffolded students' engagement with the key concepts of the Great Expectations program. The group drew heavily from the activities that had been modeled for them, using many of the same short videos and variations on the hand-outs and manipulables. For middle school facilitators just learning to speak in public, participating in the activities allowed the protocols to come alive in a way that mere written curriculum might not and seemed to give them the confidence that these activities would succeed with their peers. The group seemed to be particularly drawn to the curriculum's activities dealing with introducing the power of self-expectation (such as "Thumbs Up for Rock and Roll!"), and the mindset framework activities (including "Getting into the Head of a Mindset", "Mindset Choices Matching Game" and Eduardo Briceno's TEDx talk on mindset).

Middle school students were very capable of presenting the Great Expectations information to large groups of both youth and adults, particularly when the presentation had been scripted ahead of time and practiced with their adult advisors. Powerpoint presentations seemed

to be successful strategies for making the Middle School A facilitators feel comfortable. Although students expressed nervousness about doing public presentations, the students presented to large groups with poise. These strategies, more appropriate for teachers who are used to receiving such presentations, suggest that middle school students, with support from adult advisors, are excellent messengers in school faculty meetings or professional development sessions for this work.

However, the uncertain social dynamics of small group facilitation with peers seemed to intimidate some students and lead them to be hesitant to assume leadership of the group, as in the case at Middle School A of the eighth grade girl who was disinterested in interacting with a group of rowdy eighth grade boys who had demonstrated a low commitment to the activity at hand. In order to maintain the constructivist orientation of the curriculum that seems to support learning, it might be fruitful to intentionally pair middle school youth facilitators with an adult facilitator who can scaffold their leadership in small groups.

- *Moving from individual to systems level thinking can make certain Great Expectations curriculum concepts challenging for middle schoolers:* While the students who attended the training demonstrated understanding of the key concepts, it seems to have been more difficult for them to facilitate the critical engagement of their peers with the role of the expectations of others in influencing their own self-belief. As observed in the “Getting into the Head of a Mindset” activity facilitated by the student leadership team at Middle School A, students struggled to shift from an individualistic frame (where one person performed poorly because of low expectations for that individual) to a systems-level frame (where whole groups were stereotyped as poor performers based on class, parents’ education, race, etc.).



- *Opportunities for additional support from UP for Learning:* Finally, although Middle School A was able to successfully implement an action plan, the adult advisors observed that the task of maintaining momentum for the initiative fell largely on their shoulders and that it was difficult to focus on both the Great Expectations curriculum as well as the other initiatives that the student leadership team was responsible for. One advisor suggested that some kind of follow up or connection with other schools might help to create some internal accountability for implementation that could help the group to stay focused on moving forward with the implementation of their action plan.

***Case – Middle School B:***

Middle School B is a case of a school that was able to leverage the program to make a concrete, meaningful change in school practices. Middle School B is a small school consisting of 21 students in the 6<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grades in the 2013-2014 school year. The group which attended the conference was a small group of students from the seventh and eighth grades. After returning to school following the training, it was difficult to move forward with any project because, as one adult advisor said, their school schedule is “crazy busy” and so the group met only once after school at an all afternoon meeting in order to plan what they would do to share what they had learned with the rest of the middle and elementary school. “It was difficult,” one of the teachers said, “we don’t really have any breaks. We had to stay after school one day, serve them dinner here and then arrange for alternate transportation because that was the only time we could meet with them.” Initially, there were seven students who attended the training, but according to one of the student participants, the group dwindled to two or three dedicated students who facilitated most of the subsequent action plan in partnership with their teacher advisor.

In keeping with the training's encouragement to personalize the training material, the students came up with an acronym which they used to brand their efforts within their school, H.O.P.E., or Helping Other People Everyday. The biggest learning that they reported from the Great Expectations training, a focus group participant said, was "about the brain, and how it processes information and things that you can do to prevent it from not processing information." Originally, the students and adult advisor came up with a plan to do a four-week series of short presentations to the Kindergarten through eighth grade on this topic. They were able to complete one short presentation soon after the Great Expectations training before scheduling issues within the school forced them to put these efforts on hold indefinitely.

For this initial presentation, the group gathered all the grades in the school multipurpose room to present a slideshow and to introduce their acronym so that their peers would be able to recognize their efforts. The slide show mirrored much of the information that had been presented at the Great Expectations training, focusing on mindsets and self-expectations. At the end of the presentation, the group passed out copies of bookmarks with an A.A. Milne quote, attributed to Winnie the Pooh, that they themselves had received at the Great Expectations training in the fall.

The group students showed adaptability in the face of scheduling challenges which prevented them from more such presentations by coming up with an alternative method to get students to learn about, as one student participant put it, how "your brain processes everything that you've learned." Two students took a leadership role in planning and scheduling visits with every class in the school to read the book *A Walk in the Rain with My Brain* by Edward Hallowell and Bill Mayer. Hallowell (2009) describes the content of his book as, "written in children's language and intended for a grade-school audience, the story is rooted in sophisticated brain science and has deep implications for how people of all ages learn best and perform at the

highest level”. After reading the book, these two students talked to the classes about how “brain breaks” can help a brain to process information. The adult advisor said that these two students “really took it over.”

Because of this school wide activity, the student focus group participants related that the middle school schedule now includes “brain breaks” for all the classes. During these breaks, the middle school students take to the soccer field to run around for several minutes before returning to their classes or play dodgeball in the multi-purpose room. Student leaders reported that they felt it was important to take breaks in order to support increased learning and that one of their greatest learnings from this experience was that it was important to “keep yourself at higher expectations rather than putting yourself down”. A teacher added that the idea of brain breaks was in keeping with efforts already happening at the school regarding responsive classrooms, but that the students’ presentations had helped to encourage teachers to remember to schedule these breaks more regularly throughout the day.

Initially, the presentation to the whole group gave students a number of ways in which to participate in leadership of this effort in ways that were comfortable for them. Some students were able to expand their comfort with public speaking even though they found it “scary” or “challenging” while other students helped to hold up signs during the presentation if they found it too overwhelming to speak. There was greater attrition in participation as the group tried to find alternatives to the whole school presentations that they had planned, as one focus group participant recounted that “Some people didn’t feel comfortable reading to the classes, so they decided that they didn’t want to, so that kind of . . . the people that would do it kind of just narrowed down to two or three people.”

The students who participated in the revised project activities reported feeling surprised and empowered by their ability to “change the way classes are structured and everything.” They also reported learning a great deal about working in partnership with others, saying that “You kind of got to see how people work under stress, like if people would do what they were supposed to do or if they kind of left it up to everybody else.” Students felt that they were able to face up to challenging situations, such as public speaking, within the context of the support provided by these activities. “I don’t like it,” one student said of public speaking, “but I just did it.”

Key lessons from Middle School B’s success in creating a system-level change in their school include:

- *Alignment between pre-existing and initiatives and Great Expectations action plans can result in systems-level change:* The alignment between the message of *A Walk in the Rain with Your Brain* and the attention that the faculty of Middle School B were already giving to creating responsive classrooms resulted in the implementation of a small, concrete change to pedagogical practice. Youth became effective messengers for this work as the message that they presented was tailored to concerns that were already a priority for the school. This success suggests that the more that youth-adult teams can align the message of the Great Expectations curriculum to discussions that are already happening in the school, particularly amongst the faculty, the more likely it is that the groups will be able to translate their message into lasting change within their schools.

- *Action plans require flexibility in the face of organizational challenges:* Middle School B, in light of their scheduling challenges, faced difficulties in implementing their original plan, which included a series of short presentations to the whole school using activities that they

had participated in during the Great Expectations training. After they were only able to complete one presentation, however, two students took it upon themselves to formulate a new plan that fit the current organizational reality at their school. The variety, or “buffet” of activities that were presented at the Great Expectations familiarized the students with many ways of presenting the material to a variety of different audiences (e.g. younger students, peers, faculty). By switching to another activity that they enjoyed in a smaller class-based format, the students were able to find another avenue to present the material from the curriculum which better fit the needs of their school schedule and ultimately resulted in the creation of “brain breaks”.

- *Established time for planning and resources are important for facilitator consistency and retention:* The lack of a pre-existing group and a regular planning time created a dearth of opportunities for Middle School B’s group to establish momentum and to maintain group cohesiveness in the weeks and months following the training. As time went by and the group was unable, due to scheduling, to continue to meet, a few students who maintained an interest in the project were able to carry the work forward as others in the group became uninvolved. Unlike Middle School A, which already had an established planning time and group structure, Middle School B struggled with attrition in the face of obstacles to the group’s action plan.

#### ***Case – Middle School C:***

Middle School C is a case of a school which struggled to implement an action plan following the training. Middle School C consists of seventh and eighth grades, with a total of about 120 students. Five students attended the Great Expectations training with an adult advisor. The students who attended were not part of an established leadership group, but rather were recruited by the adult advisor with the idea that they could participate in this program, get a taste of youth-adult partnership work, and then graduate into the high school Youth and Adults

Transforming Schools Together program once they transitioned to high school. The adult advisor made an effort to recruit students who themselves felt disengaged with school. “I tried to find the kid from all walks of life here,” he said. “My goal especially was to try and get some kids who come from the families that say, “This is a bad place and bad experience.” Half of the group consisted of students who might be described as being disengaged and half of the group consisted of students participating on Middle School C’s student council.

After the students attended the fall training, they were excited to go back to their school and work on an action plan to facilitate a similar experience for their peers. “There was a buzz in the car afterwards,” the adult advisor recounted. “They’ve continued to talk about it... They liked the discussions about the brain. They found it really fascinating.” This advisor scaffolded this continued conversation by placing Up for Learning’s posters about the difference between a growth and a fixed mindset in his classroom as well as an informational poster on brain-smart learning choices.

The challenge has been navigating the delicacies of working in partnership with youth in the planning phase. The adult advisor described this process as follows:

They're more than willing to do something with it. It's just been trying to find the right thing to do with them. By that, I mean kind of waiting for them to -- I felt like I've been kind of like going after them and saying, "Hey! Why don't we do this? Or why don't we do that?" That's not really the point of the Great Expectations. It's to get them to start thinking about what they want to do. How do they think this information is best given to their peers and stuff like that. It's been a balancing act I guess that way.

In the months following the training, the group had several lunch meetings during which a plan was created, but navigating this complex balancing act, compounded with scheduling difficulties, means that there was difficulty moving forward with coordinated action. As described by the group’s advisor,

We drew it up on the board. We decided kind of what we wanted to do. They took on tasks and roles and things like that. Then, we had another meeting. Nothing got done. Then, I think a long weekend happened. Then, testing occurred... We had like three straight weeks of testing.

The multiple weeks of testing threw a wrench into the momentum that the group had been using to propel their plans forward following the training. It was difficult to regain once the testing was finished. "To the kids' credit," their advisor said, "a few of them have been after me to get something organized." He explained that he too has been swamped with responsibilities and thus it has been hard to the person responsible for moving the plans forward.

Despite a genuine enthusiasm for the work, both amongst the middle school students and the adult advisor, it has been challenging for this group to follow through on presenting the information that they received the training to the rest of the school. One plan which was discussed but still remained to be implemented at the time of writing this report was a YET campaign. The group would create posters and slogans to be posted around the school that emphasized the idea of not being able to do something "yet" as opposed to not being able to do something at all (a key difference between growth and fixed mindsets). There was still some optimism that the group might be able to implement this project by the end of the school year.

However, the group has continued to meet and the students consider themselves to be Junior YATST members, ready to join the high school group when they are able as freshman. The adult advisor said that he feels that there is a real excitement in the group for the core ideas of UP for Learning: the importance of rigor, relevance, relationships and responsibility, as well as the importance of understanding how the brain processes information. He added that, personally, it has changed his teaching. "It's slow change," he said, "because I mean I was trained to do things a certain way for three or four years. That stuff doesn't go away." He

continued, “It reaffirmed my beliefs already that relationships are the foundation. It's more fun, and the kids are more willing to be engaged and learn.”

Key lessons from Middle School C’s struggle to implement the Great Expectations curriculum include:

- *The importance of successfully navigating the delicate leadership balance in youth-adult partnership:* Learning how to lead in partnership with youth can be very tricky, requiring the adult advisor to know when and how to intervene without shutting out or shutting down youth leadership or voice (Mitra, 2005). As expressed by the adult advisor at Middle School C, the youth participants at Middle School C struggled to move forward in the planning while the adult advisor struggled to know how to best support them in the planning process. However, process, in this case, can be as important as outcome. While Middle School C was unable to implement an action plan to communicate the messages of the Great Expectations curriculum to their school, the youth in the group strongly identified with the youth-adult partnership aspect of the work and the larger idea undergirding the Great Expectations program of working to change teaching and learning at their school. Therefore, the process of working through the planning turned out to be an important learning experience for Middle School C’s youth-adult partnership group. However, this learning did come at the expense of successfully implementing an action plan.

- *The importance of building and maintaining momentum following the training:* As can be seen in the case of Middle School A and Middle School B, the weeks following the training are key to ultimately creating momentum for the action plan as the training is fresh in youth’s minds. While at both Middle School A and Middle School B, presentations were completed within a few weeks of the training, the dance over youth or adult leadership in this case meant



that the project lost momentum in the planning and has been unable to date to recapture the initial excitement that resulted from the training.

***Non-implementing schools:***

Three of the participating schools were unable to implement the curriculum at their schools. Although some of the difficulties that these schools cited as impediments to implementation were shared by implementing schools, such as lack of planning time, administrative challenges, and tenuous funding for the student leadership groups, for most of these groups, it was the compounding of multiple such challenges that impeded their ability to follow through on bringing the Great Expectations training to their home institutions. As one advisor said at a non-implementing school,

The kids went. They had a great experience. But we were also in the midst of a new contract this year, so the extracurricular contract didn't come out. I didn't even know if we were going to have a club stipend to run this. It fell into a perfect storm of reasons why this got pushed to the back burner in terms of things we worked on...I wasn't even sure if the club, or the group of kids that went were going to still have a viable group to work with in school until probably a month or two after they got back from the conference.

The lost momentum of this gap meant that it was difficult to put this work back on the group's agenda. Other groups struggled in similar ways. One group became heavily involved in implementing a second UP for Learning middle level project (Getting to Y) and was not able to balance moving both projects forward. Another group struggled without enough adult advisors who could support their student leadership program.

The fragility of this work, particularly in the context of middle school student leadership, is evident in the way in which both impediments deriving from a changing organizational context and lack of adult advisor availability is able to derail these youth-adult group's abilities to

implement Great Expectation's related projects. This finding is in keeping with the existing research literature on youth-adult partnership, which suggests that a relatively stable organizational context (Mitra & Gross, 2009), as well as strong, committed adult advisors (Mitra, 2005), are key aspects of being able to sustain this work in both the short and the long-term.

### **Conclusion:**

The Great Expectations program presents a thoughtfully designed, research-based curriculum and training that provide many avenues for middle school youth and adult groups to engage with the power of expectations to encourage and diminish learning. It is clear that middle school youth are enthusiastic about the content and eager to bring knowledge about expectations and brain research to their schools. This evaluation was meant to assess what school teams did as a result of their participation in the Great Expectations training and how their implementation drew on the Great Expectations curriculum, what short term understanding of the brain's relationship to teaching and learning resulted, and what changes in behavior resulted from the development of these new understandings. The three cases of participating schools presented in this report showcase many important lessons regarding both the strengths and challenges of middle school students as messengers of neuropsychological research to their school communities, as well as the practices which support and hinder the success of youth-adult partnership groups involved in transforming teaching and learning at their schools.

The case of Middle School A demonstrates that in the context of a youth-adult leadership group with an established group dynamic, a successful action plan can be planned and implemented. Additionally, this case demonstrates clearly the opportunities and challenges of middle school students serving as facilitators of activities which were originally designed for high school. Although the constructivist pedagogy of the curriculum appeals to the middle school

age group, middle school facilitators may struggle to deliver this content to their peers in ways that support enduring understanding of the curriculum's content. While public presentations using powerpoint play to middle school youth's facilitation strengths as they learn to master public speaking, they tend to be more effective with adult learners and do not support other students' engaged learning around the curriculum's core content.

It is challenging, in the course of a one-day training, to do justice to the key ideas and the research base undergirding the curriculum and simultaneously train middle school youth as effective facilitators. Many of the middle school students that were observed during this research were still practicing basic public speaking skills, which may have contributed to their discomfort in assuming more active facilitation roles. The "Inside Tips for Facilitators" included with the curriculum include emphasizing purpose, sharing your logic, signaling transitions, reading your participants, telling your own stories, and believing in your goal. These facilitation tips go beyond the simple basics of public speaking or facilitative leadership, which include standing tall, speaking loudly enough, and speaking slowly. One adaptation of the curriculum which may be necessary for the middle school setting is additional material to help develop middle school youth's basic public speaking skills, in addition to these more advanced tips.

Although one participating adult reflected, "one presentation does not change a culture," the case of Middle School B demonstrates that system-level change is possible when properly aligned with existing initiatives in the school. At Middle School B, youth and adults were able to identify a concrete change to the school culture in the form of school wide "brain breaks", suggesting that change resulting from this curriculum is possible as a result of engaging a school in dialogue about this research. At all participating schools, groups seemed to agree that faculty ought to be key targets for beginning a cultural shift around the use of this language. One adult

advisor suggested that more specific follow up with faculty by the groups might have better supported the adoption of fixed and growth mindsets as a shared language for both faculty and students to discuss student learning. While the enthusiasm that training participants demonstrated for the key concepts of the Great Expectations curriculum suggest that these concepts are relevant to middle school students, young facilitators who are just beginning to develop their skills may not be the best messengers to their peers for this information. However, evidence from the cases suggest that middle school youth presenting to adults can have a powerful impact on how adults evaluate their own assumptions about these ideas.

Finally, Middle School C's struggle to follow through with the program, along with half of the participating schools, demonstrates how organizational pressures beyond groups' control or the learning curve surrounding leading in partnership with youth can make implementation of an action plan difficult to achieve. As these obstacles stretched the planning process further and further away from the training, youth and adult excitement for creating an action plan diminished. One suggestion given by a participant for addressing the loss of momentum was having more accountability built into the implementation phase. It was suggested that having the opportunity to have a capstone presentation to other schools participating in the program to talk about what was done would provide a sense of finality to the program and an opportunity for teams to re-energize their efforts if they encountered difficulty in the implementation.

Therefore, key opportunities for UP for Learning to support the delivery of this program at the middle school level in the future include:

- Offering follow up in-person or virtual meetings for schools that allow middle school educators and youth the opportunity to become inspired by the work being done at other schools;

- Conducting follow up phone calls to discuss site-based challenges and youth-adult partnership best practices with adult advisors;
- Providing additional “facilitation” tips appropriate for middle school aged youth that focuses on increasing their comfort with the basics of public speaking or exercises for groups to do together in preparation for their presentation;
- Including opportunities for middle school aged youth to practice, in partnership with an adult, facilitating a small group activity as a part of the Great Expectations training.
- Creating the possibility of youth-adult pathways for ongoing engagement with the curriculum’s key ideas

It is clear that middle school age youth value the opportunity to work in partnership with their teachers and reap the many benefits detailed in the research literature on youth-adult partnership from participating in the Great Expectations program. In addition, it is evident that when a supportive school culture is present, students are able to make real changes in pedagogical structure and practice, as in the case of Middle School B’s brain breaks. The potential for both introducing youth as partners in teaching and learning, as well as presenting key research on learning and the brain, is there. The key to unlocking this potential will be further refining the curriculum for the middle school environment.

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## APPENDIX A:

### Adult Interview Protocol

#### **Individual Involvement**

Tell me about what motivated you/your school to get involved in the Great Expectations program?

#### **Group process**

Tell me about your school's team. What are the students you co-facilitate with like?

Academically engaged? Socially engaged? Extroverted? Etc.

How would you describe the current dynamics of your Great Expectations team?

Who are the leaders? Why?

What other roles do you think group members play?

Why are the student facilitators interested in this work?

What role do you play as the adult co-facilitator? How do you work in partnership with youth?

What was surprising for your group as you went through this process?

What norms and expectations did you come to as a group?

#### **Outcomes**

What is the thing your group has accomplished that you are most proud of? Why?

How do you think the program has affected the perceptions of students and teachers outside the facilitation team around mindset and abilities? (example?)

What do you think is the most important thing for your group to work on next? Why?

How rigorous do you feel the expectations are that your school has for students? Have you noticed any changes as a result of the Great Expectations program?

Has your perspective on learning changed? If so, in what ways?

Has your perspective about your students changed? If so, in what ways?

Have you noticed changes in your teaching as a result of participating in this program?

What changes have you observed in your student co-facilitators? Example?

#### **Focus/Meaning of the work**

Is the work what you expected it would be?

What has been the best part of the program so far?

How do you think the program could be improved?

In what ways did the training you received in October prepare you for the challenges you've encountered? In what ways could it be improved?

What kind of training do you think is necessary in order to engage in this kind of youth-adult partnership work as an adult?

#### **Contextual Factors**

In what ways does your school integrate youth-adult partnership or student voice outside of the Great Expectations program?

What possibilities do you see for integrating youth-adult partnership in other parts of your

practice? Other parts of your school?

How do other staff/your administration regard partnership with youth?

Has that changed as a result of your participation the Great Expectations program?

**Big ideas/Final reflections**

Why are high expectations important for your students?

What does student engagement mean to you?

What is the most important thing for an adult who wants to partner with youth to know?



## APPENDIX B:

### Youth Focus Group Protocol

#### **Individual Involvement**

Tell me about how you got involved as a facilitator in the ‘Great Expectations’ program.

Why did you get involved?

What do you like best about working as a student facilitator?

Has there been anything difficult about being a facilitator? Tell me about what those challenges have been.

#### **Focus/Meaning of the work**

What is your group working on right now?

What is the most important message you want to tell teachers and students through this work?

Why is it important for teachers to have high expectations for their students?

Why do you think the teachers and administrators here are interested partnering with students for this work?

How do you think this program changes how other students in your class think about learning?

How do you think this program changes how teachers in your school think about learning?

(if appropriate) How do you think this program changes how your family/parents or other people in the community think about learning?

#### **Group process**

What’s it like to be a part of a facilitation team?

How does the facilitation team work together?

Who are the leaders in your facilitation team? Why?

What other roles do you think other group members play?

Why do you think the other students got involved in this work?

Why do you think [adult leaders] got involved in this work?

What do you see as your role in the group?

Do you ever feel frustrated with the group? (If yes, ask about specific time/why)

How do you feel you’ve changed since participating in this work?

What new skills do you think you’ve developed as a part of this experience?

Has your perspective about expectations for students changed? If so, in what ways?

Has your perspective about your classmates changed? If so, in what ways?

#### **Outcomes**

What do you like most about what your group has accomplished?

What are the places that need the most work?

How do you think the group’s work is perceived by your classmates? Your teachers?

What do you think is the most important thing for your group to work on next? Why?

#### **Big ideas/Final reflections**

What is the most important thing for a teacher who wants to co-facilitate with a student to know?

Why do you think teachers sometimes don’t have high expectations for their students?