

Evaluation of the Safe Schools/Healthy Students (SS/HS) Initiative



RTI International has conducted research on crime, violence, justice systems, and behavioral health for over 30 years. Using rigorous multidisciplinary approaches, RTI research advances knowledge and informs policy, practice, and programs nationally and internationally.

Professional backgrounds of RTI researchers span a wide variety of disciplines, including criminology, economics, law, psychology, public health, and sociology. Crime, violence, and justice staff are located in RTI's main office in Research Triangle Park, NC, and in offices throughout the United States. RTI maintains a presence in Washington, DC, for consultation on crime, violence, justice, and behavioral health topics.

Overview

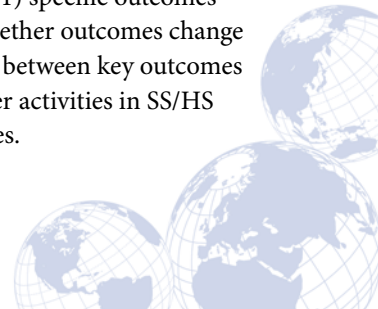
The Safe Schools/Healthy Students (SS/HS) Initiative is an ambitious federal effort to improve the health and well-being of children and adolescents. The initiative focuses on integrated prevention and treatment programs, strategies, and services designed to reduce violence and substance use among children, promote mental health, and enhance school safety. The SS/HS Initiative has awarded competitive grants to between 19 and 60 sites each year from 1999 through 2008, funded by the U.S. Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and Justice.

RTI used two approaches to evaluate this initiative: conducting a comprehensive cross-site evaluation and supporting consortia of local evaluators who conduct independent evaluations. The goal of these complementary evaluation strategies was to assess the effectiveness of collaborative community efforts to promote safe schools and facilitate healthy child and adolescent development.

Approaches

In the **cross-site evaluation**, RTI and its subcontractor, RMC Research Corporation, conducted both *process* and *outcome evaluations* across the 97 sites funded during the first 3 years of the initiative:

- The *process evaluation* (1) compiled information on how the initiative was implemented, (2) provided insight into site attributes and procedures that appeared to enhance or impede implementation, (3) examined SS/HS partnership formation and functioning and the development of policies and provision of services, and (4) helped with the interpretation of findings from the outcome evaluation by providing information on why change or lack of change was observed in certain outcomes.
- The *outcome evaluation* assessed (1) specific outcomes important to the initiative, (2) whether outcomes change over time, and (3) the association between key outcomes and planning, programs, and other activities in SS/HS Initiative schools and communities.



The SS/HS cross-site evaluation was based on a two-tiered approach: (1) a broad study of all 97 study sites, including annual surveys of teachers, school principals, other school staff, district representatives, partnership members, and project directors, plus collection of administrative data from school districts, and (2) a more concentrated study of a randomly selected subset of sites, including student surveys, teacher ratings of individual students, case studies, and a cost analysis.

In the **evaluation consortia** approach, sites initially funded in 2002 and 2003 were invited to voluntarily join with other participating sites in small groups to apply for funding to identify and carry out cross-site evaluations of common interest. Five groups of local evaluators received technical support from RTI and federal funding to study a variety of issues:

- Evaluators in Illinois and Michigan conducted a survey of SS/HS sites funded in 2002 and 2003 to understand the *role and style of local evaluators* in each site and how these characteristics affected their relationship with project directors.
 - Six sites in Minnesota studied stakeholder partnerships that were required under the initiative and the extent to which they achieved “*collaborative advantage*.”
 - A consortium of sites in Cleveland, Ohio, used the convergence of several federally funded initiatives to study the dynamics of *systems of care development* within their communities. They examined how schools interface with coordinated systems of care infrastructure development, and the selection, implementation, evaluation, and sustainability of evidence-based practices within and across sites.
 - Two sites in Florida and Pennsylvania studied factors that affect the *implementation of school-based mental health services*. Factors included school cultural and climate variables that affect staff attitudes toward referrals, effectiveness, and valuing of these services and children’s and families’ cognitive appraisals of the need, value, and burdens associated with the services.
- Eight sites in California used data from a state-required student survey to examine *differences in outcomes* between SS/HS school districts and matched comparison school districts.

Findings and Reports

SS/HS evaluations provide valuable information on multiple facets of the SS/HS Initiative, including

- SS/HS partnership characteristics and effectiveness
- School violence and school safety
- Student substance use/abuse
- School climate
- Mental health services
- Early childhood services
- Cost analysis of local SS/HS Initiative services
- Case studies of individual SS/HS Initiative grantees

In addition to stand-alone reports on each of the above, RTI is preparing two comprehensive final reports: one will integrate cross-site evaluation findings, and the other will summarize the evaluation consortia approach along with the findings of each group.

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