At-a-Glance

The Gang Prevention and Intervention (GPI) program focused on increasing campus safety at a districtwide level. The program started out as part of the Dallas Independent School District’s (Dallas ISD) Safety Initiative in 2005-06. The 2009-10 program was comprised of two major initiatives: prevention and intervention. The Gang Prevention and Intervention program worked to increase students’ school engagement and participation as well as reducing negative and destructive behaviors in an attempt to help students have more successful and rewarding futures.

Program Components and Goals

The program was made up of several key stakeholders: Gang Specialists, vendors, other Dallas ISD departments (e.g. Psychological Services, Safe and Drug Free Schools, and Student Support Team), external police and security agencies, and external service providers. School staff such as principals, assistant principals, counselors, and teachers could refer students into the program through gang specialist or vendor staff.

As the goal of the prevention initiative, education about the risks involved when making choices about behavior was key. The major goal of the intervention initiative focused on improving the lives of students who had been identified as at-risk, and referred to the program, through a combination of one-on-one work and through connecting these students with appropriate outside resources. Program staff aimed to give students the tools they needed to make better decisions, so that they could change their behavior themselves.

Student Demographics

During the 2009-10 school year, the vendors served 226 students; this number was small in comparison with the 2008-09 figure of 625. However, one vendor did not provide second semester data for the 2009-10 school year, leading to a smaller than expected identified student population.

The majority of the Gang Prevention and Intervention program’s student population were male, Hispanic or African American, between the seventh and tenth grade, and with a low socioeconomic status. The average age remained relatively stable between 2008-09 and 2009-10 (16 and 15, respectively).

Students were more likely to be identified as being at “high” risk of gang involvement during the 2009-10 school year and parent involvement was lower for the 2009-10 school year than for the previous year. The Gang Prevention and Intervention program served many students with attendance, drug, and discipline concerns during the 2009-10 school year. Percentages for each area of concern increased across the two school years. One reason for this change could have been because of the increased focus on students on the vendor’s formal caseload.

Developmental Assets Profile

The Developmental Assets were 40 common sense, positive experiences and qualities that help influence choices young people make and help them become caring, responsible adults. Gang Prevention and Intervention program students were less likely to report good or excellent levels of the assets than those students not receiving program services.

Attendance

Students in the Gang Prevention and Intervention program attended school less often than did students not in the program. This data supported vendor reports that majority of students participating in the Gang Prevention and Intervention program had attendance concerns.

Discipline

Students participating in the Gang Prevention and Intervention program received more discipline referrals than those not in the program. Out-of-school suspensions or in-school suspensions were most common. Juvenile Justice Alternative Education (JJAE) program referrals or Off-Campus Disciplinary Alternative Education (OCDAE) program referrals were less common.

Areas of Success

Program staff reported the quality of interactions with students improved during the 2009-10 school year and that they were able to develop stronger rapport with students. Anecdotal evidence suggested that program staff were more successful in facilitating students leaving gangs than during the previous year. One major strength of the program was the weekly gang intelligence meeting. Since moving the meeting to the
Alternative Placement Center at Village Fair, additional Dallas ISD and community partners were added to the group. This increase in intra-department and community collaboration led to more efficient communication and effective service provision.

Program staff identified several best practices with regards to working with students in need: find common ground with the student, hold them accountable for their actions, and make it clear that staff was aware of their actions. Building trust was an important goal during all contact with students and this was accomplished through consistency.

Areas for Improvement
Program staff were not provided ample opportunities for professional development and training, leading to staff often making decisions based on their own personal experiences and leading to varying strategies across the program (though at times varying strategies were appropriate given the setting and student needs). Gang specialists and vendor staff also provided gang awareness training to students, teachers, and parents. These trainings were well received, but inadequate. Program staff did not have the materials necessary to conduct a thorough training such as laptops and projectors, and time was often limited. Short time frames for training limited the amount of material that could be covered and often resulted in gang specialists and vendors covering topics such as how to identify gang involvement, but not what to do once a student had been identified as needing services.

There was a general lack of awareness and visibility among school staff on campuses leading to miscommunication, limited service provision, and dissatisfaction with the program. A summer training session on gang awareness issues and expectations for the program may lead to improved relations with school staff.

Because the scope of work for the program as it stood at the time of the evaluation was wide, including both prevention and intervention efforts, program staff were spread thin and were unable to always provide the targeted and necessary services that students needed.

Females were a minority of students served, but generally had different concerns and needs than males. Adequate services and resources were not available for this population.

The division of gang specialists and vendors worked as a barrier to efficiency and ease of communication. Another barrier to the program’s success was the lack of data available for evaluation.

Program staff did not have a common definition of the term “student engagement” though it was often cited as an expected outcome of the program. Based on staff comments, it was concluded that the Gang Prevention and Intervention program sought to create student engagement at three levels: the program level, the school level, and a social level. There was no established measure of student engagement.

Summary and Recommendations
Program staff, including management and vendor staff, would benefit from attending professional development, such as trainings offered by the State Attorney General’s Office and the TGIA. Funding should be allocated to purchase the materials necessary to conduct thorough training, such as laptops and projectors, and gang awareness trainings should either be more focused to adequately cover material in the time allotted, or material should be presented as a series.

Additional funding to hire youth advisors should be allocated to allow staff to concentrate their intensive efforts over fewer campuses each week, and funding to hire additional gang specialists should be allocated.

Program management staff should conduct annual small scale evaluations to determine yearly progress. A full evaluation of the program should be conducted periodically to assess student outcomes and changes in long term effectiveness of the trainings. Program staff should conduct a survey of school staff satisfaction with the program in order to better understand gaps in the understanding of program goals and outcomes.

Vendors should use a standardized form to record student data and should include more thorough notes on student sessions. Gang specialists should collect more thorough data on student contacts. Gang specialists should also keep better records of the number and types of staff and parents attending gang awareness trainings or Parent Celebrations.

Program management and staff should develop a program workscope with defined goals and outcomes to enable a more focused approach to service provision.

Additional information may be obtained by consulting EA10-135-2, which can be found at www.dallasisd.org/inside_disd/depts/evalacct/.

Student Engagement