

Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative

In 1999, in response to school shootings in Kentucky, Arkansas, Oregon, and other states, Congress took action and 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, per year, to school districts to do the following:

- Collaborate with local law enforcement and mental health agencies.
- Promote the healthy development of school-age children.
- Promote mental health and prevent violence in youth by using evidence-based programs with demonstrated long-term positive effects.

To date, 190 local education agencies representing rural, suburban, and urban communities in 49 states have received funding.

Core Elements

SS/HS grantees integrate six core elements into their programs:

1. Safe school environment
2. Violence, alcohol, and other drug prevention and early intervention
3. School and community mental health preventive and treatment intervention services
4. Early childhood psychosocial and emotional development services
5. Supporting and connecting schools and communities
6. Safe school policies

This comprehensive approach lays the foundation for schools and communities, acting in partnership, to create safe school environments that support positive outcomes for children, youth, adolescents, and families.

Words From Project Evaluators

DAVID SAARNIO, Jonesboro, Arkansas

“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.”

SHARON TELLEEN, Cook County, Illinois

“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 . . . 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.”

VICKI NISHIOKA, Deschutes County, Oregon

“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.”

MONICA KAISER, Los Angeles, California

“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.”

Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative

Making A Difference—Examples of Program Outcomes

Here are some striking examples of some of the outcomes achieved by a few of the first sites funded by the SAFE SCHOOLS/HEALTHY STUDENTS Initiative:

- **Deschutes County, Oregon**, reported increased access to mental health services for all elementary, middle, and high school students, from 56 students receiving mental health services prior to the initiative to 1,713 students during the four years of the project.
- In **Springfield, Oregon**, among students in participating schools, there were decreases in the possession of illegal weapons (–35.6%), gang activity (–35.9%), use of illegal drugs and alcohol (–9%), and bullying and harassment (–4.2%).
- More than 15,000 individual contacts were made by case managers to at-risk students and over 4,900 individual therapy sessions were provided in **Jonesboro, Arkansas**.
- **Lansing, Michigan**, reported that students who participated in the Student and Family Empowerment (SAFE) program improved their behavior and academic achievement. Students participating in the SAFE program were more likely to receive A's and B's in their classes.
- More than two-thirds of the students surveyed in the initiative in **Los Angeles, California**, indicated that they learned to take responsibility for their actions (72%), to not get in trouble at school as frequently (68%), and to say “no” when someone pressed them to do something that was not safe or good (68%).
- In **Pinellas County, Florida**, the drop-out rates for participants of the On-Campus Intervention Program, an alternative in-school suspension program that provides academic assistance and mental health intervention, were roughly half the rate of the comparison group at the end of an 18-month study.
- Fifth-graders who were mentored for three consecutive years during the initiative in **Nassau County, New York**, showed statistically significant improvements in almost all aspects of their school achievement and behavior.
- In **Jefferson County, Kentucky**, students participating in the Louisville Education and Employment Partnership (LEEP) exhibited decreases in unexcused absences and in-school suspensions.
- Gang-related school violence incidents dropped from a high of 81 incidents to fewer than 9 by the second year of the initiative in participating communities in **Cook County, Illinois**.
- Through the **Hays, Kansas** initiative, 10% of Ellis County families (approximately 400 families) received services from school-based social workers, participated in Functional Family Therapy, or accessed the Learning Center.
- The SS/HS Initiative in **Portland, Oregon**, reported that discipline referrals declined each year, with a total reduction over this five-year period of 35.8%.
- The proportion of elementary students in the **Houston, Texas** initiative who reported missing one or more days of school in the past month because of school safety concerns decreased significantly over the three-year period.

Continuing the Work—Sustainability

When 52 sites funded in 1999 and 2000 were asked about their efforts to sustain the projects that were funded through the SS/HS Initiative, we learned that:

- 86% of these sites reported that community-based partnerships still existed.
- Of the sites that reported the continued existence of their partnerships, 96% reported that the primary partners (mental health, education, and law enforcement) will continue to collaborate.
- 60% of the sites reported increases in resource sharing and 46% reported increases in resource mapping.