Creating a Window for Teen Dating Violence Prevention Policies Within the Start Strong Initiative

Authors: Clinton-Sherrod M, Gibbs D, Jones S, Miller S, Cutbush S, Williams J.

What is Start Strong?

The Start Strong: Building Healthy Teen Relationships initiative was a national effort to reduce teen dating violence (TDV) by promoting healthy relationship skills among middle school students. TDV includes physical, sexual, or emotional/psychological abuse between current or former dating partners, whether occurring in person or electronically. The initiative was implemented from 2008 through 2012 with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Blue Shield of California Foundation. Eleven Start Strong sites implemented a multicomponent approach that included efforts to improve relevant policies in grantees' states and communities. Futures Without Violence served as the national program office, providing technical assistance and resources in support of grantees' efforts to inform development and implementation of policy for the prevention of TDV and related behaviors.

Why Evaluate Policy?

Policies are “laws, regulations, formal and informal rules and understanding that are adopted on a collective basis to guide individual and collective behavior.” Policies change the context in which individuals make health-affecting choices by setting priorities, guiding resource allocations, restricting specific behaviors, and creating differential incentives for healthy and unhealthy behaviors. Individuals and organizations, therefore, engage in policy advocacy efforts to influence decision-makers and mobilize resources at the environmental level. Although significant policy efforts occur at state and local levels, few of these have been evaluated, and none focused specifically on TDV policy.

To evaluate policy efforts among Start Strong grantees, we used Kingdon’s Multiple Streams model. This model suggests that there are three key considerations or “streams” that impact policymakers’ focus on an issue (see Figure 1):
• **Problems**: not only the knowledge base that will be built, but also the need to raise specific issues to the attention of policymakers.

• **Proposals**: feasible and acceptable strategies that are perceived as consistent with policymakers’ values.

• **Politics**: the dynamics of public support for an issue, advocacy campaigns, and pressures on decision-makers.

The model also suggests that when two or more of these streams are actively engaged, a “window” opens in which policy outcomes can be advanced or achieved. For this evaluation, outcomes included adoption of new policy, adaptation of existing policy, and implementation of existing policy, as well as interim and short-term impacts of their efforts.

**PARTICIPANTS AND DESIGN**

To support their policy efforts, *Start Strong* grantees received guidance on strategies and a model policy that included sample language and implementation tools. The initiative’s funding terms did not allow grantees to directly promote specific legislation. Instead, grantees enhanced policy by raising awareness of TDV among policymakers, broadening the base of support for policy change, and acting as expert resources within the policy development process.

*Start Strong*’s independent evaluation included a multimethod evaluation of the initiative’s policy component. The policy evaluation focused on grantees’ efforts to improve policy through adoption of new policy, adaptation of existing policy, and implementation of existing policy, as well as interim and short-term outcomes. As shown in Exhibit 1, evaluation methods included:

- Key informant interviews with the individual who was most familiar with the policy component in each site;
- Document review of state and local policies addressing TDV and related behaviors such as bullying, and;
- A stakeholder survey of school personnel and school district administration staff.

**KEY ASPECTS OF MODEL POLICY**

- Designate who is responsible for implementation.
- Provide prevention orientation.
- Engage parents, school staff, and students.
- Develop protocols for responding to and monitoring TDV incidents.
- Communicate with parents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Informant Interviews Only</th>
<th>Document Review</th>
<th>Stakeholder Survey</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants: 11 Start Strong staff</td>
<td>Source: Documents from 11 Start Strong sites</td>
<td>Participants: Start Strong site stakeholders (n=64 at Time 1 and n=61 at Time 2) most knowledgeable about TDV policy and prevention</td>
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<td>most knowledgeable about the policy component</td>
<td>Data Collection Period: Ongoing document review during initiative</td>
<td>Data Collection Period: 2 time points during initiative</td>
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<td>Data Collection Period: 3 time points during initiative</td>
<td>Topics Addressed</td>
<td>Topics Addressed</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Policy advocacy goals</td>
<td>• Characteristics of current policy</td>
<td>• Knowledge about local and state policies</td>
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<td>• Activities related to policy change and advocacy</td>
<td>• Policy</td>
<td>• Current policy provisions</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Barriers encountered and successes achieved</td>
<td>• Policy provisions</td>
<td>• Satisfaction with existing policies</td>
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<tr>
<td>• External events that influenced policy decisions</td>
<td>• Designates responsibility for implementation</td>
<td>• Self-reported knowledge of TDV</td>
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<td>• Collaborations and partners</td>
<td>• Specifies processes for monitoring and responding to incidents</td>
<td>• Extent to which TDV is a problem within schools</td>
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<td>• Resources related to TDV prevention</td>
<td>• Requires staff training</td>
<td>• School and community response to TDV</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Requires prevention education for students</td>
<td>Resource availability for TDV prevention and response</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Addressed by climate survey</td>
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What Was Found?

At baseline, state and local policies related to TDV varied substantially. Among 11 sites, four had specific TDV policies; eight had policies addressing related behaviors (e.g., bullying or sexual harassment); and one had no TDV or TDV-related policies. However, the existence of policy did not necessarily ensure desired practice. Prevention practice was hampered by low levels of policy implementation, as well as limited knowledge and understanding of policies by staff tasked with implementing and enforcing the policies.

Policy goals identified by Start Strong grantees reflected the variability of communities’ policies and resources, as well as the initiative’s relatively short two-year implementation period. Grantees focused on two primary goals:

- Enhance existing policy to more specifically focus on TDV, shift to a prevention orientation, or strengthen provisions for response to incidents;
- Build staff capacity and resources for implementation of existing policy.

As suggested by the Multiple Streams model, grantees used strategies within the problems, proposals, and politics streams to work toward policy change goals. Grantees raised attention to the problem of TDV via stakeholder trainings on TDV-related issues, reviews of existing policy to identify strengths and shortcomings, and other strategies (see Figure 1). Grantees advanced proposals by identifying feasible and locally acceptable options for consideration by policymakers and developing procedural and programmatic resources to build capacity for implementation of existing and desired policy. Finally, grantees strategically used politics by aligning their efforts with existing priorities, e.g., bullying or sexual harassment policies, and developing champions to promote TDV policy.

FACTORS IMPACTING TDV-RELATED POLICY EFFECTIVENESS AT BASELINE

- Statements of intent but no requirements for implementation
- Partial implementation of policies
- Lack of awareness by staff of policy provisions
- Lack of understanding of policies, especially TDV compared to bullying or sexual harassment
FIGURE 2. Strategies and Outcomes Related to Policy Streams in Start Strong

**Policy Streams**

- **Problems: Making the Case for Policy Change**
  - Training stakeholders on TDV impacts and prevention
  - Using collaboration to extend communications
  - Assessing policy gaps and implementation status

- **Proposals: Offering Strategy Options**
  - Tailoring policy goals to local context
  - Building capacity among implementers

- **Politics: Building Support for Decisions**
  - Building collaborations to expand support for policy
  - Responding to exogenous events and related agendas
  - Developing champions for policy

**Strategies Employed by Start Strong Grantees**

- Training stakeholders on TDV impacts and prevention
- Using collaboration to extend communications
- Assessing policy gaps and implementation status
- Tailoring policy goals to local context
- Building capacity among implementers
- Building collaborations to expand support for policy
- Responding to exogenous events and related agendas
- Developing champions for policy

**Short-Term Outcomes**

- Increased understanding of TDV as a local issue
- Inclusion of TDV in multiple agendas
- Support for policy goals within school leadership
- Implementation of programmatic resources within community
- Strengthened alliances among youth-serving and violence prevention organizations.
- Enhanced access to policy decision-makers

**Policy Outcomes**

- Adoption of new policies
- Enhancement of existing policies
- Implementation of existing policies

TDV = teen dating violence

**SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES AND POLICY OUTCOMES**

Grantees described a range of short-term outcomes that were likely to support eventual policy outcomes. They reported that activities, such as trainings for school staff and school district administrators, contributed to increased knowledge about TDV and commitment to TDV prevention across multiple sectors. Additionally, Start Strong coordinators frequently became the “trusted resource” consulted when input on TDV was needed, extending their access to decision-makers. Training was particularly effective in increasing educators’ understanding of existing policies. Across all sites, school staff (such as prevention coordinators and health teachers) who responded to the stakeholder survey indicated they were significantly more knowledgeable regarding their districts’ TDV policies at follow-up than at baseline (60% correct identification of policy features compared with 36% at baseline, \( p < 0.05 \)). School district administrators, who were more knowledgeable about their districts’ policy at baseline, did not demonstrate a change in knowledge. However, they were significantly less satisfied with their districts’ policies at follow-up than at baseline (38% compared with 54% at baseline, \( p < 0.05 \)), potentially indicating a heightened recognition of gaps or shortcomings of existing policies.

Grantees described several instances of convergence among the streams shown in Figure 1. As examples, grantee support for school administration in the wake of a high-profile TDV event (politics) may have substantially contributed to support for a policy proposal that the grantee had helped to frame (policies). Training members of a school violence prevention coalition (problem) was credited with their effective advocacy for TDV prevention (policies). As school district administrators learned more about existing policy (problems), their recognition of potential liability served as a driver for policy implementation (politics).
Of the 11 sites, five sites reported policy outcomes that included either adopting new policy or enhancing existing policies. At the state level, one grantee spearheaded legislation supporting the state education agency in preventing and responding to TDV and sexual assault. Four grantees contributed to adoption or enhancement of policy within their local education agencies. In addition, three grantees strengthened policy by inserting language about electronic abuse to the bullying policy at the state or local level or both. These achievements are particularly impressive in light of the barriers to policy change, which included competing issues demanding leadership attention, staff turnover, and limited understanding of TDV among key individuals.

Grantees’ efforts to build support and develop capacity for the implementation of TDV prevention policies also contributed to development of community resources for TDV prevention in the short term. These included TDV prevention programs for all students, prevention activities for students at risk of TDV, training for school personnel, and parent education. These resource areas were more likely to exist following the implementation period than before Start Strong (Figure 3).
What Are the Implications?

The 11 *Start Strong* sites made substantial policy impacts within the context of their *Start Strong* TDV prevention efforts. *Start Strong* sites developed and/or enhanced policy even though they: 1) worked within the constraints of a two-year timeline; 2) operated within very different contexts and; (3) had varying, and often low levels of resources in practice change areas at the beginning of the initiative.

As suggested by the Multiple Streams model, we found that the three interdependent streams—problems, proposals, and politics—worked to support policy change. Each *Start Strong* grantee worked to increase the visibility and salience of TDV as a problem, advance feasible policy strategies, and engage political support for policy change. Also consistent with the model’s concept of convergence, grantees frequently noted synergies when these streams converged. Policy strategies often advanced when local events spurred political will. Stakeholders became less satisfied with existing policy. It is possible that understanding the limits of existing policies led them to support policy change. School officials who understood existing policy and its implications for them became allies in implementing and improving policy.

Factors contributing to grantees’ successes included focusing on site-specific goals and strategies, strengthening collaborative relationships within communities, and using technical assistance resources. Ideally, grantees’ achievements will serve as the foundation for further outcomes as a result of changes in norms relating to TDV, greater attention to TDV as a community issue, and broader support for prevention. The combination of policy and practice changes achieved by *Start Strong* sites thus represents a foundation for sustainable contribution to TDV prevention.
REFERENCES


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