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safe schools
healthy

students



capturing the 1999

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healthy students

experience through

local outcomes





Welcome

March, 2005

In 1999, when Congress enacted legislation creating the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative, the degree to which it would impact the lives of children, families, schools and communities could not be envisioned. Since its inception in 1999, Safe Schools/Healthy Students has reached 190 school districts located in rural, urban and suburban settings in 49 of the 50 states. Local communities participating in the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative indicate that this federal program has changed their community for the better and in many cases, for the long term. Many of the programs and services started under the initiative continue through partnerships begun by this program.

Three federal agencies—Departments of Health and Human Services, Education and Justice—have jointly guided the development and growth of the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative. This joint venture, in and of itself, represents a unique approach for the federal government in working with local schools, agencies and communities to foster systems change. Safe Schools/Healthy Students focuses on implementing programs that are grounded in evidence-based practice and address locally identified goals and objectives. The initiative is rooted in the belief that schools and communities, working in partnership, can achieve the goal of a safe and supportive school environment for our children.

The 1999 Safe Schools/Healthy Students grantees were the first group of schools and communities funded to implement the six core elements of this program. This document, based on some of the local evaluation reports of a group of 13 of the 54 funded 1999 sites, describes the challenges these communities faced and a few of the results they achieved. The experiences outlined here reflect the range of actions and activities that schools and communities participating in the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiatives are undertaking. Their stories provide evidence that the initiative is producing positive results at the local level in reducing school violence, raising academic achievement, reducing alcohol and other substance abuse, increasing access to mental health services and creating safer school environments.

The Departments of Health and Human Services, Education, and Justice affirm that Safe Schools/Healthy Students is a program that is making a difference. And we look forward to seeing its positive impact continue to strengthen our children, schools and communities well into the future.



Safe Schools/Healthy Students: Making It Work

The Challenge

December 1, 1997

Three students were killed and five others wounded in West Paducah, Kentucky, when a 14-year-old boy fired on school-mates as they participated in a prayer circle at Heath High School.

March 24, 1998

Four students and 1 teacher were killed and 10 others wounded at Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, Arkansas, as students marched outside during a false fire alarm. A 13-year-old and an 11-year-old student shot at students and teachers as they exited the building.

May 21, 1998

A day after a 15-year-old student was arrested for bringing a gun to school, he returned to Thurston High School in Springfield, Oregon, and killed 2 students and wounded 22 others. His parents were later found dead at home.

These devastating events had a profound impact, both on those who mourned the loss of loved ones and on entire communities shocked and bewildered by the tragedy. On the one hand, we know that for the majority of American children, schools are among the safest places to be, with less than 1 percent of all violent deaths occurring on school grounds. But on the other hand, as demonstrated by these violent events (as well as the April 1999 shooting at Columbine High School), some schools have serious violence problems that significantly compromise learning and leave students and teachers feeling vulnerable.

Research has demonstrated that school violence is generally a symptom of larger community problems, such as substance abuse, depression and other mental health problems, and poor academic achievement (Mazza & Eggert,

2001; Verlinden, Hersen, & Thomas, 2000). Reducing the risk of mental illness and improving academic success can result when communities undertake a comprehensive approach that builds connections between students, families, and caring adults.

But schools alone cannot effectively address the problems of mental illness, substance abuse, and poor academic achievement. Schools must come together with parents, law enforcement and juvenile justice agencies, mental health organizations, community groups, and elected officials to develop and carry out a comprehensive plan of action.



Safe Schools/Healthy Students: Meeting the Challenge

In April 1999, Congress launched the Safe Schools/Healthy Students (SS/HS) Initiative under the collaborative leadership of the Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and Justice. The SS/HS Initiative awards three-year grants of \$1–3 million to school districts that collaborate with local law enforcement and mental health agencies to promote the healthy development of school-age children. These community-based partnerships focus on promoting mental health and preventing violence in youth by using evidence-based programs with demonstrated long-term positive effects.

As of September 2004, the SS/HS Initiative had awarded grants to 190 local education agencies in a range of urban, suburban, and rural communities. Grantees have implemented a variety of programs based on the unique needs and resources of each community. Approaches have ranged from providing mental health and social services directly to students, to delivering prevention training and education to school staff, students, and family members, to improving safety by addressing the physical aspects of the school setting. Despite this diversity of strategies, the SS/HS sites all share the common goal of implementing and evaluating

evidence-based programs to increase the health and safety of all students.

This brochure features the successes of and lessons learned from 13 diverse SS/HS grantees funded in 1999. It also highlights the importance of continued support for this ground-breaking federal initiative, which enriches the lives of so many children and families across our nation.

The Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative transformed Jonesboro. We have partnerships that never before existed, among different people and across organizations. As a result of those partnerships, we have initiated and sustained programs that will help our youth for years to come. By strengthening the link between community entities and the public schools, Jonesboro's Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative grant has built a foundation for students to thrive and succeed.

David Saarnio, *Project Evaluator*, Jonesboro Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative, Jonesboro, AR



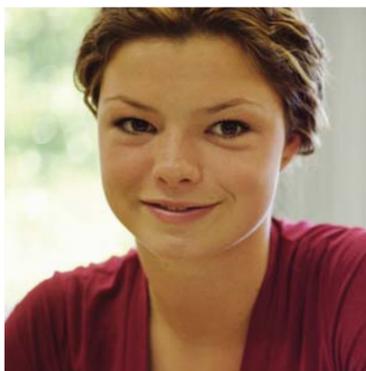
Understanding Risk and Protective Factors

The SS/HS Initiative is based on an innovative way of thinking about keeping young people safe and helping them do well in school. It draws from research demonstrating that disruptive behaviors in children and adolescents can be traced back to early risk factors. A landmark study (Rutter & Quinton, 1977) showed that certain risk factors can be detrimental to a child's mental health. In particular, severe family discord, violence, and parental criminality or mental illness can create a stressful home environment that predisposes some children to develop conduct disorders. There is now solid evidence that when

risk factors occur early in life, they can increase the likelihood of—but not necessarily cause—childhood mental disorders that can continue into adulthood.

However, children's lives include not only risk factors, but also protective factors that help to boost the child's chances of healthy social and emotional development. Protective factors include spirituality, supportive relationships with parents, and a connection to family, school, and community. Schools, families, and youth-based organizations have an important role to play in increasing and deepening protective factors in the lives of young children.

For most young people, the presence of protective factors—and the interaction among those factors—enables them to become resilient to risk factors. SS/HS grantees work within their communities to address risk and protective factors in a myriad of settings that touch young children and their families.



Building Powerful Partnerships to Support Youth

A cornerstone of the SS/HS program is the robust community partnerships—involving school staff, law enforcement, mental health services, and community groups—that form to strengthen protective factors for youth. In each SS/HS community, diverse groups come together to share ideas, pool resources, and build joint programs to protect young people. The collaborative nature in which the grants are conceived and carried out not only ensures that each site's programs are efficiently and effectively delivered, but also that key inter-agency relationships are forged—relationships that are critical to sustaining this type of community-based effort over time.

To ensure a comprehensive approach that builds on the strengths of community partners, SS/HS grantees are expected to integrate the following core elements into their programs:

- Safe school environment: School and community leaders, along with families, should make a joint commitment to establish safe school environments and should work together to reach that goal.
- Violence, alcohol, and other drug prevention and early intervention: Prevention efforts need to be focused at the classroom and community

level and should incorporate environmental strategies.

- School and community mental health preventive and treatment intervention services: These services should not only provide early prevention to reduce the onset of disruptive behaviors, but also identify and provide treatment to children with social and emotional problems.

- Early childhood psychosocial and emotional development services: These prevention and intervention efforts have enormous potential for buffering the impact of risk factors that emerge later in life.

- Supporting and connecting schools and communities: Schools should seek to foster positive relationships among students and staff and to promote parent and community involvement.

- Safe school policies: School-wide safety policies and practices should be in place.

In SS/HS sites, school-community collaborations give rise to culturally appropriate programming that serves the unique needs of the community. Efforts made possible by SS/HS funding include the following:

- After-school programs that get kids involved in sports and the arts and keep them off the streets.

- Learning centers that help school dropouts earn their high

The Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative project helped build a strong interagency base with clear goals with a working plan in place. All stakeholder groups perceived that the relationships strengthened through this project will be sustained after the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative support ends. [The resulting] systemic changes have had a positive and permanent impact on the culture of their schools.

Vicki Nishioka, Project Evaluator,
Deschutes County Safe
Schools/Healthy Students
Initiative, Deschutes County, OR

school diplomas and train them for jobs.

- Substance abuse programs that use evidence-based strategies to prevent kids from trying drugs and to help kids who are addicted to break the habit.

- On-site probation services that allow juvenile offenders to stay in school and out of trouble.

- School-based mental health programs that bring mental health providers to where young people are.

Focusing on Key Outcomes

We believe that in Jonesboro, students now have a core of resources, or assets, available to them that can help foster their success in and out of school, and that these resources are due in large part to the community partnerships that were formed. By strengthening the link between community entities and the public schools, Jonesboro's Safe Schools/Healthy Students grant initiative has built a foundation for students to thrive and succeed.

David Saarnio, *Project Evaluator, Jonesboro Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative, Jonesboro, AR*

While each of the 13 SS/HS grantees included in the evaluation monographs exercised creativity in creating programs to match their communities' unique needs, they nevertheless all met the following key outcomes:

— Building safer communities: SS/HS partnerships between schools and local law enforcement agencies have led to reduced violence and an improved quality of life for students and community members. Specifically, SS/HS services have resulted in fewer school suspensions, bullying incidents, and reports of disciplinary action. And, not surprisingly, school attendance is up and student achievement is on the rise.

— Making mental health services accessible to more

students: Students can't learn properly when they are grappling with mental health problems or distracted by disruptive behavior from classmates. School-community partnerships fostered by SS/HS expand the range of mental health services for students and make these services accessible to more individuals, thereby increasing students' chances for success.

— Improving academic performance: SS/HS school districts find that when evidence-based programs to make students feel safer, strategies for providing a range of mental health services, and out-of-school programs that reinforce learning are all in place, the districts' long-term goals of boosting test scores and improving academic outcomes become more achievable.

The following section outlines the critical accomplishments of 13 SS/HS grantees in the areas of safer communities, accessible mental health services, and improved academic performance.



Making school safer calls for creating a caring school environment in which all members feel connected, safe, and supported. Research has shown that when students have close connections with peers and adults in the school, their risk for engaging in violence is reduced (Commission on Children at Risk, 2003). Schools may choose to implement a variety of evidence-based programs to promote a strong sense of community among students and adults in the school.

In the Portland, Oregon, Public Schools, more than 60 languages are spoken. As part of its SS/HS grant, this site implemented the Family and Schools Together (FAST) program for children and families in four elementary and four middle schools. FAST is an 8- to 10-week school-based program that works to strengthen the family and increase parental involvement in school and the community. Portland students who participated in the program demonstrated the following:

- A 40 percent decrease in behaviors related to socialized aggression.
- A 27 percent decrease in attention problems.
- A 13 percent increase in parental involvement in school.

In Jonesboro, Arkansas, crime rates for juveniles had increased 41 percent since 1990, culminating in a high-profile school shooting in 1998. With a primary objective of improving the school climate, the Jonesboro Public Schools' SS/HS grant focused on partnering with juvenile justice and law enforcement authorities to provide students with opportunities to succeed and the skills to make healthy decisions related to drugs, alcohol, and violence. Evaluation results demonstrated that while the grant was underway, juvenile drug arrests declined substantially in Jonesboro, and teachers' perception of school climate improved.

Safer Communities

The Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative brought a positive approach to working with youth, in an area where too many parents and high school youth had seen only suspicion on the part of police and the schools and a focus on eradicating gangs through arrests and youth surveillance. Now there are more programs available to keep youth connected to their families, schools, and communities.

Sharon Telleen, *Project Evaluator, Cook County Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative, Cook County, IL*



Accessible Mental Health Services

The United States is facing a crisis regarding the mental health of its children and adolescents (U.S. Public Health Service, 2000). An especially pressing need is for school-based programs that provide mental health services to students. Schools and youth-serving organizations are also recognizing the need to identify disruptive behaviors in young people and intervene before a full-blown mental illness results.

One SS/HS grantee, the J. Sterling Morton High School District in Cook County, Illinois, focused on strengthening family connections through a wrap-around family case management program to enhance services to at-risk youth and their families. Through the program, outreach workers made home visits to families, and a bilingual psychologist was made available to families.

The results were striking: After just three months of case management, children in the program had statistically significant improvements in their school functioning. There was also a significant

improvement in children's moods and a marked decrease in their aggressive behavior toward others.

In another part of the country, the Los Angeles Unified School District utilized its SS/HS grant to enhance mental health services by creating an Infant Center at McAlister Opportunity High and by dedicating a nurse and a psychologist to serve the district's children's centers. As a result, the community was able to provide developmentally appropriate health and mental health prevention services to more than 1,000 infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and kindergarten students.



Improved Academic Performance

Reducing barriers to learning is an important first step in improving students' academic outcomes. As part of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, schools must work to remove the emotional, behavioral, and academic barriers that interfere with student success and make mental health services available to students. A growing body of evidence indicates that school mental health programs improve educational outcomes by decreasing absences, reducing disciplinary problems, and improving test scores (New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, 2003).

In Nassau County, New York, the Board of Cooperative Educational Services administered the SS/HS grant for two school districts. One component of the grant was an after-school mentoring program for students in grades 3 to 5 who

had at least two risk factors (e.g., low achievement, high absence rates, history of poor conduct or discipline problems, siblings with identified problems). The mentors worked to enhance students' self-esteem, personal and social responsibility, cooperation, and nonviolent problem-solving skills. They also taught students how to resist pressures to become involved in violence and substance abuse.

The results: Participating children showed major improvements in all achievement and behavior categories in just three years, and 55 percent of the students demonstrated some improvement after less than three years of mentoring.

As part of the Lansing, Michigan, School District's SS/HS grant, the schools expanded their partnership with a community mental health agency to assist troubled adolescents. Master's-level therapists coordinated with the secondary schools' counseling staff to provide mental



The Learning Center has been and continues to be the biggest success story in this area. Though originally intended as an alternative path to completing high school, it has expanded to serve a three county area and even offers English as a Second Language programs for adults. Its acceptance and utilization has exceeded original project expectations.

Steve Kitzis, *Project Evaluator, Rural Underpinnings for Resiliency and Linkages (RURAL), Hays, KS*

health services to students in need. The program was not only successful in helping families access services, but also in improving students' school performance. As a result of the program, 12 percent more students earned A's and B's, and 26 percent fewer suspensions were recorded.

Enduring Effects of the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Program

In community after community, the SS/HS program has been the catalyst for bringing schools and youth-serving organizations together to build and expand evidence-based programs to prevent violence, promote mental health, and boost young people's academic achievement. The dividends for children, families, and communities at large have been unprecedented: lower rates of school violence, more mental health services for more children, better attendance, and improved academic performance.

Many communities have drawn on the strength of their SS/HS partnerships to bring additional community resources to bear on these issues. The community investment, in the form of additional funding, staff training, and institutionalization of program components, is laudable. By obliging schools to forge working partnerships with community organizations, the SS/HS Initiative gives funded sites the roots they need to grow and the community investment they'll need to thrive over time.

Below are some examples of the lasting effects of SS/HS community partnerships:

— In Washington, D.C., a community mental health partner in the SS/HS program is making its own clinical staff available to expand school-based mental-health programs in 25 charter and public schools.

— The Hays, Kansas, Learning Center, which had offered services with SS/HS funding, has become a focal point for local residents, ranging from high school dropouts to middle-aged adults, to complete their high school education.

— In Deschutes County, Oregon, following the end of SS/HS funding, local school districts and law enforcement agencies began providing funding for School Resource Officers, and the Safe School Alliance continues to work on improving safety in all county schools.

— In the Los Angeles Unified School District, many services originally funded by SS/HS have not only been continued but also expanded. For example, county probation funding has expanded on-site probation services to all middle and high schools throughout the district.

— The Jonesboro, Arkansas, site met with a fortuitous—but unexpected—outcome: Arkansas State University has begun to work much more closely with schools and community agencies to develop programs to serve children.

Six years ago, the U.S. Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and Justice joined forces to create the SS/HS Initiative to address nationwide concerns about youth violence and school safety. The results of the initiative have been impressive. By requiring communities to carry out evidence-based programs and forge broad-based partnerships, the SS/HS Initiative has judiciously invested federal resources, producing exceptional results in schools and communities across the nation.

The SS/HS Initiative has given rise to a wealth of vibrant, community-based programs that are improving the lives of children and giving their families hope for a better future. Like never before, in SS/HS communities across the country, schools and youth-serving organizations are sowing the seeds of change.

Thus far, 190 grantees have been successful in creating innovative programs to serve families, schools, and the community. But there are still many more children across this country who desperately need the services that SS/HS provides. SS/HS is a wise investment for all Americans. Continued funding will ensure that more communities across the United States enhance the protective factors that build young people's resilience to mental illness and substance abuse and enable them to succeed academically.

On a daily basis, news headlines remind us that no community can be complacent in its efforts to make its schools and its students safe. None of us are as strong as all of us working together to help our children reach their full potential. Let us continue the investment in SS/HS, thereby harnessing the energy and commitment of the federal government in working with local communities to improve the lives of all children.

Safe Schools/Healthy Students: A Good Investment for All

Another sustainable result of the [initiative] is its impact on the teachers, agencies, principals, and staff involved. Many of them can be expected to take a piece of the [initiative] philosophy with them in their work in the schools and community.

Monica Kaiser, *Project Evaluator*, Project SECURE (Safe, Empowered Communities Using Resources and Education), Los Angeles, CA



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