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Impact of
Life Skills Training
on
Initiation of ATOD Use
January 2025.

Evalumetrics Research Brief 25-003

Summary –

The results of the current analysis of the student survey data indicated that initiation of use of alcohol, marijuana, cigarettes, and other drugs, as well as use of vaping devices, decreased after completion of Life Skills Training (LST). In addition, the change in prevalence of initiation among Wayne County 12th grade students who were exposed to LST in middle school was greater than for 12th grade students in comparable schools that did not provide LST.

Background -

The Life Skills Training (LST) program, developed by Gilbert Botvin, is one of the most extensively documented, evidence-based prevention programs in use today and is the most widely used universal substance abuse prevention strategy. LST has been evaluated extensively in controlled settings and is listed as a Model Program on the Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development, a project of the Institute of Behavioral Science at the University of Colorado. LST is an interactive classroom curriculum program that addresses substance abuse knowledge, perception of risk of harm from use of substances, refusal skills, communication skills, and other skills needed to resist the use of substances. LST begins with 15 classroom sessions in 6th grade followed by 10 booster sessions in 7th, and nine booster sessions in 8th grade.

In 2017, students in middle and high schools in Wayne County completed the Evalumetrics Youth Survey (EYS). EYS provides scale scores representing 30 risk or protective factors. At that time, significant proportions of high school students scored above the risk level on lack of perceived risk of harm from drugs, perceived laws and norms favorable to drug use, and favorable attitudes toward drug use. Life Skills Training (LST) was selected as a model prevention program for Wayne County because of its potential effects on these and other critical factors. For example, LST is designed to increase students' knowledge about the negative effects of drugs and change students' perception of norms related to adult and peer use of alcohol, tobacco, and other substances. Life Skills Training is a universal prevention measure in the individual domain and is designed to increase protective factors. LST is considered a Tier I strategy in the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) model utilized in Wayne County schools.

LST was implemented in schools in Wayne County through the leadership of the Wayne County Department of Mental Health, with support from the Wayne County Department of Public Health and, in collaboration with the Wayne County Partnership for Strengthening Families. The project has had support and cooperation from 11 partnering school districts. Delphi Rise, an OASAS designated prevention provider, was primarily responsible for the LST instruction.

Previous analyses of the Life Skills Training Health Survey¹ found strong support for the course meeting its skills learning objectives with sixth grade students. Mean scale scores for nine (9) of the 11 skills scales improved following the 6th grade LST course.

¹ Impact of Wayne County Life Skills Training on Skills Learning Objectives. Evalumetrics Research Brief 24-010 August 2024.

Method -

This Research Brief describes changes in reported onset of use of Alcohol, Marijuana, Cigarettes, and other drugs, as well as use of Vaping devices, for 12th grade students who completed LST compared to those who did not participate in LST. Comparisons were made between initiation rates for Wayne County 12th graders in 2019 (not exposed to LST) and 12th graders in 2023 who completed LST in middle school. In addition, changes for Wayne County students were compared to changes in initiation among 12th graders in similar rural schools in counties that had not implemented LST.

Results –

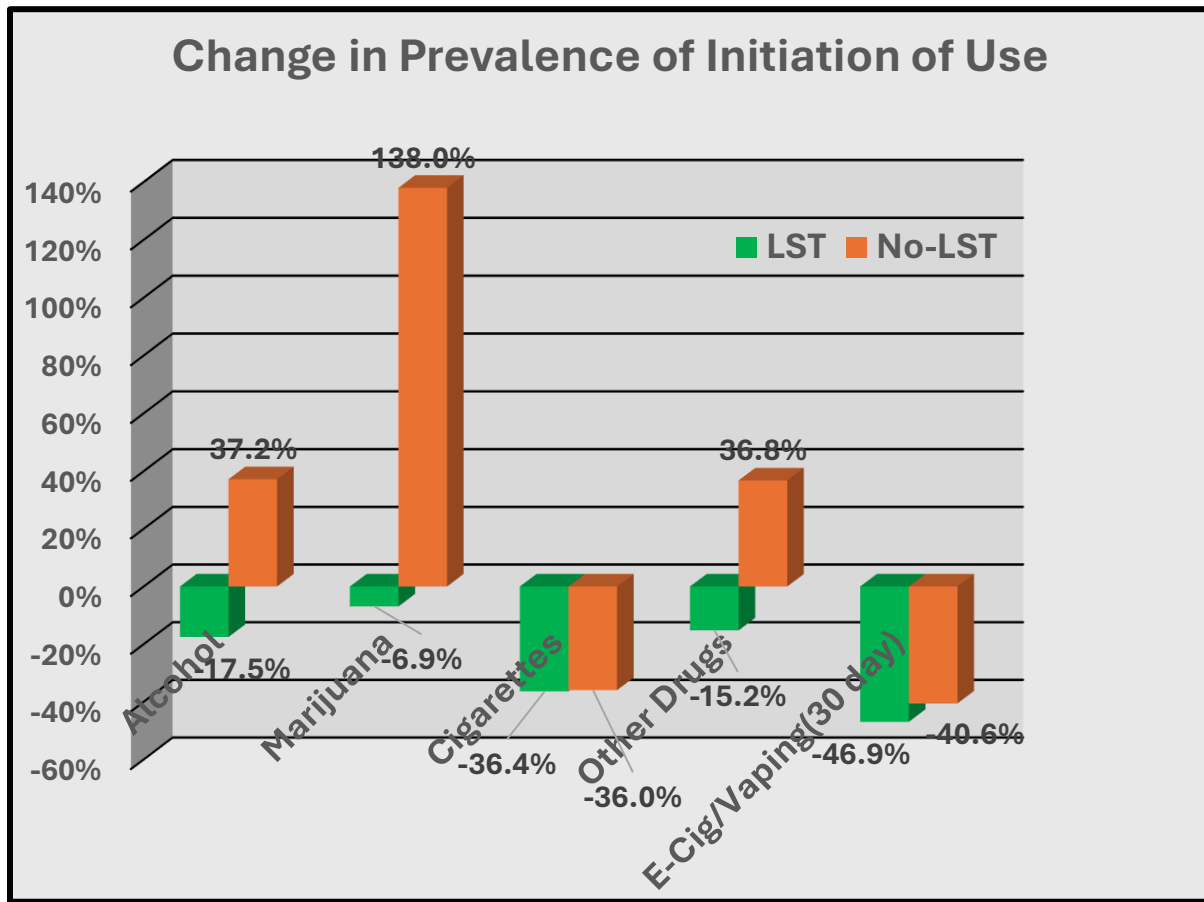
A primary goal of prevention, and specifically LST, is to provide students with information, skills, and resilience to prevent initiation of use of substances, i.e., lifetime use. The Evalumetrics Youth Survey (EYS) is conducted in all Wayne County schools, as well as approximately 20 similar small rural schools in the Finger Lakes and Southern Tier of New York State, each odd-numbered year. Comparisons were made for prevalence of initiation of use (reported lifetime use) between 12th grade students in 2019, who were in middle school prior to implementation of LST, to 12th grade students in 2023 who had completed LST in middle school. Results indicated that Wayne County 12th grade students who had completed LST in middle school were 17.5% less likely to have initiated use of alcohol, 6.9% less likely to have initiated use of marijuana, 36.4% less likely to have initiated cigarette use, and 15.2% less likely to initiated use of other drugs. EYS does not include an item on lifetime use of vaping devices but students who had completed LST were 46.9% less likely to report vaping in the past 30 days.

Proportion of 12th Grade Students who had initiated use

	Wayne County			Non-LST Schools		
	2019	2023	Change in Prevalence	2019	2023	Change in Prevalence
N	779	487		87	76	
Alcohol	45.6%	37.6%	-17.5%	27.4%	37.6%	37.2%
Marijuana	30.3%	28.2%	-6.9%	12.1%	28.8%	138.0%
Cigarettes	17.6%	11.2%	-36.4%	26.7%	17.1%	-36.0%
Other Drugs	6.6%	5.6%	-15.2%	3.8%	5.2%	36.8%
E-Cig/Vaping(30 day)	22.8%	12.1%	-46.9%	24.4%	14.5%	-40.6%

A second comparison was made between changes in initiation of use among Wayne County 12th grade students and 12th grade students in five rural schools in nearby counties where LST had not been implemented. The decrease in the initiation of use of every substance was greater for the LST group than for the comparison group. In fact, while Wayne County students showed

decreased initiation of use of alcohol and marijuana, and other drugs, students in the comparison group had an increase in initiation.



Discussion –

The results of the current analysis of student survey data indicated that initiation of use of alcohol, marijuana, cigarettes, and other drugs, as well as use of vaping devices, decreased after completion of Life Skills Training (LST). In addition, the change in prevalence of initiation among Wayne County 12th grade students who were exposed to LST in middle school was greater than for 12th grade students in comparable schools that did not provide LST. These results provide support for the value of LST for reducing ATOD use in students.