

## **AUSTIN ISD Title IV Safe & Drug-Free Schools & Communities Evaluation Report, 2002-2003 Selected Findings**

In our society and in education today, the safety and health of our children is a concern. Children should be able to come to school ready to learn and be able to learn in a safe environment. However, this is not the case in many schools. In the Austin Independent School District (AISD), a large urban school district with over 78,000 students, student violence and substance use (e.g., tobacco, alcohol, marijuana and other drugs) exist. The number of students disciplined for verbal and physical violence significantly increased by 14% at AISD between 2001-02 and 2002-03. Reflective of the overall increase in the number of students disciplined for violent offenses, student safety (e.g., fighting, harassment, and threats) has remained the most frequently reported concern for both staff and students by a wide margin. Still, the majority of students (93%) and staff (98%) surveyed at AISD report feeling at least somewhat safe at school. In a reverse of past trends, the number of students disciplined in AISD for the use or possession of drugs (e.g., marijuana, ecstasy, etc.), increased by 31% percent since 2001-2002. The number of students disciplined for both tobacco and alcohol remained relatively stable. Student self-report surveys revealed that AISD students showed similar trends in prevalence and frequency of substance use as in past years. Notably, alcohol was once again the most prevalent substance that students reported using within the last month. This year's data reconfirms past evidence that substance use generally increases by grade level. This is in spite of the fact that most students acknowledge the dangers of youth substance use, and they confirm receiving such information at school.

### **How is AISD Addressing the Prevention of School Violence?**

AISD receives federal funds through the U. S. Department of Education's Title IV Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities (SDFSC) grant program, a part of the Improving America's School Act of 1994. The purpose of Title IV SDFSC is to supplement local schools' efforts to eliminate violence and the use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs among students. The goals of the grant are to reduce student drug use, reduce student violence, increase parent and community involvement in school, and increase student involvement in school. Grant funds are funneled from the U.S. Department of Education, through state education agencies (e.g., the Texas Education Agency), to school districts and other entities at the local level. AISD has received federal funding through the Title IV grant since the 1987-88 school year. However, in recent years, there has been a significant reduction in the state dollars available for drug and violence prevention.

AISD uses a multi-faceted approach to the prevention and reduction of student substance use and violence. This approach includes student programs at both the campus and district levels, as well as districtwide support services. AISD requires each campus to address violence prevention in its campus improvement plan. Each secondary campus in AISD was allotted funds with which to conduct their own student program initiatives based on individual campus needs. Overall, campus administrators reported positive outcomes as a result of their programs, including decreased discipline referrals and increased student knowledge about the dangers of substance use. In addition to the campus level student programs, the districtwide student programs (PAL, ROPES, and INVEST/Positive Families) served over 5,600 students as well as many staff members and other adults. The PAL program (Peer Assistance and Leadership) is a student peer-mentoring program that allows middle and high school students to be mentors to younger students in AISD. The ROPES program (Reality Oriented Physical Experiential Session) is a student leadership development program that provides opportunities for students to learn leadership and decision making skills and to foster cooperative group problem solving. INVEST/Positive

Families are short-term interventions that allow students who have been removed to the district's Alternative Learning Center (for either persistent misbehavior or for first time misdemeanor drug or alcohol use or possession offenses) and their families to improve skills in problem solving, anger management, and communication. These three programs have provided AISD students with services and experiences to promote healthy involvement in school and community, gain essential personal skills, and reduce their vulnerability to the dangers of substance abuse and violence.

Support services also contributed to districtwide prevention efforts. School Support Community Specialists provided consultation and technical assistance to individual campus administrators regarding the effective use of their campus funds. Two drug prevention counselors provided service referrals and other focused services at two AISD schools with high at-risk student populations, and one program specialist in Guidance and Counseling provided staff development and leadership regarding promoting healthy, safe schools to all AISD school counselors.

The AISD Title IV Advisory Council provided a bi-monthly forum for input and collaboration from community agencies. Many of these agencies (e.g., Lifeworks, Safe Place, Communities in Schools, and YWCA) partnered with the district by providing in-kind services at numerous AISD schools. In addition, AISD staff supported by other federal and local grants that have overlapping goals (e.g., the Middle School Coordinators and Elementary School Counseling grants), participated in the Advisory Council.

*For the full report, call Austin ISD Office of Program Evaluation, (512) 414-1724, or view the report on the Austin ISD Internet site at <http://www.austin.isd.tenet.edu/about/accountability/ope/reports.phtml>. The 2002-2003 report will be available and posted in November 2003.*