

Ripple Effects of StoryArk

January 2021, Stillwater Area Public Schools' Office of Equity and Integration and StoryArk organized a Ripple Effects Mapping (REM) evaluation to document the impacts of the programming in the Stillwater Area Public Schools. StoryArk and school district staff, students, professional artists and Emerging Professionals participated in two online discussions. These core themes emerged from the process.

Building impactful relationships

Students and staff were energized and inspired by personal and organizational connections they've made through StoryArk. A prominent subtheme for students was the deepened sense of community they have gained.

I found people who go through the same things I go through and it made me feel less alone.

Cultivating voice, pride and empowerment

Students emphasized the power of elevating their own voices. Staff witnessed the power of students finding their voices and finding that what they have to say is important and holds weight

Students say it is immediately empowering to share stories about themselves.

Creating an accepting space for self-expression

Students emphasized that StoryArk has created space in which they could feel safe to express themselves. Some even shared that StoryArk was crucial for helping them work through personal mental health struggles.

StoryArk is a safe place to share your creativity and vision.

Learning about through learning among

Learning from each other was a prominent theme for students and staff. Staff, many of whom were in teaching positions, spoke highly of how much they had learned from, and with, the students.

I'm learning to be brave and courageous and speak the truth thanks to youth inspiration.

Learning life skills through experiences

StoryArk has created opportunities for students to gain a broad range career and life skills, including skills needed for future employment, creative skills, and teamwork.

It's made it easier to talk with people. In interviews and jobs, I now know how to approach the situation when I'm meeting someone new.

Unleashing creativity through a student-initiated process

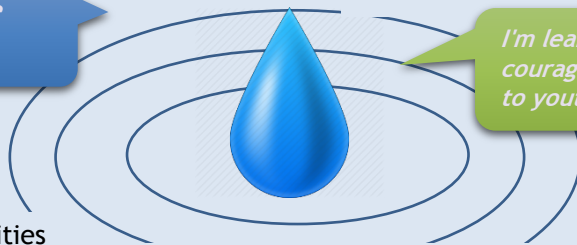
Staff emphasized the role of the student-initiated process, noting how rare it is for students to be given the opportunity to lead.

The greatest strength of StoryArk is that it seeks to nurture students' strengths. The fact that the projects are student-initiated and led validates these students. They are, to some extent, students who do not receive a lot of recognition. Creativity is often not valued.

Failing forward, learning from

Students and staff described a range of challenges they've had to work through, from time management, to collaboration, to maintaining closeness during the pandemic.

Sometimes, with a room full of creative people and their powerful voices, it can be challenging trying to write or finish a project while making sure everyone is heard.



Concluding thoughts

From Evaluation Consultant Scott Chazson, Ph.D, University of Minnesota Extension

The impacts of StoryArk are multi-faceted and deep. This Ripple Effects Mapping evaluation documented the many pathways in which the program is meeting its mission to empower student voices and equip young artists to thrive. From the student perspective, the program has offered a crucial sense of community and belonging that has created a safe environment in which they can unleash their creativity and grow. From a staff perspective, the program has pushed the envelope in terms of giving students the power to initiate and lead the creative process.

All of the intended student outcomes of the StoryArk program were documented in this Ripple Effects Mapping process. It is also affirming to see the evidence of collective impact, especially in the areas of education and nurturing/healing. StoryArk is not designed as a mental health intervention, but its emphasis on community building and artistic expression has clearly impacted the social and emotional well-being of participating students, and many of the staff. In addition, StoryArk is not specifically a career preparation effort, but it has clearly given students workforce and life skills that will be extremely helpful in their careers.

From Stephani Atkins, StoryArk Executive Director

From its inception, the heart of StoryArk has been its student led, student initiated creative process. This report has reaffirmed for us the power of providing a nurturing space for young people to gather and share their experience through storytelling. Stories provide a way to gain understanding and empathy not only of each other, but also for ourselves. StoryArk remains committed to empowering, uplifting and amplifying youth voices. Students know what is best for students; underserved communities know what is best for their communities. StoryArk's role is to provide the resources, skills and encouragement youth need to tell the story they want to tell. The mission is vital, and to that end, we commit to supporting what is most important, removing barriers to participation, and improving upon all areas detailed in this report.

From Marci Levy-Maguire, Learning and Innovation Assessment and Data Coordinator, and Eric Anderson, Achievement and Integration Coordinator

The outcomes of the Stillwater Area Public Schools/StoryArk partnership program evaluation are clearly aligned with our district's Profile of a Stillwater Graduate, which includes collaborator, critical thinker, creator, communicator, and self-advocate. As we implement lessons we have learned from educating during a pandemic and a world-wide focus on social justice, we have the opportunity to innovate through disruption. One of the intentional focal points of the district's achievement and integration work has been social justice within the educational context. This Ripple Map Effect evaluation indicates that this work has led to positive outcomes for students and staff. It also provides a model for infusing student voice and choice, student leadership, reflections on identity and identity development, a focus on college and career skills, and a strong sense of belonging throughout ALL of our academic programs. As we expand and strengthen our high school Pathways programs, reevaluate our middle school model, and enhance our elementary programs, we encourage district decision-makers to consider the philosophies and practices that have made the Stillwater Area Public Schools/StoryArk partnership so successful.