

The Multifaceted IYS Stands Out

What makes the Illinois Youth Survey unique?

By Manjula Batmanathan-Rigg

The acronyms are endless – IYS, IYTS, YRBS, ADAS and more. Each one serves a purpose with one common goal in mind: to gauge the health and well-being of Illinois youth related to risk factors such as alcohol, tobacco, drugs, violence and sexual behaviors.

From local surveys provided free of charge, to national surveys that measure the impact of risky behavior among the country's young population, data-driven surveys are designed to extract information needed to solve problems that threaten the emotional, mental and academic success of the young.

In Illinois, the Illinois Youth Survey (IYS) vies for attention inside the classroom with other popular surveys such as the Illinois Youth Tobacco Survey (ITYS) and the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS).

While no single instrument can claim to provide all the answers, a combination of several different sources of information do arm community leaders, school administrators, teachers and parents to better deal with increasing special concerns, says Mary Ellen Shannon, Prevention First manager of provider services. "Survey results can pinpoint the real issues facing young people in a community. Planning groups that are willing to hear this information can use it to help shift community norms, secure grant funds or target those in greatest need of services. They don't have to guess what the community problems or strengths are, the results tell them."

The IYS does not claim to be the leading authority in assessing youth needs, but it does possess unique factors that warrant more than a glance.

So what makes IYS stand out among the rest?

A Closer Look

IYS is capable of generating multiple reports free of charge for schools, especially individual school reports that detail how students are responding to prevention strategies employed by

the district. As a former program administrator of substance abuse and prevention programs for the Department of Human Services, Shannon describes IYS as the leading comprehensive survey which allows schools to progressively track the changes in behavior over the span of several years [see related article on page 13].

IYS is administered in even-numbered years (2006, 2008, 2010, etc.) and is given to students at grades six, eight, ten and twelve at all participating public and private schools in Illinois. "The survey is unique because it gives a bigger picture of how well youth are doing within a community—not only for a short duration, but over several years as the students move on from one grade level to another," explains Shannon. "It is the only survey that generates multiple reports to meet participants' needs." IYS results are categorized into district, county, regional and statewide reports which are available to the public. Reports are made available in print or online at illinoisyouthsurvey.org.

Individual school reports however are only released to the respective schools and not available to the public. "Schools can make their own decisions about what they would like to do with the report," explains Shannon. "School officials can both study the result and do a comparison of past years' outcome or they can share the information with other schools in the district to evaluate present prevention efforts," says Shannon. Schools can also request population subgroup reports if they are interested in studying trends for a specific student population.

Shannon points out that survey results do not necessarily spell concerns when the data is processed. "Sometimes the data shows that what is perceived to be a problem within a school district is not as prevalent as initially determined," she explains. "Positive results can be advantageous to both the school and the community. It shows that the programs and assistance available are producing positive results... a positive community environment."

Keeping Up with the Trends

Kim Fornero, chief of the Department of Human Services' Bureau of Community-Based and Primary Prevention, says among IYS's strengths is the ability to reevaluate the overall survey each administration year to include emerging alcohol and substance abuse trends.

"Ten years ago, methamphetamine abuse was not as serious a threat in Illinois as it is now, explains Fornero. "But as we examine the survey and the results, we learned meth was becoming a serious concern. IYS took a closer look and redesigned the survey to measure the rate of meth abuse among students at each grade level."

The IYS also is distinct because it is offered free of charge to all Illinois schools and is designed to accommodate up to 15 additional user-defined questions to collect data on local issues unique to the school and the community. Each school comes up with a series of questions, using IYS guidelines, to help them capture data on other trends not captured by the IYS.

Fornero says IYS offers schools and communities the opportunity to view local data taken from local samples and compare it to a general statewide result. "Schools across Illinois are slowly seeing the value of IYS and what it can do for them and their communities," she adds.

In 2006, a total of 555 schools participated in the survey. The 2008 survey has generated 810 school registrations. Not all of the registered schools will participate, but an estimated 700 schools are expected to administer the survey this year.

Fornero, who was instrumental in shifting the focus of IYS from a state survey to a community-based survey, says 100 percent school participation could mean a significant achievement in how IYS is used at state, regional, county and local levels. "Our sights are set high, but I think we are gradually moving in that direction."

Alan Markwood, prevention projects coordinator for Chestnut Health Systems, says IYS results are more important now as educators and human service professionals move toward data-driven practice. "The State Board of Education, the Department of Human Services and many other statewide agencies are looking at IYS results to assist in their planning and joint collaboration efforts," he notes. IYS measures a number of problem behaviors including youth substance abuse rates, violence rates and nutrition, and covers key risk and protective factors that contribute to community-wide substance use.

Reducing Barriers

While IYS continues on the right track, gaining momentum each survey year with more schools participating, a large number of schools remain hesitant to administer the survey.

Markwood says school administrations' reluctance to take on another survey at the expense of reducing classroom hours and reassigning staff time to conduct the survey continues to be a deterrent. "Students face multiple tests and surveys from other sources and school officials are balancing the cost of staff time and classroom time used to take yet another survey," he explains.

IYS results also include National Outcome Measures for Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA) funded grants in addition to Safe and Drug-Free Schools' core measures. "The local data generated is a viable source of information when schools are looking at additional grant options or participation in prevention strategies within their communities [see related article on page 21]. "We are not advocating using IYS as your only source of information," says Markwood. "We are urging using IYS in addition to other sources of information such as the YTS and YRBS."

Valid Results

According to Markwood, when considering participation in the IYS, schools primarily express concerns about the accuracy and validity of the results. Among the threats to validity of the IYS are sampling errors, non-standard administration, missing data, survey construction and untruthful responses.

"Sampling error is not an issue for schools that survey 100 percent of students from the target grade levels, however larger schools that survey only a sample are vulnerable to sampling errors," explains Markwood. Schools can follow the survey administration instruction to avoid errors.

To gauge truthful responses from students, schools also need to emphasize the anonymity of the survey and encourage school staff to convey the importance of the survey to students as a vital source of information about problems facing youth. "If the staff view the survey as unimportant and unintentionally communicate that attitude to the students, the youth also tend to devalue the survey and their role in participating," he explains.

Missing data also can threaten the validity of the survey says Markwood. If IYS is administered on a high absentee day at school, validity is compromised. While the responses may be accurate, the results may not generalize to the entire grade level. He advises keeping track of the percent of eligible students who actually participate in the survey to avoid accuracy problems.

Moving Forward

In July 2007, Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) State Superintendent Chris Koch offered his support to IYS by encouraging all Illinois schools to participate. In a letter to district superintendents, Koch wrote "...the data gathered from the Illinois Youth Survey helps the Illinois State Board

of Education document overall trends and specific issues related to emerging substance abuse and violence, which often impedes a conducive and productive learning environment for all Illinois students.”

Markwood says as a result of Koch’s letter to schools the 2008 IYS registration saw an increase. “ISBE has been IYS’ biggest supporter and they continue to partner with us to promote the survey. I believe we have been very successful in getting more and more schools to see the importance of the survey,” he adds.

“Everyone involved with IYS would love to see the survey used as the standard to measure our youths’ prevention needs and progress,” Markwood says. “While we are not there yet, we are definitely going down the right path.”

Batmanathan-Rigg is communications specialist for Prevention First.

Survey Name	Content	Cost	What Results Do Schools Receive?
American Drug and Alcohol Survey (ADAS)	Rates of use, attitudes, and perceptions about alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs, including ease of obtaining drugs, peer influences, age of onset, and personal problems experienced due to drug use.	\$1.25 per student, plus \$250.00 for a detailed report. Multi-year comparison reports are an additional \$125.	Reports are available for purchase.
Illinois Youth Survey (IYS)	Use of gateway drugs (alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, inhalants), problem behaviors such as bullying, other violence, and nutrition/fitness, and key risk and protective factors. In addition, schools can develop up to 15 local questions to add to each grade level survey. Results on these questions are included in their report.	No cost to any Illinois public or private school to participate and all reports are free.	Schools receive their individual detailed report at no cost, and a free follow-up analysis report is available on request. Other reports available at no cost include: district reports, county reports, regional reports, state reports, and population subgroup reports. Reports are available in print or electronic versions and in English or Spanish.
Illinois Youth Tobacco Survey (IYTS)	Originally conducted to establish a state baseline on smoking and tobacco behaviors, perceptions and general knowledge.	The IYTS is conducted only among randomly selected schools and is free to those who agree to participate.	No school level reports are available.
PRIDE’S “Communities That Care” Survey	Covers a variety of alcohol and other drug usage behaviors, delinquency behaviors, academic achievement, and risk and protective factors for adolescent problem behaviors.	Survey forms are available from SAMSHA free of charge, but to process surveys and provide feedback is \$1.65 per survey.	A printed executive summary of findings. Other reports are available to purchase, such as a multi-year comparison report for \$325.
YRBS – Youth Risk Behaviors Survey	Includes questions about six categories of priority health risk behaviors—behaviors that contribute to unintentional injuries and violence; tobacco use; alcohol and other drug use; sexual behaviors that contribute to unintended pregnancy and STDs, including HIV infection; unhealthy dietary behaviors; and physical inactivity—plus overweight and asthma.	Free if your school is invited to participate or, since this is a publicly owned instrument, schools can use the questions on this survey, but would need to find a resource to process their results.	Individual school reports are not available. State and national results are available online on the CDC’s YRBS Web site.

Source: *Illinois Youth Survey News, August 2007*