



Oregon Partnership

Oregon Partnership exists to end substance abuse and suicide.

Our Data. Our Voice. Youth Creating Positive Community Change

Introduction

Our Data, Our Voice: Youth Creating Positive Community Change is led by bright, energetic high school students excited about learning and making a profound difference. Through this evidence-based project, teens translate their newfound knowledge of substance use prevention, data collection and messaging into effective public awareness initiatives that educate their peers and the community. Rooted in social norms theory, *Our Data, Our Voice* utilizes a three-tiered approach – teen empowerment, localized media campaigns and community engagement – to help young people make healthy decisions, change misperceptions about youth substance use, and improve community safety and health.

Social norms theory

Social norms fall into two categories: behavioral norms, or what a majority of people in a group do, how they behave, or how they believe people act and behave; and attitudinal norms, or what a majority of people in a group believe about how they and others should act. Research shows a consistent and dramatic pattern in misperceptions around peer norms. In terms of substance use and other risky behaviors, most young people mistakenly perceive the problem is the norm among their peers.

Perceived social norms are based on ideas youth create from limited information, typically relying on impressions gathered from observations of behaviors and attitudes. Sources for this information include media images, conversations among peers, and opinions of adults.

The social norms approach prevents problem behavior by:

- Gathering credible data that contradict the limited information
- Identifying actual norms regarding behaviors and attitudes
- Using the data to create positive messages that communicate the truth through media campaigns, interactive programs and other proven means

Our unique project

Our Data, Our Voice employs social norms theory and marketing in a unique and compelling way, engaging and training teens. Youth themselves take the lead in changing misperceptions about underage drinking and other drug use. As part of a comprehensive strategy, teens participate in focus groups and training sessions, conduct surveys in their school and community to identify attitudes and challenging issues, and collect data. Based on the findings, they partner with a professional creative team to develop broadcast and print media messages that target teens and adults.

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The program not only educates teens, but also empowers them to promote in a hands-on way positive community change. It is based on a universal environmental prevention strategy that addresses community attitudes about underage drinking and other substance use, targeting youth and segments of the neighborhood population with uniquely tailored messages and interventions. In addition, it emphasizes a community's responsibility – through partnerships – to create policies that maintain a healthy and safe environment. By design, *Our Data, Our Voice* consists of a first-phase pilot campaign and an official campaign in a second phase. This two-phase approach was implemented at Portland's Wilson and Marshall high schools. Students were recruited and formed project satellite teams, known as Positive Action Concerning Teens (PACT) at Wilson and Students Making Ads for Social Health (SMASH) at Marshall.

Phase I

Evaluation is a critical component of each phase. Activities in phase one contributed to initial assessment and developing such tools as the social norms and campaign evaluation surveys, baseline measures, and long-term development and evaluation goals.

While the PACT and SMASH campaigns and activities differed because of the unique issues, challenges and perspectives of their respective communities, a common denominator was the tremendous enthusiasm, creativity and commitment of participating students. As part of evaluation activities, for example, PACT and SMASH members using personal digital assistants collected data from peers in classes and during school sports events. Students committed tremendous time and energy during and after school to not only collect data, but also to help organize successful events and to brainstorm, develop and refine campaign messages.

Activities

Satellite teams:

- Received training from OP's youth education staff in classroom/club presentations aimed at raising awareness about the rate of youth drinking and other substance use, its harms and perceptions about underage drinking.
- Created photo illustrations and video testimonials of negative influences and how members rise above them as pilot partners with the nationwide "Above the Influence" campaign. Satellite teams also took part in the national launch of the ATI campaign. Youth brought remarkable energy, insight and leadership to both activities.
- Participated in community focus groups and surveyed peers to collect data about the rate of substance use and perceptions about it. The teams used this information, as well as experience gleaned from participating in professionally led public awareness campaigns promoting a safe spring break and prom season, to structure their own pilot media campaigns. Surveys revealed, for example, that although nine out of 10 Wilson students believe their peers drink alcohol, the reality is that 60

percent never have. One PACT member said he was excited about the large amount of classroom discussion that was sparked about the realities and misperceptions of youth substance use following the release of a student survey.

- Developed pilot campaigns that raised awareness about the fact that students overestimate the number of peers who smoke marijuana, but the teams delivered social norms messages in markedly different ways. For example, SMASH collateral promoted the finding that 77 percent of Marshall Campus students do not smoke, with the tagline “Are you part of the 77?” PACT, based on data that revealed 70 percent of Wilson students do not smoke pot, created collateral with the text, “Where do you fit in?”
- Hosted dynamic town halls in their respective communities during which teens, parents and community members discussed local attitudes, challenges and solutions to underage drinking and other drug use. The events in part explored the need for organized after-school programs, opportunities to mentor youth via sports or other activities outside of school, the importance of youth voices being heard in the community, and creating meaningful consequences for adolescents and teens found in possession of alcohol.
- Conducted in the Marshall and Wilson high school communities an environmental scan of alcohol outlet sales practices, data students presented during the town halls.

Phase II

PACT and SMASH entered this phase more seasoned in data collection, message development, and campaign and event execution. Teams recruited new members, broadening the base of each team in terms of student experience and perspectives. To meet the goal of continually revising and improving their campaigns, teams reviewed results of new student surveys; developed fresh collateral pieces; organized events where key messages were delivered; and received feedback on the effectiveness of their efforts.

Activities

Satellite teams:

- Created and rolled out new awareness campaigns. The campaigns, while focused on similar issues and launched when students returned from winter break, featured different messages. PACT collateral featured the tagline “ABOVE IT.” Full text read, “Everyone thinks Wilson students party. The fact is the majority are ABOVE IT.” SMASH’s campaign, with the tagline “Just because we look different,” employed stereotypes of Marshall Campus students as engines of change and greater understanding. The campaign encouraged people to examine the common misperceptions about the link between so-called “alternative” youth and risky behavior, with collateral that read, “Just because we look different, does it mean we’re using drugs?”
- Organized at Wilson a highly successful Halloween party titled “Come Clean.” The PACT-organized

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event featured food and dancing, promoting the message that teens can have fun without alcohol and other drugs. “I’ve come clean” messaging at the party inspired teens to “own” their healthy choices.

- Presented data and campaign collateral at neighborhood association meetings, raising greater awareness about youth substance use perceptions and realities and attracting more community and business leaders as champions.
- Delivered campaign messages via ads in community newspapers and on transit bus benches within the two targeted communities.
- Built a SMASH float featured in the well-attended 82nd Avenue of Roses Parade in Southeast Portland. SMASH members jumped at the chance to participate, working with a local trucking company that volunteered time, materials and manpower to help with the float that depicted the superhero in the SMASH logo breaking through a brick wall. The parade opportunity came about when an area business association sought the involvement of Marshall Campus students who were making a difference in their community.
- Organized and promoted a PACT comedy night at Wilson, creating and participating in skits and routines. The event proved a subtle yet effective way to emphasize the important message that teens can have fun without alcohol and other drugs.
- Held town halls in Southwest and Southeast Portland that brought together teens, parents, and school and community leaders to brainstorm ways to build on the campaigns’ successes and address challenges in each community. Feedback touched on the fact that SMASH and PACT have changed the schools and community for the better and profoundly impacted the students involved in the groups. In light of the permanent closure of the Marshall Campus, SMASH town hall attendees stressed the impressive progress SMASH has made in promoting the fact that most Marshall students do not use substances, noting that that positive message will follow them into their new schools.

Outcomes

For the purposes of this document, we present a snapshot of data collected as part of *Our Data, Our Voice* from the Wilson High School community. The overriding trend shows that the social norms messages have impacted students’ perceptions of substance use and actual use and improved school climate. Beyond the statistical evidence, anecdotal evidence makes clear the project’s extraordinary results with respect to changes in student beliefs about themselves; their relationship to teachers and school; their attitudes and beliefs about youth substance use; and community change and cohesiveness.

Our Data, Our Voice succeeds in increasing the factors proven to protect young people from substance use. These protective factors include reinforcing clear standards and healthy beliefs; strengthening attachment to family, school, peers and the community; nurturing individual characteristics; building skills; and providing opportunities and recognition for achievement.

Student attitudes and beliefs: the data

- Student perceptions of peer alcohol use, and actual use, decreased from phase one to phase two. Students in phase one said they thought 94 percent of their peers drank alcohol, but that figure dropped to 88 percent in the second phase.
- Thirty-five percent of students in phase two said they drank alcohol, down from 41 percent in phase one.
- Thirty-five percent of students surveyed in phase two thought “occasional drinking at my age is OK,” a 5 percent improvement from phase one.
- Twenty-eight percent of students in phase two said people who drink alcohol nearly every day are at great risk of harming themselves, a marked increase from just 1 percent in phase one.

Student attitudes and beliefs: the anecdotal evidence

- Changes in student attitudes and beliefs were underlined by a few PACT members who, at the beginning of the project, experimented with alcohol or other drugs but as a result of their involvement in the group decided to be substance free and to publicly express this fact to peers, school leaders and others. They not only assumed leadership roles through their project involvement, but also served as vocal role models in terms of making healthy choices.
- Armed with new knowledge and skills, PACT and SMASH members gained greater confidence as leaders at school and in the community, showing uncompromising passion about making a difference in their world. As part of a cohesive, like-minded group, they developed the confidence to ask questions and challenge perceived norms, educate fellow students, and work alongside community leaders. Their personal growth was as unique as the members themselves: quiet and shy members, for instance, grew into thoughtful leaders whose opinions were valued, while those perceived as “alternative” learned to effectively navigate in various venues while staying true to themselves.

Improved school climate: the data

- The number of students who said they feel safe at school increased from about 23 percent in phase one to 27 percent in phase two.
- The number of students who said there are positive teacher-student relationships increased from 31 percent in phase one to about 36 percent in phase two.
- Alcohol- and drug-related school infractions decreased 28 percent from phase one to phase two. The decline would have been even larger if not for one school day, when several students were involved in a single incident.
- Positive student perception of those involved with alcohol and drug prevention at Wilson increased nearly 150 percent from phase one to two.

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Improved school climate: the anecdotal evidence

- PACT's awareness-raising efforts helped lead to the decision at Wilson to develop a first-ever student health and wellness plan. The document, developed through the school's Site Council, will address such issues as alcohol and drug prevention education and nurturing a positive environment that reduces student stress. Underscoring the strong presence PACT has developed at Wilson, the plan also will address the importance of ongoing support for PACT.
- SMASH participants put a human face on healthy decisions, taking public stands among their peers and in the community against youth alcohol and other drug use. SMASH members also exhibited strong commitment to the team and to their school even as plans to close the Marshall Campus became reality. The positive message that most Marshall students are free of alcohol and other drugs will follow them into their new schools.

Positive community change: the anecdotal evidence

Unlike student surveys at Wilson and the Marshall Campus that captured quantitative data, *Our Data, Our Voice* collected qualitative information about community change. The numerous positive changes include:

- The town halls connected students and parents to neighborhood and business leaders and served as a platform for discussion and action on issues of concern. In the Wilson community, for example, PACT's efforts helped build capacity for a community prevention coalition, a major step in formalizing a coalition. In addition, community members discussed the need for stronger community engagement with the school district's system of enforcement. At Marshall, the town halls provided a forum for students, parents, school officials, and Lents neighborhood leaders to collectively address Marshall's closure and ways to ease the transition for students. As a result of the town halls, students had a seat at the table and were seen as key participants in the discussions.
- PACT's presence played a role in improving communication between Wilson and its community of parents through a quarterly newsletter, written by Oregon Partnership and distributed by the school, that offers timely and concrete positive parenting and prevention information.

In addition to these examples, the project has produced a significant social return on investment in terms of reduced student infractions, which carry significant costs for school districts and local law enforcement and court systems.

To reiterate, *Our Data, Our Voice* has resulted in remarkable personal growth for students, reduced youth substance use, positive changes in student beliefs about substance use and a healthier school environment. It also has built stronger connections between youth, parents, school officials and neighborhoods, bringing people together to celebrate community successes and tackle challenges.