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F.E.G.S

Students Advocating Against Violence Initiative (SAAVI)

*A Submission to the Year 2001 Negley Awards Committee*

**Introduction:**

F.E.G.S is pleased to submit the following program summary, which highlights the F.E.G.S Students Advocating Against Violence Initiative (SAAVI). The F.E.G.S Students Advocating Against Violence Initiative is a well-defined, broadly distributed and highly successful program aimed at reducing and preventing violence in the school setting. The results of implementing the program in 8 New York based school districts have demonstrated that the SAAVI program is an effective means of managing the risk and liability associated with school violence, and has led to the creation of much safer, healthier learning environments for both students and teachers alike.

**I. Overview: Youth Violence and the Motivation to develop the SAAVI Program**

Violence is still the leading cause of death among Americans ages 15 to 24. It is estimated that more than half of high school girls will experience violence at the hands of dates or boyfriends before they graduate. Recent studies indicate that, nationwide, more than half a million high school students attempt suicide every year. Children with special needs -- those with learning disabilities, attention difficulties and social/behavioral problems -- are especially vulnerable to peer pressures, victimization and bullying. They often act out, instigate, or are the target of verbal and physical conflict. The National Education Association estimated that 160,000 children miss school every day due to fear of attack or intimidation by other students. According to the Children's Institute International Teen Violence Survey, more than half of all teens in America have fired a shotgun, rifle or handgun by the time they are 17 years old. More than 6,000 U.S. students were expelled for bringing guns to school," (U.S.

Dept. of Education, 1997). A 1996 report by the National Center for Juvenile Justice indicated that juvenile arrests across the nation were more than 50% greater than the rate in the early 1980s. The growth of gang recruitment and violence, once present only in urban settings, is permeating the schools and streets of suburbia; according to a 1998 Students' Report on School Crime by the National Center for Education Statistics/Bureau of Justice Statistics, the percent of students reporting street gang presence at school nearly doubled between 1989 and 1995. Unfortunately, incidents such as the tragedy at Columbine High School in Colorado focus the nation's attention on violent youth.

## **II. Development and Support of the SAAVI Program**

SAAVI was developed by the Long Island Division of F.E.G.S in 1994, long before the Columbine tragedy, to address the issue of violence among youth. This program, which is designed to run from a minimum of a semester and up to two years in duration, is a school-based, violence prevention and education program. Curriculum development is based on the premise that violence is learned; embedded in attitudes, beliefs and values about oneself and others. It therefore follows, that by addressing cognitive factors (beliefs, attributions, moral perceptions, self-statements and problem-solving skills), anger and violent behavior can be reduced. SAAVI helps students to: recognize the impact of violence in every day life; assess and explore their anger in a safe environment; understand the relationship between thoughts, feelings and behavior; learn coping skills; and understand the power and control dynamics of violent relationships. It was initially made possible by a grant from the J.E. and Z.B Butler Foundation, through UJA-Federation. Ongoing funding from the Butler Foundation and the Price Foundation has enabled F.E.G.S to reach more than 2,500 students in eight New York based school districts.

## **III. SAAVI Program Design**

The SAAVI program is applicable to the general school population, and also specially targets those with learning disabilities and/or conflict resolution issues. The primary goal of the program is to prevent or reduce violence among youth and adolescents. SAAVI is flexibly designed to meet the specific needs and goals of the students and faculty in each school. The course can be administered by teams of teaching and behavioral health professionals or, soon to be available via the Internet with guidance from a trained facilitator, thereby greatly

increasing distribution and applicability. The total course is comprised of 20 modules (see attachment), including topics such as self-awareness; empathy; analyzing the anger process, and how to develop effective conflict management responses. The modular approach to learning lends itself to creative presentation schemes for the material. For example, while several High School administrators requested primarily small process-oriented groups for students identified with behavioral problems, others requested a combination of several different models, which were easily implemented given the flexibility of the program's modular design. For instance, the S., New York's programming included the facilitation of the formalized SAAVI curriculum in health classes and study halls, process-oriented pull-out groups for troubled students, and a peer training program through which Seniors were trained to deliver violence prevention workshops to their Freshman and Junior peers, while a group of student athletes facilitated workshops in the Junior High School.

One of SAAVI's most important components uses a train-the-trainer approach. Essentially, SAAVI trains students and school staff, such as teachers, social workers, school psychologists and guidance counselors, with the tools to perpetuate program concepts once F.E.G.S leaves. The recent development of an Internet based SAAVI product has been a major advancement of the product, as it will allow for instant access to the program and greater flexibility of administration.

#### **IV. Outcomes**

There have been substantial positive outcomes associated with the SAAVI program. To date, over 2,500 students in eight New York State school districts have completed the SAAVI program. At S. High School, discipline referrals of students in the 1997-1998 school year hit an all time high of 1399 **for the final four months** of the school year. The following year, the SAAVI program was invited to the school to work with 3 groups of consumers: 1. students identified as having anger management problems 2. with general groups of students not identified as having anger management problems and 3. with staff to do training in anger management and de-escalation. The results were significant. During the 1998-1999 school year, the number of referrals during the same four-month time period decreased to 741, a decrease of 48%. By the end of the second program year, the number of referrals for the same four-month time period decreased to 336, a decrease of 76% from the base data year. The principal of the High School attributed the dramatic change in discipline referrals to the impact of the SAAVI course, noting that it is "a miracle" and calls it's staff people "angels."

Another example is the R. school district, where a total of twenty teachers took part in the SAAVI training. The R. experience was instrumental in conceptualizing an effective training and ongoing technical assistance model for teachers who will use SAAVI in the future. The R. teachers participated with the F.E.G.S social worker in implementing the curriculum and learned how to facilitate it via a modeling process, a series of roundtable discussions, and role plays using actual student-facilitator and student-student interactions. A majority of the teachers participated enthusiastically. Needless to say, the best outcomes resulted from classrooms in which the educators played an active role. Two of the teachers in particular reported on specific instances in which SAAVI concepts were directly used to resolve conflict in the class. In one case, a male student continually picked on another student. The other student reacted angrily and hostilely. Curriculum units and exercises on empathy enabled the instigating student to understand the impact of his actions, while "cool talk" and "I statement" role-plays helped the victimized student express his feelings. They each gained skills that helped defuse a situation that was progressively becoming more volatile. In the second case, a student was extremely rude and defiant to his teacher. SAAVI exercises helped him express the feelings underlying his behavior. In both instances, the teachers provided a safe space for students to express anger, and identify and practice healthy ways to communicate their feelings, preventing physical altercations.

As a measure of the qualitative impact of the program, the SAAVI social worker conducted surveys among students and teachers to assess their experiences and determine the most beneficial aspects of the program. The students unanimously reported enjoying the program. They learned the most from participating in role-plays and from the concepts of "hot talk" "cool talk". Establishing the classroom as a safe place to verbalize angry feelings, but in constructive, non-aggressive ways was reportedly extremely helpful.

## **V. Looking Ahead - 2000-2001**

F.E.G.S is proud of the universally positive response that SAAVI has received from school districts and funding sources alike. Most recently, the Price Foundation has announced its continued support of the SAAVI program. The Price Foundation has a distinguished history of funding those projects that they feel will lead to significant and long-lasting positive change in the lives of others. F.E.G.S is pleased to

have actualized this commitment through the development of SAAVI. Additionally, the coming year will see the introduction of a fully developed internet product which will allow for distribution and use of SAAVI by school districts nationwide. The F.E.G.S SAAVI program is also an approved vendor for the New York City Board of Education, and is available to school districts citywide. It is our belief that this product will continue to achieve its intent of reducing the incidence of violence and aggression in the school population. Furthermore, programs such as SAAVI will ultimately lead to healthier learning experiences for schoolchildren, teachers and families and will also lead to a reduction in the liability and expenses associated with incidents of school-based violence.

We thank you for the opportunity to nominate the F.E.G.S SAAVI program for this prestigious award.