

VIOLENCE PREVENTION PROGRAMS IN LAFAYETTE PARISH SCHOOLS: METHODS IN PROCESS AND IMPACT EVALUATION [605]

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Abstract

The importance of school violence prevention and safety is clear to professionals working in schools and communities throughout the United States. The steps involved in planning, implementation and evaluation of violence prevention and safety enhancement programs will be outlined. Preliminary findings of the process and impact evaluations will be presented.

Background

Violence is a major cause of mortality and morbidity among youth (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2004a). In the United States, homicide and suicide are the second and third leading causes of death, respectively, for persons ages 13–19 years. Homicide and suicide are responsible for approximately one-fourth of deaths among persons ages 10–24 years in the United States (CDC 2004b). Aggressiveness, impulsivity, substance abuse, depression, and hopelessness can increase the risk for both suicidal and violent behaviors (Anderson, Kaufman, and Simon 2001).

Although the declines in violence-related behaviors are encouraging, prevention efforts must be sustained if the nation is to achieve its 2010 national health objectives (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, and Modzeleski 2002). In 2003, one in three high school students reported involvement in a physical fight, and approximately one in sixteen high school students reported carrying a weapon on school property (CDC 2004c).

Violence prevention programs directed at reducing both suicide and fighting are likely to be relevant for youths (CDC 2004a). Strategies determined effective in reducing youth problem behaviors (e.g., skill and competence-building programs, positive youth development, and parent training) might reduce underlying risks and provide the skills and support that students need to avoid fighting and suicidal behavior (Trezza and Popp 2000; Plutchik 1995).

During the last two decades, the significance of school violence and safety has been studied in detail, and many programs have been implemented throughout the nation to address this issue. However, many of these programs fail to achieve their goals due to lack of planning and coordination with the people who implement, design, and evaluate these programs. The importance of process evaluation has been examined in several

health promotion programs and has been found to be very useful. This study outlines the methods in process and impact evaluations for implementing violence prevention programs in schools in Lafayette Parish, Louisiana, through a Safe Schools/Healthy Students grant. This grant, referred to as Lasting Partnerships for Safe Schools (LPSS), was awarded by the U. S. Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and Justice to the Lafayette Parish School System to assist in addressing school violence prevention issues.

Process and Impact Evaluations

Much emphasis is placed on outcome evaluation to determine whether or not a health promotion program was successful. Process evaluation is used to monitor and document program implementation and can aid in understanding the relationship between specific program elements and program outcomes. The scope and implementation of process evaluation has grown in complexity as its importance and utility has become more widely recognized (Saunders, Evans, and Joshi 2005). A program’s lack of success could be attributed to any number of program-related reasons, including poor program design, poor or incomplete program implementation, and/or failure to reach sufficient numbers of the target audience. In recent years, an increasing emphasis has been placed on measuring program implementation, in part due to great variability in program implementation and policy adoption in school and community settings. On the other hand, impact evaluations assess the changes in behavior of individuals that can be attributed to a particular project, program, or policy. With no standard approach to conducting an impact evaluation, each evaluation has to be tailored to the specific project, country, and institutional context and to the actors involved.

Methods

The Lafayette Parish School System is implementing a several-pronged initiative for reducing violence and promoting safe environments in its schools by a grant awarded by the U.S. Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and Justice to the Lafayette Parish School System. This initiative provides students, schools, and communities with a coordinated and comprehensive plan of activities, programs, and services that focus on promoting healthy childhood development and preventing violence and alcohol and other drug abuse. Through a Safe Schools/Healthy Students grant, process and impact evaluation is being implemented.

Considering the diversity in population and requirements for implementing programs in each school, an evaluation plan was developed based on the seven grant goals. The grant goals focus on behavior, policy and environmental factors to provide a comprehensive approach to preventing school violence. Data sources for evaluation based on grant goals are indicated in Figure 1.

The evaluation plan focused on predisposing, enabling, and reinforcing factors leading to healthy behaviors. A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods for evaluating the processes and impacts are being used in this initiative. Examples of the measures used in process and impact evaluations are listed in Table 1.

The evaluation measures listed in Table 2 can be classified as predisposing, enabling and reinforcing factors as they relate to school violence prevention. As indicated in Table 2, the predisposing measures address mainly the factors related to knowledge, attitudes, and behavior changes of individuals. The enabling measures focus mainly on policy and environmental factors as they relate to school violence. Finally, the reinforcing factors concentrate on incentives, funding, personnel and other resources that aid in effective implementation of the school violence prevention programs.

Figure 1. Data sources for evaluation of lasting partnerships for the safe schools initiative, based on grant goals

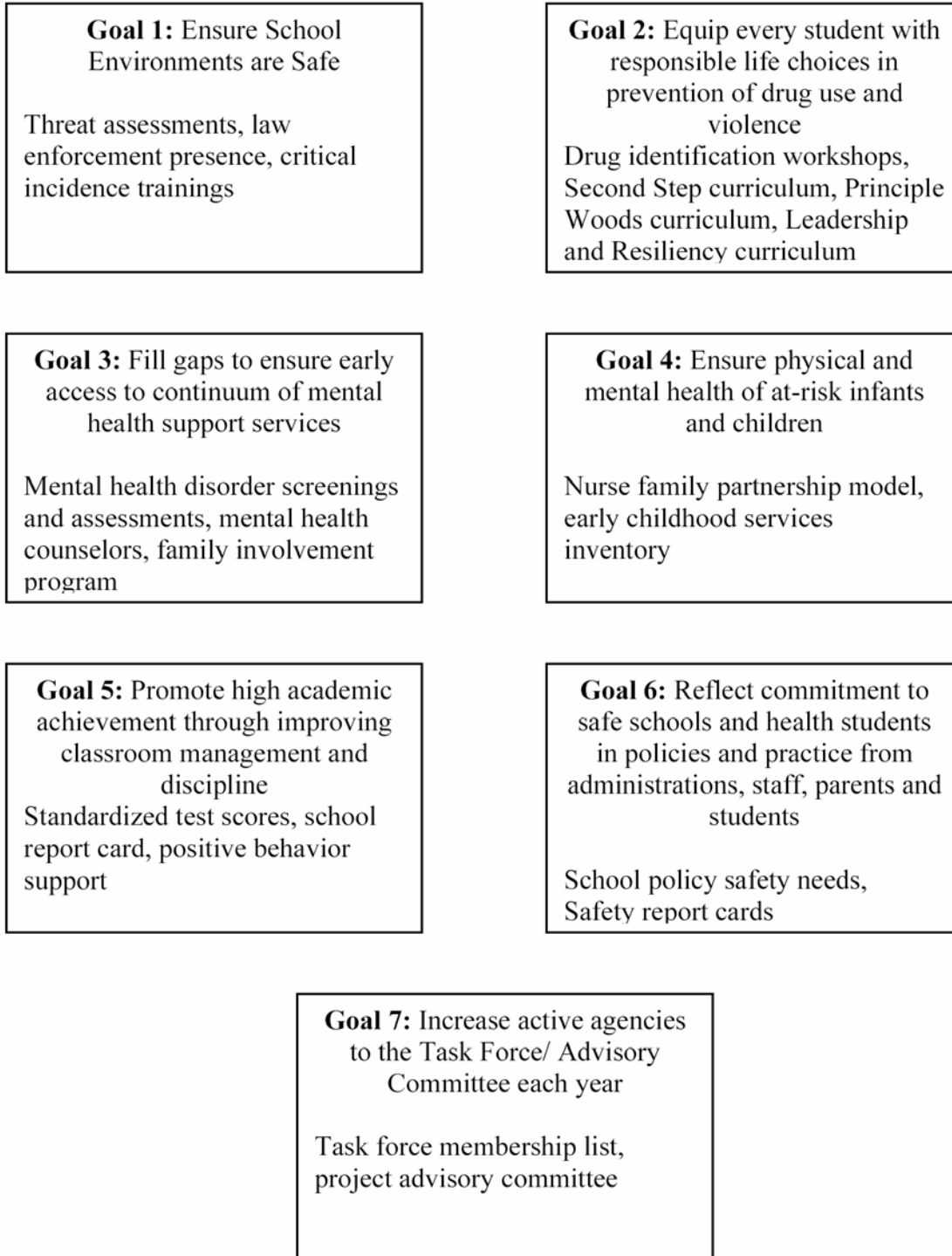


Table 1. Examples of process and impact measures for evaluating lasting partnerships for a safe schools initiative

Process Measures	Impact Measures
<p>Quantitative</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attendance records of participants • Track numbers and dates completed for threat assessments • Dates and number of critical incidence trainings • Satisfaction surveys (from participants and teachers) for drug identification workshops • Strategy team member survey for communities mobilizing change • Number of mental health counselors hired, number of participants referred, number of students identified as at-risk • Number of students receiving professional services for violence and drug abuse • Number of flyers, brochures, and educational materials distributed 	<p>Quantitative</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attitude survey for the Second Step curriculum • Behavior assessments for alcohol, tobacco and other drugs for Principal Woods curriculum • Pre-post results for Leadership and Resiliency surveys • Student behavior rating scales • Number of suspensions, expulsions; incidence of injuries; weapons possessions, etc. • Pre-post surveys for the Protecting me-Protecting You curriculum
<p>Qualitative</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Satisfaction reports and analyses for the family involvement program • Levels of partnerships with collaborations and task force development • Strengths and barriers in lasting partnerships for collaborations • Barriers in implementing effective law enforcement presence in schools 	<p>Qualitative</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effect of referral services on the mental growth of children • Client logs • Success stories of schools after implementing positive behavior support • Interviews of teachers and students regarding behavior changes and academic growth of schools

Preliminary Findings

The evaluation efforts for the LPSS initiative has been ongoing and is evolving based on the day-to-day requirements of several programs. Although the LPSS initiative was implemented to cover a variety of issues, it was able to implement only some aspects of the program in the first year. Process evaluation results indicated several barriers in implementing all the programs to the full extent. Natural disasters like hurricanes played a vital role in disorganizing any well-designed programs and pose a threat for implementation. Other barriers included delay in hiring the staff, delays in implementing surveys because of prior commitments, and the evolution of partnerships.

Table 2. Process and impact evaluation measure based on predisposing, enabling, and reinforcing factors in preventing school violence

Predisposing	Enabling	Reinforcing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge levels of participants (Second Step, Leadership and Resiliency curriculum) • Pre-post tests to assess attitudes of students toward safety and violence in schools • Pre-post results from drug identification workshops • Student behavior rating scales • Flyers, brochures, and educational materials printed and distributed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of cameras installed • School climate portion of the school analysis model • Training faculty in best practice curriculum and assigning them to classes • Web page published for school safety resources • Allotment of staff time, personnel management (nurses, counselors, officers, etc) • Transportation for students in need of professional services • Referrals to outside agencies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporation of school resource officers • Mental health counselors who cater to all middle and high schools • Nurse family partnerships • Collaborations and partnerships for effective implementation • Funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

In addition, a potential barrier in measuring the impacts for this initiative was the lack of baseline information. For instance, one of the grant goals targets the need for improving the safe environment in schools and increasing the law enforcement presence. Although several policy and environmental interventions have been planned, impacts of such interventions were hard to measure without understanding the current levels of law enforcement in schools. In this regard, a law enforcement survey was conducted for all schools in Lafayette Parish to understand the kind of law enforcement presence in their schools, any funding requests they might have made, barriers associated with effective implementation and any future plans. Follow-up surveys in the coming quarters and years will indicate the level of improvement the schools have made with regard to law enforcement and incorporating safety features in their schools.

This survey also provided an insight into the number of personnel involved in law enforcement, whether schools have the police officers full time or part time (if at all), special requirements for safety during sporting events, and assigned staff or contact person in case of emergencies. Interestingly, most schools indicated their dependence on 911 calls to handle emergencies and the problematic need to wait for a response. Barriers were noted in elementary and middle schools who could not afford to have safety personnel present in schools at all times.

To understand the extent of communication and work involvement with several partners in the initiative, a collaboration survey was conducted in April 2006 for 25 key partners involved in this initiative. The surveys provided feedback on whether an organization partnered with others, the level of partnership, and any strengths or barriers associated with those partnerships. The results of the survey indicated a growth in the level of partnerships from year 1, and it is hoped that strengthening these partnerships will help in better implementation of programs.

Utilizing the Evaluation Measures

Initiatives such as LPSS deal with a wide variety of issues as they relate to school violence and safety measures. Considering the array of issues in this initiative, as listed in the seven grant goals, the evaluation efforts can be challenging. A formative evaluation process that was designed as per the grant goals enables the stakeholders to understand the relationships of several facets of the program. Process evaluation measures provide evidence regarding the extent to which the programs are implemented and the involvement of students and teachers in these programs. Incorporating a well-designed process evaluation framework will aid in accountability and act as a quality control for the programs. Biannual reports have been prepared for the last year, which represents the results of process evaluations for several programs. These reports are sent to the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services to monitor grant progress. The evaluators meet the stakeholders on a monthly basis in a task force meeting to share the evaluation results and understand the progress of implementation of several programs. These meetings also enable the communication between implementation and the evaluation staff. To aid in the quality control measures Project Advisory Committee meetings are held quarterly to discuss the goals and objectives and the evaluation findings.

A comprehensive approach to prevent violence and to promote safety in schools is being implemented by using policy, environmental and behavioral interventions. Lessons learned from the results of process and impact evaluations can be used for implementing similar programs across the nation.

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