



## Girl Matters<sup>®</sup>: It's Elementary Evaluation Report

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## **Executive Summary**

In 2010 the NCCD Center for Girls and Young Women was funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Local Initiative Funding Partners and local funders in Duval County, Florida, to develop, implement, and evaluate the *Girl Matters®: It's Elementary (GMIE)* program in two elementary schools in Jacksonville, Florida. With the opening of the Delores Barr Weaver Policy Center in 2013, NCCD contracted with the Delores Barr Weaver Policy Center to continue the implementation of the GMIE Program.

The impetus for this project was to address the disparate treatment of girls in Duval County and to build a system of care to address their complex needs. In 2008, community leaders concluded that the number one priority was to address the overuse of out-of-school suspension and expulsion for at-risk elementary school girls. A community needs assessment revealed that 811 girls were suspended from elementary school in 2004-05 and that the number of suspensions increased until 10th grade, with the biggest increase occurring from elementary to middle school. During this same time period, the county was leading the state of Florida in residential commitments, and the number of arrests in Duval County schools ranked high, with 20 or more referrals to the juvenile justice system per 1,000 students. Existing research clearly establishes the link between academic failure and juvenile justice system involvement—highlighting the need to interrupt the school-to-prison pipeline. Last year, 69% of girls entering the juvenile justice system in Duval County had a suspension history.

Consequently, the GMIE model aimed to: 1) improve school success, 2) interrupt the suspension and expulsion of girls, and 3) prevent the spiraling effect of girls entering the juvenile justice system.

### **GMIE Program Model**

The GMIE Intervention Program was designed to address individual, school, and community level issues contributing to exclusionary discipline practices in the context of girls' life experiences. The Intervention Program was the major focus of the evaluation. Girls referred to the program received a girl-responsive strengths and needs assessment to identify factors contributing to behaviors at school. Based on her individual needs, interventions included the following services:

- School Level intervention- may include conferencing with teachers, guidance counselor/staffing; advocacy for ESE testing, group mediation with peers; participation in child protective investigations
- One on One Skills Building- paired with an intern/mentor to focus on cognitive behavioral sessions/lessons focused specifically on areas of need (e.g., relationships, identify, trauma)
- Referrals for Services in the Community—all families receive a resource directory. Referrals are made for additional services based on identified needs (e.g., individual/family counseling, primary health care, eyesight testing, housing/shelter, food bank, legal services)
- Crisis intervention (as needed)
- Home visits (as needed)

At the school level, interventions include on-site support and coaching for teachers and school administrators regarding girl centered practices including crisis intervention and classroom management techniques. We collaborate with school administrators to promote changes in policies and practices negatively impacting girls, including overuse of suspension.

At the community level, partnerships with local universities and service providers include specialized training and access to increase the reach of services and supports to girls (e.g., mentorship for skills building, girls' groups, and referrals for services to meet needs). In addition to these interventions, the GMIE Program also facilitated Enhancement Groups (prevention phase) at the schools for girls that were not involved with the Intervention Program. The groups were facilitated by college interns and focused on girls' safety, relationships, communication, emotions, and identity.

The program evaluation sought to build practice-based evidence about girl-centered practices in a school setting. The goals of the evaluation were to document the model in practice and assess the impact of the interventions on: 1) girls' measures of school connectedness, perceived social support, academics, and behaviors; 2) school level changes including suspension rates, teacher attitudes, and changing policies and practices; and 3) impact of training and mentorship on knowledge of working with girls. A mixed methodology was used to evaluate outcomes, using a variety of sources.

## **Impact on Outcomes**

From spring 2011 to the completion of the 2013–14 school year, a total of 293 girls were served by the GMIE intervention in grades K–5. The average age of girl served was nine years old and in the 3rd grade. The top five reasons for referral included classroom disruptions, relational aggression, minor infractions, internalizing behaviors, and academic failure. The top factors contributing to these behaviors included lack of conflict resolution skills, barriers to learning, physical and emotional health issues, and family stressors.

### **Girls’ Outcomes for GMIE Intervention Schools**

#### *Number of Suspensions Decreased and Future Suspensions Significantly Reduced*

The number of girls’ suspensions decreased every school year after the first full year of implementation. For GMIE girls who entered the program in 2011-12, the average number of suspensions per girl dropped to 0.17 by the 2013-14 school year (an 84% decrease). Most significantly, 89% of this group of girls were not suspended in 2013-14.

#### *Girls’ Perceptions of School Connectedness and Social Support Showed Mixed Results*

Specific to school connectedness, girls’ perceptions of liking their school and doing well in school remained stable over time. However, there were differences by school on these two measures. There were also differences by grade level where on average, girls in the higher grades tended to like school less and perceive themselves as not doing a good job at school.

Regarding social support, 63% of GMIE girls reported having an adult at their schools they could go to for help “a lot” or “most of the time,” after six months of intervention compared to 49% at baseline. There was a larger increase at School B the higher-need school.

#### *Girls Attributed Skills Building with Interns As Most Helpful*

The majority of girls (85%) reported that the mentorship with interns and skills building was helpful “a lot” or “most of the time.” Girls stated that the program had been helpful in improving their overall behavior, following of rules, improving academic performance, respecting others, building healthy relationships, and learning how to express their emotions.

### **School Level Outcomes**

*School-Wide Suspension Rates Decreased*

Both intervention schools demonstrated a decrease in school-wide female suspensions. At Maya Angelou Elementary (School A), this number dropped from 80 suspensions per 100 girls in 2011–12 to 30 suspensions per 100 girls during the 2013–14 school year (a 62.5% reduction). Similarly, at Oprah Winfrey Elementary (School B), the suspension rate dropped from 64 per 100 girls to 15 per 100 girls during the same time period (a 76.5% reduction). This is a particularly poignant finding, as the continual decrease in number and rate of suspensions for girls in the GMIE intervention schools occurred while suspension rates throughout the school district remained stable. The single-year retention rates (e.g. not promoted to next grade level) increased for girls at both schools; however, the number of girls with multiple retentions decreased.

*Staff Attitudes Shifted*

Teachers at the intervention schools felt more competent working with girls at the end of each school year than at the beginning, with the gains increasing each year. This trend was not seen at the comparison schools. More important, the baseline level of competence for intervention schools was consecutively higher each year. Staff qualitative data revealed that changes in staff attitude included increased comfort dealing with girls and improved conflict resolution skills. In addition to a shift in attitudes, the intervention schools underwent significant changes to policy and practice. For example, teachers began using GMIE as a first-line defense for problem behaviors; there was increased communication between school and GMIE staff; and mental health issues were dealt with more sensitively. As a result, teachers at the intervention schools reported higher ratings of the effectiveness of school policies in addressing girls' problem behaviors each year. Finally, teachers at intervention schools reported an increase in support by principals, school counselors, and other teachers.

**Community Level Outcomes***GMIE Interns Increased Competency and Skills*

A total of 64 undergraduate and graduate college interns from five local colleges and universities were trained and supported by GMIE Care Managers. They provided one-on-one skills building lessons aligned with girls' individualized care plans. After 40 hours of girl-

centered training, 75% of interns reported feeling “very” or “extremely” competent in working with girls. After a semester of working one on one with girls, 94% reported feeling “very” or “extremely” competent. A higher percentage of intern mentors reported feeling knowledgeable about providing one-on-one skills building to girls (90% feeling “very” or “extremely” knowledgeable compared to 74% at outset). Further, the interns provided reasons why their internship was meaningful, including opportunity to positively impact girls’ lives, build healthy relationships, or grow professionally and personally.

### *PACE Teen Mentors Expressed Strong Relationships with Girls and Increased Feelings of Being a Role Model*

GMIE partnered with PACE Center for Girls Jacksonville to recruit teen mentors and provide them with training to co-facilitate GMIE group activities. A total of 58 PACE mentors participated in the program. Here, 91% of mentors reported they were able to develop a positive relationship with the girls. Interestingly, as a result of the experience, mentors’ perception of knowledge and skills about safety and communication with the younger girls lessened at the completion of the mentorship. PACE mentors also shared that their experiences with girls were meaningful because they felt they were able to impact girls’ lives and spend time with the younger girls.

## **Discussion and Implications**

### *Needs of Elementary Girls in High-Risk Schools to Inform Training and Planning*

Many of the stressors faced by GMIE girls related to familial challenges (e.g., 46% of girls reported parent/caregiver had gone to jail, 35% had parents who lost their job, 13% experienced the death of a primary caregiver in the previous year, 29% had lived somewhere without their parents, 26% experienced the death of a close friend or relative, and 9% had been in foster care). Girls continued to face these or additional stressors over the course of GMIE. For example, an additional 18% of GMIE girls experienced incarceration of a parent / primary caregiver, and closely linked, 14% of the girls experienced a new out-of-home placement during their time in the program. The importance of this information cannot be underestimated, since it has implications for planning and training of school staff and community providers. It also

contextualizes girls' problem behaviors in that behind the disruptive externalizing behaviors or destructive internalizing behaviors, girls are experiencing stress, trauma, and pain. Equally important, these findings are important in building girl-centered practices based on their life experiences in the context of school environments.

### ***Supporting Teachers and Adapting to Changing Needs of the School***

Teachers felt supported by GMIE because there was recognition of the multiple challenges they were experiencing (school pressures regarding academic testing, lack of resources, lack of teacher training and supports, counselor responsibilities, district mandates regarding fighting, lack of parent involvement, etc.). Their input was incorporated and administrators / school environment provided them with an alternative: 1) support to send girls to a GMIE room, and 2) access to ongoing consultation regarding girls and effective strategies. This, in turn, increased the attention on girls who needed to be identified, who needed to be “seen” and “listened to,” and created opportunities for relationship and skills building with the girls. As a result of girls knowing that they mattered, there were fewer acting-out behaviors. As a result of being on-site, the program was visible—and both teachers and girls knew that. For teachers it was a “real-time” resource for receiving help. The lessons regarding how training happened in practice “in real time” suggests that administrators consider how current learning experiences are provided for teachers; often they are in artificial settings and are not directly relevant or specific to the issues teachers are facing on a day-to-day basis.

### ***Addressing Prevention: Enhancement Groups***

Preliminary analyses of prevention groups (n = 420) for girls that were not receiving Intervention care management services revealed that after exposure to the four-lesson curricula, girls reported feeling less safe in school, at home, and in the community. While this may seem contradictory to the goals of GMIE, Enhancement Groups may have raised girls' awareness about safety and thus may have led girls to recognize danger in situations that had previously been normalized in schools, homes, and the community. This reinforces the need to discuss safety, build awareness of safety with self and others, and should necessarily elevate the conversation on what is making girls feel unsafe.

### ***Working in School Settings in the Context of District and State Level Changes***

This partnership raised our awareness about how to better interface in the academic setting and how to bring services in partnership with school personnel. What was learned while at the school transformed how we did the work inside the school and how we advocate on behalf of the girls in need of more intensive community based services. Interventions are needed to increase advocacy for girls in the school when there is limited supports for parent/caregiver participation in activities that help to increase school connectedness and academic success (completing homework, parent-teacher conferences, parent involvement in school activities/advocacy).

The GMIE Program evaluation raised a number of questions that could be the focus of future work. While important information was gained specific to girls' experiences and stressors, future research should explore the impact and interaction of stressors at school, in the community, and at home level. Specific to school settings and climate, more research should address peer interactions, student attitudes toward teachers, fairness of school rules/practices, and safety specific to girls' experiences. Additionally, an exploration of the differences between girls who experience academic success and those who experience exclusionary discipline practices could be fruitful. Also, more can be learned about which of the GMIE Program components were most critical for transforming the school culture and which were most impactful in terms of the girls' success. From a community perspective, more information should be collected on the effectiveness of training and internship experiences on the next generation of professionals.

### **Thoughts on Replication**

When discussing the replication of the GMIE Program in different communities, there are important factors to consider. First, funding must necessarily be long term because some of the most significant school level changes occurred following the second year of implementation. Initial stages of replication necessitate a careful, nonjudgmental exploration of the intervention school and local community. While exploring the demographic and socioeconomic makeup of the intervention schools is important, other factors such as types of neighborhoods, safety, school layout, existing school policies, and community stability should be taken into consideration. During implementation, a needs-based assessment must be paired with resources to address the ongoing needs of the girl and her family. Additionally, school policies, practices, structures, and

attitudes of teachers must be accounted for and addressed during the program delivery. Finally, supports must be in place for teachers and staff to facilitate cultural shifts within the school.

## Foreword

Personal statements about the impact from the principals at the two intervention schools:

*“Girl Matters gives the girls at [this school] a purpose that they never knew they had. It teaches them that they are important; it builds their self-esteem; and teaches them how to communicate. I’ve been in 4 other schools and have NEVER had a program as consistent as GM. Thank you very, very much for supporting me here at [this school].”*

*—School Principal*

*“This program gives the girls hope for feeling like a strong young girl, so they have something on the way home to help them remember who they are when they hear boys’ comments and even from men. The kids here act like they are twice their age; the girls take on an adult role. Girl Matters, asking “How’s your day? How are you feeling?”; creating a room, a safe place to share information (calls made to DCF: take GMIE out of the equation and maybe they never would have said to anyone, maybe never reported ....); and it builds a type of sisterhood for them. Do not underestimate the Girl Matters: It’s Elementary room experience; they do not have it at home.... Even if they just want to go in and sit, they are getting that experience—they NEED IT and they don’t get it otherwise.”*

*—School Principal*

## Overview

This is the evaluation report of the *Girl Matters: It's Elementary* project implemented in two elementary schools in Jacksonville, Florida (Duval County). A description of the model, impetus for the project, and program outcomes at the girls' individual level, school level, and community level are described in the first three chapters. The report concludes with an implications and discussions chapter. Evaluation methodology can be found in the appendix.