



Volume 2, Issue 1 Fall 2008

The Safe Schools/Healthy Students (SS/HS) Initiative has been making a difference in schools across America since 1999. Every year, more communities join the effort to build healthy, safe environments that give young people a more promising future.

The idea behind the SS/HS Initiative is simple—people can accomplish more when they work together. Within each community, agencies and organizations serve the same youth, so they share a common interest in promoting healthy childhood development and preventing violence and substance abuse. The Initiative allows local educational agencies (LEAs) to partner with their local mental health, law enforcement, and juvenile justice agencies to apply for Federal funds to support a comprehensive, coordinated plan of activities, programs, and services. These plans are intended to develop an infrastructure for safe, healthy, drug-free schools and communities that will continue long after the grants have ended.

The SS/HS Initiative signifies collaboration on the Federal level as well. The U.S. Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and Justice are partners in the Initiative, which integrates research and best practices from the fields of education, justice, mental health, and social services.

Welcome 2007 and 2008 Cohorts!

The SS/HS Initiative welcomed 27 new grantees in 2007 and 60 new grantees in 2008. They join the 2005 cohort, with 40 grantees and 1,276 schools, and the 2006 cohort, with 19 grantees and 330 schools. (Details on the 2008 cohort were not available at press time but will be provided in a future edition of *National Evaluation Update*.)

Each 2007 grantee submitted a comprehensive plan for addressing school violence, alcohol and other drug abuse, and behavioral and mental health concerns. The plans focus on five elements:*

- Element 1: Safe school environments and violence prevention activities.
- Element 2: Alcohol and other drug prevention activities.

- Element 3: Student behavioral, social, and emotional supports.
- Element 4: Mental health services.
- Element 5: Early childhood social and emotional learning programs.

**Elements for grants awarded in 2005 and 2006 are different and are not shown.*

At a Glance—The 2007 Cohort

27

Number of local education agencies awarded SS/HS grants in 2007

1,253,416

Number of students served by the 2007 cohort

2,065

Number of schools served by the 2007 cohort

\$37,454,964

Total value of 2007 grants

Feedback From the NET

Listening to Project Directors

The SS/HS National Evaluation Team (NET) conducts annual interviews with grantee project directors to assess the strength of collaboration at the sites. Recently, the NET also conducted focus groups with a subset of project directors to learn more about factors that may influence grantees' progress as they work to implement their projects. The project director interviews and focus groups provide distinct views of SS/HS projects from different time points and perspectives. Taken together, the results provide a more complete picture of SS/HS projects and the challenges they face over time.

Project Director Interviews

In 2006, the NET interviewed all 40 project directors from the 2005 cohort near the end of their first year of funding. Interviews were conducted again a year later to determine any changes in collaborative functioning in the partnership and among the required partners. Using a 5-point scale, the project directors rated the strength of the partnership's contribution on 10 core activities derived from the research literature:

1. Assessing needs
2. Searching for best practice solutions
3. Determining capacity to meet implementation requirements
4. Selecting best practice solutions
5. Supporting implementation
6. Monitoring implementation
7. Using an outcome evaluation to guide planning
8. Formulating policy changes based on results
9. Planning to sustain SS/HS programs and activities
10. Planning to sustain SS/HS infrastructure

The average ratings in Years 1 and 2 fell in the moderate to significant range. Near the end of their second year, project directors reported a distinct shift in the contributions of their partnerships. Contributions to planning activities (#1–4) decreased slightly in Year 2, while contributions to implementation activities (#5–7) and longer-term activities (#8–10) increased, indicating that the projects were moving through the continuum of core collaboration activities.

For contributions rated moderate or greater, the project director was asked to rate the strength of each required partner's contribution. The local education agency was the leading contributor in most sites, but the contributions of the other partners increased slightly from Year 1 to Year 2.

Year 3 Focus Groups

In spring 2008, the NET conducted focus groups in Washington, DC, with a subset of SS/HS project directors from the 2005 cohort near the end of their third year. The participating sites had demonstrated progress toward implementing a comprehensive plan of coordinated policies, programs, and services.

The focus groups explored the structure and processes of successful integrative partnerships, challenges and solutions, and demographic and cultural considerations. What emerged was a look at how project dynamics can help or hinder progress (see box).

The focus group participants also recommended increasing project directors' readiness for the challenges of implementing complex partnerships. Their recommendations included additional mentoring, networking, training, and technical assistance.

The First 2 Years: Common Barriers and Successful Strategies

Barriers:

- Grant administration challenges
- Legal issues
- Turnover
- Turf issues
- Lack of commitment

Strategies:

- Hiring a project director with strong leadership skills and community ties.
- Developing strong relationships with partners, obtaining early buy-in, and recognizing partners' accomplishments.
- Establishing teams or committees to accomplish tasks efficiently.
- Ensuring accountability using strategies such as site visits to programs, detailed contracts, and data sharing.
- Fostering service integration by educating partners about how to share information without violating Federal regulations, streamlining referral processes, and increasing training.
- Addressing cultural issues through good communication, outreach, and hiring practices.

2

Feedback From the NET

Highlights From the School-Level Survey, 2005 Cohort

The NET recently identified widespread improvements at SS/HS sites in the 2005 cohort based on the results of the 2006 and 2007 School-Level Survey. Overall, targeted schools cited improvement on all measures, and these gains increased over time as the grant was more fully implemented.

On a scale of 1 (no improvement) to 5 (very great improvement), the mean for the extent of improvement in overall school safety was 2.7 in Year 1 and 3.4 in Year 2. Information on particular areas addressed by the grant is shown in the graph below.

Following are additional highlights from the survey:

- **Mental health**—The greatest change was seen in the area of mental health services, which 35 percent of schools said had improved to a great or very great extent in Year 2, compared to 18 percent in Year 1.
- **Violence**—The percentage of schools that cited great or very great improvement in violence reduction doubled to 16 percent in Year 2, from 8 percent in Year 1.
- **Alcohol**—23 percent of schools said alcohol use had been reduced to a great or very great extent in Year 2, up from 13 percent in Year 1.

The NET is grateful to the grantees for their support with the annual survey, which is completed online by the SS/HS coordinator at each targeted school. The results help the NET identify system and policy changes at the school level. Comparing the results from year to year provides information on how the schools are changing as the grants progress.

A Note About the National Evaluation

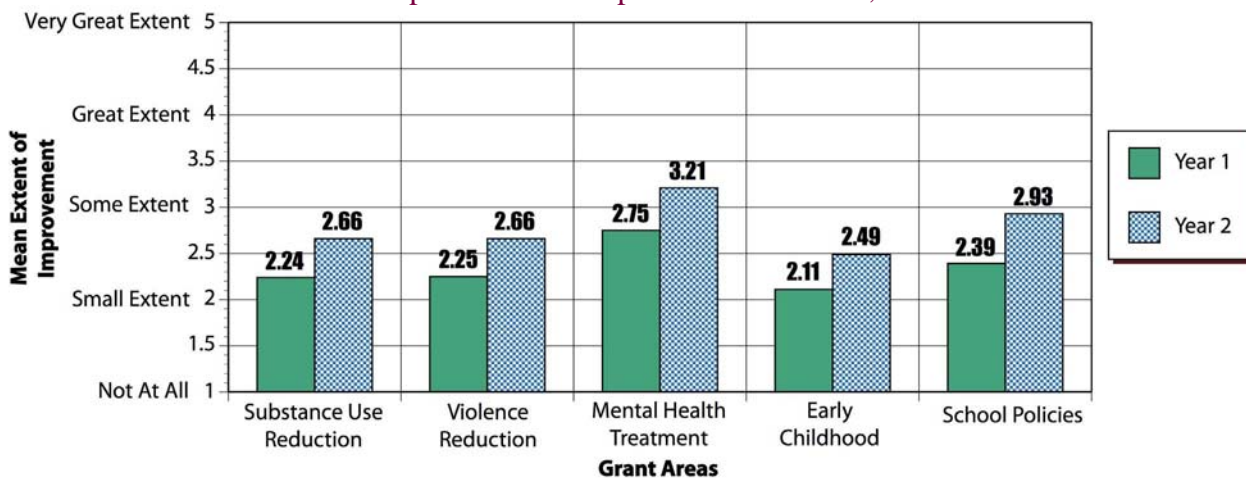
All SS/HS grantees participate in a national evaluation conducted by the SS/HS National Evaluation Team (NET). The evaluation asks two basic questions:

Does the Initiative work? The NET measures changes in outcomes over the grant period based on Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) indicators: violent incidents at schools, substance use, school attendance, and access to mental health services for students and families.

How does it work? In addition to outcomes, the national evaluation examines how the community partnerships are implemented and how they function. Collaboration, systems change, service integration, comprehensive policies, decision making, school climate, changes in infrastructure, adoption of evidence-based practices, and pre-grant conditions all play a part in the NET's understanding of the SS/HS partnerships. What did the school and community look like before the grant? Did the grant lead to positive system changes and, later, to improved outcomes?

The NET is composed of the MANILA Consulting Group, RMC Research Corporation, and Battelle Centers for Public Health Research and Evaluation. For a schedule of the NET's data collection activities, see p. 4.

Improvements in Specific Grant Areas, 2005 Cohort



3

Data Collection

Status of Recent and Ongoing Activities

| Activity | Implementation Date | Percent Complete |
|---|---------------------|------------------|
| School-Level Survey (Year 3) | April 2008 | 98% |
| Project-Level Survey (Year 3) | May 2008 | 95% |
| Project Director Telephone Interview (Year 3) | May 2008 | 88% |
| Partnership Inventory (Year 3) | May 2008 | 62% |
| Group Telephone Interviews (Year 3) | May 2008 | 95% |
| School-Level Survey (Year 2) | April 2008 | 99% |
| Project-Level Survey (Year 2) | May 2008 | 95% |
| Project Director Telephone Interview (Year 2) | May 2008 | 100% |
| Partnership Inventory (Year 2) | May 2008 | 67% |
| Group Telephone Interviews (Year 2) | May 2008 | 92% |
| Initial Site Visit | February 2008 | 100% |
| School-Level Survey (Year 1) | April 2008 | 98% |
| Project-Level Survey (Year 1) | May 2008 | 100% |
| Project Director Telephone Interview (Year 1) | May 2008 | 85% |

Upcoming Dates

| Activity | Fall 2008 | Winter 2009 | Spring 2009 |
|--|--------------|----------------|----------------|
| GPRC Data Collection (Year 3) | | | |
| Project Director Telephone Interview (Year 4)* | | | |
| Partnership Inventory (Year 4)* | | | |
| GPRC Data Collection (Year 2) | | | |
| School Climate Survey* | | | |
| School-Level Survey (Year 3) | | | |
| Project-Level Survey (Year 3) | | | |
| Project Director Telephone Interview (Year 3) | | | |
| Group Telephone Interviews (Year 3) | | | |
| Partnership Inventory (Year 3) | | | |
| GPRC Data Collection (Year 1) | | | |
| School Climate Survey* | | | |
| School-Level Survey (Year 2) | | | |
| Project-Level Survey (Year 2) | | | |
| Project Director Telephone Interview (Year 2) | | | |
| Group Telephone Interviews (Year 2) | | | |
| Partnership Inventory (Year 2) | | | |
| School Climate Survey* | | | |
| Initial Site Visit | | | |
| School-Level Survey (Year 1) | | | |
| Project-Level Survey (Year 1) | | | |
| Project Director Telephone Interview (Year 1) | | | |

* tentative

For more information, contact the NET:
Mike Van Horn
(571) 633-9797, ext. 205
mvhorn@manilaconsulting.net