
SHARP Evaluation

School Focus Groups and Interviews

Report

Sponsored by:

**Nebraska Department of Education
Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services**

Administered by:

**Bureau of Sociological Research
University of Nebraska-Lincoln**

*NRPFS is part of the Student Health and Risk
Prevention (SHARP) Surveillance System that administers
surveys to youth enrolled in Nebraska schools*

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Introduction and Overview

Focus groups and phone interviews were conducted during the spring/summer of 2017 in order to evaluate the Student Health and Risk Prevention (SHARP) project and its processes. The Bureau of Sociological Research (BOSR), the project vendor, conducted these focus groups and interviews. The Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) and the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (NDHHS) funded this effort. The following sections describe the methodologies and findings for the 2017 evaluation.

Recruitment and Participants

The goal of the evaluation was to figure out benefits and barriers to SHARP participation. As a result, it was important to hear from schools who have always participated in SHARP, those that do not consistently participate, and schools who never participate for one reason or another. Four SHARP administrations have shown that support for SHARP varies regionally as well. In order to include a mix of these groups, schools with varying levels of support for SHARP were recruited across the state.

First, schools were recruited around the focus group locations. If they were not able to attend the focus group in their area, they were asked to complete a one-on-one qualitative phone interview instead. Most participants represented school districts who have been favorable to SHARP. However, school districts that have not been supportive of SHARP did participate in the occasional focus group or through a phone interview. Most participants were members of the administration (principal or superintendent), but guidance counselors and school nurses were represented as well. The focus groups also included a mix of public and private schools, as well as variation in the number of attendees.

In addition to the school feedback, BOSR also conducted a focus group with high school students through the No Limits program. No Limits is an anti-tobacco youth organization. As a result, these students are different from many of their peers. However, they were able to give valuable feedback for themselves and others with which they go to school.

Administration

The focus groups and interviews were conducted in late April, May and early June 2017. In total, seven focus groups were conducted across the state, including North Platte, Hastings, Omaha, Lincoln, Norfolk, O'Neill, and Scottsbluff. These focus groups took place in Coalition space, Behavior Health Regional offices, a Health Department office, an ESU office, and hotel conference space. Interviews were also conducted with 28 schools during this time. The focus groups averaged one hour in length while the interviews ranged between 15 and 30 minutes.

The interviews and focus groups were recorded in order to help with reporting.

The same questions were used for both the focus groups and the phone interviews. These questions can be found in Appendix A.

Findings

Familiarity with SHARP

Neither focus group participants nor phone respondents knew a lot about the SHARP project when asked. Most admitted that they know of the project, but cannot say more. If respondents could speak to any of the surveys, they were most able to explain the Nebraska Risk and Protective Factor Student Survey (NRPFS). Those who have been asked to participate in more than one survey in the past fairly regularly knew that SHARP included more than one survey, and that BOSR may request different types of information to organize administration.

Benefits of SHARP Participation

Schools who participate regularly in SHARP were able to speak to many benefits of participation. On occasion, schools who have not regularly participated were able to mention benefits as well.

Schools reported that all of the SHARP surveys have the benefit of allowing students to reflect on their behaviors and choices. The surveys are also used as a way to open up dialogue with students about the topics covered in the surveys. The No Limits youth also reported that it is a safe place to share information that they may not yet be comfortable telling others. One even made the point that it could be the first step in students getting help.

Most benefits reported are specific to the NRPFS survey. **The district-level data and trends are a great benefit of SHARP participation.** These data allow schools to monitor student health and wellness, find gaps in intervention and prevention, and determine curriculum and program needs. Some schools reported that they were able to obtain grants and other funding through the data. One school even mentioned that it takes the emotion out of the decisions to act by having concrete numbers. Others reported that the data could be used to back some of what they are seeing, and also identify issues of which they were not aware.

No one in the focus groups or interviewed knew that the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) and Youth Tobacco Survey (YTS) reports existed. As a result, they have not utilized these data. The schools did explain that they want state-level data. They realize that problems are local, but explained that anything happening in other parts of the state could be in their area within a year.

Participants did confirm that **fall is still the best time of year to administer the SHARP surveys.** Many also mentioned that they see the flexibility of scheduling administration and ability to select different types of classes for sampling as benefits.

Barriers to SHARP Participation

Time was the most common barrier to participation across all of the focus groups and phone interviews, both in terms of the amount of class time that schools have available for SHARP and the time it takes for students to complete the surveys.

Schools reported many demands on classroom time. They have to spend a certain amount of classroom time on testing, including MAPS, NESAS, ACT, and ASVAB. In addition, some of this testing

happens at the same time as SHARP and affects the same students. For example, the MAPS testing also takes place in the fall, and includes the same grade levels as the NRPFS.

Schools, large and small, also reported that they are asked to administer many other surveys in a year. These requests come from Gallup, Naviance, Bright Bytes, and the United Way to name some. Area universities will also request to conduct research in their schools. Some schools reported that they receive a new survey request every week. Students are also asked to complete a number of internal surveys for food services, mental health, school improvement, and technology. These internal surveys are commonplace across the state regardless of school size. Lastly, some schools expressed the difficulty in getting students in one grade together to complete the NRPFS. In high schools, students are normally only ever together by grade in core classes. As a result, they have to utilize core classes to complete surveys, which takes away from that instruction time, and can lead to teacher resistance.

In summary, not only are surveys competing against required testing and necessary instruction time, they also compete for some of the same students who can only be found collectively in core classes.

The length of the surveys was also mentioned at every focus group and in many phone interviews. For some schools, the length of the surveys is a major barrier to participation in SHARP. While a few school districts feel the surveys should stay at the length they currently are, the overwhelming consensus was that **the surveys should be 15 to 20 minutes maximum**. Some schools made the point that these surveys take even longer for students where English is their second language or they have reading issues, and these students tend to be the most at risk students. Others made the point that the surveys take the longest for students most at risk as well.

Many schools also discussed the use of paper-pencil surveys as an obstacle. These schools explained that the process would be much faster and easier on their end if the surveys were administered on-line.

Teacher buy-in was not an issue for many schools involved. However, it is an issue for many other schools included in the focus groups or interviews. As mentioned above, teachers are continually losing class time from testing, especially in core classes. These schools explained that in addition to testing, teachers are regularly losing class time when students are pulled out of class for extracurricular activities. As a result, they push back when they are asked to use class time for surveys as well. One of the No Limits students even reported that their teacher was not happy that the survey took away from class time, and asked the students to hurry through the survey.

Many of the barriers given focused on reporting. Because none of the schools included knew the YRBS or YTS reports existed, the barriers given are specific to NRPFS. **Most schools do not know what to do with the data.** Many do not have time to try to figure out what they are supposed to do with it either. In some cases, the respondents explained that they never see the NRPFS report for their school district, because the superintendent does not pass it along. **Many schools also explained that they do not receive the results back quickly enough to do anything with them.** This is a major barrier for some. Some middle schools in larger school districts do not use the 8th grade data because the students are off to high school by the time they get the report. Some schools mentioned that this causes issues with student and teacher buy-in, because they never see the results.

The surveys themselves also create obstacles. The sensitive topics are a hard sell for some schools due to school administrators, the school board, and/or parents. They know these topics are important, but cannot get the buy-in they need sometimes. Some schools are required to take surveys with the topics included in the SHARP surveys to their school board. Some schools criticized that the topics overlap across all of the surveys.

One school reported that the 8th grade students do not understand the questions they are asked. They always have multiple students raise their hands when they do not understand a question, and they are concerned how many others have questions but do not raise their hand. The No Limits students backed-up this concern by explaining that they would either skip or give the best answer they could if they were unsure of a question. None of them would raise their hand for clarification or help.

Several schools also reported skepticism that students are honest and take the surveys seriously. Students in the No Limits focus group echoed these concerns.

The No Limits youth also expressed concerns about the formatting of the NRPFS. They found the tables confusing and overwhelming. Once they began reading the survey, they realized it was not as overwhelming as they thought it would be, but reported that students would not want to participate in the survey if they perceive it as cumbersome.

Recommendations

SHARP Education

SHARP familiarity could increase through the dissemination of the YRBS and YTS reports. Seeing reports from all three surveys will hopefully give schools the ability to understand the differences and strengths of each survey.

Also, participants at the Norfolk focus group explained that e-mail and phone calls are the best way to communicate with them. Perhaps educational and promotional materials should be delivered via these two mediums instead of through the mail and webinars.

Move to Web Administration

The overwhelming recommendation is to move administration to web. While a few school administrators argued that paper-pencil is actually easier to administer, the vast majority argued that it would make administration much faster and easier. **However, the move to web is only a deal breaker for a couple of schools interviewed.** The schools argued that almost all Nebraska schools are now one-to-one. Because most testing is done over the web, schools and students are used to web-administration. Administrators argued that students could complete the surveys faster as well.

If the right web-application was used, the schools could get their results much faster. One administrator hoped for a report within a week or two. This would help schools be able to utilize the data more quickly. Some schools even argued that they could get better student and teacher buy-in because they would be able to present the data and show how it is valuable.

Schools did disagree, however, on how students would view the security of the data. Some schools argued that students would feel that their responses were more secure on the computer. However, another school explained that they teach their students that data is not always confidential on computers and can be tracked through IP addresses. The No Limits focus group brought another

student concern to light. The students explained that their **teachers and school administrators could look at their screens while they are at school**. In some schools, students are not made aware that they are being monitored, but in other schools, the software will give them an alert that they are being monitored. Some students even reported that their parents have the same ability at home.

One focus group discussed the importance of students being able to complete the survey at home, while other schools argued the importance of students taking the survey during school hours even if it is not during a designated period. Others want the students to all complete the survey at the same time to prevent the students from talking to each other about it.

Based on this feedback, we recommend that students be able to **complete the survey on-line any time during school hours**. The survey link would be turned on in the morning, and then shut off at the end of the school day. The school administrators would have to remind students frequently. The No Limits students expressed concern that they would forget about it with all of the homework and activities they have. There was also a great deal of variation in how frequently students checked their school e-mail. If the survey link and/or reminders were sent out to students via their school email accounts, school administrators would have to regularly remind students to complete the survey and potentially be prepared to help students access their e-mail accounts for those that do not do so regularly.

Of course, schools with web monitoring abilities will need to make adequate protections for student confidentiality to make sure the data stay anonymous and students feel their data are safe enough to answer honestly. The No Limits students suggested shutting off the monitoring software during administration or having the survey administrators, teachers and administration sign something that they will not look at student screens while they are completing the survey.

It is worth noting that BOSR does not have the ability to administer such a large web project. A new vendor would have to be found in order to facilitate SHARP web administration.

Survey Changes

While a handful of schools would like the surveys to remain at their current lengths in order to maintain their trend data, **the majority of schools want the surveys to be shorter**. Their requested lengths ranged from five to twenty minutes, but 15 to 20 minutes was the most commonly requested length.

Schools with more diverse student populations also requested that the surveys be made available in other languages. Spanish was the most commonly requested language.

Schools also requested additional topics be added to the surveys. The most common topic is social media. Schools want to know about the frequency of inappropriate social media use, how many students have accounts their parents do not know about, and the frequency of meeting strangers online. Other requested topics included human trafficking, depression, self-harm, and cyber safety. Administrators also reported that many topics already covered by the surveys need to remain. These topics included substance use, student perception, anxiety, nutrition, home life, parent awareness, and protective measures. Stakeholders who participated in the focus groups also expressed the importance of keeping the DFC measures on the NRPFS as well. While YRBS includes nutrition questions, schools requested that this topic be covered on the NRPFS as well for local data. The No Limits youth echoed

many of these topics recommending that the NRPFSS ask about nutrition, fresh food availability at home, body insecurity, and human trafficking.

The NRPFSS questionnaire will also need to be formatted with fewer tables to appear easier to complete. In order to do so, the survey will have to be shortened to allow for the needed space of questions outside of a grid.

The No Limits students also suggested the use of Yes/No questions, because they are easier to complete. As a result, BOSR recommends minimizing the complexity of the survey questions wherever possible. Perhaps the substance use questions could be made into Yes/No questions given that they are only reported this way. The Age of First use questions might also be reduced with fewer age ranges.

Lastly, the NRPFSS should be pretested with 8th graders to understand how well they comprehend the questions asked of them.

Reporting/Data Assistance

The first step in reporting assistance is to make sure that the NRPFSS report is getting to those who need it at each school. As a result, we recommend that school nurses, counselors, and other points of contact during administration be notified when the report is delivered to the superintendent in addition to principals.

Most schools reported that they need help in knowing what to do with their data. Schools pointed out a lack of local collaboration. One school suggested building better State-level collaboration through the Nebraska Council of Administrators, NDE Days, Health/PE teacher organizations, and other related organizations.

One focus group specifically asked for local support or local programs to help with the issues they face. They explained that they want to be able to do something about the issues their students face, but do not have the access or resources to get the students the help they need. They hoped that local stakeholders could help facilitate connections between schools and the needed resources. Many schools would also like local stakeholders to connect them with other schools facing the same issues or with potential solutions that they can utilize. **The State and local coalitions should inform schools of webinars or events near them that focus on youth-related issues, such as suicide prevention.** Schools could share in the same education opportunities as State employees. Perhaps more webinars or events could be hosted geared specifically to schools, as well.

The State and stakeholders will need to be proactive in contacting schools. Schools mentioned over and over again that they do not have time to seek out resources or figure out what they are supposed to do with their data. Instead, they need the State and stakeholders to come to them. The data gathered, especially from the NRPFSS, has the ability to be a huge selling point for SHARP participation. This requires that schools know what to do with the data, know how to use this powerful tool, and see the benefits from the data and resources it provides.

Participants also requested an idea sheet on how to use the data and whom they can contact for assistance in reviewing their report. Others schools also requested that someone come into the school to help share the data with students. One focus group asked for help with press releases to get the results out into the community.

BOSR strongly recommends that the State and stakeholders consider school use of SHARP data as one of their top priorities in combatting increased recruitment difficulties.

Another common request was that the schools need the results faster. This is a deal breaker for some schools. They do not see the value in participating in SHARP if they cannot get the results within the same school year in time to do something with the data before students leave for the summer. Specifically, schools would like the results within a month or two of administration. Ideally, schools would like results by February or March of the same school year.

Lastly, the schools need to be aware when the YRBS and YTS reports are posted. One school asked that the State website be sent to them as a link instead of sending the reports themselves.

Teacher Buy-In

Few schools requested help with teacher buy-in. However, those who did had a very easy recommendation that can be included in the SHARP administration process without problem. These schools asked for a teacher letter that mimics the consent language sent to home to parents. This would help teachers understand the benefits of the surveys.

Student Buy-In

Many schools explained that students will buy-in to a survey if they know it is important and will help the school. The No Limits students had a number of recommendations to increase student buy-in and as a result, increase honest responses. The students suggested sharing the results with the students. Students would then understand why they were asked to participate in the survey and why it is important. These youth also suggested telling students about the honesty criteria used to screen out dishonest students. They feel that students would be less likely to answer dishonestly if they knew their data would be thrown out. They would instead simply be wasting their own time.

Parent/School Board Buy-In

Sensitive topics are a difficult sell for some parents and school boards. As a result, sensitive topics should be avoided when creating the surveys wherever possible. Also, the State and local coalitions should put together fact sheets on why these data are important and how they are used. This information could be made available on the SHARP website and then as needed to get school administrators on board or for them to provide to parents and school board members for participation approval.

Conclusions

SHARP still has support across the State. However, changes will need to be made in order to adapt to the many demands placed on schools. Schools advocated for shorter surveys and web administration to ease the impact on limited class time. Schools also need to see results from the data they provided for the YRBS or YTS and know what they can do with the NRPFS data they receive in order for participation to justify the interruption. More can be done to increase teacher, student, and parent buy-in as well.

Appendices

Appendix A: Questions

School Focus Group Topic Ideas

- How familiar are you with SHARP?
 - Probe: How familiar are you with the specific SHARP surveys?
- What benefits do you see from participating in SHARP?
 - Probe: Incentives? Data/report?
 - Probe: What about the data/report is beneficial?
 - Probe: Do these benefits differ by SHARP survey?
 - If so, how?
 - Probe: Are there any benefits that can be made better?
 - Information gathered? Reporting?
- What barriers do you see for participating in SHARP?
 - Probe: Are there any other external factors?
 - Community perception?
 - Other surveys?
 - Probe: Are there any other internal factors?
 - School board? Students? Parents?
 - Probe: Do these barriers differ by SHARP survey?
 - If so, how?
- What can the State do to help alleviate these barriers?
 - Probe: How can the State alleviate internal barriers?
 - Probe: How can the State alleviate external barriers?
 - Probe: What changes to the surveys or processes need to be made to maintain or increase participation?
- Any other comments?

Appendix B: AAPOR Transparency Initiative Immediate Disclosure Items

1. Who sponsored the research **Introduction and Overview**
2. Who conducted it. **Introduction and Overview**
3. If who conducted it is different from the sponsor, the original sources of funding will also be disclosed. **Introduction and Overview**
4. A definition of the population under study and its geographic location. **Recruitment and Participants**
5. The instrumentation used (e.g., questionnaires, discussion guides), a description of the data collection strategies employed (e.g., focus groups, semi-structured interviews), and the language(s) used. **Appendix A**
6. A description of any relevant stimuli, such as visual or sensory exhibits or show cards. **Not Applicable**
7. The physical location of all data collection activities (e.g., subject home, office/workplace, clinic, focus group facility, street corner). **Administration**
8. A description of subject eligibility (e.g., age or gender requirements) and the procedures employed to screen and recruit research subjects. **Recruitment and Participants**
9. The number of research subjects, by data collection strategy. **Administration**
10. Methods of interviewer and/or coder training, supervision, and monitoring, if interviewers or coders were used. **Not Applicable**
11. Duration of research participation (e.g., length of interviews, focus group sessions). **Administration**
12. Any compensation/incentives provided to research subjects. **Not Applicable**
14. Information regarding whether or not data collection included audio or video recordings. **Administration**
15. If the results reported are based on multiple samples or multiple modes, the preceding items will be disclosed for each. **Not Applicable**