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Examination of Impact of Polk County Florida's Safe and Drug Free Schools Program

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Abstract

The Safe and Drug-Free Schools (SDFS) Program is the Florida Department of Education's (FDOE) primary funding vehicle for the reduction of violence, and tobacco, alcohol, and other drug use through education and prevention activities in schools. Each year, school districts in Florida write proposals to the FDOE to receive SDFS funding for their ongoing or newly created programs. This paper documents the SDFS in Polk County, Florida and provides selected evaluation results. Qualitative and quantitative methods were used to monitor students who were admitted to the program based on current drug use status (i.e., users). In addition to reviewing program records, students completed a post-intervention survey, and comparisons were made with a district-wide student survey of all students. Results showed that the substance abuse behavior of program participants was altered from the time they entered the program until eight months after exiting the program. This behavioral change is documented by comparing program participants with other students in the district who were not part of this group using the School District Drug Surveillance survey. Upon entering the program all participants were considered drug users and defined as a "high risk population." Eight months after leaving the program the prevalence of their drug use decreased from 100% to a level nearly equal to the general student population.

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Introduction

The Safe and Drug-Free Schools (SDFS) Program is the Department of Education's primary funding vehicle for the reduction of violence, and drug, alcohol and tobacco use through education and prevention activities in schools. The SFDS program is designed to enhance programs that prevent the illegal use of tobacco, alcohol and other drugs, by involving parents and by coordinating initiatives with government and community resources. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2002), the SDFS Program provides all states with grants for violence and drug prevention, and in turn, the states provide funds to state and local education agencies for a wide range of school-based and community-based education and prevention programs.

Each year, Florida's school districts submit proposals to the Florida Department of Education to receive SFDS funding for their ongoing or newly created programs. The process assures that school districts receive money for programs that meet specific needs. Generally, a needs assessment and an evaluation component are components of the school districts' proposals. Assistance in writing the proposals is provided by the state to assure all schools are competitive. The purpose of this paper is to describe the SDFS program in Polk County, Florida and to report selected program evaluation results.

Program Description

Students in grades 6 through 12 who are identified as at-risk are required to attend a 10-day in-school suspension program located at an off-site facility operated by the Polk County School Board. At-risk, as defined in this report, indicates that the student has been found in violation of those sections of the Code of Conduct that prohibit the use, possession, or sale of alcohol or other drugs on a school campus or at a school sponsored activity. "Other drugs" may include any legal or illegal mood modifying substance, or any substance represented as a mood modifying substance.

The purpose of the program is four-fold: 1) to make prevention, intervention and/or treatment recommendations to parents in an attempt to meet the needs of the student, 2) to provide a consequence and deterrent to students in answer to their decision to use alcohol or other drugs, 3) to provide reliable information on substance abuse in an effort to aid the students in their future decision making and, 4) to enhance parenting skills of parents of at-risk students. A further purpose of the program is to make all students aware that the Polk County School Board will not tolerate the use, possession, or sale of alcohol or other drugs on school campuses.

Upon entry into the program, the student and parents/guardians are required to participate in an intake meeting with a prevention specialist. The expectations of the student, the parent and the school

board are thoroughly explained. During the intake meeting the parent completes a behavior checklist on the child and an appointment for an assessment is agreed upon. Parents are asked to complete an 8-session self-directed parenting program entitled *Parent to Parent*, which is provided by the program.

An investigation is conducted to determine the extent of the student's involvement with alcohol or other drugs and to collect relevant information. The student is interviewed several times during the program. Information is gathered regarding school behavior, attendance and academic history of the student. The students complete two substance abuse screening instruments: the *Substance Abuse Subtle Screening Inventory* (SASSI) and the *Personal Experience Screening Questionnaire*. All pertinent information is gathered and forwarded to the resident assessment specialist.

The program has an in-classroom component that provides the student the opportunity to keep up academically while learning about the consequences of substance abuse. During the ten days in the program, high-school students work on academic assignments furnished by the 'sending school,' and middle school students complete work assigned by the program teachers. All students are required to participate in a substance abuse education course that is taught daily. Students are returned to the "sending school" upon successful completion of the program. Subsequent to the release of the student, the parents are asked to complete a survey that evaluates the success of the program and the extent to which the recommendations were followed.

Evaluation Methods

To evaluate the program both quantitative and qualitative data were collected on all students who entered the program during the fall semester. Programmatic measures included: 1) intake surveys completed by the students and parents, 2) recidivism data on the students, 3) the two substance abuse assessments noted above (SASSI, PESQ), 4) exit survey data, and 5) demographic profile of the students. Post-intervention measures included: 1) a survey mailed to students eight months after completing the program, 2) a survey mailed to parents eight months after their child completed the program, and 3) one-on-one interviews with key school personnel.

To maintain anonymity of students and parents, all names, identifying marks or student numbers were removed from data sheets or copies given to the evaluators. All records and data disks were kept in a locked room off-site.

The pre-intervention data were obtained from the program records for the students referred during the

evaluation period. The post-intervention data were collected approximately eight months after the students completed the program. Surveys were mailed to students who participated in the program (n=175) and their parents or guardians (n=172) [Some parents had more than one child in the program]. Surveys for students and parents were mailed in the same envelope, however each survey had attached to it a stamped return envelope to ensure that the child's responses were not influenced by the parents and vice-versa. To increase return rates and as an incentive to each participant, a one-dollar bill was attached to each survey. A cover letter from the program manager explained the purpose of the survey and took the opportunity to thank them for participating in the program. The letter also explained that the dollar was one small way of thanking them for their assistance in evaluating the program. No codes, identifying information or marks were used on the surveys or the return envelopes. Return envelopes were thrown away and hand written comments made on the surveys with identifying names or phone numbers were marked out.

The student survey had three sections: 1) demographics, 2) alcohol and drug abuse knowledge and 3) use of alcohol and drugs in the 30 days prior to completing the survey. To compare students' knowledge and use after exiting the program, the survey had items identical to the program intake survey and the School District Drug Surveillance (SDDS) survey. The SDDS survey is administered to all high school and middle school students annually and was used for comparisons with the general student population. The parent survey assessed: 1) their impression of the program and its effect on their child(ren), and 2) their perception of their child's alcohol and drug behavior since leaving the program. This survey also used items that were included in the initial intake survey when the parent met with program personnel. One-on-one interviews assessed the perception of high school and middle schools staff regarding effectiveness, strengths and weaknesses of the program, and their recommendations. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, Version 10.0) was used to facilitate data entry and analysis.

Results

Demographic Data

Student cohort profile. Of the 175 students who entered the program during the evaluation period 67.4% were male and 32.6% were female, with 58.9% being high school students and 41.1% middle school students. With respect to race/ethnicity, 77.1% were white, 17.7% were African-American, 4.6% Latino and 0.6% were Asian.

Post-intervention student and parent respondent profile. Mailed surveys were sent to 347 addresses from the student database. Eight were returned by the post office as "address unknown" and 182 surveys were completed and returned to the program office (n=89 student surveys out of 175 mailed, n=93 parent surveys out of 172 mailed), yielding a response rate of 52.5%. Of the student surveys that were returned 62.4% of respondents reported they were male and 37.6% reported they were female, with 63.5% from high school compared to 34.1% from middle school. With respect to race/ethnicity, 62.4% reported they were white, 12.9% reported they were African-American, and 2.4% indicated themselves to be Hispanic.

Outcome Objectives

Outcome objectives for SDFS funded programs were mandated by the State of Florida's Department of Education. The five objectives written into the Polk County School Board's program proposal showed positive results:

Objective 1: Ninety percent of students enrolled will successfully complete and return to their home schools.

Results: Of the number of students (n=175) who entered the program during the evaluation period, 97.1% successfully completed the program (n=170). The five students who did not successfully complete the program The one-on-one interviews with school personnel indicated that the possible reasons for the lack of success of these students in completing the program may have been due to the lack of parental involvement in the program.

Objective 2: Ninety percent of students who successfully complete the program will increase their knowledge of substance abuse (pre/post tests).

Results: All students (100%) increased their knowledge of substance abuse while in the program. The mean difference between pretest and posttest scores was 38.57 and was statistically significant at the .05 level, p=.0001.

Objective 3: Eighty percent of students who successfully complete the program will participate in a substance abuse assessment with a parent/guardian.

Results: Of the number of students (n=170) who completed the program 94.6% participated in the assessment (n=156).

Objective 4: Sixty percent of parents given recommendations will take some action toward following them as given.

Results: Due to record keeping methods, data for the entire 1998-1999 school year was used to evaluate this objective. Of the 367 students who participated in the program during the school year, parents of 236 students, 67%, participated in an assessment and took steps to comply with the recommendations as indicated by parent surveys, school records and treatment provider records.

Objective 5: Ninety percent of students who successfully complete the program will not be found in violation of the AOD sections of the Code of Conduct a second time during that school year.

Results: The program database revealed one student to be found in violation of the AOD sections of the Code of Conduct a second time during that school year and was referred back to the center a second time.

Parents were also queried regarding their knowledge of incidences outside of the school. Of the 89 parents to whom surveys were mailed, 80 (90.0%) reported that their child did not have any trouble with the police due to AOD violations. One parent (1.1%) was not sure and eight (9%) parents reported that their children had trouble with the police due to AOD violations.

Parent Post-Intervention Surveys

Parental perception of children's AOD use.

Among the 89 parents who responded to the survey 74% thought that the program was beneficial to their child, 14% thought that the program was not beneficial to their child and 12% were unsure of the benefit. About 60% of the parents reported their child was drug free since leaving the program compared to 10% who were not sure about their child's AOD use, while 76% reported that their child was drug free in the last 30 days compared to 7% who were not sure (Table 1).

Of the 89 parents who returned the post-intervention survey, 74% reported they were unaware of their child consuming alcohol, 82% reported they were unaware of their child using marijuana, and 99% reported they were unaware of their child using inhalants, since leaving the program. In addition, 86% of the parents reported that they were unaware of their child consuming alcohol in the past 30 days, 89% reported that they were unaware of their child using marijuana and 100% reported that they were unaware of their child using inhalants or other drugs in the past 30 days (Table 2).

School Staff Post-Intervention One-on-One Interviews

The perception of high school and middle schools staff regarding effectiveness, strengths and

Table 1. Parents' Perception of Alcohol and Other Drug Use by Youth

	Drug-free since leaving Program		Drug-free in the 30 days prior to survey	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Yes	53	60	68	76
No	27	30	15	17
Not sure	9	10	6	7
Total	89	100	89	100

Table 2. Parents' Perception of Type of Alcohol and Other Drug Use by Youth

	Drug-free since leaving Program		Drug-free in the 30 days prior to survey	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Alcohol	66	74	77	86
Marijuana	73	82	79	89
Inhalants	88	99	89	100
Other Drugs	---	---	---	---

weaknesses of the program, and their recommendations was assessed by one-on-one interviews. All staff interviewed thought that the program was beneficial for the students. They indicated that students who attended the program had an increase in positive attitude and parents were more responsive to school/student issues. School staff was unaware of any students who went through the program that had a problem with the justice/criminal system.

Staff members could not say precisely if the program was effective in preventing students' AOD use, but they recognized that students attending the program learned to respect school policy. The interviews also revealed that the majority of the school district's students have become aware of the drug abuse problem and they are familiar with the program.

Staff members also felt that the program offers opportunities for parents to be involved in their child's education. They indicated that the program is successful because it requires parental involvement.

Staff members mentioned that the substance abuse education curriculum is a strength of the program and wished that a similar curriculum was available in every school. The program is excellent for students to learn to make better choices and handling peer pressure. One staff member remarked:

"The program is not a drug rehabilitation program, but an excellent drug awareness program." They also mentioned that the program runs very smoothly; activities were well coordinated and on schedule.

As weaknesses of the program, staff mentioned the lack of involvement of some parents and the fact that the program is not open to every student. To improve the program, staff recommended that the program be a requirement for all students, because it makes students aware of laws and harmful effects of drug abuse. They wish the program could have more funding, because "the program is the best program in the school system."

Summative Evaluation: Program Participants vs. All Students

To measure the success of the intervention, the evaluation compared knowledge and attitudinal changes of the students after they participated in the program with the most recent School District Drug Surveillance (SDDS) survey. As previously noted, the survey was a district wide surveillance that was administered to all students. The post-intervention results gave an indication of the students' substance abuse knowledge and attitudes in comparison to the total student population of the district.

Knowledge. Highlights of the SDDS survey revealed: 1) 81% of students believe that alcohol is

harmful to their health, 2) 76% think that marijuana is harmful to their health, 3) 43% think that marijuana should be legalized and, 4) 81% believe that other mood modifying drugs are harmful to their health.

Similar highlights of the post-intervention survey revealed: 1) 85% of students 'know for sure' that alcohol is harmful to their health, 2) 82% think that marijuana is harmful to their health, 3) 21% think that marijuana should be legalized and, 4) 88% believe that other mood modifying drugs are harmful to their health.

Alcohol consumption. Results of the self-reported 'last 30 days alcohol consumption' showed that 30% of program students had had at least one drink of alcohol and 15% of them had had five or drinks on one or more occasions (binge drinking). The SDDS survey showed that, in the 30 days before

the survey, 32% of students had had at least one drink of alcohol and 21% of them had had five drinks or more on one or more occasions. These results show a slight decrease in the use of alcohol among students who participated in the program (Table 3).

Use of other drugs. Results of the self-reported last 30 days drug consumption after leaving the program show that 17% of students had used marijuana, 1% had used cocaine, 1% had used inhalants, and 1% had used other drugs. In the last 30 days prior to the SDDS survey, 16% of students had used marijuana, 7% had used cocaine, 10% had used inhalants, and 8% had used other drugs. Whereas these results showed a dramatic decrease in the use of cocaine, inhalants and other illegal drugs among students who participated in the program, there was a slight increase in marijuana use (Table 4).

Table 3. Self-Reported Alcohol Use in Previous 30 Days by Intervention Students and All Polk County Students

Days	One drink		5+ drinks	
	Intervention Group	All Students	Intervention Group	All Students
0	70	69	84	81
1-2	16	15	7	9
3-9	11	9	7	6
10-19	2	4	1	3
20+	1	4	--	3

Table 4. Self-Reported Other Drug Use in Previous 30 Days by Intervention Students and All Polk County Students

Days	Marijuana		Cocaine		Inhalants		Other Drugs	
	Inter.	All	Inter.	All	Inter.	All	Inter.	All
0	83	84	99	93	99	90	99	92
1-2	8	6	1	3	---	5	1	4
3-9	2	4	---	2	1	3	---	2
10-19	2	3	---	1	---	1	---	1
20+	4	5	---	2	---	2	---	2

Limitations

The anonymity of the SDDS survey prevented the exclusion of the 175 program participants from the survey results. Although they represented less than 6% of the responses that were compared in this evaluation, the findings reported herein could be flawed.

A second limitation to this study is the time span of the data collection period. The evaluation only took into account one school semester. More than one semester would have increased the power of the study, but the time constraint, lack of resources, and the concern of address changes over time for the mail out surveys necessitated the shorter time frame.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the data used for this evaluation, the program met its objectives in all five areas outlined in the *Safe and Drug Free School* program's agreement with the Florida Department of Education. The program excelled in record maintenance, the administration of assessment and evaluation tools, the documentation of participants, the overall efficiency of resources being used, and the effectiveness of substance abuse prevention among students.

In addition, this evaluation concludes that the substance abuse behavior of program participants was altered from the time they entered the program until eight months after exiting the program. This behavioral change is documented by comparing the program participants with the district-wide students who were administered the SDDS survey. Upon entering the program all participants were considered drug users and defined as a 'high-risk adolescent population.' Eight months after leaving the program their drug use decreased from 100% to a percentage nearly equal to the general student population. These findings are quite remarkable considering that the intent of the program is not to focus on treatment, that the program is short term, and it primarily concentrates on knowledge and attitudinal change of the participants.

Although the program is effective, it is recommended that a means of identifying high-risk adolescents before they are "caught" with drugs would complement the program. During the one-on-one interviews school staff indicated the need for a more thorough and broader program that would reach other students. Perhaps broadening the scope of this program to include other high-risk students could be beneficial to the long-range goals of the program and the Polk County School Board.

The strong relationship built among the program office, staff members, and the student participants

and their parents is evident in the magnitude of the response rate return of the eight-month follow-up surveys. Within one week most of the returned surveys were completed and sent to the evaluation team. Few negative comments were received, although the opportunity was available for the respondents to indicate both positive and negative aspects of the program. Some parents and students wrote small notes of thanks and returned the one-dollar bill attached to the surveys. During the one-on-one interviews it was evident that the school staff members were sincere and serious about how important the program is to them and to the students of their school.

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