



DASH (Dynamic, Active, Safe and Health) Evaluation Executive Summary 2024

Overview

The Assessment and Evaluation Research Centre (AERC) in the Faculty of Education at the University of Melbourne was commissioned by Blue Light Victoria (BLV) to evaluate the DASH program. DASH is an in-school, whole-class program for upper primary school students that aims to increase student wellbeing and improve community connectedness.

BLV Program Leads deliver eight 90-minute weekly sessions to students involving a range of activities and discussions. Students also work in groups to identify a real-life concern in their community and develop a practical project to address it. Community Partners from organisations like Victoria Police participate in several sessions and the program is capped by a “showcase event”, where a winning student project is selected and awarded a \$2000 grant to support its implementation.

The evaluation was guided by five Key Evaluation Questions (KEQs) and associated evaluation criteria.

Key Evaluation Questions	Evaluation criteria
How well is DASH being managed and delivered?	Well-managed
How engaging is DASH for all program participants?	Engaging
How safe is DASH for all program participants and program partners?	Safe
How well is DASH creating an atmosphere of community and connectedness during program activities?	Connected
How effective is DASH in producing positive outcomes for participants (including considering unanticipated and negative effects)?	Effective

This Final Report provides summative findings, focusing on DASH’s implementation and effectiveness in Terms 2-4, 2023, when it was operating as a mature program. Findings are based on pre-program and post-program surveys of student participants; feedback surveys from teachers and Community Partners; interviews with Community Partners; a focus group with Program Leads; and analysis of Program Leads’ end-of-term written reflection reports.

Key Findings

Overall, the evaluation data indicate DASH is performing at a very high level across all five evaluation criteria. Students were overwhelmingly positive about the program, stakeholders said DASH exceeded their expectations, and 100% of teacher survey respondents said they would recommend DAHS to other schools.

DASH's performance			
	Outstanding	Strong	Developing
Well-managed			
Engaging			
Safe			
Connected			
Effective			

Results: Well-managed

Overall program experience and stakeholder perceptions

Students, teachers, and Community Partners were overwhelmingly positive about the program. 92% of surveyed students said the program was fun and most said that nothing needed to be changed. Teachers and Community Partners said the program exceeded their expectations and 100% of teacher survey respondents said they would recommend the program.

DASH exceeded my expectations. I knew the program was very valuable but was really impressed. (Teacher)

I think the program's fantastic. It's very valuable. I'd be very disappointed if it didn't come to our area again. (Community Partner)

All teacher and Community Partner respondents agreed the program was organised and delivered well and many commented that it was “well-run”, “well-designed” and “well-planned”.

Results: Engaging

Program content and activities

Most students (83%), teachers (89%), and Community Partners (100%) agreed that the DASH program was interesting and relevant. In qualitative data, many students mentioned the games and activities (183 student respondents) or the end-of-program showcase (113 student respondents) as their favourite part. Most students specifically said that nothing needed to be changed about the program (288 student respondents).

Teachers and Community Partners commented that students were interested and actively participating in sessions.

The content was engaging, and the students enjoyed the hands-on activities. (Teacher)

Quality of facilitation from Program Leads

Teachers and Community Partners were uniformly positive about the high quality of BLV's Program Leads. Their facilitation skills, responsiveness, and agility in the moment were essential to make the program an engaging experience for students.

The facilitator was able to create, sustain and harness energy in both classes, and the level of student enthusiasm was high as a result. (Community Partner)

Teacher participation

Program Leads and Community Partners reported that having teachers actively participate in sessions supported and enhanced student engagement in the program.

The schools where the teachers were actively involved made the sessions easier to deliver and the students enjoyed doing something different with their teachers. (Program Lead)

Results: Safe

Program atmosphere

This was the highest rated criterion in student survey data, with 94% of student respondents agreeing that the DASH program felt welcoming. In qualitative data from students about their favourite part of the program, there were several positive comments about the program being welcoming and inclusive.

That we all got a chance and I felt welcomed. (Student)

How it includes everyone. (Student)

All teachers and Community Partners responding to the survey agreed that DASH program sessions were a safe and welcoming environment for students. In interviews, Community Partners described the atmosphere in the program using words like "relaxed", "fun", "happy", and "friendly".

Emotional and psychological safety

The data indicate that the program is supporting and safeguarding participants' psychological and emotional safety. Community Partners and Program Leads commented on the seriousness of the topics covered in DASH sessions and felt that students' willingness to engage in activities and discussions demonstrated that program sessions were an emotionally and psychologically safe space for students.

The young people were able to put their trust in myself and the other community members because the facilitation skills were fantastic which allowed the young people to feel comfortable having other people in their space. (Community Partner)

Program Adaptations for Students with Different Needs

The data showed that the program was inclusive and safe for students with different needs. Community Partners described how BLV and Program Leads adapted DASH to different students' needs, to make sure it remained welcoming and inclusive for all students.

The last one I did...they were kids with high needs and behaviours. And that was a different program that was structured specifically for those children. So, it was unlike any other program that I've actually done with them. But it was actually quite phenomenal. They did a really great job of that. It was catered specifically for these children. But we still got the same outcome. (Community Partner)

Results: Connected

Atmosphere of connection, inclusion, and belonging

The data indicate the program is working well to create a participatory ethos that supports connection and belonging. 90% of student survey respondents agreed that the DASH program made them feel like they were part of something worthwhile. All teachers and Community Partners responding to surveys agreed that DASH sessions had a good vibe that helped students feel connected and included.

Getting to make a difference in the community and feeling welcome and a part of it [was my favourite part]. (Student)

Connection to Community Partners

The program primarily supports a sense of connection to community through the Community Partners. Both Community Partners and Program Leads described how well this connection was fostered during sessions. One Program Lead reported that, particularly in more remote schools, the simple presence of Community Partners in the program strengthened students' sense of community connection.

Community Partners, teachers, and Program Leads provided evidence that the program helped to reduce students' fear and negative perceptions of Victoria Police and other community authority figures.

We got to meet a lot of local kids that we would otherwise not have had a reason to meet. It showed a more human, less scary side of [my organisation]. (Community Partner)

Results: Effective

Empowerment and self-efficacy

The data indicates students increased their knowledge of possibilities for empowerment and self-efficacy through the program with 75% of students feeling confident to ask questions and express opinions. This was one of the best evidenced outcomes of the program.

[my favourite part was] that we all got a voice/say. (Student)

[my favourite part was] being able to express and share my ideas and feelings. (Student)

At the end of the program, 92% of students agreed that "I feel that one person can create changes, even if the changes are small"

Problem-solving

After the program, 79% of students agreed with the statement “I try to work out problems by talking about them” (+4 percentage point gain). A higher 87% of students agreed with the statement “I try to solve problems by understanding more about what’s causing them.” Asked directly whether the program had enhanced students’ problem-solving skills, 78% of student respondents and 100% of teachers agreed that it had.

Social awareness and empathy

Most students (90%) and all teacher respondents (100%) agreed that students had a better understanding of others’ perspectives after the program. Several student respondents nominated something related to this outcome when asked about the main thing they would do differently after the program.

Knowing it is ok to have different thoughts. (Student)

Be more respectful. (Student)

Collaborative teamwork

There was substantial evidence for the program’s effects on collaborative teamwork skills. After the program:

- 85% of students agreed “I know how to disagree with people in a respectful way” (+3 percentage point gain compared to before the program)
- 80% of students agreed “I can easily work well with other people” (+3 percentage point gain compared to before the program)
- 79% of students agreed “I can tell others when they are doing something I don’t like” (+7 percentage point gain compared to before the program)
- 63% of students agreed “I can talk to someone I don’t know well” (+8 percentage point gain compared to before the program).

All teachers agreed that the program increased students’ knowledge of how to manage differences of opinion and communicate with others, and 96% agreed that students increased their understanding of how to collaborate and work in a team

Understanding of community participation

Most students (89%) and all teacher respondents agreed that students had better knowledge of how to make a difference in the community after the program. Many teachers nominated this outcome as the most valuable aspect of the program and data from Community Partners supported this. Community Partners said that the program helped students to better understand what a community is and recognise their place in (and responsibility for) their own community.

I guess it's kind of a crucial role to sort of show kids just how many different aspects there are to being part of a community. It's not just what they see within their everyday life. (Community Partner)

Other Outcomes – Benefits for Community Partners

Although not a primary objective of DASH, the program also generated benefits for the Community Partners. Four other outcomes which are not a directly intended part of the program's design emerged from the data.

First, many Community Partners reported that the program increased their awareness of the capabilities of primary school aged children.

The first time around, I was a little bit stunned by just the caliber of some of the things that they were thinking about. (Community Partner)

Second, some Community Partners reported strengthened connection to community for them personally.

I think it was good working in with the other community members that did come in from time to time, just strengthened some of those relationships. (Community Partner)

Third, Community Partners mentioned that the program seemed to increase students' awareness of different community service roles as a career path and highlighted the importance of community volunteering.

I've had people look at me and be like - you know, not your typical firefighter. So it was cool for me to be able to also see kids go, "Wow, I could do that as well." (Community Partner)

Finally, a few Community Partners also reported that the program helped them to increase awareness of their organisations' programs and services for young people.

By attending the program my organisation...was able to develop a profile with the children and explain to them what services our organisation provides within the community. (Community Partner)

Conclusion

Overall, DASH **performs strongly** in **engaging young people** and **providing a safe space** that builds a **growth mindset** and **connection to community**. The program is working well to **enhance collaboration** between youth participants and community to deliver the student-led projects, build their confidence and ability to work and communicate as a team to reach a common goal.