

SCHOOL-BASED PREVENTION PROGRAMMING AS A TOOL FOR COMBATTING SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER

Lessons Learned and Impact from Marion County's Evidence-Based *Prevention Matters* Initiative

Introduction

Substance use has long plagued Marion County and Indiana, and fatal drug poisonings (overdoses) rose significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic – from nearly 1,700 statewide in 2019 to over 2,800 in 2021.¹ In Marion County, fatal drug poisonings rose from 377 in 2019 to 714 in 2021 – an 89% increase.² Along with the human toll, the impact extends to the state's economy, as combatting the epidemic costs Indiana billions each year.³

While it is crucial to provide support to those struggling with substance use disorder, we cannot stem the crisis through treatment alone. Long-term prevention strategies play a critical role in addressing this epidemic. Since substance use often begins in adolescence, ensuring children have access to evidence-based prevention resources in school can help them avoid using substances in the first place – and prevent lifelong struggles with addiction.

To address this need, in 2018, the Richard M. Fairbanks Foundation launched *Prevention Matters*, a four-year grant initiative aimed at

helping Marion County K-12 schools identify, implement and sustain evidence-based substance use prevention programs. Such programs have been proven to help students avoid substance use, improve academic outcomes, and reduce bullying and violence. These programs focus on developing skills and competencies that help students avoid substance use as they grow older, such as self-awareness, self-regulation and relationship skills. The specific program structures vary, but most include a series of lessons delivered by teachers during the school day.

¹ Source: [Indiana Department of Health](#).

² Source: [Indiana Department of Health](#).

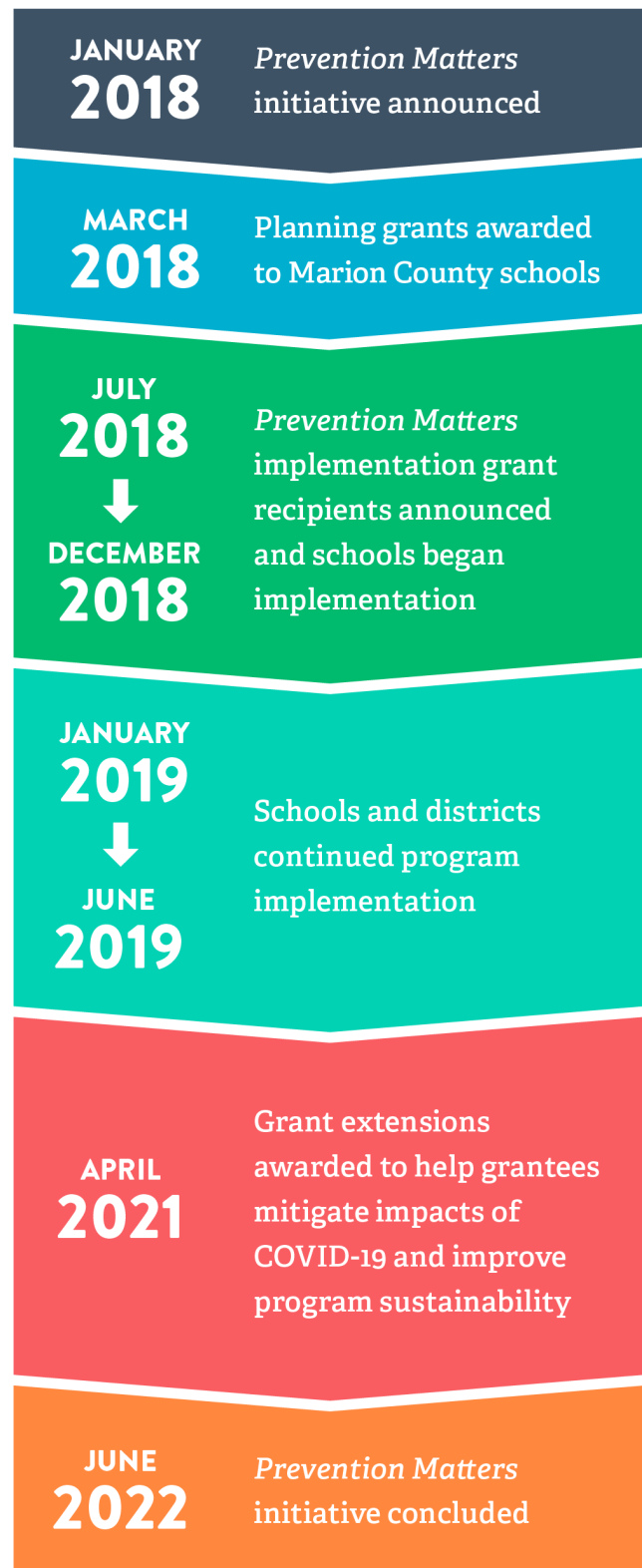
³ Source: [Indiana Business Review](#).



As part of the initiative, the Foundation awarded planning grants of up to \$40,000 to 44 Marion County districts or schools spanning elementary, middle and high school to develop plans for implementing evidence-based prevention programs. The Foundation worked with prevention experts at the Indiana Prevention Resource Center to develop a list of 25 approved programs that have been demonstrated through prior research to reduce future substance use. After this planning period, the Foundation awarded three-year implementation grants to 27 school districts, charter school networks and individual schools to put their plans into action. In 2021, in light of the pandemic, the Fairbanks Foundation provided one-year grant extensions to give schools additional time to implement their programs and plan ways to sustain them.

Most grantees chose to implement programs in elementary and/or middle schools, though eight grantees implemented programs in high schools (typically ninth grade). A majority of grantees (63%) implemented Second Step, which has separate elementary and middle school programs. LifeSkills Training, a middle and high school program, was the next most common program (26% of grantees). Too Good for Drugs was the second most common high school program implemented by grantees.

All together, the Foundation committed \$13.5 million to *Prevention Matters* for grant funding, technical assistance and evaluation activities. Implementation grants ranged from \$17,600-\$341,000 for single-site schools, while large districts received \$144,000-\$2.2 million.





Introduction

From 2018-2022, *Prevention Matters* grantees launched and delivered their prevention programs, with a focus on effective planning, lesson/content instruction, monitoring and feedback, and integration of their programs into school operations and culture. Grantees received technical assistance from third-party experts throughout the initiative to help them

with all aspects of implementation as well as with planning for program sustainability. Additionally, grantees participated in an external evaluation. Although *Prevention Matters* grant funding has concluded, most grantees continue to implement their programs with a long-term commitment to improving student outcomes.

MEASURING PREVENTION MATTERS' IMPACT

All programs put into practice through the *Prevention Matters* initiative have proven to be effective in preventing youth substance use or building skills that have been shown to prevent substance use. As grantees continue effective implementation, these prevention programs will allow students to gain skills to avoid substance use later in life. The ultimate goal of the initiative is to prevent substance misuse – which will help to stem the crisis in Marion County and Indiana. Although this long-term outcome is not yet possible to measure, two types of indicators show progress toward this goal:

- **Fidelity of implementation:**
The programs approved for use in *Prevention Matters* have proven to be effective when implemented as designed. Schools can expect to see long-term benefits if they deliver programs according to the curriculum developers' guidelines.
- **Improvement in intermediate outcomes:**
Students who achieve certain types of intermediate outcomes, such as understanding program concepts and developing self-regulation and interpersonal skills, are less likely to use substances in the future.

