SAVE Success Stories Evaluation
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Abstract

Background: Youth violence is a significant public health issue. Youth violence that occurs in schools and constitutes school violence is particularly concerning because such violence impairs the school environment and hinders youth's ability to perform and excel academically -- important precursors for life-long success.

Objective: The purpose of this study was to assess violence-related concerns in schools and evaluate the effect of SAVE programs designed to address these concerns among students and/or improve the school environment.

Methods: Two middle and 2 high schools in NC were selected to participate. The chapter advisors actively consented to participate and they obtained the active consent of their school leadership. After consent was obtained, the chapter advisors attended training on the study and protocol. The SAVE chapter assembled a team of students, school personnel and community members to complete module 1 of the CDC's Division of Adolescent and School Health's School Health Index (SHI) on "Safety and Violence". The SHI is an on-line assessment tool that provided a method for the schools to systematically identify safety and violence prevention areas for improvement in their school. At the completion of the team assessment meetings, there were one or more school safety/violence items identified that needed improvement. The SAVE chapter members with the assistance of their advisors, decided what issue they wanted to focus on and used the SHI to assist in developing a program plan for improvement of the selected areas. They were also charged with implementing the program and were given a mini-grant of $500.00 to help defray the program implementation costs. At the completion of the violence prevention program the SAVE advisor and a minimum of 3 students completed a Success Story template to share the results of their project.

Results: Issues identified for improvement through the school teams and SHI at all four schools were (1) school connectedness; (2) respect in student-to-student, teacher-to-student, and adult-to-adult interactions; and a (3) safe physical environment. Other identified issues for improvement included tolerance for harassment or bullying, theft and gang-related activity. The Success Stories reflected that SAVE chapter members successfully developed and implemented a variety of programs to improve school connectedness, build respect, and establish a safer physical environment.

Conclusion: Though schools are generally safer environments for youth than many communities, the level of school violence remains unacceptable. SAVE can play an important role in improving safety and preventing violence in schools through systematically identifying and prioritizing safety issues, and working with school administrators, school personnel, other students and community members to develop and implement strategies.

Background:

Youth violence is a significant public health issue. Youth violence that occurs in schools and constitutes school violence is particularly concerning because such violence impairs the school environment and hinders youth's ability to perform and excel academically -- important precursors for life-long success. School violence is "behavior that violates educational mission or climate of respect or jeopardizes the schools' intents to be free of aggression against persons or property, drugs, weapons, and disorder." Research has suggested that comprehensive, universal, school-based violence prevention programs can be effective for reducing youth violence in schools, particularly when there is community engagement. These programs can be effective in decreasing school violence, improving school climate and increasing student connectedness to school and community. Although several school violence prevention programs exist, relatively few have been rigorously evaluated.

The evaluations conducted have demonstrated that violence prevention programs that utilize positive youth development theory and incorporate multiple levels of the socioecological framework with strategies addressing known precursors, protective factors, and risk factors for violence are likely to be more effective for reducing youth violence than those that focus solely on the individual. The socioecological model outlines how the health status of an individual is not simply influenced by the attitudes and practices of that individual, but also by personal relationships as well as community and larger societal factors. The Students Against Violence Everywhere (SAVE) model of improving school climate, preventing school crime, and increasing school and community connectedness, operates through three levels of the socioecological model, (1) the individual level, (2) relationship level (peers, school personnel, family) and (3) community level (school, neighborhood) to reduce youth violence.

The SAVE model is based on a student involvement approach, and it provides resources and a framework for students to work together to prevent violence. SAVE provides education about the effects and consequences of violence, teaches students skills for finding alternatives to violence, and promotes extra-curricular activities and community service projects.

SAVE's Youth Development Model takes a three-tiered approach to addressing violence in schools and communities.

1. **Conflict Management:** Youth are encouraged to participate in effective ways to manage conflicts without resorting to violence.
2. **Crime Prevention Through Positive Youth Development:** A safe school and community means more than the merely the absence of violent activity. There is an increase in positive behaviors among youth, creating a school and community climate where all students feel respected and valued.
3. **Service to the Community:** Youth are encouraged to coordinate and participate in service and service learning projects that aid in the

prevention of crime. Service projects take practical knowledge and information, such as in the areas of crime prevention or conflict management and turn them into a service-oriented learning experience with an after-action reflection piece. Service projects and programs target the development of attitudes, behaviors and conditions that enable youth to grow and become productive members of their communities.

SAVE has 1839 chapters in over 46 states and several foreign countries, with a student membership of 211,463.

A previous quantitative evaluation of SAVE focused mainly on the implementation of SAVE strategies in chapters across the country. Research conducted with SAVE chapters and advisors revealed that incidents of violence decreased in many schools, and the number of weapons brought into schools also decreased. The beliefs and attitudes of students towards violence demonstrated positive improvement. Knowledge and skills for handling conflicts without violence were gained, and youth become better informed of ways to not only be safe, but also to make their schools and communities safer. As reported by the Evaluation Training Institute in Los Angeles, California, students who participated in SAVE demonstrated increased self-esteem and confidence, conflict resolution, presentation/public speaking, and knowledge about different violence prevention strategies. Advisors reported that they successfully involved students in organizing and implementing community activities, meeting weekly as a club, and making people aware of the program. Principals believed that students who participated in the SAVE program played an important role in creating a safe campus and community by practicing nonviolence, possessing positive attitudes, and being good role-models. More, recently SAVE conducted a mixed method study with qualitative and quantitative components. The remainder of this manuscript is devoted to that study,

Objective:
The purpose of this study was to assess violence-related concerns in schools and evaluate the effect of SAVE programs designed to address these concerns among students and/or improve the school environment.

Methods:
During the 2008 school year, four schools from North Carolina were selected to participate in this study. These schools were selected to participate because they were thought to be representative of chapters in North Carolina based on student membership and activity, and the chapter advisors had actively consented to participate. The advisors had also obtained the active consent of their school leadership. There were 2 middle schools and 2 high schools selected; no invited school declined to participate. After consent was obtained, the chapter advisors attended training on the study and protocol in which they learned about their responsibilities and the instruments that would be used in this study.

The first task of the chapter advisor was to assemble a team to complete the first module of the CDC's Division of Adolescent and School Health's School Health Index (SHI) on "Safety and Violence". The SAVE team consisted of students, SAVE advisors, administrators, social workers, school resource officers, teachers, school nurses and other school staff. The purpose of using the SHI, an

on-line assessment tool, was to provide a method for the schools to systematically identify a safety and violence prevention area for improvement in their school and assist with the development of an action plan. The (SHI): Self-Assessment & Planning Guide was developed by CDC in partnership with school administrators and staff, school health experts, parents, and national nongovernmental health and education agencies to enable schools to identify strengths and weaknesses of health and safety policies and programs. The SHI also enables schools to develop an action plan for improving student health and safety, and engaging teachers, parents, students, and the community in teams to promote safety and to consider factors such as importance, cost, time, commitment, and feasibility.

At the end of the team assessment meeting(s), there were one or more school safety/violence items identified that needed improvement. These items were prioritized by the members of the team and taken back to the SAVE chapter. The SAVE chapter members with the assistance of their advisors, decided what issue they wanted to focus on and developed a program plan for improvement of the selected area. They were also charged with implementing the plan and were given a mini-grant of $500.00 to help defray the program implementation costs.

At the completion of the violence prevention program the SAVE advisor and a minimum of 3 students completed a Success Story template to share the results of their project. The Success Stories template tool came from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's Success Stories Workbook Impact and Value: Telling Your Program's Story. Success Stories tools can demonstrate a program's progress over time as well as their value and impact. In this context they also facilitated the documentation of both intended and unintended program effects, and provided information that can be used to publicize early achievements such as how the safety and lives of the program participants changed because of the program, and by providing a "face to the numbers" by bringing to life a program's impact at the school or community level. The process of collecting success stories has also been demonstrated to facilitate learning for all staff involved as they may not fully understand what is happening at the school level or in the daily life of their students. The team members also may learn a great deal from each other.

Chapter advisors were provided technical assistance as needed on all aspects of the project. In addition to receiving the mini-grants for project implementation, at the conclusion of the project, chapters received a $250.00 credit to be used for SAVE merchandise or materials and a $150.00 stipend was given to the SAVE advisor upon completion of all project deliverables.

Results:

School Health Index
All four schools participated in this project and successfully completed the SHI. Issues identified at all four schools as areas for improvement were (1) school connectedness; (2) respect in student-to-student, teacher-to-student, and adult-to-adult interactions; and a (3) safe physical environment. Other identified issues

for improvement included tolerance for harassment or bullying, theft and gang-related activity. SAVE chapter members developed and implemented programs to improve the top ranked areas.

Projects:

School connectedness:
These projects focused on increasing interaction and appreciation between students, teachers and other school personnel. Projects included a recognition breakfast for staff at the school who often felt unappreciated and a field day with interaction and friendly competition with students, faculty, parents and community members. For the recognition breakfast, the SAVE chapter identified the staff members, who felt disconnected from the school and disrespected the most. The members stated that cafeteria workers, bus drivers, and custodians felt the most disconnected from school and disrespected the most by students. The chapter decided to prepare a breakfast for this group of adults, to let them know that the students care and appreciate all that these individuals do for them and the school. SAVE members planned a menu and made up invitations and passed them out to the targeted adults. Their intention was to do something special just for them to personally thank them for their service, let them know they are respected and an important part of the school community.

Respect:
SAVE members decided on a project entitled "Boomerang." Their theory was that when tossed out, respect like a boomerang would return. With the hope of engaging everyone on campus, the chapter came up with an array of activities scheduled to take place throughout a two week campaign. In keeping with the theme of their International Baccalaureate school, daily announcements shared sign and customs of respect from different countries. "Decorate Your Door" contests encouraged homeroom classes to discuss their individual ideas of respect and to come up with a creative way to demonstrate it on their door. Students were also encouraged to share their own artistic side by submitting entries into the "Expressions of Respect", contest were entries could be in the form of a song, dance, poem, poster or any three dimensional art. Winners of both contests were awarded with prizes. Boomerang citations were neon colored citations that were issued whenever someone witnessed or experiences an act of respect. A respect bulletin board located in the entry way of the school was dedicated to highlighting the citations.

School safety:
Projects for school safety included fixing holes in a track surface, picking up glass bottles and trash on the campus grounds, reinforcing policies that custodians lock up poisonous chemicals and painting over graffiti, particularly graffiti that depicted negativity.

Success Stories:

Sixteen success stories were collected from the four schools. The age range of the students was 12-16; the average age was 13.5 years. Most respondents (94%) were females.

Success stories excerpts on programs for school connectedness:

"Success from the breakfast was evident from all the smiles and the hugs that were shared. The adults were really surprised and they really left knowing that the students did have respect for them and the jobs that they did at the school. I had to say it really changed their perception of the students at the school. It also gave the students a chance to hear from the adults themselves that they did respect the students. This changed the climate of the relationship of the students and the staff, teachers and adults at the school. It appeared to ease a lot of tension for both groups and make them feel more connected to their school."

Regarding Field Day

"The major outcome of this event had to be the fact that everyone seemed so relaxed, it was" not the tension of I am a teacher, or I am an office worker, I can only be professional." Just the fact that it was authorized for everyone to dress down by the administration made the students feel at ease when they entered the guidance office or the main office. They saw school staff dressed in tee shirts and jeans and tennis shoes. School administrators and staff all felt that this is something that should be done more often. This event was open to the entire student body (517), staff, and parents. With the teachers participating in this event, it was easy for the student to get some one on one time with teachers or administrators. They even joked with the administrator and some office workers. Students said things like "I thought you like yelling at us". Students saw that adults laugh too."

"This event showed the students and the parents that the teachers and the staff here at the school do have their interest at heart and that there are many resources and people at the school who are willing to help any student who may be having a problem that they can't handle on their own. Today was a good Day!!!"

Regarding School Wheel Activity

"We found out different cool facts about our school and created a "School Wheel." The students spun the wheel and answered questions about the school and won a school sticker and candy. We were able to get them excited about being at school and so they wore their stickers around the rest of the day. Our activity was implemented during lunch periods in May. I believe that the students who participated feel more connected to school and in turn, feel more secure and safe about being here."

"I think that this activity worked because it was fun and more hands-on than just a lecture. I hope that we can continue to play the game or others like it several

times a year so that students can continues to learn interesting facts about our school."

Success stories excerpts on programs for respect

"The Boomerang Project" helped to put a focus on an underlying cause of many of the problems encountered each day. It also encouraged students and adults to consider how their own actions impact the climate at our school and the world beyond. One great example is the Respect bulletin board. Students stopped by each day to read the new citations and were excited to see one issued in their name. In fact, the citations were so well received that one month after the official end of the project the citations are still being used."

"One factor that contributed to the success of the Boomerang Project was that is allowed everyone to be included. Students could participate as individuals or with a group. There were opportunities to participate on a voluntary basis and in a classroom setting, there were competitions and random recognitions, students were doing it and adults were doing it. Because the project was so inclusive the fear factor of not being cool was removed."

Success stories excerpts on programs for safe physical environment

"Does a feeling of safety help a child concentrate on schoolwork? Some may say no, but as a student, I feel that safety is one of the most important things. When a student feels safe, they don't have to worry about anything but their classes. I think our activities helped make our school safer."

"To me, our efforts were successful because the SAVE Evaluation Team worked together and discussed so many avenues about how to address these issues. Every voice at the table had equal weight; the staff listened to the student's opinions and vice versa. No idea was seen as invalid and what we came up with was a conglomerate of each person's input."

Discussion:

The Success Stories reflected that SAVE chapter members successfully developed and implemented programs to improve their identified areas. The Success Stories also reflected the efforts of SAVE students working to improve school connectedness, build respect, and establish a safer physical environment.

Creating and maintaining safe learning environments in our schools that are free of fear, conducive to learning, and foster positive youth development are essential to developing a community of youth equipped and well prepared to become productive members of our society. Students Against Violence Everywhere (SAVE) as a public, non-profit organization is dedicated to providing

students, parents, school administrators, law enforcement, and community organizations tools to help prevent violence in their schools and communities.

The occurrence of violence in schools is a multi-faceted issue, involving more than just high profile incidents like the Virginia Tech killings in 2007 or the Columbine killings in 1999. Violence in schools runs the spectrum from cyberbullying to harassment, theft and fighting, to bringing and/or using weapons at school. It affects children of all ages and is present in varying degrees in urban and rural schools. Though schools are generally safer environments for youth than many communities, the level of school violence remains unacceptable. SAVE can play an important role in improving safety and preventing violence in schools through systematically identifying and prioritizing safety issues, and working with school administrators, school personnel, other students and community members to develop and implement strategies.