



A STUDENT ASSISTANCE PROGRAM IN ACTION

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One in four children in the United States lives in a home affected by alcohol abuse (Grant, *Am. J. Public Health*, Jan.

2000). Effectively implemented Student Assistance Programs (SAP) can be valuable resources for children of alcoholics as well as for all school-age children.

In Santa Ana, California, we at WestEd, with our school partners in the Santa Ana Unified School District, designed and tested a model elementary student assistance program. We tested the model in a quasi-experimental design with repeat measures over time to determine its effectiveness in preventing ATOD use as well as other health and behavior problems. What we found were some very significant results for children and their families. The lessons we are learning here may help other schools to better serve children of alcoholics and others who experience risk and stressors during their school careers.

In developing the study, we relied on evidence from researchers (e.g. Jessor & Jessor, 1977; Williams, 1997) who demonstrated that programs were more successful in reducing alcohol and drug use if they concentrated on improving the context of the lives of children and adolescents rather than only addressing ATOD use. We also acknowledged that each child presents his/her own unique risk factors and need for protective factors. One intervention would not be appropriate for every student in a "one size fits all" model.

Our SAP uses an integrated database management system to efficiently coordinate and conduct the prevention programming for students and his/her families as they are referred to the SAP. The action plans generated for each student and his/her family is created by a SAP team using the integrated database software. The team's SAP plan then assigns a case/outreach worker, and provides referrals for appropriate school and community-based services and/or assessment appointments. The service and assessment categories are: School Based Services including tutoring; Life Skills Instruction and Counseling; Parent Education, Support and Family Strengthening; Social and Leadership Opportunities and Community Based Services such as medical, dental, legal, immigration and child care.

The study of the comprehensive student assistance program funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Safe and Drug Free Schools Model Demonstration Program, which we call *Creciendo Saludable*, was implemented in one elementary school in Orange County, while three other elementary schools served as comparison sites. Both the intervention and comparison sites were 45 percent female with 98 percent of the students of Hispanic origin, 94 percent English Language Learners and over 83 percent living at or below the poverty level as measured by receiving free or reduced fee lunch. There were no significant differences between the intervention school and comparison schools at our baseline measurements.

At a one year follow-up we compared the changes for those who referred to the SAP in the intervention school

versus those referred to the response teams for troubled students in the comparison schools (these latter students were referred because of academic or behavioral problems).

We found that the SAP group declined in alcohol use as compared to the comparison group, from seven percentage points lower for any past month use, to 19 percentage points lower for peer use. These differences suggest that compared to the SAP group, those in the comparison schools were between 1.3 times more likely (for ever use) to nearly three times more likely (for peer use) to engage in drinking and drug use.

One of the areas of concentration in the SAP was to improve academic performance and to decrease suspensions, absences and tardiness. There was a 17 percent increase on the annual standardized tests among SAP students compared to the comparison students.

We also found that a student in the comparison group was over two and half times more likely to experience a suspension than was a SAP student after a year of intervention. A student in the comparison group was approximately one and half times more likely to experience an absence, to be tardy, or to have an unexcused tardiness than a SAP student. Thus students who were in the SAP were attending their classes more often.

The most significant finding in our study was that parents of SAP students reported a large decline in the frequency of stress in their lives versus the comparison group.

The process evaluations found that children of alcoholics were often a sizeable sample in the SAP, although

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