Safe and Supportive Schools
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Reporting and Dissemination of School Climate Data

WEBINAR QUESTION AND ANSWER SUMMARY

On June 29 and 30, 2011, the Safe and Supportive Schools Technical Assistance Center hosted a Webinar, entitled *Reporting and Dissemination of School Climate Data.* During the session, the presenters, David Osher from American Institutes for Research and David Hawkins from the University of Washington, received several questions from the audience. Since the presenter could not answer all of the questions during the event, the Center has prepared the following Webinar Question and Answer Summary with responses to each question. For additional information, please email or call the Center (sssta@air.org; 1-800-258-8413).

Q1. How do you handle schools who feel threatened by seeing their scores?

David Osher: Ideally, you want to create a culture in a community and district where people are not scared to speak up; building that culture includes district leadership communicating that they really want to use the data for continuous improvement and providing support for people to do the necessary work to improve climate, just as that happens with the Safe and Supportive Schools initiative. In addition, it probably means doing work with the media in order to help people understand the fact that it is a strength when schools and districts start reporting data. The key issue is not focusing on a once-in-time snapshot of data, but on whether or not people are using that data for improvement. The key is not the individual score report, but rather the ability to talk to people about what is being done to improve those scores over time. It is looking at trends year by year.

Q2. How do schools continue to create opportunities for student reporting of bullying or safety incidents so that administrators have a real time assessment of student safety?

David Osher: I think this is something that you do at a point in time. Those surveys are not all that one would want to do. It is also important to be able to collect data on a much more regular basis regarding certain things to allow you to act on the mark quickly, but also because you may want to collect data to figure out what the base rates are in different points of time. Some of you may know about positive interventions and supports or PBS, and one of the things that PBS schools often do is not just ask about incidents, but what is the time of day of those incidents so that you are able to figure out interventions based on that type of more granular information.

You want to do surveys annually, maybe even semiannually in some cases, in order to get your overall picture as you monitor progress. But those surveys really function as screens. There are areas that you then want to look into detail. You may want to look more deeply into an issue by doing focus groups. I would suggest that those focus groups be intentional. But you may also want to delve deeper into an issue by collecting more data, and I think an ideal way of collecting data from students is to train up other students to help in the collection and interpretation of the data. Make it a student-driven process.

Q3. How do you get the CTC survey for utilization at your school?

David Hawkins: The survey is available on the web; it has been put in the public domain by SAMHSA- the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. You can find it on the website: www.communitiesthatcare.net and look for the Communities that Care survey. You will find the server there and all the items, as well as, an item construct dictionary which shows you what items go into those. Also, please note that on the Safe and Supportive Schools website, we have a list or a compendium of school climate surveys. We are in the process of reviewing the CTC survey and once it is reviewed, we will post it on the website.

Q4. What are the pros and cons of reporting data in a text format rather than graphs and tables?

David Hawkins: I think that graphs are really wonderful because people can see the impact visually. I think that graphs are really very helpful. At the same time, I have learned that people love stories, and narrative stories that illustrate what is shown in the graph can also be very convincing and very useful for decision-makers about why we should use these data. So I think that both may be the answer, but I would say that to inform decision-making, graphs are very helpful.

David Osher: I agree, and I would just say to use both formats, but keep it simple and digestible in one setting.

Q5. Which is better for various audiences: e-mail, access on Internet, or distributed hardcopies?

David Osher: I think that you have to really think about who your audience is, and what access they have. I think that e-mail and electronic versions are very useful for people who use e-mail and have easy access to the web. There are people who don't.

David Hawkins: There are a number of school districts around the country that budget for profiles of individual school buildings so that parents, teachers, and concerned citizens can go on the web and actually look at the profile of their local school or neighborhood. On the other hand, having hardcopy reports that people can share with one another and that the principal can refer to and look at is often very useful. So I think that it is hard to say only one format is best for any particular audience group.

There is a group at the University of Maryland that sends an e-mail out to its subscription list providing one little bit of data that they think is very important. It could be useful for decision making, and that is another thing that you can think about doing. Once a month or once a week, e-mail or provide this latest news or bit of information on Facebook. So I think that using all the channels may be important because people may move in and out of certain audience or demographic groups over the course of time (e.g., as people get to be my age, sometimes they don't twitter, but they might be willing to look at their e-mail). And on the other hand, if you are trying to reach students, obviously smart phones are everywhere.

Q6. Is it better to let the schools see the other schools was also just their own?

David Osher: Ideally, we want people to be able to see each other's results; transparency can provide that, and it gets people's attention. However, somebody asked the question earlier about people being fearful. In our work in Chicago, we suggested that people have their work benchmarked against the highest performing schools in their categories so that they can learn from them. Principles do not want that. They wanted their ability to choose their own comparison sites. I think that people are fearful of data, but there is more promise of being able to say we want to get better, we are working intentionally to get better, and we are not hiding anything.

David Hawkins: I don't think people want to be necessarily compared with the best, but I do think they want to be able to compare with each other. What we find is that states like to compare with their neighbors. If you live in Kansas, you'd like to see what's being done in Missouri or Iowa. There is a fear of the data. I would be surprised to see that as school districts have put these data up to district websites, there really have not been negative repercussions; but people have said that this is really great that we can look at this information and use it to improve our school and ask community members to get involved with our school and our school is not afraid to say that these are things that we are working on and want to improve. Although there are people who are concerned about data and what it might mean, and what it implies, I think that we are entering a time when many of these people are eager to look at the data because it helps guide them to say what we can do to really improve our schools.

Q7. The most difficult step may be choosing an intervention based on the data. How did your schools or districts choose interventions and what recommendations do you have for that?

David Hawkins: For the Communities that Care (CTC) system, we have identified 56 tested and effective interventions, preventive and early interventions, that address specific risk factors and specific protective factors. And when I say that they are tested and proven, it means that the interventions that are in the CTC prevention strategies guide have been tested in randomized controlled trials or comparison studies and shown to be a factor in reducing specific risk factors and enhancing specific protective factors and in reducing violent or substance using behavior and enhancing academic success. So the stakeholders can go to a guide that actually allows them to choose specific tested and effective interventions that actually are targeted for the risk factors that they have prioritized. The process of choosing actually involves looking at some information about the program that includes not only what risk or protective factors it addresses, but also, what does it take to implement this program? What organizational capacity do we have to have in order to implement it? Do our teachers need to be trained in new methods of custom instruction? Is this something that we do school-wide or can it be done in an individual classrooms? What does it take to implement this and how much technical assistance what we need to do it? How difficult will it be to do it? How much has this intervention actually been tested with populations like ours (e.g. alternative schools)? Is compatible with our community culture and values? All programs have not been tested with all ethnic and cultural groups so it really becomes the responsibility of stakeholders in the school community to ask, does this program feel like it could work for people in our group and in our community? We have a lot of immigrants from East Africa, will this work with them? We have immigrants from South East Asia, will this work for them? That is a decision that people really need to think about and the best way to do that is to actually assess the programs themselves and see if they have been tested with the population and if not, if they seem like they would work with the population and with the cultures and the values of the groups that we have. Again, what training and technical assistance is required. And is there a way to ensure that we can put this program in place and our intervention in place and do it well and ensure that it is done with fidelity and with quality. Many of these interventions include tools that teachers use as they are doing the programs to check whether they were able to implement effectively and which parts of the program they had difficulty implementing. Observers can also be involved sometimes in helping to assess implementation fidelity. Implementation fidelity is ***key*** to getting the outcome that has been produced in the study that led you to choose these programs and interventions as important to the youth.

Q8. In your experience which is the most used audience to report to about school climate data?

David Osher: I think I would say that there isn't a particularly hard audience categorically. I do think that one has to be intentional about every audience and that includes what we know from social marketing research, which includes being aware of what is the level of readiness that people are to receive the data and to understand the data.

David Hawkins: The other thing that I would add to that is that you respect people's positions. If you have data from a school, it may be beneficial to share it first with the school leadership so that they are not surprised when they see the data and they are not seeing it for the first time in a forum where they may react negatively or be surprised by it. So thinking about who was at stake and who is in the game as they say, and how can I make sure that they are not broadsided by the data when it is made more public might be a thing to think about. Have a decent amount of lead time, so that when the data comes out publically, leadership are actually able to say, "This is it and this is what we are planning to do about it."

Q9. Could you explain how the four point scale was combined into three levels?

David Osher: We have roughly 50 items that go into four scales; each one of those items gives a student respondent four choices—that then makes up the four scales. For the four scales, we developed a standard of interpretation that created statistical algorithms for the reporting. Those standards have been different for different districts; so for example, Chicago wanted one quarter of the schools to need improvement, one quarter of the schools to be excellent and the rest of them in the middle. In other districts that we have worked with, people have wanted us to really develop standards in a more expert-driven way. So we put together national experts and have them go through the survey to identify what would be, for them, a response of a school that is safe and a school that is unsafe.

Q10. On the school level report, how did you translate the Likert scale construct items into categories such as excellent and needs improvement?

David Osher: For every survey report, there have to be cut points. Those cut points are determined in a human way; just like everything else, you want to be strategic in the setting of cut points and you also want to be as objective as possible in the setting of cut points. What we have recommended as the ideal way of setting cut points is a combination of three things: the first is expert judgment; the second is analysis of past data (e.g. about 1 million students have filled out surveys on these types of items already); the third piece is local judgment.

Q11. How do schools deal with the communication/print/production issues that are required to not only "prepare" parents and taxpayers to learn about the survey and the results? It seems very expensive to print and mail information.

David Hawkins: One of the ways that people have communicated this information is actually to put some graphics on the school district website so that people can actually look at the information. In addition, schools actually often do prepare a written report that the principal has on the profile of the school protection for the student population. Cost is often an important consideration in thinking about what you can afford to prepare; fortunately it is possible to produce and distribute information electronically without a great cost of production of written materials. But you want to keep in mind the portion of your population without access to internet connections.

Q12. Do you look at the data for non-responders? If so, how do you do it?

David Hawkins: You can't actually look at data for non-responders because there is no data to look at. The other thing that I need to say is that the survey is administered anonymously in schools so that students are told no one will know how you respond; it is not possible in this particular way to compare the non-responders to the responders. We have done a survey with parental permission to identify survey responders and then we were able to look at responders versus non-responders. Typically what you'll find is that the children who don't respond are actually at higher risk than children who do respond on measures that you can identify in terms of numbers of days absent and etc. We recognize that when we do the surveys, we want to get very high response rates; but we want to get everybody, and those people who do not respond are probably people who are more at risk and probably more engaged with problem behavior. We can help solve that problem by administering the survey multiple times on different days; so if you administer one time, you'll miss some students because of the absences but if you'd administer the survey again in that school to those children who were absent on the first day, then you're going to get a higher proportion.

Q13. What do we do if schools want to use programs they are familiar with, instead of choosing them according to survey results?

David Hawkins: One of the reasons that it is important to have a coalition of people who are working together on this, including stakeholders from the larger communities, is that this is a problem. It is hard to make change and yet if you have people who have learned that there are programs and strategies and interventions that have been tested and shown to produce better outcomes, then that can encourage people to say, “Let's try this new program.” We have found in the 12 exponential committees that, at first, only six of those communities were willing to try new tested and effective programs in response to the data. Because the coalition was there looking at the data every year or every two years and saw that we are still not getting the outcome that we want, people began to make changes; and by the third year of the project, all 12 communities were implementing new tested and effective programs. One of the things I would say is to collect data every couple years; if you're getting the changes that you want with the programs that you're using, well then stick with them. If you are not, then consider new programs with a foundational understanding that says that we should make a change and that we need to make it better for kids.

David Osher: What is really key is that if people want to keep the same programs they’re currently using, start a dialogue about what data they’re using to support the fact these programs are in fact working. If they are persisting, help them collect the data to see if the program are really having the intended benefit that they want. If the data says that the current programs are not working, the staff may be more opening to trying other tested and effective programs at that point.