

The author(s) shown below used Federal funding provided by the U.S. Department of Justice to prepare the following resource:

Document Title: Qualitative Report of Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD's Safe Schools Research Initiative: Implementation of the Safe & Civil Schools Foundations Program

Author(s): W. Carl Sumi, Hanna Cheever, Kirby Chow, Jaunelle Pratt-Williams, Nyema Mitchell, Veronica Madrigal

Document Number: 254128

Date Received: October 2019

Award Number: 2014-CK-BX-0015

This resource has not been published by the U.S. Department of Justice. This resource is being made publically available through the Office of Justice Programs' National Criminal Justice Reference Service.

Opinions or points of view expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.



Qualitative Report of Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD's Safe Schools Research Initiative: Implementation of the Safe & Civil Schools Foundations Program

SRI Education™

A DIVISION OF SRI INTERNATIONAL

Prepared for:

Orlando Noyola
Safe Schools Research Initiative
Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD

Prepared by:**SRI International**

W. Carl Sumi
Hanna Cheever
Kirby Chow
Jaunelle Pratt-Williams
Nyema Mitchell
Veronica Madrigal

Suggested citation:

Sumi, W. C., Cheever, H., Hsieh, T., & INSERT NAME HERE, L. (2018). *Qualitative Report of Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD's Safe Schools Research Initiative: Implementation of the Safe & Civil Schools Foundations Program*. Menlo Park, CA. SRI International.

Study Overview and Introduction

The Pharr-San Juan-Alamo (PSJA) Independent School District in the Rio Grande Valley implemented the Safe Schools Research Initiative (SSRI) funded through the National Institute of Justice's Comprehensive School Safety Initiative. Through the SSRI, district secondary schools serving majority Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students adopted *Foundations*, a schoolwide intervention for promoting positive discipline policies, developed by Safe & Civil Schools (S&CS).

To learn about the district's implementation of *Foundations* in more depth and to generate lessons learned and best practices, SRI International and Copia Consulting (hereafter referred to as the SRI Team) conducted three rounds of site visits in fall 2015, spring 2016, and spring 2017. During each site visit, the SRI Team spoke with a number of different stakeholders at the district and school levels. Site visits in fall 2015 served as a baseline to identify the status quo in the eight treatment (*Foundations*) and seven comparison schools. Site visits in spring 2016 gathered feedback on the first full school year of implementation in the eight *Foundations* schools. The third round of site visits in spring 2017 focused on identifying best practices and lessons learned from the first two years of implementation in the treatment schools and to highlight any major changes in the comparison schools since the baseline visits.

For all three rounds of site visits, the researchers used semi-structured interview protocols to answer specific implementation research questions. Exhibit 1 demonstrates which research questions were included in each site visit.

Exhibit 1. Research Question by Site Visit

To what extent is the multi-tiered system of supports implemented with fidelity in the participating schools? What factors facilitate or constrain implementation and why?	Fall 2015 (round 1)	Spring 2016 (round 2)	Spring 2017 (round 3)
	Baseline (At the start of implementation)	Halfway Check-in (At the end of the first year of implementation)	Summary (At the end of the second year of implementation)
To what extent did schools implement the Safe and Civil Schools' <i>Foundations</i> framework? What components of the framework are easier/harder to implement by staff?		◆	◆
What approaches or strategies have schools used to reward and discipline students?		◆	
<i>How have schools changed their policies and practices in rewarding and disciplining students? Were there any changes in these areas in the control schools?</i>		◆	
What approaches or strategies are schools using to establish and maintain staff buy-in for the <i>Foundations</i>	◆	◆	◆

framework? What factors impact buy-in?			
<i>How are staff perceiving various components of the model? Do staff understand different components of the model?</i>		◆	◆
What types of supports are most useful to implementation of the <i>Foundations</i> framework (e.g., advisors, training)?	◆	◆	◆
What are perceptions among stakeholders (i.e., students, staff, parents) about overall school climate and safety?		◆	
<i>How have those perceptions changed as the framework is implemented?</i>			◆
How do schools plan to sustain framework components once the grant ends? What additional resources do they need to facilitate sustainability? What lessons learned did schools identify? What best practices emerged that could be scaled to the other schools in the district?			◆ ◆

Both treatment and control=

Treatment only = ◆

This memo summarizes qualitative data from all three rounds of site visits, focusing on the evolution of the *Foundations* program implementation over the course of the study and highlights significant findings on several aspects of the implementation.

Sample

Fifteen secondary schools were included in this study. Four were located in San Juan (2 middle schools, 2 high schools), eight in Pharr (4 middle schools, 4 high schools), and three in Alamo (2 middle schools, 1 high school). The *Foundations* schools were four middle schools and four high schools, including one alternative high school. The comparison schools were four middle schools and three high schools, also including one alternative high school.

Exhibit 2: Descriptions of Schools by Type and Condition

<i>Foundations</i> Schools	Comparison Schools	Total
----------------------------	--------------------	-------

	Traditional	Alternative	Traditional	Alternative	
Middle schools	4	0	4	0	8
High Schools	3	1	2	1	7
Total	7	1	6	1	15

The data include interviews with school administrators, teachers, non-instructional staff, and program advisors as well as student focus groups. The program advisors were district employees who assisted the administration in overseeing proper implementation of *Foundations*. In fall 2015, researchers conducted 150 interviews and 11 student focus groups across the *Foundations* and comparison schools. In spring 2016, the SRI Team focused on *Foundations* schools, conducting a total of 33 interviews. In spring 2017, the researchers returned to all fifteen schools and conducted 68 interviews and 15 student focus groups.

At each *Foundations* school, the SRI team conducted individual interviews with the principal or assistant principal, a teacher who is part of the *Foundations* team, a teacher who is not part of the *Foundations* team, a non-instructional staff member (e.g., custodian, nurse), and the school's designated S&CS advisor for the 2015 site visits. The *Foundations* team is a group of teachers, staff, and an administrator at each school that spearhead the implementation of the *Foundations* curriculum and attend regularly scheduled district-level trainings. They are responsible for communicating the curriculum to the school and ensuring successful implementation. With the exception of the non-instructional staff member, the SRI team interviewed the same types of participants for the 2016 site visits. At each comparison school, we conducted individual interviews during the baseline and summary visits with the principal or assistant principal, two teachers, and one non-instructional staff member. In fall 2015 and spring 2017, researchers also conducted student focus groups with an average of 4-6 students at each school, *Foundations* and comparison. Each year the SRI team also completed one-on-one interviews with district leaders and S&CS staff.

Exhibit 3: Interview Respondents by Job Category, Condition, and Year

Respondent Type	Fall 2015	Spring 2016	Spring 2017
<i>Foundations</i> Schools			
Principals or Assistant Principals	31	9	8
<i>Foundations</i> Teachers	23	8	8
Non-<i>Foundations</i> Teachers	22	8	8
Staff	17	0	8
Program Advisor	16	8	8
Student focus group	8	0	8
Total	117	33	48
Comparison Schools			
Principals or Assistant Principals	14	0	7

Teachers	29	0	14
Staff	14	0	7
Student focus group	7	0	7
Total	64	0	35
District/ S&CS			
District leaders	2	2	2
S&CS staff	2	1	2
Total	4	3	4

Analysis

The study team conducted qualitative analyses after each round of site visits. Prior to each site visit, the research team reviewed relevant documents, including background information on the *Foundations* Program and any previous formative memos submitted to the district. Throughout the interview process, the study team discussed relevant findings and learnings gleaned from the interviews and focus groups. The researchers documented interview and focus group findings in debrief guides or a spreadsheet, in which findings were summarized across multiple interviews in a given setting (e.g., school or district) in a consistent and structured format to capture important contextual information and to trigger some initial interpretations of the data. Multiple cross-analysis team meetings were held to refine the overall conclusions based on the findings from other schools and researchers. At each cross-analysis meeting, the researchers reviewed a draft summary outline, discussed the accuracy of general conclusions, identified any potentially important findings that the initial summary did not capture, and weighed the available evidence from each school to support findings. The purpose of the analysis meetings was to provide the study team with the opportunity to compare, contrast, and synthesize findings from the district and schools regarding the study's evaluation questions. This memo summarizes key findings from all three rounds of site visits.

Key Findings

Implementation

Almost all respondents at the *Foundations* schools reported *START on Time!* as the main focus of their implementation and one of the greatest successes of *Foundations* program.

- Though they received training on other aspects of the *Foundations* framework, *Foundations* schools primarily focused on *START on Time!*, a program designed to create safe hallway transitions and reduce tardiness schoolwide, throughout the two years of implementation. *START on Time!* was the first major intervention component of the *Foundations* framework implemented across the *Foundations* schools. After one year of implementation, the *Foundations* schools continued to focus on *START on Time!* and this trend persisted throughout the second year of implementation.
- Across all three rounds of site visits, school staff reported that implementation of *START on Time!* was a success, as they believed that it not only improved behavior in the hallway, but also enhanced school culture almost immediately. Even though the schools had only been implementing the intervention for a few weeks, by fall 2015, staff in all but one of the *Foundations* schools reported that the increased supervision prescribed in the *START on Time!*

invention had led to an improvement in school safety and climate. One teacher noted “Overall, our campus teachers have seen how much of a difference it is. [*START on Time!*] changed the environment.”

- During the second year of program implementation, seven *Foundations* schools expanded their *Foundations* implementation to include Common Area Policies and Guidelines for Success where school staff, in conjunction with students, described the attitude, traits, and behaviors that would help students be successful in classrooms and throughout their lives. Common Area Policies required schools to have clear structure and policies for the common areas that are known by all students. These policies may be kept in “The Process Notebook” or “The Artifact Notebook.” However, respondents still highlighted *START on Time!* as the greatest success. An advisor shared, “Major successes, has been *START on Time!* We’ve implemented it pretty well, it’s been ongoing about two years. I noticed that the staff are already trained, they do it second nature. They go out in halls, get students in. I think it’s very successful.”

Throughout the initiative, staff reported the advisor plays an important role in the implementation of the *Foundations* framework. However, staff continued to struggle to fully understand the role of the advisor.

- In the first year of implementation, some school staff struggled to understand the role of the advisor both as part of the initiative and the school community. Some school staff wanted the advisor to have more in-depth knowledge of the framework and to serve as a school-based expert. By the second year of implementation, the role of the advisor was clearer to most respondents, particularly among the *Foundations* Team. The *Foundations* team members thought of the advisor as a leader of their team as well as a manager of the entire program. Four members indicated that the advisor “advises the team,” usually in a facilitative way, guiding them towards solutions. The majority of non-*Foundations* teachers and staff members stated that they viewed the advisor as an overseer, monitoring the hallways to ensure staff were doing what was expected of them. School administrators saw the advisor as a tool for overseeing implementation and keeping the team engaged.
- However, some school administrators often still struggled with the limitations of the role of the advisor at the end of the two years of implementation. They looked to their advisor as someone who could step in as an attendance liaison, particularly in middle schools. In half of the *Foundations* schools, the advisor had taken on an attendance liaison role in addition to their role as an advisor. At these schools, the advisors often felt overloaded and frustrated as they were pulled in too many directions and unable to fulfil their advisor responsibilities to the full extent. One advisor noted that, “Unfortunately the hardest part was having to do the liaison aspect since there was no liaison person... I ended up with that responsibility on top of Safe Schools. Our program, S&CS, is secondary. The liaison is time consuming, full time.”
- This pressure from the administration led to some confusion on the part of the advisors. One advisor shared, “I think I would have liked a bit more clarification of what the actual responsibilities are. That’s been blurry from the get go and it’s still blurry.” Another advisor expressed a need for, “clarity of what really our role should be. Are we overstepping, are we ok? Up to what extent can we do what we’re doing besides S&CS?”

The majority of respondents reported the *Foundations* training and resource tools were useful in supporting implementation. The school staff appreciated that the training was more individualized in the second year but still expressed the need for more training, specific to their unique campus needs.

- The majority of respondents indicated that the *Foundations* trainings, were helpful in understanding the framework and its implementation. Almost all school administrators, *Foundations* team members, and advisors in spring 2017 mentioned these trainings were the most useful training they received over the course of the grant.
- Respondents appreciated the opportunity to participate in small group trainings, divided by middle and high school, which allowed them more time to share and discuss issues happening at their own school. In a spring 2016 interview a S&CS staff member explained, ““We did very well the first year with tardies and improving that, so [we’re] now working with S&CS to continue improving climate, by making trainings more individualized this year. We met more with middle school[s] together and more [with] high school[s] together, each had similar situations in the campuses.”
- In a spring 2017 interview one teacher shared, “Training gives us ideas to work on, for example we’re having problems with absentees across the district. We had some tips and we were talking to other schools, they tell us what they’re doing. Lots of interaction with other schools. They tell us what works, what doesn’t, we tell them what works here, what doesn’t. This interaction with other schools helps a lot. We kind of compare notes to see what we could do.”
- However, even toward the end of the second year of implementation, a few respondents still expressed the need for more trainings on topics specific to their school context, such as child-abuse, bullying, or family engagement.

Communication and Buy-in

Buy-in from school staff was driven both by the success of the program and the engagement of school administrators.

- In the first few months of implementation, most *Foundations* teams struggled with getting their colleagues to participate in program activities. In fall 2015, across all eight schools, only one *Foundations* team involved a non-*Foundations* staff member in decisions and only three non-teaching staff were trained or involved in the implementation of the *Foundations* framework. By the halfway check-in after the first year of implementation, staff became more bought into the program as they saw positive outcomes they perceived resulted from the program, such as a decrease in number of tardies and reduction of misbehavior in the hallways. One advisor noted that teacher buy-in increased “when they [saw] how it was working and see the students responding.”
- The majority of respondents interviewed in spring 2017 commented that positive program outcomes contributed to initial staff buy-in and described strategies their schools used to keep implementation up over time. For example, schools used positive reinforcement from *Foundations* team members, advisors, or follow-up from administrators to promote engagement. This included verbal ‘thank yous’ from advisors as staff monitored hallways and common areas and incentives or tokens of appreciation for staff, such as free lunches.

- In spring 2016 and 2017, respondents at the majority of *Foundations* schools reported that administrator support was key in successful implementation, as it led to more engagement from the rest of the school staff. Initially, there was some resistance from school leaders as it was an additional burden to their teachers. However, once administrators observed positive changes (e.g. decreased tardiness, faster and safer transitions between classes, etc.) that they associated with implementation of the program, they were more apt to support the initiative. Administrators often sent emails to promote engagement with the program and might be on hall duty alongside teachers to support implementation of *START on Time!*. This investment of principals coincided with stronger staff investment; schools where advisors reported high staff investment generally also reported strong investment from principals. For example, seeing principals and assistant principals in the hallways encouraged staff members do the same. In one school, a *Foundations* teacher said, “We’ve learned that the initiative depends on the principal. If the principal is for it, it’s wow. If not it’s an uphill battle to accomplish something.”
- School administrator buy-in was especially important as all respondents reported that the authority to make significant change in the schools ultimately lies with the principals. Despite some challenges with school administrators, *Foundations* team members at all *Foundations* schools, including advisors, reported having the ability to suggest changes to school administrators to improve safety and climate. The majority of *Foundations* team members indicated principals were generally receptive to and supportive of suggestions made by them.

Successful implementation relied on widespread staff engagement and participation beyond the *Foundations* team, which led to student buy-in for the program.

- In spring 2017, respondents at all the *Foundations* schools mentioned that an increase in staff engagement with the program, including increased teacher and administration presence in the hallways during transition times, was key to successful program implementation. A teacher noted, “Our tardy sweeps have been so impactful because everybody is working together as team. Before, coaching staff were not involved, they lived in [their] own world and we lived in our own world. They are helping us with tardy sweeps.”
- Following this increase in staff engagement, students started to recognize that the framework was an integral part of the school structure. In a 2016 interview, a *Foundations* teacher said she overheard a student mention hallway sweeps at the end of the first year of the initiative. The student said, “I gotta go because I don’t want to get swept.”
- In spring 2017, students reported a greater presence of school staff in the hallways during transition periods, with most staff conducting hallway sweeps. Student respondents at half of the *Foundations* schools reported this increased staff presence helped to improve behavior.

School Safety and Climate

The majority of respondents from both *Foundations* and comparison schools reported positive or improving perceptions of school safety and overall climate from fall 2015 to spring 2017. However, there was a lack of contrast in the perceptions of safety and climate between respondents at *Foundations* and comparison schools.

- At all *Foundations* and almost all comparison schools, the majority of the respondents expressed positive or improving perceptions of climate during the summary visits in the spring of 2017. Slightly more respondents at *Foundations* schools expressed positive or improving perceptions of school safety, however the difference was negligible.
- This lack of differentiation in the perceptions of safety and climate between *Foundations* and comparison schools may be attributable to multiple factors:
 - Staff in each participating school reported an overall positive school climate at the start of the initiative, with a positive shift in climate within the district in the five years leading up to the initiative.
 - There were district-wide efforts to improve safety and climate in all middle and high schools from fall 2015 to spring 2017. For example, an initiative called *Capturing Kids' Hearts* was commonly mentioned at both *Foundations* and some comparison schools. This initiative included training for teachers on building positive relationships with students.
 - Nearly all comparison schools had implemented safety and climate improvement efforts that resemble some aspect of the *Foundations* framework. These included assigning teachers to monitor hallways during transitions, having students walk on the right, conducting hallway sweeps, and having teacher duty posts before and after school.
 - Staff at comparison schools may have learned about aspects of *Foundations* by attending training led by comparison teachers who had been invited to *Foundations* trainings, bringing on staff who had worked at *Foundations* schools, or observing strategies in *Foundations* schools. At two comparison schools in spring 2017, administrators had worked in a *Foundations* school during the first year of implementation. At a third school, an administrator reported having observed efforts at a *Foundations* school and decided to implement these strategies at their own school.
- Even with these other initiatives in the district, respondents at the majority of *Foundations* schools attributed improvements in safety or climate at their school to *Foundations*. In addition, respondents at the majority of *Foundations* schools stated that there have been fewer fights on their campus, fewer tardies, and less misbehavior in the hallways since they began implementing the *Foundations* framework.

Reward and Discipline Systems

***Foundations* schools did not make substantive changes to their schoolwide discipline or rewards systems throughout the initiative, and these systems looked similar across both *Foundations* and comparison schools.**

- Discipline systems in *Foundations* schools varied widely, ranging from minor consequences that included calls home, parent conferences, behavior contracts, lunch detention, to more severe punishments such as in-school suspension. Despite some minor changes, *Foundations* schools' discipline systems remained largely unchanged and did not seem to differ systematically from those reported by comparison schools. The district also implemented an online system of tracking student behavior and referrals. Along with the online system, the district provided schools with guidance on appropriate consequences for various behaviors. The use of this system and new guidance was required of all schools, both *Foundations* and comparison.

- In fall 2015, staff at eleven of the fifteen schools reported that they only systematically reward students for attendance or meeting academic expectations. This trend held in spring of 2017, where respondents at the majority schools rewarded students for attendance and academic achievements such as being on the honor roll. Similar to schoolwide discipline systems, these reward systems did not differ systemically between *Foundations* and comparison schools.
- Almost no schools reported rewards that were specific to positive behavior, but often respondents said that participation in events rewarding attendance or academics also depended on having displayed positive behavior. The majority of students reported they would like more rewards and expressed it would promote positive behavior throughout the school.

Challenges/Barriers

The specific context of the school impacted implementation, including the physical design of the school, school size, and alternative versus traditional school settings.

- The layout of the school may affect the degree to which the *Foundations* program can be implemented effectively. Respondents at one high school expressed frustration at how the design of the school, which was a large physical building with many hallways, impedes effective hallway sweeps and common area monitoring. The school administrator shared, “the structure of the schools has been one of the biggest drawbacks to our success.”
- Middle schools and smaller alternative high schools were more likely to successfully implement more components of the *Foundations* program with fidelity than the larger comprehensive high schools. Some of the challenges advisors faced at larger campuses included keeping staff informed, promoting engagement, and monitoring implementation. One district administrator said, “Middle schools are more effective. Middle schools range from 700-900 kids, high schools are bigger, and layout for middle school works well for what we are doing, layout in high schools are just enormous”.
- Alternative schools also struggled with differentiating the program to meet their specific needs. The smaller alternative high schools experienced more success with implementation than the larger comprehensive high schools but also needed to differentiate the program to meet the school’s specific needs (e.g., increased monitoring of hallways and the school perimeter at one school, or flexibility in hallway monitoring for students with non-standard schedules at another school).

Moving the advisors to different schools created challenges for many *Foundations* Teams.

- Advisors were transitioned to different schools several times during the two years of implementation. *Foundations* team members and school administrators often found this disruptive. One *Foundations* teacher said, “I didn’t like we got ours moved. He knew the kids. She’s doing a great job, don’t get me wrong, getting to know kids and staff, but constantly moving them is not a good idea...They need to stay with us, just like us, need to stay with consistency.”
- Several advisors also reported that the transition between schools presented a challenge, especially changes from middle to high schools and vice versa. One advisor noted, “It was a learning curve for all of us. To me, I would have liked it if we had stayed at the school we were

at.” Another said, “I think it's been hard coming to another school. I think that has really been a challenge because I think you start forming a team with one school, and then I was moved from a middle school to a high school.”

Conclusion

The majority of *Foundations* schools attributed improvements in safety and climate at their schools to the implementation of *Foundations* and had generally positive feedback about the program.

Respondents at almost all *Foundations* schools reported that the *Foundations* program aligns with school priorities related to attendance, behavior, safety, and tardiness. District leadership also noted that the *Foundations* program was highly aligned with the district goals, which gave validity both to what the district was already implementing prior to the *Foundations* program as well as the program itself. At *Foundations* schools, the majority of respondents reported that the *Foundations* program met their expectations to reduce tardies, increase attendance, and ultimately create a “safe school” for students with improved climate. One administrator said, “Our expectations were that we were going to have our kids do the *START on Time!*, work with our teachers, get their buy in to stand in the halls, to get the kids in class, and start your class on time, and have them not be tardy. To take care of our common areas. As far as those expectations, I think we've done real well.” Another administrator shared, “I had high expectations. The name/title itself tells you, teaching them to be responsible but teaching them safety. Well it has to work, it has to have research behind it, the best way to keep to our kids safer in our school...It met expectations.”

Administrators and staff at *Foundations* schools also shared that consistency and perseverance in implementation were key tenets in the success of the *Foundations* program. Respondents at all schools indicated that, while a challenge, consistency in implementation was vital to successful implementation and staff investment. One school administrator said, “Fidelity, it's gonna work if you implement it faithfully.” Interviewees also cited the importance of perseverance in implementing the program and warned against wanting to see drastic changes overnight. For example, one person said, “Be in for a long tough battle. It's people beliefs, are hard to change, it's hard for them to change.”

It is important to note that interview data also showed that over the course of the two years of implementation, respondents at both *Foundations* and comparison schools included in the initiative reported positive changes related to improved school climate and safety. There were generally more similarities than differences between *Foundations* and comparison schools. This lack of contrast might be related to the increase in district-wide initiatives to address safety and climate, the lack of substantive changes in the rewards and discipline systems at *Foundations* schools, the sense of community and sharing among schools in the PSJA district, and the staff transiency between the schools.

Even without additional grant funding, nearly all *Foundations* schools plan to sustain the program next year, reflecting the perceived success of the program on the part of staff at *Foundations* schools. The findings included in this memo may help PSJA as it plans to sustain the *Foundations* program, including the need for committed staff members, engaged administrators, differentiated trainings, and clear communication among all staff. Findings may also help to inform other districts about facilitators and barriers associated with frameworks devoted to improving school climate and safety.