# Preparing to Evaluate
# a School Violence Prevention Program:
# *Students Against Violence Everywhere*

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**ABSTRACT.** After introducing a promising school violence prevention program, *Students Against Violence Everywhere* (S.A.V.E.), this article describes a process for program staff to use in preparing for program evaluations. It suggests ten evaluation questions to use as guidelines to prepare essential information about the program to be evaluated. The rest of the article describes the program information prepared by S.A.V.E. staff to inform evaluators about S.A.V.E., their purposes in seeking evaluation, the questions they wanted an evaluation to answer, their descriptions of the evaluation's challenges, and their suggestions for the evaluation design. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2002 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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School Resource Officer Mike Bryant expected a few dozen students to attend the first meeting of a new anti-violence club, Students Against Violence Everywhere (S.A.V.E.), at North Asheboro Middle School in North Carolina in February of 2000. Instead, about 100 students–a fourth of the school–showed up. A year later North Asheboro Middle School was named one of 25 Super Safe Schools in the state by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. The award "recognizes public schools that go above and beyond in their efforts to ensure the safety of students and staff" (Reese, 2001, p. B1).

The number of out-of-school suspensions and reportable crimes at North Asheboro had dropped according to Principal Eric Hall. Further evidence of the school's reduction in violence was that 93 out-of-school suspensions were issued during the 1999-2000 school year, down from 209 during the 1997-1998 school year (Reese, 2001).

The principal attributed these reductions to a change in the school's atmosphere. According to Hall, officials at North Asheboro quickly inform parents about children who are threatening other student's safety. Hall also described a strong desire among students to maintain a safe school and noted that most of the school's students recently signed a voluntary S.A.V.E. pledge against violence (Reese, 2001).

The story from North Asheboro is one of many examples of successful implementations of the S.A.V.E. program collected by the National Association of Students Against Violence Everywhere. This national, nonprofit organization provides students the information and resources necessary to make a difference in safety efforts in schools and communities. The National S.A.V.E. staff had observed S.A.V.E. chapters making a positive difference across the nation. They gathered evidence indicating that S.A.V.E. is an effective organization. For example, the reported number of weapons brought to school by students had dropped and incidents involving violence were down at many schools with S.A.V.E. chapters. Administrators had reported that students' attitudes had changed to reflect the more positive themes of S.A.V.E.

The S.A.V.E. staff was pleased with the initial feedback from the program's implementation on a national level; they knew something positive was going on; and they decided it was time to have a formal evaluation of the national program conducted by an external evaluator. They consulted with an evaluation specialist on hiring an external evaluator and preparing for the evaluation process. The consultant suggested a series of preliminary questions to guide the preparation for the evaluation and to provide a document to use in soliciting the services of an outside evaluation team.

## *PREPARING FOR EVALUATION*

The evaluation consultant stressed the importance of having S.A.V.E. staff provide the program evaluators with parameters and specifications for the evaluation to increase the likelihood that the evaluation would meet the program's needs. The consultant suggested that the S.A.V.E. staff prepare answers to specific evaluation preparation questions. The answers to these questions could be presented to prospective evaluators to explain what the S.A.V.E. staff was looking for in an evaluation.

### *Evaluation Preparation Questions*

1. What is a brief description of your program?
2. What makes your program unique?
3. What is a brief history of the program?
4. What are the program's mission, vision, and goals?
5. What are the core elements of the program?
6. What are the major purposes of the evaluation?
7. What guiding questions do you suggest for each of the purposes?
8. Who are the anticipated audiences for the evaluation?
9. What design challenges will the evaluation have to handle?
10. What specific suggestions do you have for the evaluation?

The consultant stressed that program staff needs to remain flexible with regard to its answers to questions 7, 9, and 10. There needs to be room for dialogue between program staff and evaluation staff in the design of the evaluation.

The rest of this article presents the answers the S.A.V.E. staff compiled in preparation for a formal program evaluation.

## *DESCRIPTION OF THE S.A.V.E. PROGRAM*

The National Association of Students Against Violence Everywhere (S.A.V.E.) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing students, parents, school administrators, law enforcement, and community organizations tools to help prevent violence in their schools and communities. Through a cadre of volunteers and the resourcefulness of over 80,000 students, S.A.V.E. chapters are growing and making a positive difference across the nation.

S.A.V.E. spreads the program's message by providing activities, materials, training, and technical support to S.A.V.E. chapters in high schools, middle schools, and elementary schools. High school and middle school S.A.V.E. programs usually operate as clubs. At the elementary level, S.A.V.E. is usually part of the curriculum in the school day. The S.A.V.E. lessons integrate knowledge and skills from language arts, social studies, science, mathematics, arts and guidance.

S.A.V.E. provides education about the effects and consequences of violence and helps provide safe extracurricular activities for students, parents and communities.

S.A.V.E. is open to all students who want to support an attitude of nonviolence.

S.A.V.E. chapters meet regularly to learn about alternatives to violence and to promote their message of nonviolence to other schools and throughout the community. School participation restrictions may vary.

S.A.V.E. activities provide students with opportunities to practice and reinforce important academic skills as they learn to manage conflicts commonly found in school settings, to mediate disputes among their peers, and to contribute to ensuring safe and nonviolent schools.

S.A.V.E. strives to teach the skills of nonviolence to students at an early age and reinforce these skills throughout their school years to enhance their ability to be resilient to environmental and school risk factors.

## UNIQUE FEATURES OF THE S.A.V.E. PROGRAM

- S.A.V.E. is a unique and powerful approach to school safety because it recognizes the role that young people can take in making schools and communities safer.
- S.A.V.E. chapters are established and operated by students to enhance the opportunity to spread the message of nonviolence to young people and their communities. By involving students in the various aspects of school violence prevention, including safe school planning, ongoing extracurricular activities, and activities to heighten awareness, students have a sense of ownership in providing safer environments for learning.
- S.A.V.E. represents a prevention-oriented, proactive approach to decreasing the potential for violence in schools and communities.
- S.A.V.E. is cost effective. Minimal expenses for chapters may include the cost of necessary supplies (i.e., paper for newsletters, poster paper, etc.), and local businesses have shown an eagerness to

    help promote the ideals of S.A.V.E. by donating products and money.
- S.A.V.E. participants learn skills that have the potential to last throughout their lives.

## *HISTORY AND BACKGROUND OF THE S.A.V.E. PROGRAM*

In April of 1989, over 200 students from West Charlotte Senior High School gathered at a party. A carload of young men from a rival school showed up armed with baseball bats and looking for trouble. One of the intruders pulled a gun and started firing random shots. As teens panicked, 17-year-old Alex Orange stepped forward. Alex, a fullback on the West Charlotte football team, was a young man who looked out for other people. Alex grabbed the gun and tried to wrestle it away. His grip slipped and the gun's owner fired into his chest. Alex fell to the floor. Surrounded by shaken friends and schoolmates, he held on for a few moments and then died.

Alex could have been just another statistic. But the following Monday morning, grieving students refused to let that happen. A special friend, Angela Bynum, a special teacher, Gary Weart, and Alex's classmates did not want him to become just another statistic. On the Monday morning after his death, students put on orange armbands and gathered in the school cafeteria with a vow to organize against violence in Alex's memory. The group formed Students Against Violence Everywhere (S.A.V.E.).

The S.A.V.E. message spread rapidly and soon students were forming chapters from coast to coast and even in other nations. Believing that S.A.V.E. needed to be introduced to students earlier in life to make a lasting difference, high school and middle school chapters began visiting elementary schools to spread the S.A.V.E. message and provide students with alternatives to violence.

In 1992, in response to several violent tragedies affecting elementary school students, Grace Stanley, a very creative teacher, heard about S.A.V.E. in high schools and middle schools and wondered why it was not implemented at the elementary level. She started the first elementary chapter in Charlotte, NC. Soon S.A.V.E. began receiving requests for information from elementary schools, so S.A.V.E. developed an elementary curriculum.

S.A.V.E. promotes the virtues of peace, civility, and violence prevention through compassion by helping students of all ages learn how to respect themselves and other people. The program was started as a result of student's compassion for Alex Orange; they were drawn together to learn to respect each other.

Communication plays a big role in S.A.V.E. The organization takes its message to schools and tells the story about Alex Orange and the consequences of violence. Through role-playing and discussions about conflict and respect, students learn ways to end violence. "I think it takes children to talk to children," says Dawn Orange, Alex's mother. "Evidently, we've made a mess of things, and it's going to take young people to straighten it out. S.A.V.E. is one of the most honorable clubs you can belong to, because it's about saving young people" (Penninger, 1996).

Chevrolet, a company interested in supporting a non-profit youth development organization, provided S.A.V.E. support to conduct a pilot program in four southeastern sites during the 20002001 school year. The success of the pilot prompted Chevrolet to continue to include S.A.V.E. in its community service initiative, Chevy R.O.C.K.: Reaching Out to Communities and Kids. Chevy R.O.C.K. is Chevrolet's response to the nation's top priority of providing children with safe schools and communities to ensure that they develop the skills needed to grow to their full potential.

In 2001-2002, support from Chevrolet is being used for outreach, training, and evaluation in five target areas across the country: Detroit, Orlando, San Antonio, San Diego, and Tampa. The goal is to increase the number of chapters in these markets. Currently S.A.V.E. has 800 chapters in 34 states. With Chevrolet's support, S.A.V.E. will develop and enhance its educational materials; educate and conduct outreach to teachers and students on how to start a S.A.V.E. chapter; and develop a team of trainers who will conduct local S.A.V.E. workshops and provide technical assistance to new and existing chapters.

## THE S.A.V.E. PROGRAM'S VISION, MISSION, AND GOALS

### Vision of S.A.V.E.

All students will be actively involved in meaningful safer school and community efforts so that every student will be able to attend a school that is safe and secure, free of fear, and conducive to learning.

### Mission of S.A.V.E.

The National Association of Students Against Violence Everywhere (S.A.V.E.) Inc. is a national, nonprofit organization striving to decrease the potential for violence in schools and communities by promoting mean-

ingful student involvement in efforts to provide safer environments for learning.

### S.A.V.E. Goals

- Promote the forming of pro-active, long term, violence prevention programs that are student-initiated, student-owned, and student-driven.
- Encourage opportunities that enhance positive youth development and involve members in crime prevention, conflict management, and service learning project activities.
- Make the S.A.V.E. message available for all students and schools across the country.
- Decrease the potential for school violence by creating environments conducive to learning through increasing student involvement.
- Assist in the development of responsible young citizens that feel a part of, and a need to improve upon, their community.

## CORE ELEMENTS OF S.A.V.E.

### S.A.V.E. Chapters

- Focus on violence prevention in the school and community.
- Strive to decrease the potential for violence in the school and community.
- Utilize crime prevention strategies in violence prevention activities.
- Promote peaceful conflict management strategies and positive anger management techniques.
- Enhance student involvement in violence prevention activities through service learning and community service.
- Provide others with a positive peer influence by promoting peace, civility, and nonviolence.
- Connect students in meaningful ways to school safety efforts.
- Advocate for appropriate and healthy behaviors.
- Build resiliency skills through problem solving, critical thinking, and decision making.

### MAJOR PURPOSES OF THE S.A.V.E. EVALUATION

The major purpose of an evaluation of S.A.V.E. is to determine whether the program makes a difference in reducing school violence. But, before asking "Does it work?," it is important to determine what "it" is and that "it" has actually been implemented. Therefore, prior to evaluating the program's impact or effectiveness, it is important to evaluate its implementation. This phase of the evaluation should determine the extent to which the program has been implemented at various sites, which aspects of the program are working well, and where there may be problems. The results of the implementation will provide information to make mid-course corrections to the program, prior to its being evaluated for effectiveness.

As the *W. K. Kellogg Foundation Evaluation Handbook* (1998) points out, "Effective evaluation is not an 'event' that occurs at the end of a project, but is an ongoing process which helps decision makers better understand the project . . . . Evaluation should not be conducted simply to prove that a project worked, but also to improve the way it works" (p. 3).

Another purpose described in the *Evaluation Handbook* (1998) is to "lead to more effective programs, greater learning opportunities, and better knowledge of what works" (p. I). That is, in addition to informing about program implementation and effectiveness, evaluation should also provide information to those who want to replicate the program or design new programs.

With this multipurpose approach in mind, the S.A.V.E. evaluation should have three major purposes: Implementation Evaluation, Impact Evaluation, and Essential Elements Evaluation.

### Implementation Evaluation

The purpose of implementation evaluation is to document the extent to which sites actually use S.A.V.E. recommended strategies appropriately. This aspect of the S.A.V.E. evaluation should look at the extent to which each school site implemented the key components of S.A.V.E., which aspects of the program are working well, which aspects of the program are having problems, and what obstacles may be preventing schools from fully implementing the program.

### Impact Evaluation

The purpose of the S.A.V.E. impact evaluation is to determine the impact of S.A.V.E. on key indicators of school violence. For example, this

aspect of the evaluation should provide evidence of the effectiveness of S.A.V.E. in reducing in-school fights, violence-related suspensions, and weapon carrying at school. It should seek to document what has changed in the school environment because of the S.A.V.E. program. It should look for items suggested by Flannery (2000):

- Reduced problem behaviors, aggression, delinquency, or violence.
- Increased student attendance and academic achievement.
- Reduced discipline visits to the office.

### Essential Elements Evaluation

The purpose of this aspect of the S.A.V.E. evaluation is to describe which aspects of the program work well in which contexts. It should seek to describe which characteristics of schools, districts, and communities affect program outcomes and which components stakeholders value (e.g., training, materials, communication from national center, sense of community, involvement in service learning activities, etc.). Identifying these essential elements should prove useful to those who wish to replicate the program or those who are creating other programs to reduce school violence.

## GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR THE S.A.V.E. EVALUATION

To assure that the evaluation provides useful information to program staff, funders, and other stakeholders, representatives of these groups were interviewed to determine the kind of information they could use. The concerns of the various stakeholders were incorporated into questions and organized into categories representing the three purposes of the S.A.V.E. evaluation.

### Implementation Evaluation Questions

1. To what extent has each school site implemented the key components of S.A.V.E.?
2. What aspects of the program are working well?
3. What aspects of the program are having problems?
4. What obstacles are preventing the school from fully implementing the program?

5.  What evidence is there that the program is working as intended? What progress has been made toward program objectives?
6.  What are the recommendations for the second year implementation?

### *Impact Evaluation Questions*

1.  How has S.A.V.E. impacted the overall school environment on indicators such as those listed below?
    *   Number of suspensions.
    *   Incidences of disciplinary action.
    *   Number of violent/physical confrontations.
    *   Peaceful resolutions to conflict.
    *   Overall environment.
2.  How visible is S.A.V.E. in a school and how does it impact the overall school environment?
3.  What do students think of S.A.V.E. at the school? (Is it "cool" to be associated with the group?)
4.  Does the school environment become more positive (fewer conflicts) as the school has more S.A.V.E. members (as S.A.V.E. is more visible)?
5.  How has S.A.V.E. impacted students on an individual level?
6.  What are the "real stories" that back up the numbers ("I've learned how to resolve conflicts peacefully, for example. . . ." or "Being a part of the S.A.V.E. team has given me self-confidence and the opportunity to become a leader in my school. . . .")?
7.  How does S.A.V.E. impact students long-term? (Follow S.A.V.E. students from elementary through high school.)
8.  What is the long-term success of S.A.V.E. in developing nonviolent, empowered, and successful youth?

### *Essential Elements Evaluation Questions*

1.  What are the characteristics of schools that promote successful S.A.V.E. chapters?
2.  What characteristics and activities of the various S.A.V.E. chapters correlate with success in achieving the goals of S.A.V.E.?
3.  Which services and materials provided by the National S.A.V.E. organization do chapter leaders value?

These questions were given to evaluators to guide the design of the study; however, their use did not preclude other questions from being added to the study, especially during the implementation phase.

## *ANTICIPATED AUDIENCES FOR THE S.A.V.E. EVALUATION*

The various groups who have an interest in the implementation and impact of the program and who would, therefore, have an interest in the evaluation results include:

- Program directors who seek information to improve the program.
- Program funders who want evidence of the implementation and outcomes of programs they fund.
- Educators, parents, and law enforcement representatives who are looking for effective violence prevention programs.
- Organizations that provide funding for research and evaluation.
- Organizations that fund promising violence prevention programs.
- Media who might publicize the program.

## *DESIGN CHALLENGES OF THE S.A.V.E. EVALUATION*

The evaluation questions described above present challenges that need to be addressed in designing the S.A.V.E. evaluation. The list below represents an initial attempt to describe the challenges and is in no way meant to be an exhaustive list.

- Challenge: The need to conduct a broad scope evaluation of a national program within the resources available.
- Challenge: The program gives students flexibility in how they implement the core elements of S.A.V.E. in their local S.A.V.E. chapters.
- Challenge: Schools are likely to have other violence prevention activities going on simultaneously.
- Challenge: The need to find appropriate comparison groups willing to participate.
- Challenge: The need to find additional funding for longitudinal, in-depth outcome studies.

## *SPECIFIC SUGGESTIONS FOR THE S.A.V.E. EVALUATION*

Considering the evaluation questions and the challenges they provide, the following design suggestions serve to further define the expectations of the evaluation.

- Suggestion: Use a Mixed Method Design.

The evaluation questions point to a strong need for statistics, especially in the area of impact. For example, it would be important to determine the number of incidents of school violence reported prior to S.A.V.E. compared with the number of such incidents reported after S.A.V.E. implementation. This need would indicate a quantitative design. At the same time, the questions also ask for information about the impact of the program on individual students. The stakeholders want to know the "real stories" behind the statistics. This type of information is best revealed thorough an in-depth qualitative approach. So, although some evaluation researchers prefer to do either a quantitative or a qualitative study, the S.A.V.E. evaluation needs an evaluation that employs both types of methods.

- Suggestion: Conduct formative (implementation) evaluation during the first year of the national implementation.

The implementation evaluation should include documenting program implementation, identifying program strengths and weaknesses, making recommendations for improvement, and establishing baseline information.

- Suggestion: During the first year, focus on new sites.

In order to establish baseline data such as a school's ratings on indicators as well as on essential program components prior to program implementation, it would be important to collect data from schools that are new to the S.A.V.E. program.

- Suggestion: During the first year conduct pre- and post-assessments.

Although the first year is primarily devoted to implementation evaluation, the results of pre- and post-assessments are of interest to stakeholders.

- Suggestion: Create a different design for the elementary program, which differs from the program at middle school and high school.

- Suggestion: Use S.A.V.E. staff members to assist with evaluation where appropriate.

To conduct an implementation evaluation within the budget requirements, use S.A.V.E. staff members to carry out several evaluation tasks under the evaluator's guidance. For example, during the first year, conduct a survey to gather data from the other existing sites.

- Suggestion: Conduct summative (outcome) evaluation during subsequent years.

Document the extent to which S.A.V.E. schools experienced a decrease in violence indicators; the active involvement of students, teachers, parents, administrators, and parents as a result of S.A.V.E.; and the impact on the school and community. Design a comparison study with a control group comparable to the program group. Make recommendations for improvement and for replication.

## *RESULTS OF EVALUATION PREPARATION*

The advance work done in preparation for evaluation led to several positive results for the S.A.V.E. organization. First, it encouraged the staff to think about evaluation issues early in the process and to clarify their thinking about their program and its anticipated effects. Next, it allowed S.A.V.E. to map out a strategy for immediate and long-term evaluation. They could see how the evaluation could be broken up into stages.

Most importantly, the advanced preparation saved the program time and resources because the evaluators were able to spend their time designing the actual evaluation without having to gather information about program background, goals, and evaluation purposes.

For the 2001 to 2002 school year, S.A.V.E. hired Evaluation and Training Institute (ETI) in Los Angeles to conduct the implementation evaluation. S.A.V.E. provided ETI researchers with the background information, including history and goals, and focused their attention on the evaluation questions devoted to implementation evaluation. ETI designed an evaluation based on this information with results expected in July 2002.

As the implementation evaluation is being conducted, the national S.A.V.E. organization is using the background information and the specific evaluation questions to seek funding and proposals to conduct impact evaluation and essential elements evaluation.

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