

**EFFECTIVE SAFE SCHOOLS/HEALTHY STUDENTS
COMMUNICATIONS: A CASE STUDY REVIEW
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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December 2004

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**Professional Services Contract # 02M009313
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services**

PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

A study of the role of communications in the success of Safe Schools/Healthy Students (SS/HS) programs at eight grantee sites proposed to document grantees' efforts, identify factors that contributed to success, show how communications contributed to program goals, identify difficulties they faced, and draw lessons from their experiences. The sites represented four census categories:

Urban -- Salinas, California and Missoula, Montana,

Suburban -- Poway, California and Tyrone, Pennsylvania,

Rural -- Hays, Kansas and Deschutes County, Oregon, and

Tribal -- Flandreau, South Dakota and Pinon, Arizona.

Staff at these sites had worked closely with the SS/HS Communications Team providing technical assistance. Information collected from 2002 to 2004 came from on-site interviews with key people and from the study of documents including planning documents, brochures, videos, and newspaper articles. A cross-site analysis enabled findings to be presented as separate issues, with their implications for communications, and what can be learned from each.

RESULTS

1. Issue: Communications goals and vision. Grantees were persuaded of the value of communications when they saw how it would make their programs more effective or help sustain them after funding ended. Some of the grantees' communications goals were to get the word out about the initiative, engage parents, reach new partners, sustain programs, affect policy and increase student engagement. From a social marketing

perspective, many program activities such as parent group meetings (Salinas) or community service (Flandreau) were also communications. Sustainability was at least partially attained where this was a goal. The Aha! moment came for several sites when they understood how communications fit into a larger picture of improving society through changes in public policy (Salinas) or attitudes and beliefs (Flandreau, Tyrone, Missoula).

Communications implication. Sites are interested in communications not in order to make a better pamphlet but as a means to reach program goals and affect society. The current emphasis on communications for sustainability helps grantees.

Lessons learned. Sites undertook the communications they felt were necessary and appropriate. All sites said that building relationships with partners was the key to sustaining programs, and that this needs to begin in the first year of the grant.

2. Issue: Technical assistance in communications. Most of the sites had never thought about communications beyond publishing a pamphlet or a newsletter until they attended an institute organized by the Communications Team. This training helped the sites produce more polished pamphlets and newsletters (Tyrone, Poway), broaden their contacts with media (Salinas, Missoula, Flandreau), and look for new ways to engage their target audience using video (Salinas), public service announcements (PSAs) (Missoula), and social marketing campaigns (Hays, Deschutes County).

Communications implication. All sites were enthusiastic about the quality and the usefulness of the training in producing materials, aiding program goals and securing sustainability. Challenges concern how learning can be continual and on-going after SS/HS funding ends, and where sites have high staff turnover or are already sophisticated

in communications. Providing for on-going peer learning among sites is also possible.

Lessons learned. Many sites do not think of communications as support for their programs until they attend a training session. Peer exchange through grouping by cohort, by geographical category or by ethnic populations can all be useful at different times.

3. Issue: Conditions for success. Sites attributed their success with communications to technical assistance from the Communications Team, leadership and support from superiors, staff enthusiasm and teamwork, timeliness, strong relationships particularly with local media, and expert local help. Sites never cited budgeting for communications as a reason for success, but they always recommended that other sites budget adequately.

Communications implication. Communications institutes and on-site technical assistance, especially the idea of a communications plan, were always the first reasons given for success. The Communications Team can consider how to enhance these elements and compensate for unfavorable conditions.

Lessons learned. Successful communications for most of these sites did not arise out of a vacuum – many existing relationships had set the stage for success. For others, training provided ideas on how to use the resources they had.

4. Issue: Funding. Few sites had originally budgeted for communications, so they had to manage by using carry-over money, leveraging existing funds, pooling with partners, and using student and staff resources. They were quite good at doing something for practically nothing. The level of funding made a difference with big-ticket items such as videos (Salinas, Missoula).

Communications implication. Sites could be educated in typical costs and time-frames for products.

Lessons learned. Money needs to be budgeted for the communications planned. When communications are specified as a line item in the Request for Proposals (RFP), grantees include them in their plans and budgets.

5. Issue: Urban/rural perceptions. A site's perception of itself does not always coincide with the census designation. Suburban Tyrone, and urban Salinas and Missoula perceived themselves to be rural in terms of relationships and networks. All sites cited urban problems, such as drug use, gangs and high levels of violence, as affecting youth. Of the two suburban sites, Poway perceived itself as "urban" and Tyrone as "rural."

Communication implication. These perceptions seem to be based on the extent and stability of local networks, including relationships with media and the degree of formality in accessing media and potential partners. Personal relationships were very important in all sites.

Lessons learned. Sites perceived as rural often already have strong positive relationships with local radio and newspapers, which have a sense of civic pride and get much of their news from the schools. An "urban" site is more likely to have a public relations office and an established protocol for contacting media and partners.

6. Issue: Tribal sites. Pinon and Flandreau are both outside the mainstream culture and are constrained by overlapping state, federal and tribal regulations, high staff turnover, and great distances. Like rural sites, Pinon has a stable population and a shared culture, but fewer economic resources, potential business partners, or media outlets. Flandreau's

students, from various tribes and cultures, are isolated from traditional supports of family and community. At both sites students were the primary communicators of prevention messages and of a positive image of Indian youth.

Communications implication. Many ways to use the media in mainstream American life do not apply to tribal sites. Spokesperson training is especially promising. Relationships with local and tribal leaders need to be developed by local staff who know their own tribal systems well.

Lessons learned. Tribal sites drew on positive traits and traditional values to communicate “Indianized” prevention messages. Indian youth were their greatest resource.

7. Issue: Internal and external communications. In Tyrone, Flandreau and Missoula, the internal audience (school and partner staffs) required repeated explanations of the initiative before external communications could move ahead smoothly.

Communications implication. Communications need to target this internal audience as well as the external one. Sites used staff meetings, presentations and newsletters for this, and some trained many staff members as spokespeople to promote the programs (Deschutes County, Pinon).

Lessons learned. Communications to an internal audience must be part of the first publicity push when the grant begins, and must continue regularly to keep staff informed and involved.

8. Issue: Documentation. All sites kept samples of their major products such as videos

and newspaper articles, but they did not keep records of PSA runs or of radio and TV coverage. Large binders and decorative scrapbooks were displayed at information tables (Hays), and sites regularly sent samples to the Communications Team.

Communications implication. Sites need to see how their communications products can be archived, recycled to further promote their programs and train new staff members in creating new products, and kept as historical record. Archiving products and documenting media coverage must not require much staff time.

Lessons learned. Sites were very proud of the communications products they created but generally did not document their use. They need to see that keeping such records is both practical and serves a purpose.

9. Issue: Evaluation. Several sites used focus groups in planning and pretesting materials (Missoula, Hays, Salinas), and Flandreau's local evaluator conducted a communications needs assessment. Hays and Deschutes County tried to evaluate outcomes through surveys, but informal feedback was the norm.

Communications implication. The local evaluator can give more help with formative, on-going and impact evaluation. Criteria might be useful for when to use focus groups and when to decide content unilaterally.

Lessons learned. Evaluation needs to be seen as easy to do and useful before sites will do it. Anecdotes and stories may be as useful as a survey of immediate impact.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Further investigations of communications in similar grant-funded and coalition-based initiatives might be:

What communications have been effective in large urban sites, particularly with sizeable African American or Asian American populations?

What role have communications played in sustaining programs and partnerships one or two years after funding has ended?

To what degree have the sites that received intensive training in communications applied their knowledge to other programs?

How have other sites evaluated their communications?