

Looking Back, Moving Forward: SRAE National Evaluation Frequently Asked Questions

As part of the federal government's ongoing efforts to support youth in making healthy decisions about their relationships and behaviors, Congress recently authorized the Sexual Risk Avoidance Education (SRAE) discretionary grant program and, in 2018, the Title V SRAE grant program. Title V SRAE replaces the Title V Abstinence Education grant program, which Congress passed as part of welfare reform in 1996. Title V SRAE funds programs that address the following topics:

- a. The holistic individual and societal benefits associated with personal responsibility, self-regulation, goal setting, healthy decision making, and a focus on the future
- b. The advantage of refraining from nonmarital sexual activity in order to improve future prospects and physical and emotional health
- c. The increased likelihood of avoiding poverty when youth attain self-sufficiency and emotional maturity before engaging in sexual activity
- d. The foundational components of healthy relationships and their impact on forming healthy marriages and safe and stable families
- e. How other risk behaviors, such as using drugs and alcohol, increase the risk for teen sex
- f. How to resist and avoid, and receive help regarding, sexual coercion and dating violence, recognizing that even with consent teen sex remains a youth risk behavior

The 2018 SRAE legislation also calls for a national evaluation of the program.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE SRAE NATIONAL EVALUATION?

The SRAE National Evaluation is a comprehensive five-year study of grants administered by the Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) that will produce important information on how grantees design and implement SRAE programs, the effectiveness of program components, and the ways grantees can use data and evidence to improve their programs. It has two main objectives.

The first is descriptive: to tell the story of the SRAE grant program. How did states respond to the SRAE legislation? How did grantees design and implement their programs? What did youth gain from the programming, and what outcomes did they achieve?

The second objective is program improvement: to learn about effective implementation approaches and program components, to support and empower SRAE grantees in using data and evidence for their own program improvement processes, and to help grantees learn from one another.

These two objectives are achieved through three distinct studies:

- 1. National Descriptive Study:** A descriptive analysis of SRAE grantees' program plans (Early Implementation Study), followed by an in-depth, nationwide study of program implementation and youth outcomes (Nationwide Study)
- 2. Program Components Impact Study:** An analysis of promising program approaches and the effectiveness of individual program components, such as parent engagement and/or staff training strategies
- 3. Data Capacity Building and Local Evaluation Support:** Support for grantees to collect and use local data to improve programs and support for grantee-funded evaluations

Ultimately, the SRAE National Evaluation will inform current and future programs and policy by improving the understanding of successful program design and implementation features. Throughout the project, FYSB and the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) will work closely with the contractor (Mathematica Policy Research in partnership with Public Strategies), stakeholders, and experts so that the research questions asked are relevant and the evaluation will yield timely, action-oriented, and widely disseminated findings.

HOW WILL THE SRAE NATIONAL EVALUATION DIFFER FROM THE PREVIOUS TITLE V EVALUATION?

The primary nature of the two evaluations differs substantially. The first study, which began in 1997 and ended with a final report in 2007, was primarily an impact evaluation of four selected Title V Abstinence Education programs. Using a rigorous, multiyear random assignment study design, that evaluation examined the impacts of these programs on sexual attitudes, intentions, and behaviors.¹

In contrast, the SRAE National Evaluation aims to tell the full story of SRAE program implementation across all grantees and their program providers, identify features of SRAE programming associated with improved youth outcomes, and help grantees use data and local evaluation results to improve their programs. The evaluation will include a small number of studies designed to identify effective components of SRAE programs, such as parent engagement and/or staff training strategies, rather than testing the effectiveness of a full program.

ONE THING THAT IS NOT DIFFERENT: CONDUCTING THE EVALUATION IN A SENSITIVE POLICY ENVIRONMENT.

Like the previous Title V Abstinence Education programs, SRAE programming is politically sensitive, with diverse stakeholders holding firm beliefs about the best approach to educate youth on sexual risk and healthy development. Some stakeholders will lack confidence in national evaluation efforts because they feel skeptical of sexual risk avoidance education programs, the evaluation itself, or both.

Strongly held views can lead to selective and misleading interpretation of evaluation goals and findings. A key example of such misinterpretation involves the final report from the previous Title V evaluation of abstinence education programs. The findings from that report are often cited as evidence that abstinence education “does not work.” As stressed in the report, however, the evaluation reached two main findings:

1. Youth in the abstinence education programs had similar rates of sexual abstinence as youth not in the program.
2. Youth in the abstinence education programs were no more likely to have engaged in unprotected sex than youth not in the program.

The second finding has been largely ignored. Before the Title V Abstinence Education evaluation and continuing today, a main criticism of abstinence education program funding has been that a focus on abstinence puts youth at risk of having unprotected sex and its adverse consequences. The 2007 evaluation found no support for that criticism: compared to youth not in the programs, participants in the abstinence education programs had similar rates of unprotected sex at first intercourse and over the previous 12 months. Between the two groups, the prevalence of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections did not differ.

Taken together, these two main findings from the 2007 evaluation have important implications for SRAE programming and the new SRAE National Evaluation. At worst, the selected programs were no less successful than other sexual education programming available to youth in the study. At best, given the new SRAE program funding and ongoing research on youth health risks, the SRAE National Evaluation provides an opportunity to learn how to advance SRAE programming and help youth achieve healthy lives.

HOW CAN GRANTEES BE INVOLVED?

For the SRAE National Evaluation, all SRAE grantees can be active participants in the evaluation. We will welcome suggestions from grantees and other stakeholders in the field on relevant research questions and outcome measures. The studies of program implementation features will focus on a selected group of program grantees, but all grantees will be involved in some way. The overall descriptive studies will include all grantees, as will the data and evaluation capacity support activities tailored specifically to improve SRAE programs and youth outcomes.

WHO IS LEADING THE SRAE NATIONAL EVALUATION?

FYSB and OPRE in the Administration for Children & Families have jointly designed the SRAE National Evaluation. FYSB has fully funded the evaluation, and FYSB and OPRE will co-lead it. Federal contract officers are Jessica Johnson (FYSB) and Calonie Gray (OPRE). The contractor for the SRAE National Evaluation is Mathematica Policy Research in partnership with Public Strategies. For more information, please contact:

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¹Trenholm, Christopher, Barbara Devaney, Ken Fortson, Lisa Quay, Justin Wheeler, and Melissa Clark. “Impacts of Four Title V, Section 510 Abstinence Education Programs.” Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research, 2007. Available at <https://www.mathematica.org/our-publications-and-findings/publications/impacts-of-four-title-v-section-510-abstinence-education-programs>. 2