

Supporting Students and Staff Through Relationship-Centered Circles

Early Findings From EVOLVE

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As schools work to address student disconnection, chronic absenteeism, and educator capacity challenges, EVOLVE offers a life skills and resiliency program that helps schools strengthen relationships, increase student engagement, and build supportive learning environments through what are known as relationship-centered circles. Early findings from WestEd's evaluation suggest that EVOLVE not only supports student engagement and well-being but also strengthens adult instructional practices and reflective capacity through high-quality training and coaching.



What Is EVOLVE?

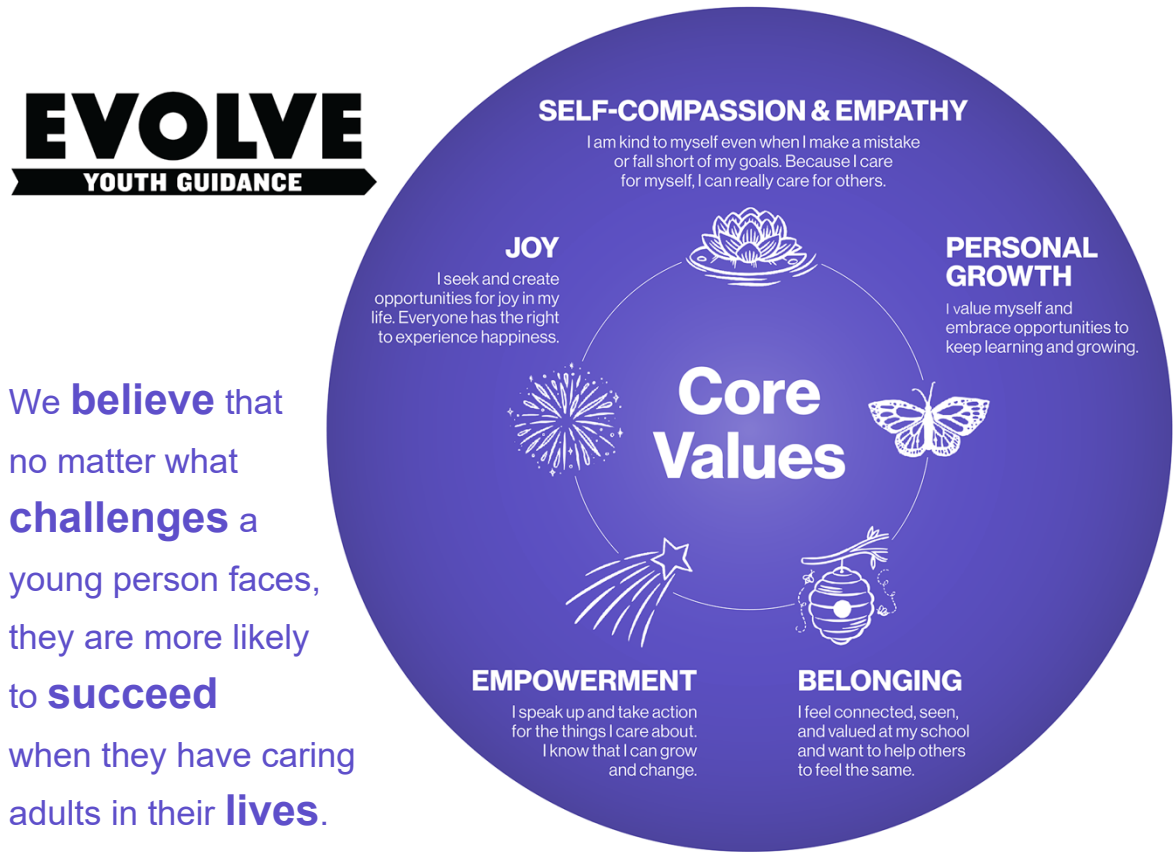
Across the country, schools are working to address rising concerns about student disconnection, chronic absenteeism, and well-being while also supporting educators who face increasing demands on their time and capacity. [EVOLVE](#) is a Tier 2 life skills and resiliency program developed by Youth Guidance to help schools strengthen relationships, increase student engagement, and create supportive school environments through structured group discussions known as relationship-centered circles. Typically delivered in small groups through a structured 13-lesson circle model, EVOLVE brings students together weekly with a trusted adult facilitator to build connection, reflect on shared experiences, strengthen relationships, and develop practical life skills in a supportive environment. Built on Youth Guidance's long-standing expertise in youth development and group facilitation, EVOLVE combines a practical curriculum for students with professional learning and ongoing coaching to support the adults who facilitate the program. At the heart of EVOLVE is the belief that strong relationships create the conditions for growth, helping students feel valued and supported while equipping adults with strategies for fostering belonging and engagement (Figure 1).

Through the EVOLVE Training Academy, coaching, and structured circle model, facilitators develop skills to support communication, reflection, relationship building, and positive instructional practices that can extend beyond EVOLVE circles into the broader school environment. Importantly, EVOLVE can be implemented by any adult in the school setting, including counselors, deans, support staff, paraprofessionals, teachers, and other trusted adults, which allows districts to expand relationship-centered supports using a model that is flexible enough to be adapted to the local context. This flexibility, combined with the program's ongoing coaching and ease of onboarding, can help schools build internal capacity, and it positions EVOLVE as a support model that can be scaled and sustainable.





Figure 1. EVOLVE's Core Values



We **believe** that no matter what **challenges** a young person faces, they are more likely to **succeed** when they have caring adults in their **lives**.

Note. This figure is reproduced by permission from Youth Guidance.

As shown in Figure 1, EVOLVE's core values are as follows:

- **Self-Compassion and Empathy**—I am kind to myself even when I make a mistake or fall short of my goals. Because I care for myself, I can really care for others.
- **Joy**—I seek and create opportunities for joy in my life. Everyone has the right to experience happiness.
- **Personal Growth**—I value myself and embrace opportunities to keep learning and growing.
- **Empowerment**—I speak up and take action for things I care about. I know that I can grow and change.
- **Belonging**—I feel connected, seen, and valued at my school and want to help others to feel the same.



Evaluation Findings

Since its launch in the 2022–23 school year in Illinois, EVOLVE has rapidly expanded across multiple districts and states. The program’s pilot implementation in the 2023–24 school year involved 27 trained staff across 10 schools who convened circles with approximately 450 students. The 2024–25 school year represented the program’s first major scaling phase, with 178 trained staff from 68 schools across 10 districts supporting more than 1,200 students. Following this expansion, Youth Guidance partnered with WestEd to conduct an external evaluation of EVOLVE. The evaluation examined the program’s design, implementation, and early outcomes for participating facilitators and students. The findings summarized in this brief are based on facilitator and student survey responses, program implementation data, and pre–post comparisons collected during the 2024–25 school year.¹

EVOLVE Provides High-Quality Facilitator Training and Coaching

A core strength of EVOLVE is its focus on building adult capacity alongside providing student support. Through the EVOLVE Training Academy and ongoing coaching, facilitators develop practical skills related to relationship building, reflection, communication, and group facilitation that can be applied both within EVOLVE circles and across the broader school environment. Based on survey responses collected at the conclusion of the Training Academy, more than 95 percent of facilitators reported feeling confident in their understanding of the EVOLVE model, student-centered facilitation strategies, and their ability to successfully lead circles. In open-ended responses, facilitators also highlighted the interactive, hands-on nature of the Training Academy and the strong modeling provided by Youth Guidance staff as key strengths of the experience.

¹ This brief summarizes key evaluation findings. Detailed results and additional information about the evaluation design, data sources, measures, and analytic methods are available from the authors upon request.



Ongoing coaching was also identified as a key strength of the EVOLVE model. Facilitators consistently described coaching as supportive, collaborative, and responsive to their needs, providing opportunities to reflect on their practice, problem-solve implementation challenges, and strengthen their ability to build trusting relationships with students. This emphasis on a parallel process whereby adults experience the same relationship-centered practices they are expected to facilitate with students helps distinguish EVOLVE from many other school-based programs.

“[My coach] is so great. Not only is she a wonderful and joyful person to talk with, she also is extremely supportive and helpful in my implementation and work in general. I am very grateful for her partnership this year!”

—EVOLVE Facilitator

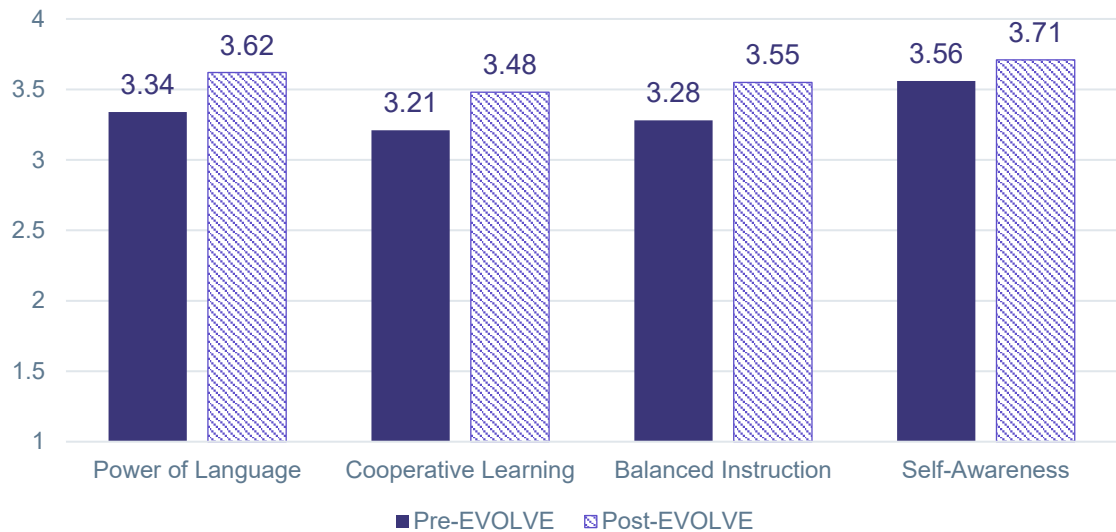
EVOLVE Supports Improvements in Facilitator Instructional Practices

On a self-assessment survey completed before and after participation in EVOLVE, facilitators reported having made meaningful improvements in several of their instructional practices. The survey included 10 scales related to instructional practices and 5 scales aimed at assessing educator competencies. All 15 scales showed positive changes from pre- to post-participation, suggesting overall growth across both instructional and relational practices. Statistically significant changes were observed for cooperative learning, balanced instructional strategies, and the use of supportive and intentional language, which are all practices that help create engaging and relationship-centered learning environments (Figure 2). Facilitators also reported statistically significant improvements in self-awareness, suggesting increased reflection on their own emotions, behaviors, and interactions with students.





Figure 2. Pre–Post Mean Changes in Educator Self-Assessment Scale Scores



Note. This figure displays the statistically significant pre–post changes ($p < .05$) identified in the survey. Mean scores are based on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 4 = Strongly Agree). Some respondents did not answer all items on both the pre- and post-EVOLVE surveys; the number of respondents for this figure’s items ranged from 27 to 31.

EVOLVE Helps Cultivate Strong Relationships and Positive Student Experiences

Students also reported positive experiences with EVOLVE. Based on survey data collected following participation in the program, more than 90 percent of students reported positive responses across all survey items. As shown in Figure 3, students consistently described EVOLVE as a space in which they felt comfortable, supported, and connected to both their peers and the facilitators. Responses were especially strong regarding students’ relationships with facilitators, including feeling cared for, respected, and able to trust the adults leading the program. In responses to additional open-ended items, students also highlighted the ways EVOLVE helped them feel seen and valued at school; build supportive peer relationships; and find opportunities for joy, self-expression, and meaningful connection. Many noted that the program created opportunities to share openly, build trust, and form relationships that are not always available in traditional classroom settings.



Figure 3. Student Perceptions of EVOLVE, Mean Scores



Note. Mean scores are based on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = Disagree a lot, 4 = Agree a lot). $n = 202$. See Table A1 in [Appendix A](#) for the numerical data in this graph.

Facilitators similarly emphasized the importance of relationship building within EVOLVE circles, noting that students became more comfortable, communicative, and supportive of one another over time. One facilitator observed that “some of the quietest students in class are the most vocal in EVOLVE,” underscoring the ways in which the program creates space for student voice, confidence, and connection. Together, these perspectives highlight EVOLVE’s strength in fostering a safe, inclusive environment in which students feel seen, heard, and supported.

“[The students] are more open to discussions with each other, they are excited about the group, and I can actively see them try and use strategies that we tell them about throughout their school day.”

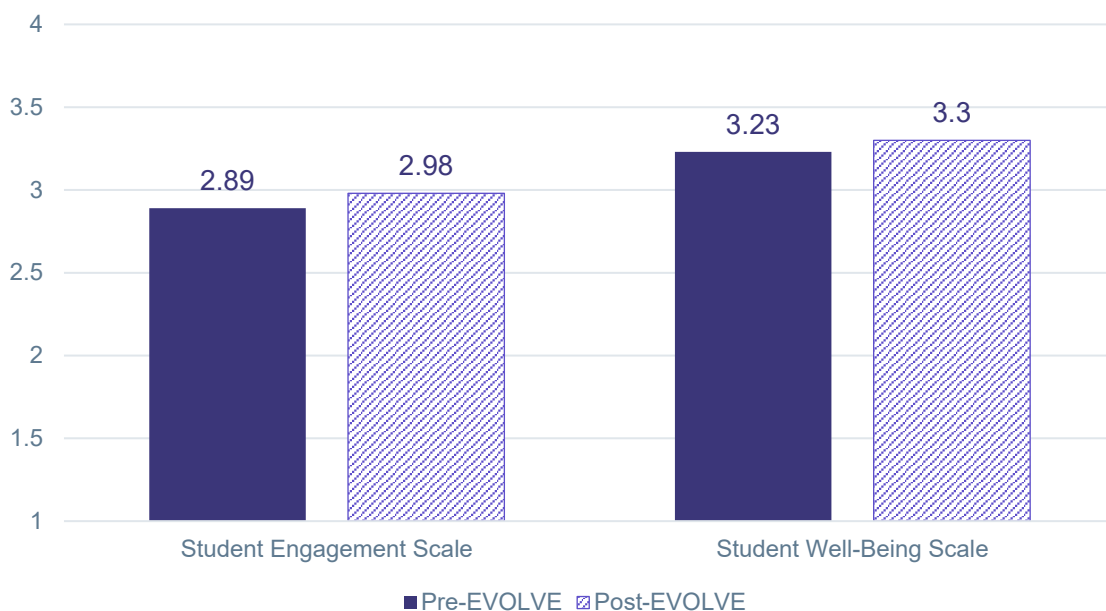
—EVOLVE Facilitator



EVOLVE Supports Student Engagement and Well-Being

Students participating in EVOLVE also reported positive patterns in engagement and well-being. Survey findings showed that average student ratings on measures of school engagement and well-being were higher after participation in EVOLVE than before (Figure 4). Importantly, these positive patterns were consistent across different schools with varied student populations and implementation settings, suggesting that EVOLVE can support a wide range of students in diverse school environments. Although academic outcomes are influenced by many factors and may take longer to shift, improvements in engagement and well-being are important foundations for longer term student success.

Figure 4. Pre–Post Mean Changes in Student Engagement and Well-Being



Note. Mean scores are based on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = Disagree a lot, 4 = Agree a lot). Pre-EVOLVE $n = 487$; post-EVOLVE $n = 364$.



Conclusion

Overall, findings from the evaluation suggest that EVOLVE has the potential to support both student and educator growth through its relationship-centered approach. Facilitators reported high levels of satisfaction with the program, training, and coaching while also demonstrating improvements in instructional practices and self-awareness that may extend beyond EVOLVE circles into the broader school environment. Similarly, students described EVOLVE as a space in which they felt connected, supported, and valued, and they reported positive changes in engagement and well-being following participation. The early findings from this evaluation point to the potential for EVOLVE to contribute to longer term outcomes such as stronger school connectedness, increased use of positive instructional practices, and, over time, stronger academic and well-being outcomes for students.

Appendix A. Data Table for Figure 3

Table A1. Data for Figure 3: Student Perceptions of EVOLVE, Mean Scores

Item	Mean score
I feel comfortable with my group facilitator.	3.58
My group facilitator cares about me.	3.51
I trust my group facilitator.	3.48
I like the things I do in EVOLVE.	3.43
I would recommend EVOLVE to a friend.	3.43
EVOLVE helped me feel connected, seen, and valued at my school.	3.36
EVOLVE helped me value myself for who I am and be kind to myself.	3.36
EVOLVE is fun and helped me find opportunities for joy in my life.	3.35
Support from other students in EVOLVE was a helpful part of the program.	3.34
EVOLVE helped me speak up and take action for things I care about.	3.34



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