

Getting Started

1

Establishing Your Work Group

Truth is stranger than fiction, and often it's a lot harder to believe.

—Unknown

“I’m not a scientist! I just want to help people. That’s what I went to school for, and that’s what I’m good at.” This is the cry of today’s prevention worker. Until a few years ago, a prevention specialist didn’t have to know much about program development, program assessment, or outcome measures. All we had to do was pull the puppet out of the box and read the script that came with it to a classroom full of children. A few years later, when some of those same children began using drugs, we were discouraged. “Why didn’t it work?” “What else could we have done?”

Those two questions are the basis for program development and program assessment. You are probably reading this book because one or both of those tasks have recently been added to your job description. Developing an effective program and assessing program effectiveness has become your responsibility because you (a) have received competitive state or federal funds to implement new programs, (b) coordinate the Safe and Drug Free Schools program, (c) are trying to market your program to a school district that needs to see proof of effectiveness, or (d) simply want to know whether what you have been doing all these years is effective at preventing drug use and violence in the youth you serve.

In 1998, the U.S. Department of Education announced that all funds received under Title IV—Safe and Drug Free Schools and Communities Act State Grant programs—would be governed by the Principles of Effectiveness

(U.S. Department of Education, 1998b) (see Resource A). Most school-based programs that are designed to reduce violence and substance abuse are funded with this money. Once people really understood the Principles, a wave of fear moved through the prevention community. Adhering to the Principles would require data collection, program adjustments, and (gasp!) mathematics. Not only would this become one more responsibility of the already overextended prevention worker, but this also meant that some programs—and jobs—might be eliminated because of the absence of proper “proof” of effectiveness. Suddenly, we all have to show that what we do is effective at changing student behavior.

The Principles of Effectiveness were developed after numerous studies showed that state and federal prevention funding was sometimes misused or spent on eye-catching programs that were aggressively marketed but often not evaluated for their effectiveness in changing drug use and violent behaviors (Dryfoos, 1993; Klitzner, 1987; Sherman et al., 1997). Safe and Drug Free Schools funds were even being spent on programs that had been shown to be ineffective. An exhaustive review of program availability, selection, and implementation funded by the federal government in 1996 (Sherman et al., 1997) showed that research had determined what effective **prevention** methods and techniques were, but most prevention programs still used what was easy or familiar rather than what actually worked (Sherman et al., 1987). The Principles of Effectiveness were developed to start prevention program providers thinking in terms of effectiveness.

These Principles of Effectiveness may or may not apply to you directly, but they do provide a logical and well-grounded direction for how to develop and assess effective programming.

➤ The Principles of Effectiveness

Principle 1

The first principle states that all program implementation will be based on **objective data** about drug use and violence specific to the school and community being served. This means that if you want to continue with a violence prevention program already in place, then you will have to produce the *data*, or the actual numbers, proving that a violence problem that needs preventing exists in the first place.

This principle makes good sense because collecting data and measuring first makes good sense. You would never think about buying curtains for a window you had not measured. You could probably make a good guess, but the curtains wouldn't fit their best unless you measured first. Similarly, you can't fit a program to your population unless you measure that population's needs first. Many communities that have resisted data collection efforts and student surveys will now have to do these things to ensure effective programming and continued funding.

Principle 2

The second principle states that programming will be developed with measurable program goals and objectives based on the data collected and will rely on “proven” programs to meet those goals and objectives. This programming is to be developed with the assistance of a local or regional advisory council. Principle 1 helped us collect the data to determine the actual needs of our population; now Principle 2 directs us to develop programming based on those actual needs. It also specifies that an advisory council representing the school-community be involved. This process is intended to do the following:

- ▶ Eliminate the continuation of ineffective programs.
- ▶ Eliminate decisions being made by a single person.
- ▶ Eliminate continued use of programs that are not meeting the actual needs of your population.
- ▶ Support changes in program direction or program content.

Principle 3

The third principle directs us to select program designs and activities based on scientific research that provides evidence that the strategies used actually reduce or prevent drug use or violence. There is a rich, extensive collection of research on what really works to reduce student drug use and to change attitudes and behaviors. This includes direction on selecting packaged programs, teaching techniques, classroom management, school organizational strategies, and leadership styles, all of which have been proven to reduce substance use and violence. Principle 3 ensures the following:

- ▶ Schools involved in ineffective practices will now be encouraged to replace them with proven approaches.
- ▶ Safe and Drug Free Schools and other state and federal money previously spent on T-shirts, pencils, and narrowly focused, short-term programs will now be better spent on more effective strategies.
- ▶ Lists and collections of “proven and promising programs” will be distributed from a variety of sources to simplify the program selection process.
- ▶ We will all become much more informed consumers of prevention programming.

Principle 3 also means, however, that all Safe and Drug Free Schools or similarly funded programming currently in place must either be replaced

with “proven” programs or “proven” methods or be evaluated to prove that they are themselves effective programs. This second option is the area that seems to strike a chord of concern with prevention workers.

Countless homegrown programs are out there, and many have never been formally measured for their outcome effectiveness. These homegrown programs have been written and designed, not by scientists, but by school counselors, social workers, therapists, agency staff, teachers and students, or just about anyone else who works with youth. Some of these are creative, accurately targeted, and well-implemented programs, but they just haven’t been evaluated. Now they will have to be if certain state and federal funding is to continue to support them.

Principle 4

The fourth principle states that programs will be periodically evaluated to assess progress toward achieving goals and objectives (see Resource B, “Resources for Evaluation”). It initially sounds as if all that’s needed to meet this principle is a sound data collection system. Principle 4 goes on to state, however, that programs that are unable to demonstrate positive outcomes in reducing drug use or violence must be discontinued.

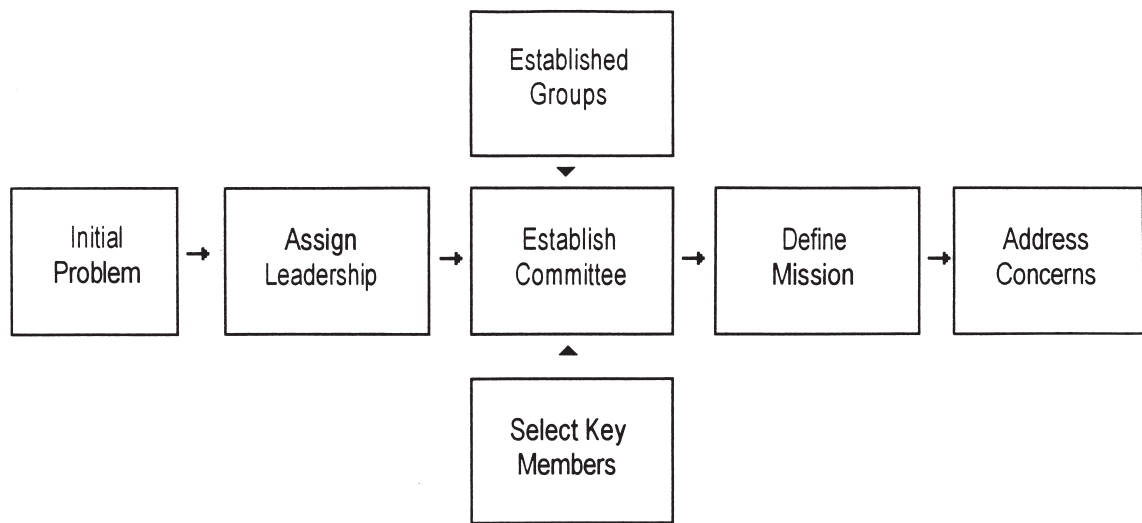
What does all this mean to you? It means that, like it or not, the federal government is going to pull you either willingly or kicking and screaming into the world of science. Say good-bye to easy answers, assessment by opinion, doing what you’ve always done, and blissful ignorance of statistics. Welcome instead to the valid and reliable world of controlled experiments, separation of variables, and number crunching!

➤ Where to Begin

You have to begin developing new programs and protecting your old prevention programs with a structured plan that will measure your program’s outcomes. You will need to collect, organize, and present irrefutable evidence supporting the effectiveness of the work you are doing. This is a necessary process and will help you do the following:

- ▶ Develop an organized data collection system so that you’ll know exactly the needs of your population.
- ▶ Develop programming that is uncluttered, streamlined, and less hit-and-miss because it will be based on the actual needs of your population.
- ▶ Discontinue ineffective program practices.

FIGURE 1.1. Program Development: Flowchart 1



- ▶ Establish a system for program assessment that will ensure accurate information for refining, improving, and strengthening your prevention program.
- ▶ Provide accurate feedback to program planners.
- ▶ Provide real accountability, through your quantitative data, to program supporters and funders.
- ▶ Have real data and “proof” to report program progress and success.

The following five steps will provide an organized beginning to the process of developing effective programs (see Figure 1.1).

Identify the Problem

The first step in developing an effective program is to identify the general problem the program is supposed to fix. This often happens naturally as a concern or question that comes from an administrator, teacher, school staff, or students. “We have to do something about the smoking in the bathrooms.” “The last survey we gave students showed that we had an increase in drug use among ninth graders.” “Do we need to look at some character education programs?” “I’m concerned about the youth violence I’m hearing about on TV. Maybe we should get a violence prevention program here.” Identify the problem and write it down.

Assign Leadership

Once the problem has been identified, someone needs to be in charge. The second step, therefore, is assigning leadership. When selecting a project leader, keep in mind that this process will take time and require a knowledgeable leader who is very organized and who is respected by the school community. Try to avoid giving this assignment to someone who is already overloaded with responsibilities. It simply won't get done. Some districts create a part-time position or expand a current employee to full-time. Using volunteers as committee members is fine, but leadership needs to be a paid position.

Form a Work Group

No one person should be responsible for developing and assessing a program. This is definitely a team effort, working best if a committee or group is in place to help with the data collection, data review, and interpretation. Thus the third step is forming a work group. When determining who should be involved, consider the purpose of your project. If you are developing a drug or violence prevention program, then you will probably want on your committee those individuals who are involved with prevention or health education. If you are assessing implementation or teaching techniques, then you will want more teachers involved. Ideally, this process of data collection and program development will dovetail with the work of preexisting groups, committees, and advisory councils.

Make a real effort to access these preexisting groups, committees, and advisory councils. Most districts have a building planning team, a school improvement team, a health advisory committee, and a Safe and Drug Free Schools advisory group. These groups may already be involved with data collection and the development and assessment of programs. Each of these groups needs similar data in order to do their work. It makes sense to work in cooperation with each other to avoid duplication of efforts.

Because effective violence and drug prevention programming will overlap between these groups, it's a good idea to have broad-based representation from all of them. By creating a blended group that represents a cross section of your community and school programs, you will have a head start in building support for your programs. Starting with the cooperative endeavor of data collection will also assist all groups in working together to implement the most effective and comprehensive programs.

Key members for your group may include the following:

- ▶ *A district employee* who fully understands the software used to track all student referrals.
- ▶ *Classroom teachers* at the grade level where you will be implementing programs.

▣ FIGURE 1.2. Sample Mission Statement

This group has been assembled by [authority], with the support of the Board of Education, to assess the effectiveness of [district] drug and violence prevention programs in a manner that involves all stakeholders and results in recommended changes that will increase the effectiveness of current programming.

- ▶ *Parents and students* who will be participating in the programs that are being assessed.
- ▶ *Members of other key groups and committees* in your school-community, including local businesses and service agencies.
- ▶ *People with expertise or interest in drug and violence prevention programming.*
- ▶ *School board members and an administrator*; it's nice to have representation and support from the real decision makers.
- ▶ *Members from your anticipated opposition*; having this group involved from the very start will reduce program opposition and increase favorable word-of-mouth around the community.

Make sure the people who have committed to help with data collection/analysis and program development and assessment have the time to do this job in a thorough and accurate manner. In some cases, Title IV money can be used to pay stipends for this type of committee work.

Define the Mission

Once this group is together, they need to define their purpose. Thus the fourth step is defining the mission. Refer back to the initially identified “problem” that began this process. What concern brought this group together in the first place? Did an event or incident lead to this assignment? What is the purpose for developing this program? Who’s in charge? Is there administrative support? Is there a timeline for finishing this job? As a group, write a mission statement (see Figure 1.2 for a sample).

Address Concerns at the Beginning

Do we really have to do all this? How do we narrow our focus? It's difficult to sift through everything to determine what is relevant and necessary. This looks very expensive, confusing, and time intensive. How often will this group have to meet? Will we get release-time or stipends? Do we have access to any money? Do we even have a place to meet? This will take *how* long? It seems easier just to do nothing and take our chances.

You do not have to conduct an assessment of all your programming in the first year. To be thorough, you will want to look at consistency of implementation, collect some outcome data to make sure your program is doing what you say it is doing, and monitor your time/cost effectiveness to make things easier when you repeat the program. That's all there is to the fifth step, addressing concerns at the beginning.

With a little planning, you can estimate costs for your work group activities up front and work it into your budget. Program development and assessment need not be confusing, time-consuming, or expensive. This book will walk you through a systematic process of data review, establishment of goals and objectives, collection and synthesis of assessment data, and adjustment of your program to maximize effectiveness. This will be done in normal language, with the only assumption being that you have never done it before.

Conclusion

At the 12th Annual National Prevention Network Research Conference in Buffalo, New York (October 1999), General Barry McCaffrey, Director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy—Office of the President, defended plans to shift Safe and Drug Free Schools money from entitlement to competitive funds. He said that this proposed change in funding was attributable to an “absence of measurable results” and that future funding increases to the Safe and Drug Free Schools program would not occur until there was more accountability for program effectiveness.

Another motivation for developing more effective programs is money. The better able you are to prove that what you are doing is working, the more money will be available to you. The more money at your disposal, the more staff training and programming you can do. The result will be healthier and safer students, and that is everyone's ultimate goal.

Second Thoughts

- ▶ The Principles of Effectiveness were designed to help prevention program providers think in terms of “What’s going to be most effective?” rather than “What’s the easiest way to do this?”
- ▶ Structured program development will enhance your program’s implementation, effectiveness, and accountability.
- ▶ Program development efforts can be time-consuming and require a credible, knowledgeable, paid leader.
- ▶ Program development is a team effort, requiring a committed group of people with a genuine interest in ensuring effective programs.
- ▶ Organization, role definition, and a clear mission will streamline the process and ensure greater effectiveness.