

# The LiFEsports Initiative Service Learning Course: A University-Community Partnership

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## Literature Review

Experiential learning is a unique programming and intervention effort implemented by schools to increase school-level phenomena such as school connectedness and school engagement. Service learning, a form of experiential learning, helps to improve academic motivation, develop stronger social skills, and promote school involvement (Conway, Amel, & Gerwein, 2009) among youth participants. Among other outcomes, service learning can be especially beneficial for allowing students to learn in a unique environment and thus feel more connected and interested in school, further positively influencing the likelihood of school engagement. Research has shown that school disengagement is a contributing factor to youth dropping out of high school (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). As such, universities and school districts have been called upon to form partnerships and collaborative prevention efforts to ensure positive outcomes for all youth. Service learning provides a unique example of a university-community partnership which positively influences all partners involved including the university, community organizations, and schools involved.

Through a positive and ongoing partnership, integrated programming serves the needs of the school and students (Harkavy, 2005). University-community partnerships are unique in their ability to serve various groups of individuals; however, they also face challenges such as attempting to align expectations between or among all partners (Fisher, Fabricant & Simmons 2004). Due to the intricate nature of the relationships, partnerships between community organizations and higher education institutions are often fueled by the political, funding, and community priorities at the time of implementation (Fisher et al., 2004). All decision making is made with the input and outcomes of each partner in mind (Mulroy, 2008). In other words, all partners are involved in all decisions made regarding the programming and partnership efforts, ensuring that decisions will lead to the best possible outcomes for all individuals and organizations involved. University-community vary in design and outcomes, of which one is a service learning course, such as the one presented.

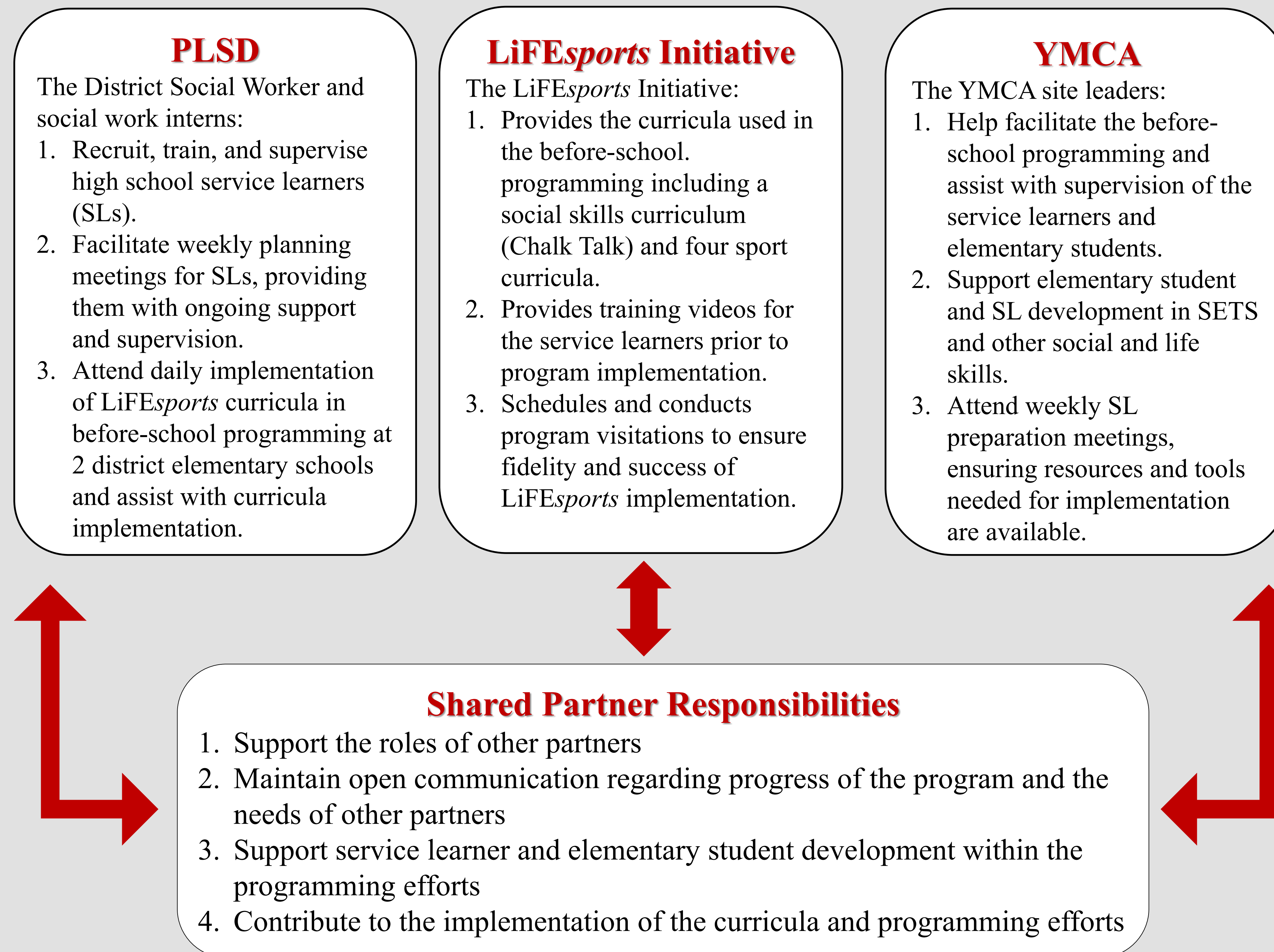
## Program Description

The Learning in Fitness and Education through Sport Initiative (LiFEsports) aims to enhance youth development, social skills, and physical well-being through sport. The initiative works to create and maintain unique partnerships within Columbus to improve sports-based positive youth development (SB-PYD) programs. The current program is a unique three-partner relationship involving Pickerington Local School District (PLSD), a community partner (YMCA), and a university-based organization (LiFEsports).

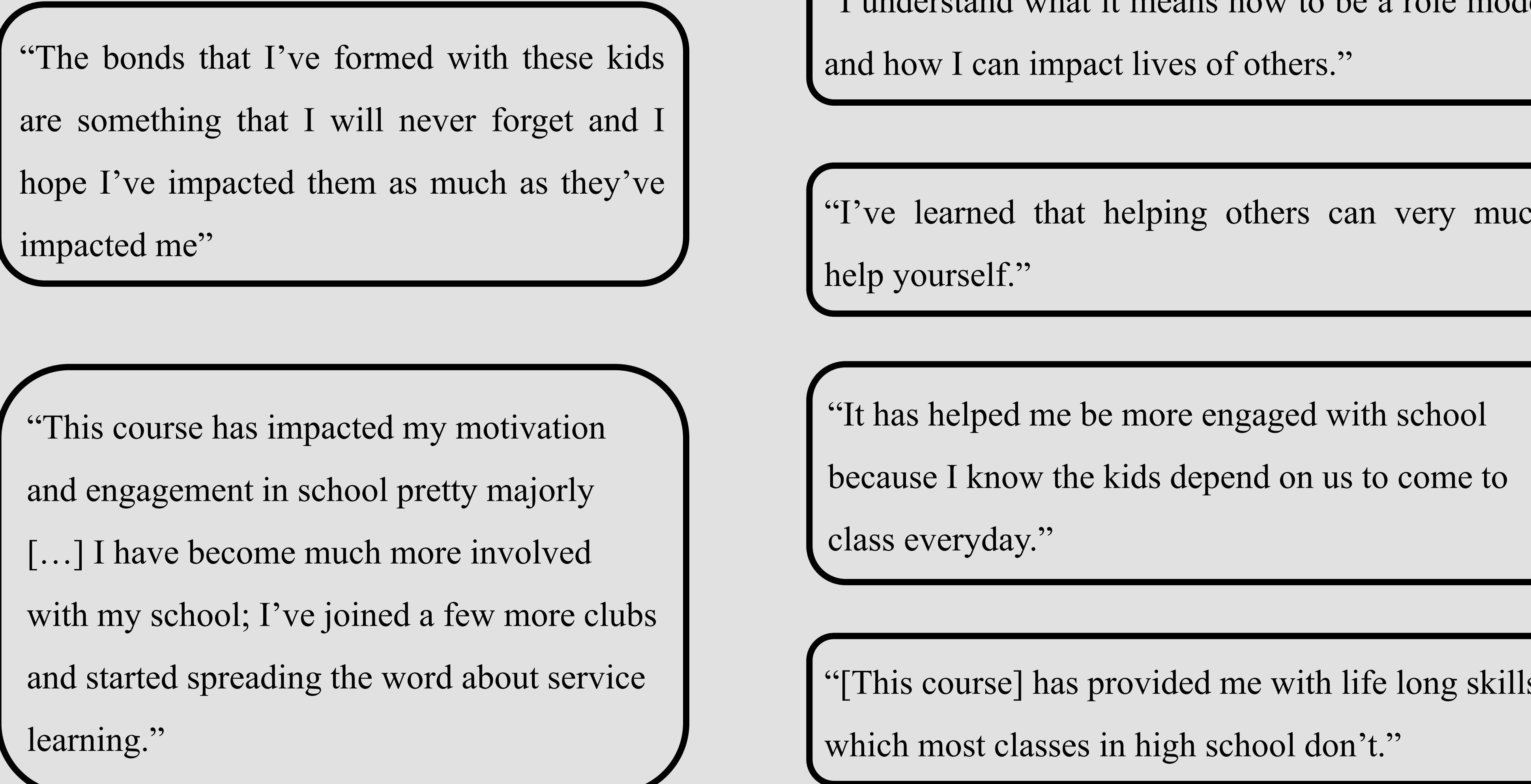
### Program Components

1. Service learners (SLs) implement and co-teach LiFEsports curricula at the before-school program at 2 local elementary schools.
2. SLs attend weekly planning meetings to discuss past and future implementation strategies to improve outcomes for all partners involved.
3. YMCA site leaders help with co-facilitation and supervision of elementary students and high school service learners.
4. SLs prepare for and attend their service learning culminating event: YMCA Healthy Kids Day (HKD), to celebrate their hard work over the school year

## Partnership Roles



## Service Learner Reflections



## Implications

The three-partner relationship involving an education system, a community partner, and a university demonstrates how such a model can be used to positively influence the health and well-being of youth of varying ages. Through collaboration, shared resources, communication, and accountability through evidence, the partners were able to successfully implement a service-learning course and before-school programming using the LiFEsports curricula focused on developing youth social skills (SETS) and overall health and well-being. Due to the nature of the three-partner relationship, positive benefits were experienced by all key stakeholders.

### Successful Strategies

1. Develop shared expectations and a combined research agenda to support evidence-based programs
2. Maintain open communication throughout the duration of the partnership
3. Implement collaborative and resource sharing methods to address youth health and well-being
4. Understand the challenges and barriers to successful university-community partners

### Mutual Benefits

Mutual benefits were experienced by all members of the unique three-partner relationship. For example, both high school youth (service learners) and elementary youth participants grew in SETS and other social skills (i.e. leadership). Furthermore, service learners were able to earn flex credit toward graduation in addition to further engaging with the community via daily programming and the culminating event.

LiFEsports and PLSD were able to benefit by improving the social emotional learning (SEL) outcomes of students of varying ages. In addition to promoting SEL and SB-PYD in the Columbus area, partners also benefited in other ways. For instance, the District Social Worker and social work interns were able to build on their own professional skills while introducing new programming into the school district. YMCA staff were able to enhance the before-school program in the elementary schools and develop stronger relationships with high school and elementary youth. The LiFEsports staff were able to become engaged with more youth and community partners within the Columbus area.

## References

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