

Strategies for Effective Reports

From Guidebook II page 30

Be Concise, Clear, and Understandable. Clearly and concisely present the data that are most significant and interesting, and don't overwhelm with details. Don't give more information than necessary. Too much information discourages readership and diminishes the report's impact. Present the data in a logical order, using active instead of passive verbs. Summarize data in the most complete and efficient manner. Avoid using jargon, abbreviations, or acronyms. Define terms that the average reader might not understand. If you must use them, explain them. Have a layperson, such as a parent, read the document for understandability.

Be Selective. Clearly define your message and focus on key findings, the most significant conclusions you want people to reach, and the most important recommendations. Not everyone will read a detailed report. People often expect to receive the information in summary formats that can be quickly absorbed. Look carefully at your results and select a few basic findings that will have the most impact on specific audiences. Think about what headlines you want to see.

Prepare an Executive Summary. Any lengthy or detailed report should contain an executive summary similar to that of the CHKS *Key Findings*. This will be the most read part of your report, and therefore the most important. Many readers may never read past it. This should be a succinct, clear document highlighting the main findings of interest to the widest audience with liberal use of visuals and plain language. It should include the survey's purpose and methods, purpose of the report, conclusions based on results, and recommendations.

Use Graphs and Other Visuals. Pay attention to the visual appeal of written reports. Visual images are more powerful than written text. Solid pages of text tend to turn readers off. Intersperse text with pictures that focus on a single survey finding. Make use of headings, subheadings, and well-placed tables, charts, or other graphics. Excel, PowerPoint, and Lotus are examples of data analysis and presentation software that are available.

Tables, graphs, and charts should complement the text and illustrate the findings. Figures can be used to create interest, attract attention, save space, better convey quantifiable information, and show relationships between results. Title your graphs so they clearly describe the content and the message you want to convey. Use your *Key Findings* as a model.

Provide Local Context. Anecdotes and stories may help illustrate certain key points or emphasize the importance of some of your results.

Provide Comparison Data. Do not limit the content of your report to just CHKS results. Provide comparison statistics, such as from the state CSS or national YRBS that help place your local findings in a broader context. The CHKS provides some comparison data in the *Key Findings*. If you have local data from other sources, they can add weight to the findings. You might want to contact another school system that you consider similar to yours and compare results—but do not publish anyone else's findings without permission.

In making any comparisons, be aware of differences between two data collections (see discussion in Section 7). In comparing data from any other survey, make sure the questionnaire items, survey methods, and samples are truly comparable.

Emphasize the Positive. While identifying problems is of primary importance, also stress the positive findings. Show how many students don't engage in negative behaviors and do demonstrate healthy attributes. The purpose of reports is to provide a profile of the whole child and inform the community about the lives of its kids and their well-being. This helps avoid the public focusing only on the negative. Your CHKS report provides the percentage of students who responded negatively on each risk behavior.

Emphasize the Community Context. Although the survey is conducted in the schools—and many items assess school behavior—the results reflect the youth of the community. Student drug use, violence, and other risk behaviors are not just school problems but community problems as well—and require the schools and the community to work together to prevent them. Use the report as a call to the community to protect its investment in children and schools. Include recommendations for what community groups can do to help.

Highlight Your Program and Its Successes. In all your dissemination products, describe what have you been doing to ensure safe and drug-free schools and to promote well-being. Include information about your SDFSCA and school health education programs. Highlight any success stories that you have. Use the release of your results to describe and generate support not only for the survey, but also for your programs. Be sure to include your program name, address, and telephone number.

Highlight Your Response. Include what your LEA plans to do in response to any problems identified. Will you be doing anything new as a result of what you have found? This will help to allay concerns.

Link Recommendations to Results and Be Realistic. Make sure your recommendations are stated objectively and are clearly based on your results. In describing any plans for addressing identified problems, don't minimize the difficulties in changing behavior. Establish realistic goals and expectations for when you conduct a follow-up survey.