

Vermont School-based Substance Use Prevention Evaluation Summary

August 2026

In 2025, the Vermont Department of Health Division of Substance Use Programs (DSU) contracted with Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation (PIRE) to conduct an [evaluation of the School-based Substance Use Prevention Services program](#). The purpose of the evaluation was to assess the program's implementation, impacts, successes, and challenges. This document summarizes the key findings.

If you need help accessing or understanding this information, contact AHS.VDHDSU@vermont.gov, with subject line "School Prevention Evaluation."

Background

As part of a comprehensive approach to prevent youth substance use, DSU awards grants to Supervisory Unions (SUs) and School Districts (SDs) across Vermont. During this evaluation period, the grants were funded through the federal Substance Use Prevention, Treatment, and Recovery Services Block Grant, as well as Vermont's General Fund and Opioid Settlement Fund. The number of funded SUs and SDs has ranged from 15 in fiscal years 2021 and 2022 to 29 in fiscal year 2026. Annual grant awards have ranged from approximately \$40,000 to \$80,000 per SU or SD in this same time period.

The types of activities and programs supported through these grants have remained relatively consistent over time, focusing on substance use screening, referrals, and individualized student support; educational and peer leadership groups; evidence-based substance use prevention curricula; staff training; and efforts to strengthen substance use prevention capacity and collaboration with community partners. In many districts, grant funding has supported Student Assistance Professionals (SAPs) and other prevention-focused student support staff who lead and deliver these services.

A previous evaluation examined the program through 2020; this evaluation continues that work by assessing program outcomes from 2019 onward and program implementation in the past two years of the grant. Using a mixed-methods approach, the evaluation drew on data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), School Health Profiles, quarterly reports and interviews with staff from funded SUs and SDs in state fiscal years 2025 and 2026, and student perspectives collected through a Photovoice project in 2026.

Key Points

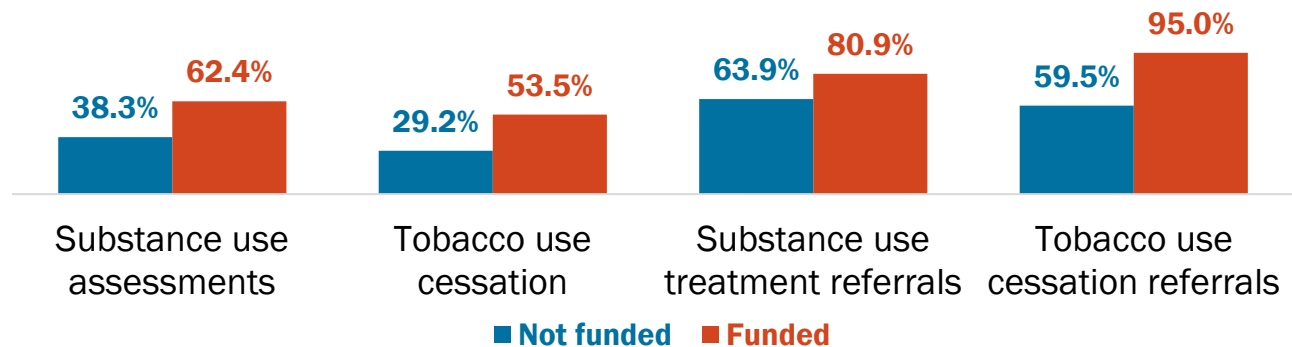
- **The grants strengthened schools' abilities to prevent substance use and support students.**
- **High school student alcohol, cannabis, and vaping use declined across the state between 2019 and 2023, although improvements were not consistently different between the funded and unfunded districts.**
- **Long-term success depends on stable funding, adequate staffing, and strong community support.**



Key Findings

Increased Substance Use Prevention Capacity

Funded schools were more likely to provide substance use assessment and referral services for students compared to **non-funded schools**.



- Staff at funded schools shared that these grants helped increase school capacity for prevention, including improved staff training, expanded curricula, and stronger community partnerships.
- School Health Profile data showed that funded schools demonstrated greater capacity as compared to unfunded schools for providing services such as substance use assessments, tobacco cessation support, and referrals for substance use treatment.

Improved Student Support and Access to Services

- School staff shared that the presence of specialized prevention and support staff, such as SAPs, strengthened student-staff relationships and encouraged help-seeking behaviors, including increased self-referrals for support.
- In state fiscal year 2026, over 600 students in funded schools were screened and identified as at risk for substance use and/or mental health issues and most were referred for additional services and support.

“You know your message is getting through when students come to you asking for help.”

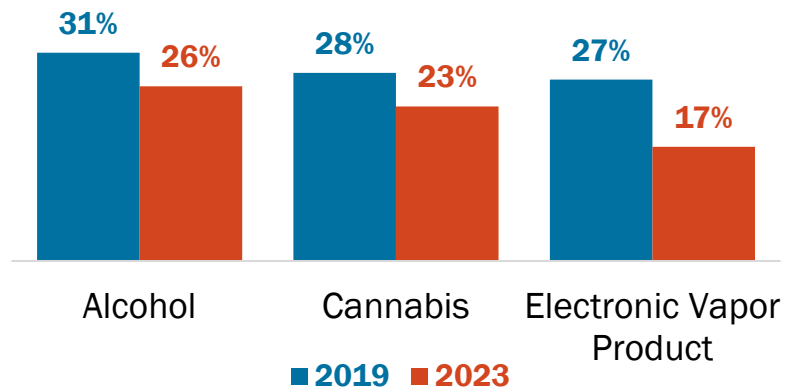
Encouraging Trends in Student Outcomes Across the State

Findings from analysis of YRBS measures of student substance use and associated risk and protective factors were mixed.

- Between 2019 and 2023, high school student use of alcohol, cannabis, and electronic vapor devices declined statewide across all SUs and SDs, including within the subset of funded SUs and SDs. Some improvements were also observed in perceptions of risk and access to harmful products, particularly vaping products.

- When comparing funded vs. unfunded SUs and SDs, there was not consistent evidence that funded districts improved more than districts that did not receive this funding, and therefore these positive prevention trends were statewide.

Past 30-day use of alcohol, cannabis, and electronic vapor products decreased among high school students in funded schools between 2019 and 2023.



Ongoing Challenges Limit Impact and Sustainability

School staff identified several significant barriers to implementing and sustaining effective prevention services, including:

- Ongoing staffing shortages, recruitment and retention issues (especially SAPs), and a lack of systematic ongoing professional development and connection between SAPs across the state.
- Unstable, short-term funding which undermines program continuity and sustainability.
- Community factors including stigma, poverty, and normalization of alcohol and cannabis use, as well as limited access to external treatment and other support services for youth in need.

Implications for Strengthening School-Based Prevention

Overall, the findings indicate that the grants helped schools strengthen substance use prevention efforts by improving services, building partnerships, and increasing prevention capacity. At the same time, challenges such as limited staffing, insufficient funding, and community factors made it harder for schools to fully implement and sustain prevention activities. The mixed results on the district-wide student substance use outcomes that were examined for this evaluation project suggest that additional support may be needed to increase the program's impact for all students. Ongoing, reliable funding at a level that allows schools to hire and retain dedicated prevention and student support staff would help ensure that schools have the capacity to deliver effective prevention services and improve student outcomes over time.