

Surveys Rally Communities to Support and Protect Kids

On February 5, 2005, the community of Pacifica, CA, was rocked with tragedy when two teenagers died in a drunk driving accident near the city's golf course. That same night, school administrators and community agency staff were on the phone to one another, coming to an agreement: "This cannot happen again." The question was how to prevent another such incident.

The answer has involved using results from the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS)—a youth needs assessment and school climate data collection service created by WestEd for the California Department of Education and available to education agencies in California and beyond—to address students' vulnerabilities to behaviors and environments that jeopardize their academic performance, health, safety, and positive development.


Uniting under a coalition called the Partnership for a Safe and Healthy Pacifica, teenagers, parents, local health and human services and law enforcement agencies, and school administrators scrutinized CHKS data to more clearly understand the substance abuse problems in the Jefferson Union High School District (JUHSD). They then drew upon that data to garner \$500,000 in grants from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services over the past five years to fund the Drug Free Communities Support Program.

Those efforts have paid off. JUHSD teenagers are now promoting alcohol awareness and designated driver programs at proms and parties. Local police are diligently working to make sure merchants don't sell alcohol to minors. And, thanks to a new ordinance, parents are now held accountable to prevent underage kids from drinking at parties at their homes—or risk paying a stiff fine. The 2011 CHKS data on binge drinking indicated a significant downward trend, compared to data from 2005, for both 9th and 11th grades in one Pacifica high school, but data for the other high school showed an upward trend in binge drinking. The new data helped the coalition build a case for new funding in its 2012 application because the data shows much more work needs to be done in Pacifica to reduce alcohol abuse among middle and high school students.

What's (Really) Going On

JUHSD's experience is just one of many success stories demonstrating how schools may turn troubling statistics into projects and programs that serve students' emotional, social, health, and safety needs and improve school climate. Indeed, that's the motivation behind the CHKS and its partner surveys, the California School Climate Survey for school staff and the California School Parent Survey. The CHKS is nationally recognized as a leading tool for the assessment of youth

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resilience and the developmental supports and strengths that have been linked to positive educational, social, emotional, and health outcomes.

“The resulting information allows districts to monitor whether they’re providing the critical developmental supports and opportunities that promote healthy growth and learning,” says Greg Austin, program director of WestEd’s Health & Human Development Program. The majority of questions examine student experiences at and attitudes toward school, to provide data to guide school improvement efforts. The middle and high school surveys capture information on serious and growing issues that are barriers to learning and positive development, such as drug use, harassment and violence, nutrition and physical health, sexual behavior, suicide, gang involvement, and truancy.

“Because CHKS data has enabled us to demonstrate need, our family advocates have been able to bring service providers into the schools to work with parents and students,” reports Melissa Cadena, formerly the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Coordinator for Soledad Unified School District in California. As a result, the district now offers evening and Saturday parenting classes, and in-school interventions such as anger management, grief groups, and substance abuse classes for students who face suspension. Schools have also been able to implement the Safe School Ambassadors program to address bullying concerns.


WestEd rolled out CHKS in California for the first time in 1998. “We developed it to meet multiple needs and help schools avoid becoming overwhelmed, as they often were, by numerous survey requests, frequently for data required by the federal and state government—but still provide them with the basic data they need to guide the fostering of positive school climates and the supports that all students need to thrive in school and life,” says WestEd’s Austin.

The flexible data collection tool offers schools the ability to customize a survey to meet their needs by adding supplementary modules of their own choosing that expand on topics covered in the core module and that address in more detail issues of sexual behavior and education, gang involvement, staff cultural responsiveness, and other factors related to the achievement gap, school climate, physical and mental health, and the community environment. It also allows schools to assess other special topics by creating new items.

With feedback from school districts, WestEd has continued to refine the surveys over the years and has created additional tools to capture the experiences and knowledge of school staff and parents. The surveys are now available in a web-based online version and in a paper form with optical-scan answer sheets. Louisiana and West Virginia are using the CHKS, along with the staff and parent surveys, to assess school climate as part of their Safe and Supportive Schools projects.

The Rhode Island Experience

Cited as a model program by the U.S. Department of Education, CHKS has inspired the development and administration by WestEd of similar surveys in states including Louisiana, West Virginia, and Rhode Island. In the “tiniest state,” SurveyWorks! is the name given to a suite of surveys collaboratively designed by WestEd and the Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education for Rhode Island students, parents, teachers, and administrators. It enables school teams and the community to get a 360-degree view of climate in local schools, student learning, teaching supports, family involvement, and funding and other resources.



In 2010, SurveyWorks! replaced an older survey in Rhode Island, which mandates a yearly questionnaire process of its 300 elementary, middle, and high schools. “While this data tool looks at school climate issues, it also focuses on teachers’ classroom practices, professional development, school decision making, and other education-related matters,” says Natalie Lacireno-Paquet, senior research associate with WestEd.

One key lesson that Rhode Island districts have learned is the importance of including a variety of stakeholders in developing survey questions. “This is critical for getting buy-in from all of those being asked to respond,” says Lacireno-Paquet. At the same time, SurveyWorks! developers have had to guard against questionnaires becoming too long and laborious as a result. “This year we shortened the surveys and we’re thinking of alternating various topics each year,” she notes.

Optimizing Survey Participation

For California alone, which includes more than 1,000 school districts, 7,000 schools, and more than six million students, collecting such data every two years has been a huge, multifaceted effort. WestEd has taken care to provide workshops, guidebooks, webinars, helplines, and instructions to assist with survey administration, data processing, and the creation of action plans in response to results.

“One key challenge everywhere is getting sufficient numbers of students, staff, and parents to take the survey to have representative, useful data,” says WestEd’s Austin. To encourage the highest response rate possible, WestEd guides schools to conduct all three surveys at the same time, offer paper and online options, thoroughly inform all parties about the surveys’ value and procedures, and frequently remind them of survey dates.

To help schools use the resulting information effectively, WestEd works with districts to discuss the survey results in depth, identify and prioritize their issues and needs, and determine what resources are available to create or improve intervention and school climate programs. “Bringing the student and parent voices into the process is also critical,” emphasizes Austin. “Holding student fishbowls and focus groups helps a school better understand why students have responded the way they have, what the issues are, and what can be done to support them. This also communicates caring and promotes a healthy environment and students’ sense of connectedness to school.”

Between 2003 and 2010, all California districts were required to complete the surveys every two years in order to receive federal Title IV funds to support risk prevention work in schools. The federal government stopped funding Title IV in 2010, meaning that CHKS and its companion surveys for staff and teachers were no longer required.

“The surveys have proven so useful,” says Austin, “that many communities are organizing resources at the county level to continue their administration. It seems that such data collection tools will continue to play a role in California and other states because they’re having a real impact on the quality of life and education for our students.”

For more information about the Healthy Kids Survey, contact Greg Austin at 562.799.5155 or gaustin@WestEd.org. And for more information about SurveyWorks!, contact Natalie Lacireno-Paquet at 781.481.1133 or nlacire@WestEd.org.