

Schools for Hope Program Executive Summary

The International Foundation for Research and Education on Depression aims to teach hope and prevent youth suicides globally with the Schools for Hope Program. Research suggests that one out of nine students attempt suicide before graduating from high school, with 40% in grade school (Journal of Adolescent Health, 2011) and hopelessness is the number one symptom of depression and leading predictor to suicide (Association of Physicians, 2004).

The curriculum consists of ten lessons teaching children the social and emotional learning tools to have and maintain hope throughout life's challenges. Lesson content was developed based on leading research on hope conducted by Dr. Shane Lopez, Dr. Anthony Scioli, CR Snyder and others, along with the Social and Emotional Learning Standards successfully implemented around the nation through CASEL. According to this research, hope can be taught (Cheavans, 2008) and the greater the hope, the greater the level of well-being (Scioli, 2009). Each lesson contains objectives, critical thinking questions, discussion points, hands-on activities and stories to enhance student comprehension. Supplemental lessons, critical resources on depression and an online forum are available to all facilitators, as well as access to iFred staff if additional assistance is needed.

The program was launched with 370 fifth grade students in the Chicago area in the fall of 2014. Research has found that there is a significant rise in suicide attempts when children reach sixth grade or at the average age of twelve (Journal of Adolescent Health, 2011). iFred's goal is to equip children with hope tools at age ten prior to middle school to aid in prevention. Our long term development plan includes expanding the curriculum to meet all grade levels and ensure every child is taught hope.

Results of fall testing concluded the effectiveness of the program with an overall increase in student comprehension of material and content. Pre and Post Tests were administered to students with an average post-test score increasing in a value of +0.314. This significance in difference between the pre-test and post-test mean scores is supported by p-value < 0.05. Full results of the study can be viewed in the attached report. Additionally, feedback from educators and students was collected with indicated reports of overall satisfaction, support, and a desire to continue forward with the program.

iFred needs financial support to supply the necessary staff, further curriculum development, and expand our outreach efforts to schools and other community service providers to reach as many children as possible. With the need to address this alarming global issue, iFred offers the full lessons and resources for free access and download on the Schools for Hope website. With financial support, iFred will be able to supply classrooms with a curriculum kit that contains full colored printed lesson plans, student worksheets, a planting kit (iFred established the sunflower as the universal and positive symbol of hope), resource sheets, and the Chicken Soup for the Soul in the Classroom textbook to be utilized for supplemental stories and activities.

With the alarming rate of reported suicide attempts and success shown with the fall implementation of the program, iFred aims to move forward in outreach and expansion efforts as incoming resources allow.

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Program Overview: Schools for Hope is a new curriculum project developed by iFred, the International Foundation for Research and Education on Depression. It is based on research that suggests hope is a teachable skill (Cheavans, 2008). Our aim is to equip students, educators, and parents with the tools they need to find and maintain hope even during the most trying of times.

The leading predictor of suicide is hopelessness (Association of Physicians, 2004), so we believe through our positive advocacy we can reduce overall suicide attempts in youth. Our focus is on prevention through practical tools and exercises. We are offering it free in hopes that students around the world benefit from our research and material.

Research data has shown a significant rise in suicide attempts when children reach sixth grade or at the average age of twelve (Journal of Adolescent Health, 2011). Therefore, the program was targeted for fifth grade students to ensure this age group was given the social and emotional learning tools prior to entering middle school or sixth grade.

The lesson objectives and content meet the Standards for Social and Emotional Learning set in place by the state of Illinois. For a thorough understanding of the program's content, lesson topics are listed here:

Fall Hope Curriculum (Five lessons lasting approx. 30 minutes)

- Lesson One: What is Hope?
- Lesson Two: Why is Hope Important? Defining Success
- Lesson Three: The Brain and Hope. Understanding the connection between thoughts and feelings and physiological response.
- Lesson Four: How to Create a Hopeful Mind. Self-Regulation Techniques taught including deep breathing, meditation, positive thinking, gratitude, and visualization.
- Lesson Five: Hopeful Self. Learning the beneficial effects of caring and investing in something they find sacred such as nature, music, art, or a higher power.

Spring Hope Curriculum (Five lessons lasting approx. 30 minutes)

- Lesson Six: Hopeful Purpose. Learning about your purpose and passion in life.
- Lesson Seven: Hopeful Goals and Pathways. Setting goals and creating realistic action steps to reach them.
- Lesson Eight: A Hopeful Approach to Change. Create a plan to meet anticipated obstacles.
- Lesson Nine: Challenges to Hope. Using hope tools when life brings unexpected events. Finding and identifying a person of support.
- Lesson Ten: Giving Hope. The importance of giving back to others.

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Supplemental Projects: Artworks for Hope, Hero for Hope Report, and Movies on Hope.

Educator Resources: Signs and Symptoms of Depression in Children, Who to Call, Guidelines for Educators, Guidelines for Families, and Curriculum Requirements for Social and Emotional Learning Standards (SEL).

All lessons contain teaching objectives, critical thinking questions, topics for classroom discussion, hands-on activities, and engaging stories.

To date, the first five lessons (Fall Hope Curriculum) were tested with 370 fifth grade students in the fall of 2014 from two Chicago area school districts. Pre and Post Tests were delivered to all participants to measure student comprehension of material taught. The study hypothesized that the post-test survey results would increase after administration of the HOPE curriculum. Results confirmed and concluded the effectiveness of the program revealing an overall increase in student comprehension. See Results section for detailed information.

Results: Student comprehension was measured through 10 comprehensive questions related to hope and the overall meaning of hope. Statistical analysis data was sourced from student responses by converting responses to numerical values (1 = none of the time, 2= A little of the time, 3= Some of the time, 4= A lot of the time, 5= Most of the time, 6= All of the time). A t-test was performed to compare the average numerical response between Pre and Post Test Surveys for each individual question. Our hypothesis for the study was that the numerical value for each question would increase in the post-curriculum surveys for students in the experimental group. On average, each post-test score increased by a value of +0.314. This significance in difference between the pre-test and post-test mean scores is supported by $p\text{-value} < 0.05$. $P\text{-value} < 0.05$ indicating that we can reject our null hypothesis that the mean pre-and-post test scores will be the same. This offers evidence for increased comprehension of the concept of hope. Table 1 below shows the results of statistical analysis completed on the experimental group.

Despite issues with incomplete data and skewed experimental to control group ratios, initial analysis of the Schools for Hope Program shows promising results with data supporting an increase in comprehension. Feedback from educators and students indicated reports of overall satisfaction and a desire to continue forward with the program. Further studies should ultimately utilize a similar number of participants in the experimental group and the control group in order to provide improved accurate data comparison. Feedback from educators recommended a survey with fewer answer choices that are both concise and appropriate to the reading level of the participants. Students did not supply all of the necessary information for data comparison such as student id number. Further examination on best practices will be made to ensure students complete necessary information to help fully evaluate the scope of the hope curriculum.

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Expansion: With the high number of suicide attempts occurring at such a young age, it is our responsibility to ensure all youth receive the education and skills so vital in caring for their mental well-being. We need financial assistance in order to expand our outreach to serve as many communities as we can, further our curriculum development to reach all grade levels, and make it available in all languages.

Financial support delivers every classroom a curriculum kit containing the complete set of lesson plans, student worksheets, educational resources, planting kit, and the *Chicken Soup for the Soul in the Classroom* textbook to equip educators, facilitators, and responsible parties the means to provide hope tools.

Our goal is to ensure all schools, communities, and children have access to the program, so iFred has placed all lessons, resources, and worksheets at schoolsforhope.org for free download.

Recommendations: As observed in a short time span, students have responded positively to the Hope curriculum and have shown an overall improvement in their level of comprehension on hope. Educators reported satisfaction with the results and plan to continue implementation. Minor improvements were suggested related to terminology within the lessons and the curriculum has been updated accordingly.

References:

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Scioli, Anthony (2009). *Hope in the Age of Anxiety*. Oxford University Press.