

# **Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey Project Evaluation**

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## ***I. Introduction***

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The Youth Risk Assessment Survey (YRBS) has been implemented every two years in the state of Vermont since 1995. The survey is administered by middle and high schools in the fall, with data released during the following spring. The utilization of the YRBS data has generally been left to the prerogative of school personnel, local social service agencies, and community-based organizations.

In 2007 the Vermont Department of Education (VT DOE) utilized funding from their cooperative agreement with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to pursue an innovative approach to using the YRBS results to inform strategic interventions in schools and communities to address selected areas of need. The approach pursued by the VT DOE built on the growing awareness and appreciation of the role that youth engagement and leadership can play in fostering healthy behaviors among youth. Drawing on a youth action research design, the VT DOE hired consultant Helen Beattie, Ed.D. to create and implement the Vermont YRBS Project.

The importance of youth engagement for prosocial and healthy behaviors and academic achievement have been widely noted.<sup>1</sup> The social capital possessed by engaged youth supports their positive growth through the development of strong youth-adult ties. Strong parental involvement has long been understood as an important factor leading to the health behaviors and academic successes of young people.<sup>2</sup> School counselors, administrators and teachers, as well as community social service professionals have implemented a wide array of projects, programs and curriculum designed to strengthen the bonds between youth and adults, particularly for those young people with weaker parental involvement. The Vermont YRBS project described here fits into this category of projects. However, another strong factor leading to healthy youth behavior and academic achievement is the role that peer to peer interactions play. “Peer pressure” has long been recognized as a negative factor leading to increased drug and alcohol use, teenage sexual activities and the like. However, peer pressure can also have a positive influence, as recognized in the successes of some youth abstinence groups, anti-drunk driving initiatives, and “Project Graduation” programs fueled by youth involvement. The Vermont YRBS project is also constructed on the appreciation that youth peer to peer engagement is a critical factor in building stronger and healthier youth behaviors.

Thus, the Vermont YRBS project is premised on the assumption that when youth and adults work together they may achieve more than if they were operating in silos on their own. Teams of youth are recruited from participating schools and facilitated by one

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<sup>1</sup> See Appleton J., Christenson, S. and Furlong, M. (2002). Student engagement with school: Critical conceptual and methodological issues of the construct. *New Directions for Youth Development*. 96: 27-46; Minkler, M. (2000). Using participatory action research to build healthy communities. *Public Health Reports*. 115: 191-197.; Ginwright, S. and James T. (2002). From assets to agents of change: Social justice, organizing, and youth development. *New Directions for Youth Development*. 96: 47-68.

<sup>2</sup> See Ginwright and James (2002).

or two adult coordinators. Together these teams are provided training, written materials and networking opportunities over the course of their year of involvement. A small grant is awarded to the team to cover some costs associated with events, which include a data analysis retreat, and community dialogue night, action plan development and participation in a final conference.

The central function of these teams is to take the YRBS survey results for their community and to ascertain what actions should be pursued to mitigate some of the underlying factors that have given rise to some of the more troublesome results. The team approaches this data through the lens of “action research,” in which evidence culled through sound research is utilized to inform subsequent actions.

Since 2007, sixteen school communities have participated in the Vermont YRBS project. In the fall of 2010, the project leaders Kate O’Neill and Helen Beattie commissioned this evaluation of the Vermont YRBS project. The central questions driving this evaluation are:

- How effective was the structure and execution of the YRBS process as it unfolded within the participating school communities?
- What were the perceived impacts of the school community’s involvement in the project? In terms of the youth engaged in the project? In terms of the wider school community?

This final report of the evaluation is organized into three additional sections. In part II we discuss the methods employed in this study. Part III discusses the results of the research, broken down by the component parts of the Vermont YRBS project and some summative assessments drawn from the data. Part IV provides an analysis of these results and a set of recommendations.

## ***II. Overview of evaluation methods employed***

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Drawing upon a utilization-focused program evaluation approach,<sup>3</sup> the evaluation was structured around two central considerations: What are the intended uses of the evaluation data? and Who are the intended users of this data? This evaluation is designed to be used to inform the future development of the Vermont YRBS project and the possible replication of the model in other locations. The immediate uses of this evaluation will be to determine the efficacy of the project to achieve its desired goals.

The evaluator undertook a mixed methods approach to program evaluation, combining interviews, participant observations, and surveys. Specifically, these data collection methods included:

- **Phone interview with past and present project coordinators.** Twelve (from a total of sixteen) current and past adult project coordinators were interviewed by phone between January 2011 and June 2011.
- **Surveys of community dialogue night participants.** Three of the schools involved in the project during the 2010-2011 academic year administered community dialogue night surveys.
- **Surveys of student participants.** Eight of the schools involved in the project during the 2010-2011 academic year had their students complete a student survey. A total of 32 students completed the survey.
- **Observations of one training and the final conference.** The evaluator attended the second of two training sessions held for participants in the fall of 2010. He also attended the final conference held in May of 2011. Field notes were compiled from these observations.

Notes compiled from the interviews and observations were coded by major theme (see outline below) and sub-themes. The results of the survey were analyzed in Excel and reported out as basic descriptive statistics.

Several observations need to be made regarding the data collection process. The high percentage of past and present project coordinators interviewed make the interview the most salient data source for this evaluation. The student surveys were completed by a majority of the core student participants, however, surveys were not completed by all participating students. Students from previous years were not surveyed. Thus, the survey results should be viewed with these caveats in mind. Lastly, the community dialogue night survey data was the most incomplete data source, as not all schools collected these surveys.

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<sup>3</sup> Patton, M. (2002). Utilization-focused Evaluation. *Evaluation in Education and Human Services*. 49: 425-438.

### III. Findings

The findings section is divided into major headings: getting involved; structure; perceptions of project components; perceptions of impacts; and sustainability of project. These findings are presented here in the aggregate. Variations in perceptions will be noted as warranted.

**Table 1. School Communities Participating in Vermont YRBS Project from 2008 to 2011**

SCHOOL	YEAR	MIDDLE SCHOOL	HIGH SCHOOL	STUDENT TEAM COMPOSITION	ADULT LEAD POSITION
<b>Participated in interviews</b>					
<b>Bellows Free Academy</b>	'10-'11		X	SADD student group	SAP counselor
<b>Lamoille Union MS</b>	'10-'11	X		Student council; all 8 <sup>th</sup> graders	SAP counselor
<b>Long Trail HS</b>	'10-'11		X	Mostly seniors; recruited from math course	SAP counselor
<b>Milton MS</b>	'10-'11	X		Middle of the road students; met during lunches	SAP counselor
<b>Mount Abraham HS</b>	'08-'09		X	VTLSB	SAP counselor
<b>Rutland HS</b>	'10-'11		X	Combined student council and GMYI	SAP counselor
<b>Spaulding HS/ Barre Town MS/ Barre City MS</b>	'10-'11	X	X	Mixed MS & HS; recruited students	SAP counselors
<b>Vergennes</b>	'09-'10; '10-'11	X	X	Recruited from each grade—8 to 12	SAP counselor
<b>Walden MS</b>	'10-'11	X		Entire 8 <sup>th</sup> grade	Teacher
<b>Williamstown HS</b>	'09-'10		X	Student council; mostly seniors	Principal
<b>Williston MS</b>	'09-'10	X		VCAT group; racially diverse; mix of at-risk and high achievers	SAP Counselor
<b>Winsor Central HS</b>	'09-'10		X	Recruited from most engaged students	Community coalition coordinator (outside of school); teacher
<b>Did not participate in interviews</b>					
<b>Hazen Union HS</b>	'09-'10				
<b>Mount Mansfield HS</b>	'08-'09				
<b>Peoples Academy HS</b>	'08-'09				
<b>South Burlington HS</b>	'08-'09				

**A. *Learning about / decision to get involved in YRBS project***

When asked how the school community got involved in the YRBS project the following responses were given: through social service network presentations (3 schools); SAP network presentations (4 schools); the VT DOE newsletter (2 schools); and direct contact by project leaders (2 schools). These findings suggest that presentations to networks of community social service professionals and school counselors were the most effective approaches for recruiting participating school communities, followed by newsletter articles and direct contacts. All of the participating school communities had prior knowledge of the YRBS survey and saw this opportunity as a means of using this data to drive strategic actions.

**B. *Structure and composition of YRBS projects***

The structure of the YRBS projects in the different school communities generally took on one of two different kinds of structures: the teams met during the course of the school day or the teams met outside the school day. The determination of which approach was employed hinged on two factors: the flexibility of the school schedule to accommodate a project like this and the position of the lead adult coordinator of the project. In those school communities that embedded the projects in the school day the school schedule was flexible enough to accommodate the project (e.g. lunch blocks were long enough to be used; a floating extended block was available for use; or the project was embedded into an existing course or courses). In most instances, the school's Student Assistance Professional (SAP) Counselor served as the lead adult coordinator and was given access to all of the school's resources. In a few instances the project was coordinated by a social service professional operating outside of the school. In all cases, school grounds were used for meetings.

The adult coordinators reported varying degree of involvement and support coming from the school administration. Some administrators were active supporters of the project, dropping in to see the students and offering financial resources. Other administrators took a more hand-off approach. In a few instances the project was linked to existing courses, as in the case of one math class's involvement in the analysis of the YRBS data and in another instance in which the entire 8<sup>th</sup> grade was involved and linked the project to their ongoing studies.

The composition of the student teams varied drastically across schools. Twenty-two point five percent of the participating school involved middle school students from grades 7 to 8; 20% involved both middle and high school students, and 62.5% were focused on high school students. The relative heterogeneity of the groups of students varied drastically as well. Some student teams were mostly comprised of high achieving students, while other schools had more mixed groups of students—including those from diverse racial background and at-risk status. All student teams were relatively balanced along gender lines. Some students were recruited from standing leadership groups or clubs. Some schools had existing SADD chapters that were natural venues for recruiting students. It should be noted that in the instances where these groups had already existed,

the coordinators reported a stronger likelihood that the YRBS project would be sustained, a point that we will return to later.

In most instances the adult coordinators reported slight to substantial drop off of core student involvement over the course of the year, suggesting the need to “front load” more activities earlier in the process to harness the early enthusiasm for the project. The extent to which the students who were involved as core students represented the most at-risk youth is a point that was noted by some and something that we will return to again later in the report.

As was noted in the introduction, the basic components of the YRBS project involved a series of trainings put on by the statewide project leaders; written materials put together by these leaders; a data analysis retreat; a community dialogue night; the development of an action plan; and participation in a final year end conference.

**Table 2: Student perceptions of project components (1= very ineffective; 4 = very effective)**

	n	mean
First training	21	3.10
Second training	14	3.14
Data analysis retreat	22	3.40
Community dialogue night	24	2.80
Action plan	23	3.23
End of year conference	16	3.25

1. **Training sessions.** Two trainings were held during the fall for all of the youth and adult team members. These trainings involved all of the schools in the project for the year, providing opportunity for people to meet and network with others. The first training was designed to orient the teams to the goals and structure of the project. Teams were prepared to undertake the data analysis the retreat. The second training was shorter and focused on the development of the community dialogue nights and to a lesser extent the development of action plans.

Adult coordinators reported that the first training session was very important for them to develop a deeper understanding of what the project entailed. Seeing other teams in the room placed added emphasis that they needed to perform as expected because other teams would be hearing their reports in future sessions. One adult reported that she felt that it was “eye opening” for her students to see other students motivated about the project.

Some of the students reported that they did not understand all of the material and that the session “lacked organization.” Others students felt that the session was very well organized and engaging. The majority of the students responded that the first training was effective (3.1).



The second training was held in the evening. Again, both adults and youth reported that the session was useful, with some students citing that the session was a somewhat “boring.” The use of hands-on examples was mentioned as being very important. The timing of the session in the evening was challenging for some of the schools that had to travel great distances. Arriving home at 10 pm or 11 pm on a school night was mentioned as a problem. The students that attended the session were generally positive about the training (3.14).

In summing the perceptions of the two trainings two things stood out. The first was the frequent mentioning of the value of having youth leading some of the sessions. Seeing a fellow student facilitating the training was said to be inspiring and very effective. The second consistent observation had to do with the value of, as well as the complexity of, having the different school teams networking with each other. Getting a chance to meet other teens motivated some students. Seeing the enthusiasm for the project of peers was viewed as contagious. Sharing ideas across schools was viewed as very helpful. However, the fact that the variation in ages (from 7<sup>th</sup> graders to 12<sup>th</sup> graders) was viewed as a challenge for some. The ways in which some sensitive topics were discussed between 12 year olds and 17 years olds was viewed as challenging. Some of the younger students appeared to be a little intimidated by having to speak up in front of much older students.

2. **Written materials.** When asked about the written materials prepared by the project leaders, the adult coordinators uniformly expressed an appreciation for the comprehensiveness and quality of these materials. The only draw back cited was the lack of clarity around how prescriptive these materials are, e.g. “can we deviate from these to create our own process?”

3. **Data analysis retreat.** All of the schools that took part in the evaluation study held a data analysis retreat. These sessions were planned by the core adult-youth teams and were then to involve a wider array of students. The retreat was to last for an extended period of time (half to a full day) and preferably occur off school grounds. The exercise was to result in the identification of three major areas of concern to work on and address in their action plans.

Almost all of the participating schools undertook the data analysis retreat as half day or full day exercise in a location outside of school. One school reported undertaking a series of shorter data analysis sessions. Those that held their retreat off campus used some of the grant funds to secure a comfortable location and food. The adult coordinators reported that the setting helped to set the tone. All of the analysis retreats/sessions were facilitated by the core students.

The number of other students who participated in the retreats varied, from only the same core group of students to others reporting an additional 30 students participating. Some schools reported challenges with recruiting these students, citing that the turn out really depended on the level of effort and skill that the core students had in bringing their peers in to the session. Challenges relating to the school schedule and the

willingness of school leaders to release students from their schedules was also cited as a challenge for some schools. The students that were surveyed widely recognized that the retreat of “the best part of this project.” The student scores for this component were the highest of all (3.40). They reported that the exercise helped them to narrow down their focus.

All of the adult coordinators reported that they let their student leaders facilitate the session and that for the most part this process went very well. In many instances the coordinators were surprised by the kinds of findings that the students focused on. In some instances the students focused on relatively small percentages of risky behavior, noting that “any percentages of students engaged in behavior X was too many.” Some adult coordinators noted that they would have selected areas with higher rates of risky behavior, but honored the process. This observation suggests something about the nature of adult and youth perceptions of risky behavior and what amounts to a bigger problem over others. In some instances the adults were not clear how much direction they should give. In the end, all of the adult coordinators said they honored the students’ selection of their three highest risk factors.

4. **Community dialogue night.** As a critical piece of the process was to plan and host a community dialogue night. These sessions serve as the way to disseminate the results of the YRBS and for the students to highlight the key issues that had surfaced for them during the data analysis retreat. The vast majority of schools completed this activity with only one exception. Planning for dialogue night was the central focus of the second training. Ideas for promoting and implementing the nights were provided.

Several challenges faced all of the groups. Getting a critical mass of people to the event was uniformly viewed as a challenge. In several cases events had to be postponed due to snow. In other cases the dialogue night had to compete with other events in the community. With the exception of a few schools, all adults and most students reported that they were disappointed with the turnout for this event. Some ideas from those schools that had larger turnouts included holding the dialogue night in conjunction with another event. For example, one school coupled the dialogue night with a talent show in which the students put on a skit about the data.

**Table 3. Community Dialogue Night Survey Results (1=strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree with the statement)**

		n	Mean
1.	The YRBS survey results were clearly presented.	46	3.4
2.	I did <u>not</u> learn anything new about youth risk behaviors.	46	1.68 (3.32)
3.	I believe that the participants at this forum will be stimulated to take action to reduce the health risks faced by young people in my community.	46	3.28
4.	The students' passion for and ownership of this project was clearly evident today.	46	3.39
5.	I think the survey results presented here has motivated our community to work together to promote healthy youth behaviors.	46	3.21
6.	I was very surprised by some of the results from the survey.	46	3.2
7.	Tonight's forum was well organized.	46	3.19
8.	I understand the asset web activity and appreciate its purpose in the evening.	46	3.1
9.	Tonight we explored some of the root causes and potential solutions to some of the more wide spread unhealthy behaviors identified in the survey.	46	3.34
10.	I am clear about the purpose and goals of tonight's forum.	46	3.3
11.	I would be interested in learning more about how I can get involved in some of the ideas discussed tonight.	46	3.04

Survey responses were obtained from only three schools. Of the 46 completed who completed the surveys, 37 were students, 6 were parents, 2 were staff and 1 person was from the community but not a parent. Table 2 suggests that those people who did attend reported that the event was well organization (3.19 out of a score of 4.0); that the students' passion was evident (3.39), that the goals were clear (3.3) and the participants were motivated to take some action (3.04).

When asked about how they learned about the dialogue night the following survey responses were reported: 16 people said they heard about it at a meeting or class announcement; 13 people received an email about the event; 12 people heard about it word of mouth; 12 read about the event in a newsletter; and 2 people heard about the event on the radio (multiple sources were possible). These findings suggest that a diversified promotional campaign is most fitting.

The adult coordinators and student leaders felt that the event was worthwhile and that some good ideas for their action plans were identified. The participants reported specific things that they learned from the forum ranging from new awareness about teen sexual activity to risky behaviors that they had no awareness of prior (for example, that laxatives are abused to stay thin).

Several schools "took the show on the road." At least two teams made presentations to their local school boards, one made a presentation to the faculty, and another visited several middle school classes. Taking the information to these different groups was cited as an important way to build synergies around the action plan development.

5. **Action plan.** Designed to occur after the dialogue night, most schools reported that they had generated an action plan. Several schools reported that they did not complete this step for one of two reasons: they ran out of time or they ran out of energy. Of those that ran out of time, most were intending to pick up the action planning process next year.

The action planning process itself was undertaken by the core team of the adult coordinator(s) and the core student group. In some instances other stakeholders joined the team at this phase. Community social service professionals, school administrator, or health educators joined the action planning group in these instances.

Those that completed their action plans were able to devise specific steps to be taken. A list of proposed actions is provided:

#### **Action Plan Items Reported in Interviews**

Revise sex education curriculum (Williston).

Meet with crisis team and science teachers (Williston).

Develop new VCAP group to improve community perceptions of youth (Williston).

Review of planning room and guidance practices (Williston).

Institute the Positive Behavioral Incentive Framework (PBIF) (Williston).

Add units to the health curriculum on inhalants and alcohol abuse (Williston).

Devise a book discussion based on promoting positive self esteem (Milton).

Engage in a information campaign that “seatbelts are cool” (Milton).

Add unit on laxatives and self esteem to health curriculum (Milton).

Encourage students to take YRBS seriously the next time it gets distributed (Milton).

Incorporate a self defense unit into the health curriculum (Rutland).

Develop peer led program focusing on positive teen relationships (Rutland).

Hire a new SAP coordinator (Rutland).

Facilitate more dialogues, inviting more parents to show up (Lamoille; Mt. Abe).

Develop outreach plan to the elementary schools (get to them early) (Vergennes).

Develop school wide service-learning project with a health focus (Mt. Abe).

Push food services to offer healthier food options (Mt. Abe).

Start *good news* section of local paper to promote positive views of youth (Mt. Abe).

Promote a “healthy kids” initiative (Winsor).

Develop a “kids matter” community group (Winsor).

Revise alcohol and tobacco policies in the school (Winsor).

Support teachers to enforce policies already in place (Winsor).

These action plan items can be grouped under one of several themes: curricular revisions; creation of new policies; enforcement of existing policies; creation of new community groups; engage in public information projects; change systems; hire new personnel; and engage in more dialogue. Some adult coordinators noted that some action plan items were already being planned for, but that the YRBS project helped to add momentum to the effort.

6. **End of year conference.** About one half of the 2010-2011 schools were able to attend the end of the year conference held in Montpelier. This conference was sponsored by the Vermont Rural Partnership and involved schools engaged in other projects in addition to YRBS. The YRBS teams that did attend hosted a table and gave a brief report out to the larger group. Those schools that did not attend reported that it was difficult to get their students released for the day. Of those that did attend this event there was a general consensus that the event lacked focus and relevance. Some of the students were shy to share their work and speak with other students.

### C. Perceived impacts

It is difficult to isolate the impacts of this project for either the participating students, youth in the community, or within schools. The evaluation design would not accommodate a more in depth, longitudinal study of the impacts of this experience on the individual youth leaders who participated in some or all of the YRBS related activities, the levels risk behaviors reported in future YRBS results, lasting changes to school curriculum, community intervention strategies, community awareness, and youth led initiatives.

We are able to report back what those interviewed and surveyed perceived to be the impacts of this project on student development and learning, at-risk behaviors, community awareness and additional interventions.

1. **Impacts for students who were a part of the core YRBS team.** A survey was made accessible to all student members of the YRBS team. In the survey we asked about which aspects of the YRBS process they participated in, and their assessment of what they had learned and acquired through their involvement in the project.

**Table 4: Results from core student survey (1=strong disagree with the statement; 5 = strongly agree with the statement)**

	n	mean
1.) As a result of participating in the YRBS project this year I learned a great deal about the <b>healthy and unhealthy habits</b> of my peers.	32	4.19
2.) As a result of participating in the YRBS project this year I learned that there is <b>nothing that I can do to improve the health and safety</b> of my fellow students.	32	1.50 (3.50)
3.) As a result of participating in the YRBS project this year I developed a strong sense that I, personally, <b>can make a difference</b> in my community.	32	4.00
4.) As a result of participating in the YRBS project this year I increased my <b>awareness in health-related issues</b> .	32	4.03
5.) As a result of participating in the YRBS project this year I discovered or enhanced an interest in <b>health care as a possible career choice</b> (for example, I've increased my interest in becoming a health educator, a doctor, a nurse, a social workers, or a counselor).	32	3.00
6.) As a result of participating in the YRBS project this year I learned that it is <b>very hard to work with other adults and students</b> on a project like this.	32	2.33 (2.67)
7.) As a result of participating in the YRBS project this year I learned how to more effectively <b>work on teams</b> .	32	3.69
8.) As a result of participating in the YRBS project this year I developed <b>stronger communication skills</b> .	32	3.53
9.) I believe that the process of collectively analyzing the YRBS survey results in this way will lead to <b>meaningful changes in my school or community</b> .	32	3.84

These results consistently show that the core students involved in the project perceived that their involvement raised their awareness regarding healthy behavior (see responses to questions 1, 2 and 4). Their sense of “locus of control,” meaning their sense that they personally can have an impact on their communities was also rated very highly (see response to questions 3 and 9). Lastly, the students appear to have learned better communication skills, how to work with adults, and how to work in teams (see responses to questions 6,7 and 8).

2. **Impacts on youth behavior.** The data collected through the YRBS is an obvious source of data to track the impact of any interventions on youth behavior. Changes in patterns of self reported behavior may be inferred back to the kinds of interventions suggested through a YRBS project. The reports from the community dialogue night regarding the new insights about youth health behaviors may, in the long run, lead to changes in behaviors or provide warning signals for those involved in the life of a youth who is at risk. Arguably, one prevented suicide, one intervention into an abusive relationship, one person spared the suffering resulting from anorexia provides a certain level of return on investment in projects like this.

3. **Impacts on the community.** The larger impacts on a community’s perceptions of youth at risk behavior is an other way to assessment project impacts. The low turnouts at most community dialogue nights do not suggest as wide an exposure to

the YRBS data that is presumably possible. We can say with a great deal of certainty that the YRBS project in each of these communities exposed them to a statistically significant and imminently important information about the behaviors of youth within their own communities. Some schools promoted dialogue night events over the radio, in newspapers and on websites spreading the knowledge that this data is available for use.

4. **Impacts on schools.** There is a long and rich history of projects and programs designed to engage youth, communities and school professionals in developing collective approaches to change be it the reduction of truancy and drop outs, the application of more effective pedagogy, the transformation of a food service, or the development of new curriculum and assessments. The YRBS project fits well within the family of projects designed to engage youth in challenging, but important community development work.

The empowerment of young people to take some responsibility for tackling these challenges is clearly evident in these projects. There is strong evidence to suggest that the adults who listened to these students were impacted by the evidence and the range of solutions proposed by them. Action plans have been devised in many of the schools to address specific concerns about youth health behavior. The majority of the proposed action items were directed at changes in school practices, be it new health curriculum, more staff supports, or new policies, student projects and clubs. The extent to which these action items reached the stages of being implementing was not addressed in the evaluation.

#### **D. Sustainability**

All of the schools that participated in the evaluation reported significant efforts to carry out all or substantial parts of the YRBS project. Although some schools reported substantial challenges to completing the project, all of the adult coordinators interviewed expressed a desire to undertake all or parts of the YRBS project model in the future. At least three of the five schools that were interviewed that had undertaken the project in 08-09 and 09-10 reported that they continue to convene youth to look at the YRBS data. The two year cycle that the YRBS follows provides some natural breaks in the continuity for the work. New sets of students will need to be recruited in many cases. Those schools that recruited younger students into the initial year of the project have the benefit of relying on some experienced students in future years.

In most instances the adult coordinator was an SAP counselor in the school. Most believe that carrying out this project in conjunction with their duties is possible. Although one SAP counselor reported that her position had been cut back, the capacity to sustain existed in most schools. A majority of the adult coordinators reported that the stipend they received to cover miscellaneous expenses from the VT DOE was important, however they believed that the future application of the YRBS model did not necessarily hinge on the school stipend. This observation will be reiterated in the recommendations section below.

## IV. Analysis

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In the previous section we discussed the range of findings to be drawn from the evaluation. In this section a summary of the success factors, the challenges, and recommendation for the future are provided.

### A. Success factors

1. **Youth engagement.** The central premise behind the Vermont YRBS project is that engaging youth in the analysis of health data about themselves and their peers can lead to the generation of effective strategies for promoting healthy youth behavior. The adult coordinators, the core student team members, and those who completed community dialogue night surveys all indicated that there is a significant value to having youth lead dialogues and action planning processes around proposed solutions.
2. **Strong project design, trainings and mentorship.** The role of the state level project leaders was touted as a strong facet of the project. The training and written materials, the role of youth as trainers, and the availability of state level project staff was uniformly praised. The accessibility of Helen Beattie, in particular, was noted by many adult coordinators.
3. **Opportunities to network and learn from other schools.** Although some of the middle schools reported some dis-ease with combining middle and high school students into the same trainings, most adults and youth reported that they saw a real benefit from interacting with other teams because of the chance to share ideas or draw inspiration from each other.
4. **Alignment with existing student assistance programs and community-based social service programs.** The majority of the projects were coordinated by one or more school SAP counselors. As school staff, they were able to link to teachers and school administrators and be positioned to have their action plans accepted. In the two schools that were coordinated by social service professionals operating outside of the school context were able to leverage their ties with community-based organizations and statewide student leadership projects. The visibility of the YRBS project was reported to play a role in raising the visibility of healthy youth behaviors and the need for programs designed to promote healthy behavior.

### B. Challenges



1. **Consistency of youth involvement.** Some of the schools struggled with keeping a critical mass of students engaged in the project over time. The variation in how the student teams were composed does not allow us to conclude what the major drivers of student turnover in these projects are. Adult coordinators strongly recognized the importance of getting the right mix of students (in terms of grade levels, diverse backgrounds, etc.). A variety of challenges associated with keeping youth engaged included scheduling challenges, confusion about the scope of involvement, and simply a loss of interest were cited.
2. **Lack of enthusiasm from community.** A majority of the schools reported challenges associated with getting larger turnout for community dialogue nights. The efforts that teams undertook to promote the dialogue night varied, with all reporting some efforts to get a large turn out. Many of the adult coordinators concluded that these challenges have been seen in other attempts to engage parents and communities in activities like this.
3. **Lack of deep investment in projects from some schools.** The extent to which placing substantial focus on promoting healthy youth behavior is a priority for the participating school administration and school boards remains to be seen. Although every school administrator was generally supportive of the project, challenges with releasing students from class and a lack of active involvement and interest in the project on the part of many administrators suggests that YRBS projects would benefit from more direct involvement and buy-in from school leadership.
4. **Time to implement action plans.** The timeline for crafting action plans was noted as a challenge. In some cases the dialogue nights occurred late in the academic year and placed some pressure on developing action plans. With the project ending the student leaders were not in place to advocate for particular solutions.

### C. Recommendations for the future

When asked if they would recommend that other school communities participate in the Vermont YRBS project, all adult coordinators said that they would, indeed, recommend the projects to other. A number of recommendations directed to state-level project leaders is provided below. These recommendations are offered in no particular order and should be viewed along the lines of considerations rather than prescriptions.

1. Consider holding trainings earlier in the day to avoid late nights for teams that travel great distances.
2. Prepare the project leaders to think in terms of multi-year projects.
3. Consider front loading more activities early to capitalize on early student interest.
4. Gear seed grants to new schools.
5. Convene past grantees to share best practices, network with each other and provide mutual supports.

6. Consider how the project can be adapted to meet specific community needs, structures and formats.
7. Provide more guidance around the composition of the initial students groups (ensure that student succession is considered, expand group to involve more diverse youth, etc.).
8. Consider more ways of integrating the YRBS project within the curriculum.
9. Reconsider combining high school and middle school students in common trainings for the second training.
10. Have youth trainers continue to lead trainings.
11. Think about integrating community dialogue nights into pre-existing events (talent shows, orientations, partner visitation nights, etc.).
12. Clarify expectations for schools prior to awarding the grant.
13. Have new grantees meet with past grantees.
14. Reconsider format of concluding conference to make it more engaging and relevant.
15. Consider expanding links to elementary schools.
16. Provide more guidance around sustaining the effort post grant period.
17. Build in funding for a longitudinal, in depth documentation and study of the long term impacts of the project.

In sum, the success of the state wide Vermont YRBS project may be understood in the fact that all schools had completed all or most of the project as it had been designed. A good faith effort was undertaken by all. All schools produced tangible results and stayed true to the guiding premises of the project. The recommendations above should be viewed in the context of “continuous improvement,” rather than as needs for substantial reforms.

Reflecting again on the impacts that this project had on the participating students, the community and school, it is clear that the Vermont YRBS approach to engaging youth in dialogue about youth health behaviors is a good idea and reflects the best in best practices embodied in the literature pertaining to youth led action research.<sup>4</sup> The guiding materials, the trainings, and the body of experience compiled over the last the three years of the project deserve to be extended into future years.

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<sup>4</sup> See Checkoway, B. and Richards-Schuster, K. (2002). Youth participation in evaluation research. *American Journal of Evaluation*. 24(1): 21-33.; Minkler, M. (2000). Using participatory action research to build healthy communities. *Public Health Reports*. 115: 191-197.; Morsillo, J. and Prilleltensky, I. 2007. Social action with youth: Interviews, evaluations and psychopolitical validity. *Journal of Community Psychology*. 35(6): 1-16.