

CHANGING LEADS

By Tamara Merritt and Caleb Bay

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HEARTS & HORSES' FULL-DAY SCHOOL PROGRAM

Three weeks into learning about equines and building rapport with her horse, the 11-year-old rider mounts for the first time, takes a deep breath and exclaims, “I am free!” This liberated feeling has been particularly rare for this rider and her classmates this year, due to the isolation and confinement that accompanies the COVID-19 pandemic. Hearts & Horses, Inc., a PATH Intl. Premier Accredited Center in Loveland, CO, is dedicated to providing opportunities for growth, connection and empowerment. This year’s adapted programming, which is offered to serve youth amidst safety restrictions, is no exception. Partnering with schools to conduct equine-assisted learning (EAL) courses is vital to providing services for youth at risk, especially in a time when behavioral health services are in higher demand and more difficult to access.

PREVENTION THROUGH SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Given the growing need for youth behavioral health services, it is no surprise that Hearts & Horses’ largest program is Changing Leads, which is designed to help youth who have experienced great hardship find friendship, develop trust and form deep connections by partnering with a horse. Founded in 1997 to primarily serve individuals with physical disabilities, the center has, over time, expanded its services to meet the needs of various populations, including military veterans, adults with dementia and youth craving positive social engagement. Initially, riders in Changing Leads came mostly from residential treatment programs. However, participant make-up shifted with increased recognition of the importance of engaging young people before their emotional and mental health is most threatened. In 2016, Hearts & Horses began partnering with local school districts to offer a full-day program designed to accomplish exactly that.

The school-based Changing Leads classes are designed to engage middle schoolers in Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). Over the last several years, SEL programming has received increasing attention—and for good reason. Social and emotional competence is crucial to effectively managing challenges and developing

positive relationships that impact many aspects of one’s life, including physical and mental health, social belonging and goal achievement (Devaney et al., 2005). Early adolescence is a key stage of development, making SEL interventions during this period highly influential. Programs that incorporate SEL, especially when designed to engage youth with numerous adverse experiences, can therefore prevent or mitigate the impact of stressors and improve well-being.

In addition to prevention being more cost-effective than reactionary interventions, prevention programs have an array of immeasurable impacts on the individuals served and those around them (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2009). Interventions that incorporate SEL have a ripple effect. For instance, among other outcomes, students leave the Changing Leads program more focused and ready to learn. This certainly has the targeted benefit of improving the participants’ own academic performance, but it can also boost their classmates’ learning by reducing distractions in the classroom.

WHY A SCHOOL-BASED PROGRAM?

While there are many important access points to ensure youth receive needed mental and behavioral health services, working with schools is a particularly effective strategy. Kids spend a significant portion of their waking hours at school, often more than any other place—including home. It follows that school-based programs are effective in creating lasting behavioral changes for students, including efforts to get kids outside and engage in more physical activity (Chalkey et al., 2020). Few schools can offer the unique programming that leverages EAL. To provide students the powerful benefits of EAL, a strong partnership between equine-assisted services (EAS) programs and the schools is essential. School counselors and teachers often have great insight into students’ struggles, and Hearts & Horses relies on their familiarity with students to select participants. Having school staff who understand the aims and strengths of EAL helps identify students who would benefit most from the program. When building a working relationship with school districts, it is extremely helpful to identify

and support certain “champions” within the school, who understand and appreciate the impact of EAL. Over the years working with various school districts, Hearts & Horses has fostered close relationships with key administration staff and teachers who help advocate for the continuation and growth of its school-based programs. Inviting key staff for a half-day experiential workshop encourages them to witness the impact of EAL firsthand, which creates compelling buy-in.

This confidence in the program’s effectiveness only strengthens as teachers, faculty and caregivers see the transformations in their students. Hearts & Horses receives abundant feedback from adults involved in the participants’ lives, who report the students are more excited to go to school, able to focus and likely to initiate conversation.

Maintaining that conversation, at the ranch and beyond, is a key factor in the program’s success and another reason partnership with schools is so critical. Strong relations with administration and caregivers ensure an open dialogue. Such a dialogue allows instructors to adapt programming based on what else is happening in the students’ lives and extend learning off the ranch. Through weekly newsletters, Hearts & Horses describes what students accomplished during their session and provides talking points to help adults at home and school engage participants. This extension of lessons is very important as SEL is most effective when incorporated into other activities and everyday life, instead of being distilled and isolated (Devaney et al., 2005). The Changing Leads program is designed to give kids an anchoring experience. They



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draw on the comfort felt, confidence gained and lessons learned in interacting with their horse, and the reach of those lessons is that much farther through strong school partnerships.

PROGRAM STRUCTURE

The school-based Changing Leads program is an eight-week course with each session focused on a particular theme. Sixteen students from up to four schools within a district take a bus from their school to Hearts & Horses for a three and a half-hour class each week and return to school for their remaining classes. At the end of the course, instructors host a graduation ceremony, to which students invite family members, teachers and other supportive people to celebrate what they accomplished and learned.

Each week, students engage in different activities that focus on a certain theme within SEL. A possible schedule of themes, used in the Changing Leads course, might look like the following:

- ◆ Respect, Responsibility, Relationship
- ◆ Empathy, Gratitude and Mindfulness
- ◆ Building Trust
- ◆ Recognizing Patterns and Triggers
- ◆ Considering a Challenge
- ◆ Listening and Teamwork
- ◆ Motivation and Optimism
- ◆ Reflections on the Journey

Building consistency into the program helps students feel comfortable and anticipate their responsibilities. Most importantly, students are paired with the same horse and volunteer for the duration of the course. Many of the students enrolled in Changing Leads have trouble building trust and rapport because other relationships in their lives may be inconsistent or trying. Often, the support of just one caring adult significantly improves mental and physical health outcomes for young people facing adversity (Berger et al., 2019). Seeing the same volunteer and horse show up week after week assures the student they are valuable and cared for, and it gives them time to develop meaningful connections. In order to match students with volunteers and horses that best set them up for success, instructors meet with students at their schools—a familiar setting—before the course begins and get to know them. As relationships between students and volunteers develop, volunteers are better equipped to understand students' capabilities and challenges, which enables them to appropriately push students to grow while making necessary accommodations.

The consistency in program format also increases students' confidence and responsibility as they develop trust in the process, helping them anticipate tasks and engage

more in activities. Each session begins with a "Horse Hook" in which instructors introduce the day's theme and front-load the SEL associated messaging. Students then have time with their horses, including catching horses in the pasture, grooming and tacking before they work with horses in the arena or on the trail, where activities reinforce the SEL theme. Before returning to school, students gather in the classroom again to report what they learned so their volunteers can praise and affirm their accomplishments. This structure allows the SEL component of each session to be referenced and integrated throughout working with the horses and encourages students to take ownership of the programming. Participant engagement is one of the most important factors when considering the effectiveness of SEL programs (Low et al., 2016), so assigning students responsibility and involving them throughout the session—from arena set-up to mucking stalls—reinforces lessons in several ways.

The following example shows how an SEL theme can be practiced independently and with a horse. On one day, students might focus on grounding techniques. The Horse Hook includes a conversation in which instructors explicitly invite students to consider competencies that accompany the theme, such as self-awareness, social awareness, mindfulness and self-management. Students then practice these competencies in the classroom by doing a guided yoga routine. During this routine, instructors remind students to bring awareness to their body and practice paying attention to their breath. In the arena, students can apply these skills by regulating their breaths and energy levels to adjust the horses' walk speed and ride through a pattern of half halts. After riding, the students tune-in with their horses even more through the "breathe with" activity. To do this, a student stands with their hands on the horse's belly, closes their eyes and focuses on aligning their breath with the horse's. Debriefing at the end of the session, students and instructors discuss how the skills practiced can transfer to other life situations. For instance, instructors encourage students to ask themselves, "How can I use a 'half halt' to rebalance myself outside of horse time?"

PROGRAM ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK

It is crucial to continually evaluate the program's effectiveness and seek ways to improve services, even when implementing an established program like Changing Leads. Hearts & Horses uses multiple tools in the Changing Leads program to assess its impact on the youth. Each week during the Horse Hook, students use the Mood Meter, an emotional literacy tool developed by the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, to identify how they felt over the course of the previous week. Then, at the end of the day, they identify how they feel after working with

their horse. In analyzing the results of the students' Mood Meters, the center could see that students tend to feel more positive and more regulated after Changing Leads classes. Additional assessment tools include a custom-designed evaluation tool that volunteers utilize to measure students' progress. This assessment tool is completed after week one and week eight by the volunteers. Historically, results of this assessment indicate significant improvement in students' social skills, confidence and attitudes over the full eight-week course. Other self-assessments that Hearts & Horses has used for program evaluation are the Strengths and Difficulties questionnaire, the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9) assessment for depression and the Zung Self-Rated Anxiety Scale.

The most recent cohort that Hearts & Horses hosted was during spring 2021 when schools began to reopen after a year of remote learning and other changes brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Unsurprisingly, preliminary research shows that rates of anxiety and depression symptoms were three to four times as high during the pandemic as they were in 2019, and youth are especially impacted by this dramatic increase in symptoms (SAMHSA, 2021). Results from the pre- and post-self-assessments in the latest Changing Leads cohort showed a decrease in anxiety symptoms and a statistically significant reduction in depression symptoms for the students.

Through the open lines of communication established with families and school staff, Hearts & Horses receives even richer feedback. Families and teachers comment on witnessing a transformation in their students over the course of the Changing Leads program. Considering the program's effectiveness in addressing the very symptoms exacerbated by this year's challenges, Hearts & Horses was thrilled to support the students. Staff worked with the school district to make creative adaptations to the standard curricula that would ensure safety while maintaining the benefits of partnering with a horse.

PROGRAM FUNDING

Seeking ways to improve services and acting on feedback from evaluation tools helps secure funding and support, which allows the program to grow. After the success of Hearts & Horses' first school-based program, other school districts sought partnerships of their own. Some school districts pay for SEL programming, so working with an array of districts can strengthen the program financially. Still, it is important to secure funding from grants and other donors to make the program accessible to districts without SEL funding.

When launching a new program, it is helpful to find private donors to back the project. Programs tend to be more attractive to grantors once established, especially when organizations have data to demonstrate the program's efficacy. Grantors also appreciate collaborative

projects, so partnering with school districts and other local organizations has financial benefits in addition to the advantages discussed above. Using these strategies, Hearts & Horses has developed strong donor and grantor relationships, resulting in a growing source of funding. Since its inception, the Changing Leads program has positively impacted thousands of young people through the powerful partnership with a horse. Hearts & Horses is eager to not only grow its own Changing Leads program, but also to contribute to a broader understanding of SEL with equines and collaborate with other organizations to touch the lives of countless youth. In sharing this information, it is Hearts & Horses' hope that more EAS programs will be enabled to adopt SEL programming when working with youth at risk, as its impacts are life-changing.

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