

Promoting the IYS to Schools

Why Are Some Schools Not ‘Sold’ Yet?

By Bridget Ingebrigtsen

With all of its benefits, the Illinois Youth Survey (IYS) should be an easy sell. It’s free. It’s anonymous. It’s easy to administer. It’s bilingual. It provides local results. And, you don’t even have to pay for postage to return the surveys. The list goes on.

Despite its many positive attributes, not every school is sold on the IYS just yet. The number of participating schools has risen from 91 in 1993 to 555 schools in 2006. While that is a significant jump (510 percent) in participation, IYS administrators would like 100 percent of schools on board.

According to the Illinois State Board of Education,¹ there are 613 public junior high schools, 665 public secondary schools and 116 non-public secondary schools in Illinois. These numbers, when compared to the number of participating schools, provide a sobering perspective of the issue.

Lisa Snider, prevention coordinator for Prairie Center Health Systems in Champaign County, is one Illinois preventionist who faces a seemingly uphill battle trying to get schools in her coverage area to participate in the IYS. Only two schools in her coverage area currently participate. “I have been given no good reason why these schools don’t want

to participate,” Snider said. “There is no way that this survey could be made any better or easier than it is.”

Snider suspects, as many preventionists do, that schools that do not participate are fearful of taking the test because it

may draw negative attention to the school – even though the issues that are addressed in the IYS are a reflection of the community and not the school. Answers remain anonymous, and the IYS focuses on issues globally across a community rather than targeting a particular student or school. But Bill Lapp, principal of Fieldcrest High School in Minonk, can quickly dispel any concerns over negative attention. Fieldcrest High School’s results have never been a subject for the local media, he said.

“We’ve never had any bad press about what came out in the survey. The only bad press I think we would get is if we weren’t making progress in those areas,” Lapp said. “Schools these days are bombarded with these kinds of social issues. They have to be addressed, and I think the school that doesn’t try to address them will get the bad press.”

Alan Markwood, prevention projects coordinator for



Chestnut Health Systems in Bloomington, which administers the IYS for the state, said some administrators question the validity of the survey, while others say they cannot spare the time for “yet another test.” Markwood is quick to point out that the IYS takes only 45 minutes to administer and can be done online or on paper. However, their reasons, or excuses, not to participate in the survey makes community prevention efforts more difficult and less effective, Markwood said. “Substance use is not on a separate planet from academic achievement. If schools are trying to raise academic achievement, they have to look at the social issues, too,” he pointed out.

Satisfied Customers

The IYS provides valuable data not only to the community but to the schools as well. The insight the IYS provides may not be otherwise available to administrators. Fieldcrest High School has been able to use their IYS data in a number of ways to help their students, Lapp said. “You’re not just measuring drug use in the school,” he said. “You’re looking at the goals and aspirations of the students so that you can set programs to help them.”

Because of the results of the IYS, which showed that drug use was high among students when compared to community results, the school re-examined its policy on drug use and, in particular, its stance on punishment for drug use. “It used to be that a student would be suspended for drug use. But now, they will not be suspended if they agree to enter drug rehabilitation. We’re trying to help the students instead of punishing them,” he said.

The benefits of the IYS trickle down to individual teachers as well. The information can be used to target teaching styles and curriculum. Lapp remembers using the IYS data when he was a health teacher in Carthage. “As a teacher, I would use the IYS data from an instructional standpoint to help me determine what my emphasis should be. It helped me to become more goal-oriented as an educator. Did I need to address drug use or was it really self esteem that I had to address? The IYS helped me figure that out.”

Lapp said he thinks it is important for every school to participate, especially those within the same community, to facilitate information sharing. “If I were to talk to another administrator whose school funneled into mine, I would make sure that he or she knows how important it is for me to have them participate in the IYS. That way, I could have information on the eighth grade students, which would help me prepare programming for them and know what the trends are.”

This is Lapp’s third year at Fieldcrest High School. The IYS will be administered this year for the second time since he began

working there. “I am really anxious to see the results this year versus when I started two years ago. I want to see the difference in the senior scores and how they have changed since they were sophomores.”

Jeanne Brady, a prevention specialist for Tazewood Mental Health Center, said one of the best testaments to the IYS is its high rate of repeat participation by schools. Brady also is the facilitator of the CASA (Citizens Against Substance Abuse) Coalition of Woodford County and the Tazewell Teen Initiative-Underage Drinking Prevention Committee. With the 2008 survey, CASA’s coverage area will have 100 percent participation by public schools, Brady said.

“Once schools experience the IYS, they see its value,” Brady said. “A school’s participation in the IYS benefits the whole community. We use data-driven prevention efforts.”

As an example, Brady said, one year when the results of the IYS indicated a high number of students in the area were using alcohol, CASA increased the number of compliance checks. In the next IYS, the community saw a drop in alcohol use among eighth, tenth and twelfth graders.

When compared with other methods of collecting data, the IYS is close to being the most comprehensive and most accurate surveying tool available, Snider said. “I attempt to put together some statistics about our county, but they don’t offer a true picture of what is going on out there,” Snider said. “The IYS would really help.”

Sold for the Future?

While the increase in IYS participation is promising, said Markwood, the numbers are not where state officials and preventionists want or need them to be. “Between 2004 and 2006, the participation rate increased by 40 percent,” Markwood said. “I would like to see participation increase by at least that amount every year.”

The Illinois Department of Human Services and the State Board of Education have more ambitious plans, he said. “Their desired goal is to have 100 percent participation by 2010. I sure hope that happens.”

¹ www.isbe.net/research/pdfs/quickstats_05-06.pdf

Bridget Ingebrigtsen is a freelance writer.