Lessons Learned: Funding School-Based Substance Use Prevention Programs & Mental Health Initiatives

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Introduction & Background

Youth mental health and substance use challenges have reached crisis levels in the U.S. over the last decade, and are affecting the health and safety of Indiana students.

As two pieces of recent evidence of this:

1. The 2021 Youth Risk Behavior Survey shows that 38% of female high schoolers in Indiana reported seriously considering attempting suicide in the past 12 months, up from 22% in 2011.

2. This same survey shows that teen drug and alcohol use remains high. 28% of Indiana high school seniors reported drinking alcohol, and among all Indiana high school students, 27% reported having tried marijuana and 17% reported having misused prescription pain medication.

It is imperative that we address these troubling trends, not only to help the next generation thrive, but also to save lives. Philanthropy can play a key role in combatting the problem by supporting students' wellbeing and success through school-based substance use prevention and mental health programming.

Prevention strategies in schools can help students avoid substance use and prevent lifelong struggles with addiction, since substance use often begins in adolescence. Mental health initiatives develop schools' capacity to identify students' needs and intervene early by connecting students with care.

Prevention and mental health initiatives focus on developing skills and competencies that promote students' wellbeing and help them make better decisions about potential substance use. These skills include self-awareness, self-regulation, and relationship building. Such programs also have been proven to improve academic outcomes and reduce bullying and violence.

From 2018-2023, the Richard M. Fairbanks Foundation, North Central Health Services, Inc., Healthcare Foundation of LaPorte, Indiana Department of Education and Indiana Division of Mental Health and Addiction supported grant initiatives to help Indiana schools implement evidence-based substance use prevention programs and develop comprehensive mental health initiatives.

Based on these organizations' experiences, this document provides guidance related to planning for, supporting and evaluating grant programs or initiatives so that other funders can support their schools and communities effectively.

Overall Lessons Learned

Determine the needs of students in your community and identify the gaps in programming or services to address those needs.

Support strong evidence-based programs that meet students' specific needs, fit into the school's schedule and culture, and can be sustained over time.

Before launching an initiative, consider your organizational capacity.

Consider how to structure the grant opportunity to meet schools' needs.

When launching grant opportunities, consider the school and community outreach needed to gain interest and support.

Evidence-based programs must be implemented as designed to have the desired student impact.

Technical assistance helps support schools in effectively planning and implementing programs.

Identify the progress indicators that measure impact, and support schools' efforts to capture those indicators during the grant period.

Build relationships with grantees and establish methods of communication that are helpful and not burdensome.

Detailed information about each lesson is provided on the following pages.

Research & Planning Considerations

LESSON LEARNED: Determine the needs of students in your community and identify the gaps in programming or services to address those needs.

As an initial step, it is important to assess the current conditions within your community and its schools. **This landscape assessment may include:**

- **Identifying the needs** of students in your community and the programs that have been proven to address the most pressing issues.
- **Assessing the supply** of school-based and community-level resources and activities to promote student wellness and prevent substance use disorder (SUD).
- **Identifying gaps** in programming or services for students.
- **Gauging schools' capacity** to implement new or additional programs to meet students' needs.

- **Determining the availability** of behavioral health providers and other community partners to support students.
- **Identifying funding** that may be available from various sources to fill gaps.
- **Conducting research** on relevant information that has already been collected by other sources, such as surveys completed by the state and local health departments.

Funders can conduct their own landscape assessments, commission a consultant or research firm to do it, or provide funding to schools or other community groups to enable them to lead the assessment.

LESSON LEARNED: Support strong evidence-based programs that meet students' specific needs, fit into the school's schedule and culture, and can be sustained over time.

First and foremost, ensuring programs are evidence based will be key to the initiative's success. Not only should programs be proven to be effective, they must work within the context of the schools' culture and infrastructure.

When choosing an evidence-based program, schools benefit from help selecting the programs or initiatives that will best serve their student population and local community. For example, some programs are designed to be delivered to all students within a particular grade, while others target students who are at high risk or who have experienced mental health challenges.

It could be equally valuable to fund efforts to build schools' capacity to increase access to mental health programs, services and supports. This might include increasing capacity of school staff so they can identify mental health needs and provide interventions or referrals to ensure students receive appropriate services. Hiring technical assistance providers at this stage will increase schools' ability to select the programs best suited to meet their students' needs.

Funders must also determine how these programs or initiatives align with school leaders' current priorities. To that end, funders should meet with local school leaders to discuss their priorities and interest in implementing these kinds of programs.

LESSON LEARNED: Before launching an initiative, consider your organizational capacity.

It is critical to assess your organization's available resources and staff capacity to ensure a new funding initiative can be effectively implemented. **Questions to consider include:**

1. Is your organization able to fund a comprehensive initiative, or only a portion of the costs to implement programs?
2. Are there other funding sources that exist or could be applied to support some aspect of the costs?
3. What tasks need to be completed by internal or existing staff, and what might be conducted by external consultants or others?
4. Do you have systems in place to create, receive and review the grant applications and collect data throughout the grant period?
5. Is your organization interested in supporting a single year or multiple years of implementation? It is also important to consider the amount of time it might take for schools to train staff and ramp up implementation.

If your organization does not have funding or staff capacity to launch a large initiative or cover all costs of implementation within a school or district, consider supporting smaller aspects of the work, such as funding a needs assessment or supporting start-up costs, which are often the most difficult expenses for schools to cover. *(Please see Page 12 of this document for a list of sample grants that your organization might award and what types of programming each grant could cover.)*

LESSON LEARNED: Consider how to structure the grant opportunity to meet schools' needs.

When contemplating when to offer the grant opportunity and create deadlines for proposals, it is important to analyze school calendars and competing priorities during specific times of the year (e.g., testing, school breaks). It is also important to clarify grant expectations and requirements in requests for proposals and grant agreement letters.

Things to keep in mind when constructing the application and grant include:

1. The potential burden on schools to complete the application.
2. Whether to structure the grant for size, number of schools, or number of students participating.
3. Whether grants should be competitive or non-competitive.
4. Depending on the type of programs selected, whether to encourage or financially support partnerships between schools and community partners, such as local community-based organizations, coalitions, or behavioral health providers.
5. What data grantees will be asked to collect, making note of what is feasible to measure during the grant period.

In addition to supporting programs' implementation, consider whether to award planning grants to schools to set them up for success. Schools benefit from having ample time to conduct planning ahead of implementation, but they often do not have the resources to cover costs associated with robust planning (e.g., stipends for planning work done outside of normal hours, or travel costs for mileage, hotel, etc., to visit successful programs in action). Small planning grants can help cover these costs so that schools can establish a strong foundation for implementation.

LESSON LEARNED: When launching grant opportunities, consider the school and community outreach needed to gain interest and support.

To help build awareness around grant opportunities, engage key stakeholders to cultivate school and district interest and buy-in. This includes outreach to school superintendents, cabinet-level school staff, principals, school boards, school nurses, school counselors, and teachers.

Gaining buy-in from school leadership at the outset is critical to ensuring that the programs are implemented as designed and integrated into the school culture, which increases the likelihood that they will be sustained over time. Different methods of communication can be used to reach key stakeholders, including emails, webinars, and virtual or in-person meetings.

To increase interest in the grant opportunity, look at conducting information sessions in advance of a proposal deadline to explain the grant, share information about evidence-based programs, and answer questions.

Supporting Effective Implementation

LESSON LEARNED: Evidence-based programs must be implemented as designed to have the desired student impact.

Launching any new program or initiative is likely to come with unanticipated challenges for schools. To prevent these obstacles from becoming too difficult for schools to overcome, funders can take proactive steps to increase the likelihood of successful implementation over the long term.

1. **Provide funding to support early staff engagement.** Schools that generate early buy-in and enthusiasm with their staff are better positioned to overcome challenges that arise later in implementation. Examples of ways to do this include engaging teachers and leaders in the planning process; providing frequent updates to school administrators, school boards and parents; and designating champions in schools to keep teachers engaged and help them troubleshoot issues as they arise.

2. **Support initial and ongoing training.** This training is critical for individuals who are responsible for implementing and leading the initiatives, including new staff who are hired when turnover occurs and existing staff who could benefit from a refresher. When there is leadership or grant director turnover, funders should reach out to share the purpose and expectations of the grant to avoid any disconnect that can lead to implementation challenges.

3. **Monitor program implementation.** As a condition of their grant, schools should be required to collect, analyze, and respond to implementation data, such as through completing lesson trackers and observation feedback forms. This will help ensure programs are implemented as designed.

4. **Ensure program sustainability.** In order to increase the likelihood that programs will be implemented as designed after the grant period ends, it is important to support sustainability planning and activities. This might include activities that enable schools to embed the programs in their school culture and operations, ensuring that school leadership and parents understand the importance of the programs, and identifying existing or potential funding streams that could cover costs after the grant period ends.

LESSON LEARNED: Technical assistance helps support schools in effectively planning and implementing programs.

Providing technical assistance for planning will help schools select programs that meet students' needs, develop effective implementation and monitoring plans, and integrate programming into school schedules and culture.

During implementation, technical assistance also can help schools overcome unanticipated obstacles and make modifications to increase student engagement. For example, during the pandemic, technical assistance providers worked closely with schools to help teachers continue to conduct lessons as schools shifted between virtual and in-person learning.

Providing technical assistance also can help schools lay the groundwork for long-term sustainability of the programs or initiatives.

Further, technical assistance providers also can be instrumental in creating opportunities for peer learning and building relationships between schools implementing similar programs. Providers can convene schools and facilitate communities of practice to enable schools to share lessons learned, discuss challenges and opportunities, and build networks to sustain implementation. Peer learning can happen in different ways, such as joint in-person or virtual learning sessions, sharing written materials and tools, or hosting convenings for formal and informal networking.

Grant Updates & Evaluation

LESSON LEARNED: Identify the progress indicators that measure impact, and support schools' efforts to capture those indicators during the grant period.

The evidence base for prevention programs shows that quality implementation is key to programs' success and impact. Because it takes time to see long-term student outcomes, such as reduced substance use and improved mental health, it is especially important to measure program implementation quality and early indicators of student success.

These leading indicators might include, for example, student understanding of program content or changes in skills and mindsets. It is also critical to understand what can reasonably be measured by schools during the grant period.

Funders can support schools' efforts to evaluate their programs, including providing guidance to schools about what types of data should be collected, helping schools develop practices for data collection, and providing resources and tools to assist them. Consider offering technical assistance specifically related to data collection and reporting, if needed.

Funders also can commission a third-party evaluator to collect data and analyze aggregate outcomes for the overall initiative. If an evaluation is commissioned, clearly define the goals of the study and the research questions that will be explored. Ensure that grantees understand and agree to collect the necessary data as a condition of the grant – particularly because schools might have different priorities when it comes to expected outcomes and data collection.

LESSON LEARNED: Build relationships with grantees and establish methods of communication that are helpful and not burdensome.

After the grant has been awarded, receiving periodic updates from grantees will be helpful to assess progress and challenges.

When determining how to communicate with grantees, consider what information is necessary to collect to assess progress, and balance your desire to have more information with consideration of the time burden on grantees. For example, consider what information you need to get directly from grantees and what may be available from other sources, such as technical assistance providers.

When requesting written updates, create reporting templates that include clear requests for information and forms that are easy for grantees to complete. This can also help funders compare information across grantees and aggregate information for the overall initiative.

If an independent evaluation has been commissioned, weigh the additional burden that could be placed on grantees, who may be required to report multiple metrics to both the research partner and the funder. If possible, try to align with the research partner prior to sending reporting guidelines to streamline data requests.

It is also helpful to create informal touchpoints throughout the grant period, such as kick-off meetings, periodic phone calls or meetings to build relationships, provide guidance, assess progress and identify challenges.

Conclusion

There has never been a more pressing or urgent need for substance use prevention and mental health programs.

Prevention programs and mental health initiatives play a fundamental role in ensuring students' mental wellbeing and preventing substance use among the next generation. Philanthropic support is critical in providing many schools the initial funding they need to implement or expand their programs. Understanding the community landscape, being strategic in program implementation, and capturing key data will ensure grantees and funders are positioned for success.

Organizations interested in supporting school-based substance use prevention programs through grant funding can contact the partners below for more information.

Richard M. Fairbanks Foundation

In 2018, the Richard M. Fairbanks Foundation launched *Prevention Matters,* a four-year $13.5 million grant initiative aimed at helping Marion County K-12 schools identify, implement, and sustain evidence-based substance use prevention programs. At scale, *Prevention Matters* funding served 27 Indianapolis school districts, charter school networks and individual schools in their delivery of proven prevention programs in 159 schools, reaching more than 83,400 students annually.

North Central Health Services

In 2018, NCHS funded $6.2 million over four years for the Resilient Youth Initiative (RYI) to help nineteen school corporations and schools in north central Indiana select, implement, and sustain evidence-based social-emotional learning and substance abuse prevention programs. Overall, the NCHS Resilient Youth Initiative aimed to create a culture of resilience and support for young people, helping them to thrive and reach their full potential.

Healthcare Foundation of La Porte

Partners in Prevention (PiP) is a school-based substance misuse prevention initiative to further HFL's Healthy Minds' result of achieving positive mental health including the prevention of substance use disorder. PiP served 11 La Porte County schools representing 6 public school systems, 4 private schools, and 1 charter school, and impacting more than 13,000 students in Year 3 of the initiative.

Indiana Department of Education & Division of Mental Health and Addiction

IDOE and DMHA have administered three federally funded Project AWARE grant rounds since 2018, reaching 18 local education agencies (LEA) across the state. Project AWARE Indiana aims to develop and expand school-based mental health infrastructures; increase capacity of schools' staff to employ evidence-based tools to detect and respond to mental health issues; increase schools' early identification and intervention of student mental health needs; and increase student and family awareness of mental health issues, services, and engagement.

Grant Ideas Based on Available Funding

This table provides a list of grant ideas to support school-based substance use prevention and student mental wellbeing initiatives. Funding levels are approximate and will vary based on factors such as the size of participating schools or program scope.

FUNDING	GRANT IDEAS
Less than $2,500	Ten substitute teachers to allow ten teachers to participate in a one-day planning or training session.
	Food for annual teacher training/professional development or annual discussion with parent-teacher organization.
	Curriculum developer's fee to provide an on-site trainer/facilitator to conduct one-day training for all school staff.
$2,500-$5,000	Room rental, A/V and food expenses for annual convening for multiple grantees.
	Laptop and other technology required by Grant Director to support program oversight and implementation.
	Posters, pencils, lanyards and other supplies to integrate the curriculum into school culture.
	Off-year administration of the Indiana Youth Survey in up to 20 schools to assess student substance use, mental health, gambling, and protective and risk factors associated with these behaviors.
	Stipends ($25/hour) for faculty and staff at a single school (approx. 80 employees) to attend 2.5 hours of booster training.
$5,000-$10,000	Commissioned survey of local schools to assess capacity and barriers to implementing prevention and mental wellbeing programs. The findings of this survey can help inform the design of the grantmaking initiative.
	Annual foundation meeting expense for staff mileage, food/meals for meetings and site rentals to meet with grantees.
	Annual stipend for one building-level employee (lead teacher, counselor) to serve as a "building-level champion." This person acts as a liaison between the district-level program coordinator and teachers within the building for activities such as professional development and implementation monitoring, which support coordinated implementation throughout the district.
	Registration and travel expenses for 5-person program leadership team to attend national conference conducted by curriculum developer.
	Annual, per-grantee fee to provide implementation technical assistance (TA), including 12 hours of 1:1 TA consulting for each grantee and facilitated peer learning cohorts.
$15,000-$50,000	Annual wages for a part-time contractor (Family Services Coordinator, Supplemental Mental Health Provider) to expand a school's implementation staff capacity.
	Three-month planning grant to provide schools staff time and financial resources to identify the program(s) that best meet the needs of their students and staff and develop a plan for implementing the selected program(s). Schools may use planning funds to provide stipends to planning team members, pay for substitute teachers, purchase sample curricula, or travel to observe schools implementing one or more programs.
	Average annual implementation grant for a single-site school or small school network (e.g., charter school network with 2-3 schools).
	Physical curriculum materials for 40 classrooms or a 5-year digital curriculum license for single-site school.
	One district's annual license for Panorama Survey or Partnerships in Education and Resilience (PEAR) Assessment to measure student mindsets and other outcomes.
$50,000-$85,000	Commissioned report studying a community's current needs related to substance use disorder (SUD) or mental health, strategies to address the problem, and gaps that can be addressed through philanthropic support.
	Average annual implementation grant for a small school district (total student body <15,000).
	Annual salary/benefits for one full-time position such as grant director, school counselor, or other leadership position to manage grant-funded activities.
$250,000-$350,000	Average annual implementation grant for a large school district (total student body >15,000).
	Four months of 1:1 technical assistance support provided to 45 planning grantees, including virtual information sessions for all grantees and intensive 1:1 support to help grantees select and plan to implement the program(s) that best meets their needs.
	Annual cost to hire a third-party evaluator to collect, analyze and report on the aggregated impact of your grantmaking initiative.