



OPENING THE DOOR TO ABSTINENCE EDUCATION EVALUATION IN THE SCHOOL SETTING

Introduction

It is important that well-designed evaluations are established to assess the implementation and effectiveness of abstinence education (AE) programs—many of which are operating in public schools. Evaluating school-based AE programs cannot be done successfully without the collaboration and support of the school community, from administrators to instructors to parents. Gaining school support can be challenging. This brief highlights the key steps that should be taken to ensure school investment and support for your evaluation.

1st Meeting—Getting the Memorandum of Understanding

For agencies applying for federal abstinence education funding and for private funding in some instances, it is important to include in the grant application a *Memorandum of Understanding* (MOU) that conveys that the school is a willing partner in the program if funding is obtained. The MOU is most often signed by the superintendent of the school district. Therefore, visiting a school and enlisting strong support for both program and evaluation components is a crucial *first step* to the application for funding. It may be necessary to schedule an introductory meeting with the superintendent as well as the principals of the schools that are candidates to participate in the evaluation—for both the treatment and comparison/control groups. At this meeting the AE program is the main agenda item with only a general overview of the need for evaluation briefly touching on the pre- and post-test survey, need for parental permission and follow-up testing. Describe the program with a logic model. This will give your audience a simple snapshot of the program components.

In trying to secure an MOU, the following tips are helpful:

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- Relate the general importance of evaluation to determine:
 - the success of implementing all components of the program as intended;
 - the portion of the targeted population that has completed the program;
 - program responsiveness to the needs of the target audience, including subgroups, and; impact on behavioral outcomes, if applicable.



- Stress that all evaluation data collected will be kept confidential, including names of students and participating schools. This may ease the concerns of some school officials who fear that data will result in bad press for their school.
- Provide information on the principal investigator(s) and their affiliations to a university, a private research firm or other entity responsible for the evaluation design, data collection and the writing of interim and final reports

2nd Meeting—The School Research Gatekeeper- First Meeting after ‘Notice of Award

All schools require that research conducted on their premises receive approval. This approval requirement is separate from any MOU that may have been obtained by the program. Larger school districts serving tens of thousands of students may have a research review committee similar to an Institutional Review Board (IRB). In this case, the evaluator must complete an application to conduct research and submit this application. The approval process may take several weeks. Medium and smaller size districts may have one person who is in charge of curriculum and research decisions. This may be the Assistant Superintendent, the Director of Curriculum and Instruction or a Health Education Coordinator. The evaluator and project director need to schedule a meeting with this “gate keeper” to get approval for the evaluation design, implementation logistics and the evaluation instrument (survey questions).

At this meeting evaluators should share the requirements of their IRB with the school research committee since these requirements often overlap with those of the school. *(Note: In many cases school board approval is needed to win research approval. Gatekeepers provide access to the school board, but it is important to meet with the gatekeeper first.)*

Areas for discussion during this meeting include the following:

- Identify consensus goals shared by your agency and the school. Goals may include:
 - academic success;
 - increased physical and emotional health for students;
 - higher graduation rates, and;
 - increased communication between parents and teens concerning sex.
- Present local, regional and national statistics regarding unmarried teen births and STD rates, especially data that are pertinent to the particular student population.
- Provide an overview of your agency’s staff professional qualifications and the evaluator’s professional qualifications.
- Provide background information on funding for the program evaluation.



- Provide information on program delivery including:
 - the number of sessions required for the abstinence curriculum,
 - classes hosting the presentation health, family life, other),
 - who will deliver instruction [classroom teacher or outside instructor],
 - scheduling protocols, and
 - the need for a school contact person.
- Describe the evaluation design. Give a concise description of the evaluation design including the pre/post-test, survey and control or comparison group as applicable. Also include:
 - information about the importance of a control or comparison group, if applicable. School officials may want all students to benefit from the program. You can say conducting a quality evaluation that finds the program is meaningful may open the door for all students to receive the program. You can also suggest that students in the control or comparison group receive the program after the intervention group program is over.
- **Share the evaluation instrument:** Provide all meeting attendees with a complete copy of survey questions and give ample time for review (*Note: you may be asked to provide copies before the meeting so personnel can review questions in detail.*) To prepare for this exercise you should anticipate concerns that may arise among school administrators, parents, teachers and others about asking questions about teen sexual behavior. Be prepared to demonstrate a willingness to address the merits of adding, deleting or changing questions designed to assess students' behavior.
- Describe the administrative and logistical needs for implementing the evaluation. Be sure to include: the number of class periods/days needed, the personnel required and your agency's commitment to relieve any undue burden on school staff. Additional areas for discussion should include:
 - the need for 6- and 12-month follow-up surveys (if planned) to measure the sustained effect of the program;
 - a plan for tracking students at the 6- and 12-month markers;
 - a timeline for the overall evaluation.;
 - the need for the school to appoint a designated contact person to handle scheduling and other related issues, and;
 - any general reporting requirements for the evaluation.



- Explain the need for active or passive consent (as applicable) and parental notification about the program. (It is helpful to provide the school with a sample *parent letter* that can

accompany the consent form.) Also explain your proposed plan for obtaining consent/assent. (*The AE program and evaluation team should supply the extra staff to secure active and informed parental consent, youth assent and data collection. These processes call for trained data collection field assistants.*)

- Present a clear plan of how findings will be reported to the school administration.
- Establish the school personnel designated to receive interim and final evaluation reports.

Prior to the conclusion of the meeting, a date for the school board presentation should be set. This date should allow enough time for the AE project to recruit support for the program and evaluation and prepare the materials to support the school district personnel in their efforts to “sell” the AE program and evaluation to the school district.

3rd Meeting—Getting Buy-In from Key School Personnel

The intent of this meeting is to get buy-in and support for the activities needed to conduct a successful evaluation. School personnel who will be involved with the program as well as the evaluation should be invited to this meeting, including the principal and teaching staff who may be involved in the program. All of the information provided during your previous meeting with school research officials should be presented again during this meeting.

4th Meeting—The School Board

In many cases school boards are decisionmakers as to whether research will be conducted in their schools. In cases where their permission is not required, protocol usually calls for the board to be apprised of any research activities occurring in the school(s). Your gatekeeper will schedule a meeting for the program provider to present to the school board.

A summary of all of the issues discussed during the meeting with school research officials should be prepared for the school board members. The evaluator can prepare this summary as a PowerPoint slide presentation or handout. Professional folders with the summary materials can be submitted to the school district before the meeting to allow school board members time to review the materials and prepare questions. Information presented to the school board should be concise and easily understandable. The main point is to communicate the benefits of the program and evaluation.



The evaluator can leave contact information such as a business card in the school board packets. This is a courtesy to board members who may have more questions after the meeting. Sending

thank-you notes to the key administrators and school board members can also help to establish a positive working relationship with the school district.

5th Meeting—Parents

Once the school approves the research request it is important to schedule and conduct a parent information session. During the meeting the following should be accomplished:

- Provide copies of the curriculum and present a brief summary of issues that will be covered in class. Copies of the curriculum and the evaluation instrument should be kept in the main office for parents to review. Consent letters should specify the location of the curriculum and surveys.
- Explain the need for evaluation and how confidentiality is secured. Share sample evaluation questions and allow time for questions. Make sure you communicate your understanding of their concern for age appropriateness in this process.
- Explain active and passive consent and assent forms that will be used. Emphasize the importance of parents' partnership in the consent process. Active consent forms should include contact numbers of the AE program director and evaluator—not the school personnel—for parents who have follow-up questions.
- Reiterate your message about the need, if applicable, for a control or comparison group and address any concerns about children who may not receive the program.

Maintaining good parent cooperation should be a priority. When new student cohorts are introduced every attempt should be made to engage the support of parents along with obtaining the required active consent. By providing information and being available to address any questions and concerns throughout the evaluation cycle, parents can become a great support to the overall effort. It is helpful to view parents as *ongoing* partners and not as a “one-time” audience.

Final Meeting(s)—Report back to Stakeholders

The evaluator is responsible for reporting all findings accurately to the stakeholders including positive, null and negative findings. Prior to sharing the results with school officials, faculty and parents, the evaluator should review all findings with the AE program. This meeting allows the director to see the evaluation results before information is shared with the school district and the larger community. It allows for the program to celebrate the positive evaluation results and think through the null or negative findings. Null and negative findings should be couched within the



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framework of program improvement. Strategies for improvement can be identified prior to sharing the results with the school district and other community stakeholders.