



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](#).

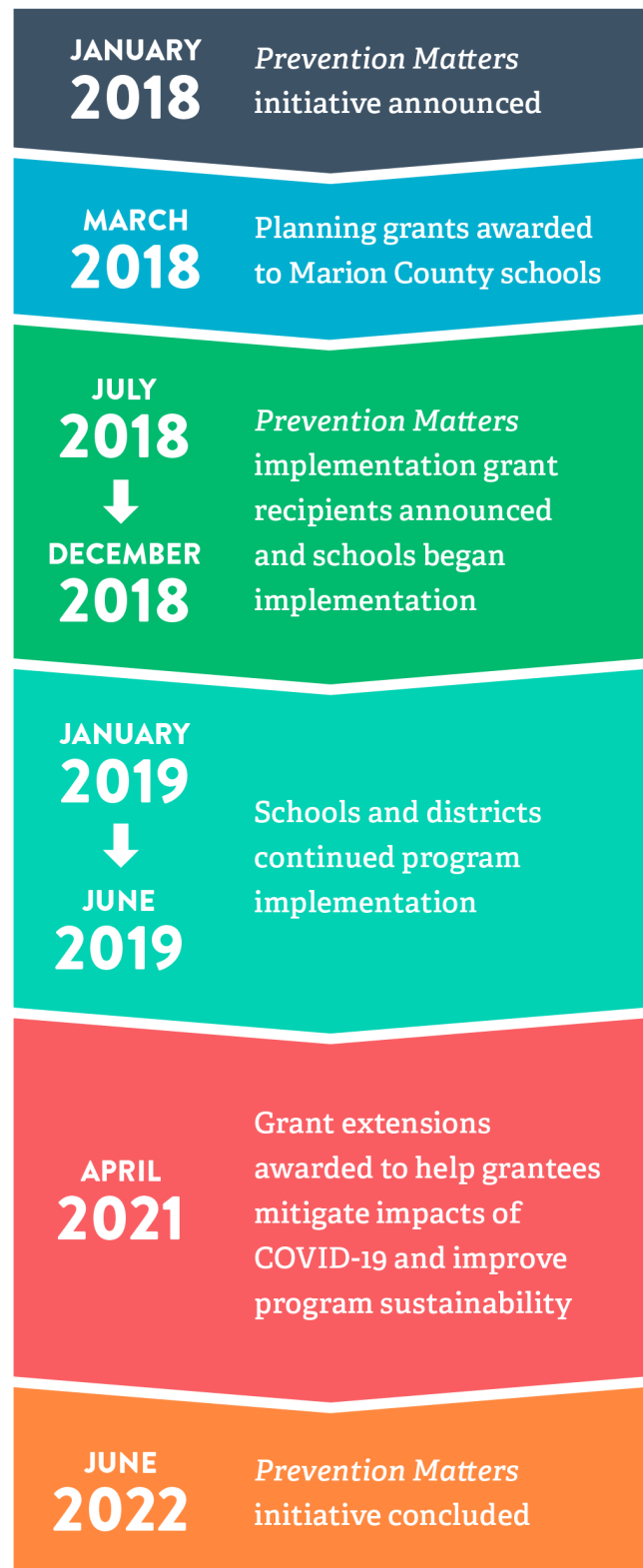
³ Source: [Indiana Business Review](#).



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.



Program Implementation

LESSONS LEARNED

Through the four years of the *Prevention Matters* initiative, the Foundation identified several key lessons about effective prevention program implementation.

LESSONS LEARNED

- 1 It is important to select programs that meet students' specific needs and fit into the school's daily schedule.
- 2 Program teams should include multiple people to mitigate disruption caused by routine staff turnover.
- 3 Schools should train new implementers and provide ongoing training and support to experienced implementers.
- 4 Program coordinators' effective planning, monitoring, and feedback to implementers contribute to high-quality implementation.
- 5 It is critical to implement programs as designed, though minor modifications to increase student engagement can be effective.



1 It is important to select programs that meet students' specific needs and fit into the school's daily schedule.

Schools should consider student academic and behavioral data, as well as the overall school culture and schedule, to identify which evidence-based prevention program aligns closely with students' needs and can fit into the daily class schedule. During their planning phase, *Prevention Matters* grantees worked with technical assistance providers to identify their students' needs and select appropriate programs. Many grantees established a planning committee that involved implementers (typically teachers, or in some cases counselors, who deliver program content), which ultimately contributed to their success in selecting a program that would be a good match for their students. In the final year of the evaluation, 77% of implementers reported their program was a good fit for their students' needs, and 84% reported the program was compatible with their school's culture and goals.

2 Program teams should include multiple people to mitigate disruption caused by routine staff turnover.

To ensure programs are implemented effectively and can continue amid staff turnover, it is important to have a team responsible for program implementation at each school. This team often consists of a lead coordinator responsible for training and oversight as well as a group of implementers. Districts with multiple schools can benefit from a district administrator overseeing program strategy alongside program champions in each school.

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3 Schools should train new implementers and provide ongoing training and support to experienced implementers.

New implementers should be trained on their prevention curricula to ensure programs are taught as designed, and returning implementers should receive annual “booster” training as well as other professional development throughout the year. Training can take different forms, from in-person group settings to self-paced, online modules, and can be delivered by outside trainers or in-house staff.

Prevention Matters grantees often saw success from group training at the start of the school year paired with learning opportunities throughout the year. Ongoing professional development can help remind implementers of information they may have forgotten while encouraging collaboration and peer learning. In the evaluation, implementers who participated in training sessions within the past year reported higher student engagement and understanding.

Most *Prevention Matters* grant directors agreed training and professional development opportunities were crucial to increasing implementer buy-in, which led to greater enthusiasm for the program among teachers and students. Resources should be allocated to support implementer training, such as stipends to support teacher attendance at professional development events. Typically, stipends would need to cover teachers’ hourly rate (if training is during the summer) or the cost for a substitute teacher (if training occurs on a school day).





4 Program coordinators' effective planning, monitoring, and feedback to implementers contribute to high-quality implementation.

The evaluation found *Prevention Matters* schools that monitored progress throughout the year and provided ongoing feedback to implementers had stronger student engagement and understanding. Curriculum maps are an important tool for planning and tracking, as they help grantees coordinate consistent lesson pacing across school buildings and classrooms and make it easier for program coordinators to monitor progress and course-correct when needed. Program monitoring should be conducted through a lens of support – rather than accountability – with a goal of continuous improvement.

5 It is critical to implement programs as designed, though minor modifications to increase student engagement can be effective.

It is critical to implement programs as designed, including delivery of all core components. For example, schools should deliver all required lessons in the specified order and frequency. However, in some cases minor modifications can increase student engagement, such as including additional culturally relevant examples or repeating lessons if students did not understand material the first time. *Prevention Matters* grantees worked with technical assistance providers to determine what small tweaks would be appropriate while ensuring they delivered the program as designed, with the “essential ingredients” of each individual program intact. In the final year of *Prevention Matters*, about half of grant directors requested implementers make adaptations to their programming or allowed them to do so. Nearly 80% of implementers reported making modifications to their programs, typically to increase student engagement.





Outcomes & Impact

KEY FINDINGS

SCALE OF PREVENTION MATTERS

- *Prevention Matters* has reached **nearly 50%** of all K-12 students in Marion County.
- As grantees expanded programs to more schools and grade levels, the scale of *Prevention Matters* increased. In 2020-21, **27 grantees** delivered programming to **more than 83,000 students in 159 schools**.
- In 2021-22, the **24 grantees** that received one additional year of funding delivered programming to **nearly 70,000 students in 132 schools**.

Students understood *Prevention Matters* content.

More than three in four implementers (77%) reported that students who participated in *Prevention Matters* understood lesson content, and teachers were observed to be effectively checking for student understanding during lessons. Seventeen grantees reported anecdotal evidence of program knowledge, such as students using common program language and reciting songs from the program throughout their day. In the final year of the initiative, pre- and post-test data from curriculum assessments showed students who participated in *Prevention Matters* programs improved their knowledge of life skills and drug refusal skills.



Prevention Matters programs helped students develop skills that protect against substance use.

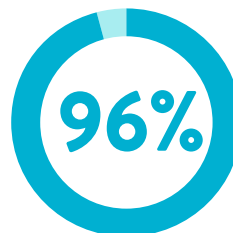
Grantees found meaningful increases in students' self-regulation, coping and interpersonal skills, and implementers reported the programs were working. Throughout the initiative, several grantees used their prevention programs as the basis for broader efforts to support student well-being and strengthen school culture.

The pandemic complicates our understanding of *Prevention Matters*' impact on student behavior.

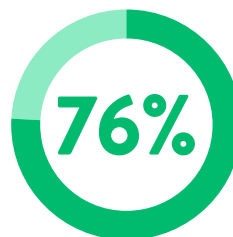
It is difficult to assess the impact of *Prevention Matters* on student behavior for two main reasons. First, students' social and emotional needs skyrocketed during the pandemic, and for many, these challenges were exacerbated when returning to school in person. Second, because of the changes in school format (in person, remote, hybrid), standard discipline measures like suspensions and expulsions may not be accurate or reliable.

Four grantees reported reductions in discipline referrals, reductions in drug possession or drug use, or improvements in student attendance. However, four other grantees reported increases in disciplinary referrals, despite successful implementation of their prevention curricula, attributing this to the challenges of students returning to in-person learning after extended virtual learning. Evaluation results showed that while student suspensions decreased for schools participating in *Prevention Matters*, they also decreased for non-participating schools. Still, many grantees said they would have experienced greater disciplinary challenges without their prevention programming.

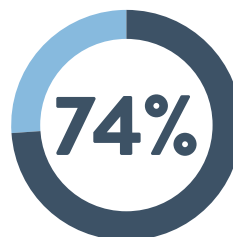
PREVENTION MATTERS IMPACTS



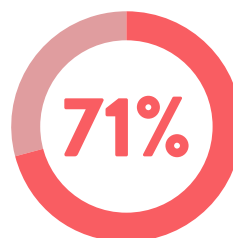
of grantees reported positive program impacts.



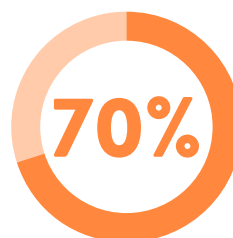
of implementers felt the program improved student self-awareness.



of implementers felt the program improved student social awareness.



of implementers felt the program improved student self-management and self-regulation.



of implementers felt the program improved student relationship skills.



Program Sustainability

LESSONS LEARNED

KEY ELEMENTS OF SUSTAINABILITY

While financial sustainability is critical to ensuring long-term program implementation, it is equally important that programs are embedded in school culture and operations, and stakeholders, including school administrators, buy into the importance of these programs.

External funding is especially key when starting programs.

There are many up-front costs when launching a new program, such as staff time for planning, training and monitoring, in addition to program costs for materials. *Prevention Matters* helped schools pay for these initial costs, but after four years of grant funding, schools are generally well-positioned to fund ongoing program expenses. In fact, the evaluation found most schools focused their sustainability efforts on securing funding. For example, grantees have identified short- and long-term funding sources, such as Title I and Title IV funds, general operating funds, or state/federal funding specific to COVID-19.

ENSURING CONTINUED IMPLEMENTATION

Many grant directors shared they had program sustainability in mind from the start of the initiative. Using grant funds during the final year of funding, more than half of grantees purchased multi-year curriculum licenses and additional materials to support continued implementation.



To sustain a program, it is critical to integrate it into school culture and daily operations.

Integrating prevention programming into school culture and daily operations can help ensure programs are sustained even if there is staff turnover or if the school adopts new priorities. For example, if time for prevention

programming is incorporated as a standard part of the school schedule, and if all staff understand both the importance of the program and how to implement it, the program is likely to continue to be embedded in the school moving forward.

EMBEDDING PROGRAMS INTO SCHOOLS

Many *Prevention Matters* grantees expressed confidence their prevention programs will continue, as they are deeply woven into the fabric of their schools. Grantees achieved this through several methods, including:

- Building time into annual calendars for implementer and other staff training.
- Protecting time in daily schedules for lessons (for example, during morning meetings).
- Reinforcing lessons across classes throughout the school day.
- Using common program language throughout the school.
- Displaying posters related to program content in school buildings.
- Creating an implementation handbook to codify the school's practices.

Grantees cultivated school and district buy-in, which increased the likelihood of sustainability.

In addition to student and teacher buy-in, overall school and district buy-in support program sustainability. School administrators – including superintendents, cabinet-level staff and principals – are key stakeholders who ultimately have decision-making power about what programs schools implement and what resources they have. Sharing student success stories can be helpful, especially when supported by data on improvements in students' academic outcomes.

Prevention Matters grantees' sustainability planning improved over time – particularly in identifying key stakeholders to support

prevention efforts, aligning programs to the missions and goals of those stakeholders, and regularly communicating with these stakeholders through staff meetings, school board meetings and other opportunities for sharing information.

93%

(25 of 27 reporting) of grantees plan to continue implementing their prevention programs.



Conclusion

School-based prevention programs can play a pivotal role in addressing substance use disorder. To maximize the benefits of these programs, schools should select an evidence-based program that meets students' needs, ensure program instructors are well-trained and committed to the core components of the program, and routinely monitor program delivery for constant improvement.

Schools must also ensure their programs are set up for long-term success, including both financial sustainability and staff, student and stakeholder buy-in. With these components in place, schools and communities will reap the benefits of a student population not only better equipped to avoid substance use but who also see additional positive life outcomes.

