



National Center for Mental Health Promotion  
and Youth Violence Prevention

# Engaging School Administrators

A Guide for Safe Schools/Healthy Students  
Project Directors





## Purpose of this Guide

**This guide provides SS/HS project directors with strategies to gain the support of principals and superintendents to meet the goals of SS/HS initiative.**

Safe Schools/Healthy Students (SS/HS) projects form collaborative efforts that involve educators, mental health providers, juvenile justice professionals, and law enforcement agencies in creating safe learning environments that promote healthy child development and prevent youth violence and drug use. Support from school administrators (e.g., superintendents, assistant superintendents, principals, assistant principals) is essential to carry out project activities and to meet long-term objectives of creating safer schools with healthier students. This guide provides SS/HS project directors with strategies they can employ to enhance their district's administrators' involvement in and commitment to the SS/HS initiative. There are five sections in this guide: Understanding Your Audience; Understanding Your Local School System; Partnering to Reach a Shared Vision; Sustaining a Relationship with Administrators; and Advice from Successful SS/HS Projects.

## Understanding Your Audience

Principals and superintendents typically have the power and influence to make initiatives like SS/HS sink or swim. When these school leaders are convinced of the value of an SS/HS project, they can take steps to secure the active participation of school staff and community partners, greatly increasing the project's chances for success. Conversely, when they are uninformed about—or remain unconvinced of—the connection between SS/HS and the school's educational mission, they can intentionally or inadvertently impede the work of the project.

Principals and superintendents typically have tremendous demands on their time. Communicating effectively with administrators requires understanding the scope of their responsibilities and the issues for which they are accountable. Principals are responsible for the success of the school; they supervise school staff and set the tone of the school. It is their job to ensure that every student receives an appropriate education. Principals also lead community engagement efforts and serve as the spokesperson for all school initiatives. The sidebar delineates the responsibilities of principals in Troy, Michigan.

The responsibilities of a superintendent are even more multifaceted and political in nature. Superintendents are accountable to the mayor, the governor, the school board, unions, the press, the public, and parents. Many superintendents are charged with producing considerable improvements in a very limited time frame. Nevertheless, superintendents receive an average salary only 1 percent of what Fortune 500 CEOs earn and have an average term of service of only 3.3 years (National School Boards Association, 2002).

## Understanding Your Local School System

To work effectively with administrators, it is critical to understand the realities of the school district and how it functions. SS/HS project directors who are not long-term employees of the district may need to put in extra effort to acquire this knowledge.

### What Principals Do

*A job announcement for a principal position in the Troy, Michigan school district listed the following job responsibilities:*

1. Administers the total operation of the high school and its personnel.
2. Supervises school curriculum development and school improvement.
3. Directs, supervises, and evaluates the instructional program and all instructional staff assigned to the high school.
4. Plans staff, departmental, and other special meetings; ensures that teaching staff are appropriately assigned within the validity of their teaching certificate or license.
5. Accepts responsibility to oversee and provide leadership to an assigned curriculum area and assists the district with the growth and development of said area.
6. Assists in the recruitment and selection of teaching and nonteaching personnel.
7. Plans and develops the school budget; supervises the expenditures from the school budget; and is responsible for all fiscal matters pertaining to the school.
8. Attends regular Board of Education meetings, as requested.
9. Attends all central office staff meetings, as requested.
10. Administers the Student Code of Conduct and maintains student discipline throughout the school campus and at all school events.

The work of school administrators is often heavily influenced by demographic factors (e.g., diversity and socioeconomic status of students and families) and geographic factors (e.g., district size; urban, suburban, or rural setting). You should familiarize yourself with demographic and geographic factors that influence the schools involved in your initiative. This information is often available on state, district, or school Web sites, in school report cards, and in the needs assessment section of the district's SS/HS grant application.

Understanding the inner workings of a school district can be greatly facilitated by forming an alliance with an “education ambassador”—an insider who's willing to share his or her perspective on the district. A school principal is an ideal choice for this role. Once you've identified an education ambassador, some issues to explore with him or her include:

- How are major decisions made in the district? What is the typical decision-making timetable (e.g., budgets created; staff hired; new programs launched)?
- Does the school board operate with a unified vision? Do board members work as a team to set policies? Is there anyone on the board who might champion the SS/HS initiative?
- What is the superintendent's role? How does she or he communicate expectations? Has she or he established an accountability system for performance? What are the superintendent's priorities? Who has the superintendent's ear?
- How much power do individual principals have? What authority does a principal have to make decisions regarding budget, staffing, and curricula?
- What are the community's expectations for the schools? Are they the same for all schools? Is there anyone in the community who might be a strong champion for the SS/HS initiative?
- (If the SS/HS project is in a collective bargaining state) What relevant union issues do I need to be aware of?
- Who are additional opinion leaders who can tell me about the district?

## Partnering to Reach a Shared Vision

### Opening Lines of Communication

Having an effective relationship with administrators requires communication that is strategic and planned and that occurs at regular intervals. Your first meeting with administration should be with the superintendent. (In some large, complex districts, it may not be possible to work directly with the superintendent.) Having the support of the superintendent can enhance the project's credibility throughout the district. Consider bringing to the meeting an SS/HS team member or an ally from the district who has credibility with the superintendent. Superintendents are often more willing to engage with individuals who have seniority in the district and experience in the field of education.

### Sample Agenda for Initial Meeting with Administrators

1. Introduce yourself as the SS/HS project director.
2. Provide a brief summary of the project, focusing on how it connects to the district's priorities and needs.
3. Offer administrators the opportunity to comment and raise questions.
4. Ask administrators to be involved in and take action in support of the project—be as specific as possible. Clarify the steps you need them to take and when.

Your first meeting with administrators is likely to be brief, so be prepared to present your messages clearly and concisely. (See “Sample Agenda.”) Your remarks should be conveyed with enthusiasm for the work and should not be laden with jargon or complex research findings. Using a handful of visuals (e.g., PowerPoint slides, handouts) to accompany your remarks is helpful. Your visuals should be simple, clear, and contain a minimum of text. Over time, you can make minor modifications to the presentation and use it to introduce a variety of audiences to the goals and activities of the initiative.

## SAMPLE MESSAGE

### How SS/HS Dovetails with the Mission of Schools

Some students face barriers to learning that cannot be overcome by instructional improvements alone. The SS/HS initiative has the potential to promote academic achievement by

- increasing students’ attention
- improving academic performance
- saving instructional time currently lost to disruptive behavior

Recent research has produced some persuasive evidence in support of SS/HS goals. Durlak and Weissberg (2007) reviewed more than 300 research studies on social and emotional learning (SEL) programs. They showed that, compared with students who do not participate in SEL, students who are involved in SEL


- score an average of 10 percentile points higher on achievement tests
- earn higher grade point averages
- have better school attendance
- are less disruptive in the classroom
- like school more

Following the meeting with the superintendent, you should meet with the principal of each school involved in the SS/HS project. In some communities, meeting with each principal in his or her school is the best option. In other cases, it is advantageous to convene a group of principals away from their school sites.

Attending regularly scheduled district meetings for principals and administrators can be an effective bridge-building practice for SS/HS project directors. Attending administrator meetings that focus on strategic planning for the district can create an opportunity to reinforce the SS/HS project’s objectives and activities. These meetings, however, don’t replace periodic one-on-one communication with the superintendent and district principals.

### Highlighting Connections between SS/HS and the District’s Mission

School administrators are most likely to support an SS/HS project when they understand how it can help to meet the district’s (or school’s) needs and mission. In conversations with administrators, SS/HS project directors should highlight the fact that the project will provide schools with access to new, much-needed resources. Demonstrating how the project’s goals align with federal, state, and local accountability measures and standards for school improvement can be the factor that propels administrators to endorse SS/HS efforts.



More specifically, SS/HS initiatives are a valuable asset to the district and the community because they

- employ evidence-based programs to promote students' positive development and prevent violence
- enhance the overall school climate
- provide professional development for school or district staff on prevention, early identification, and/or intervention for withdrawn or disruptive behavior
- connect students who need more intensive interventions to community-based services
- develop relationships with youth-serving organizations that provide after-school programs and/or opportunities for students' positive involvement in the community
- provide user-friendly data reports to help track trends in the school or district
- create linkages between schools and community mental health, law enforcement, and juvenile justice agencies

Some SS/HS project directors have gained the trust of administrators by reviewing the district's health and safety initiatives and suggesting ways to streamline efforts and replace unproven programs with evidence-based ones. Presenting administrators with examples of how the SS/HS initiative enhances existing programs—or how it can supplant ineffective ones—is a tremendous service.

## Strategies for Building Relationships with Administrators

Seasoned SS/HS project directors offer the following suggestions for developing effective, long-term relationships with school administrators:

- Be caring, honest, and persistent, but not controlling.
- Participate in relevant district and community meetings, providing regular updates on the project.
- Provide a clear timeline for project activities and ensure that the project meets all of its commitments.
- Give administrators an active role, but don't overwhelm them.
- Communicate clearly to administrators what you need from them; respect their competing commitments.
- When possible, give administrators the spotlight. Leaders who embrace the SS/HS initiative are a sign of the project's success.
- When experts (e.g., technical assistance or communications specialists, program developers, federal project officers) come to meet with you, schedule time for them to meet with the superintendent and you.
- Encourage the superintendent to attend SS/HS conferences to network with other administrators and learn about promising new approaches.

In conversations with administrators, you may find they voice frustration in regard to issues such as federal requirements and new mandates that lack funding. Your response in such moments is critical. As Steven Covey (1999) has said, "Nothing is more validating and affirming than feeling understood. And the moment a person begins feeling understood, that person becomes far more open to influence and change." In these situations, consider the following guidelines:

- Be sincerely interested in what the administrator is talking about.
- Listen not only to the words but also to the nonverbal and emotional content.
- Briefly clarify and restate what the administrator said to improve mutual understanding.
- If you don't understand something, ask about it.

## Clarifying How Administrators Can Provide Support

An administrator's general statement of support for the SS/HS project is not sufficient. It is important to be as specific as possible regarding the steps you need the administrator to take to facilitate the work of the project (e.g., sending out a press release about the project and speaking to media representatives about the significance of the initiative for the schools and the community). Be certain to obtain clear assurances from the administrator that he or she will follow through with the actions you have agreed upon.

The following are examples of steps that project directors have requested *principals* take in support of the SS/HS project:

- Facilitate building-level collaboration by making time for teachers to plan and carry out SS/HS activities.
- Provide resources for teachers' professional development and space to store materials and supplies.
- Reduce additional responsibilities for staff who participate in SS/HS activities.
- Work with resistant teachers to solicit their buy-in to the initiative.
- Communicate to parents and the media the vision and goals of the project.

Project directors may need *superintendents* to take the following steps:

- Provide access to the school board and create time on the board's agenda to discuss the SS/HS initiative.
- Intervene with resistant schools, teachers, and principals.
- Communicate the value of the project and the administration's support for it to parents, staff, school and community leaders, and the media.

## Sustaining a Relationship with Administrators

Project directors need to maintain regular communication with administrators over the life of the project. Doing so helps to ensure that administrators continue to be knowledgeable about and invested in the project. SS/HS projects that involve several districts or many schools in one district have found it useful to hold regular meetings with a "horizontal" network of school leaders who share a similar role (e.g., all superintendents, all principals). In other communities, periodic meetings with a "vertical" network of staff (e.g., superintendent, central office administrators, principals, relevant building-level staff) is most effective. The goal of these meetings is to regularly renew participants' sense of ownership of the SS/HS initiative.

Providing public recognition of administrators' contributions to the success of the SS/HS initiative can fortify their long-term investment in the project. Giving and publicizing awards to administrators can be an effective strategy for celebrating project successes, showcasing effective collaboration, and creating a reservoir of goodwill for the initiative.

## Advice from Successful SS/HS Projects

In August 2006, staff from the National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention facilitated a focus group of SS/HS project directors from around the country to discuss what they had learned from their efforts to engage administrators in SS/HS projects. The following section summarizes their advice.

## Administrative Support Is Essential for SS/HS Projects

One project director discovered that when the superintendent became personally committed to the success of the project, the initiative was transformed. The project director was invited to participate in regular meetings of the district's principals, enabling her to garner the support of key staff at the building level, which resulted in swift implementation of project activities.

In another community, the superintendent—who believed the district and the community must work collaboratively—brought the project director to meetings throughout the community, establishing visibility and credibility for the SS/HS initiative. The project director soon became an integral part of the district.

## It Is Important to Be Flexible When There Is a Change in Administrators

When the superintendent or a key principal in a district leaves, there can be significant changes in the district's priorities, and support for the SS/HS initiative may wane. In one district, because the project director had worked to keep principals and central office administrators involved in SS/HS activities, she was able to maintain support for the project following the superintendent's departure. Another project director found that having strong ties to community agencies and community leaders bolstered the stability of the project in the face of changing school leadership. In yet another district, developing strong relationships with school board members enabled the SS/HS project director to maintain support for the initiative despite the appointment of a new superintendent and new principals every couple of years.

## Teachers Must Be Involved

In small districts where school buildings function rather independently, engaging lead teachers at each school can be critical. Lead teachers can coordinate building-level activities and be influential in securing buy-in from their peers. In one community, where teachers had not been invited to participate in the project, the project director had to make a concerted effort to break through the resentment that teachers felt toward SS/HS project employees. In another SS/HS project, the director found that identifying a project coordinator in each school vastly improved communication between SS/HS staff and building-level educators.

## Utilize Evaluation Data



Gathering and sharing data with school leaders can be a useful strategy for engaging administrators. One project director gained the support of the entire community by conducting an assessment of the district's needs and then sharing the findings with administrators, community leaders, and parents. Another project director used the findings of a survey conducted twice annually to make improvements in project implementation. When administrators, students, and families saw that their recommendations were heeded, their commitment to the project intensified.

## Communicate Regularly with All Stakeholders

Additional communications and marketing strategies to enhance school leaders' awareness of the significance of the project include the following:

- Communicate regularly with opinion leaders in the district, school, and community through meetings, e-mail, and telephone calls.
- Have students describe how the project has affected them. Real stories often make a bigger impact than evaluation data.
- Regularly share evaluation findings with the school board through presentations, newsletters, and reports. This type of communication can create a ripple effect that brings the superintendent and principals on board.



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- Use public forums (e.g., school newsletter, local newspaper, public access television station) to publicize project activities and give credit to supportive leaders.
  - Showcase project successes at national conferences and events.

Building strong collaborative relationships with school administrators can enable the work of SS/HS projects to take root in the community and thrive for many years to come.

## References

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