

ADAPTING TO A NEW REALITY: LESSONS FROM SRAE GRANT RECIPIENTS' EXPERIENCES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Background

Sexual Risk Avoidance Education (SRAE) grant recipients implement programs that teach adolescents to refrain from sexual activity. The SRAE programs also provide education on personal responsibility, self-regulation, goal setting, healthy relationships, a focus on the future, and prevention of drug and alcohol use. SRAE grants are funded by the Family and Youth Services Bureau within the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the SRAE grant recipients had to adjust their work spaces, programming, and data collection activities. As part of the Sexual Risk Avoidance Education National Evaluation (SRAENE), Mathematica conducted a study to examine how SRAE grant recipients responded to the pandemic and their plans for the future. This fact sheet summarizes grant recipients' experiences related to their work environments, communication, technology use, staffing, implementation, and data collection.



Data and methods

This study draws on data from interviews with General Departmental and Competitive SRAE grant recipients.¹ From November 2021 to February 2022, the grant recipients completed an online interview. In total, 101 of 103 grant recipients responded; these recipients represented 33 states, 5 territories, and the District of Columbia. For some interview questions, grant recipients were asked to recall information about their programs in fall 2020 and spring 2021, as well as more current information about their programs in fall 2021. Therefore, for these questions, the study could assess how grant recipients' impressions of their situations changed over time.

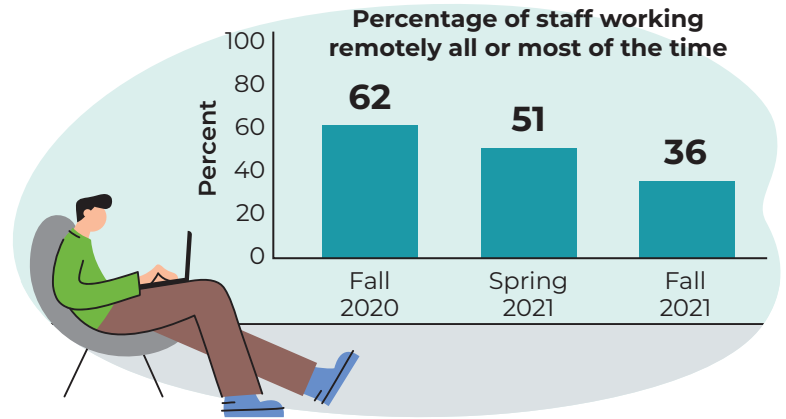
The SRAENE team conducted qualitative and quantitative analyses of the interview data. The team conducted qualitative coding of open-ended responses to identify themes across respondents. For quantitative data, the team calculated simple summary metrics across respondents. Percentages shown below are calculated out of 101 grant recipients, unless otherwise noted.

¹ We excluded State SRAE grant recipients from this data collection because they do not directly deliver programming to youth.

Findings

Work environments

Like many workplaces across the United States, grant recipients altered their work environment because of the pandemic. In particular, many grant recipients had more staff work remotely, although this percentage fell over time. There was considerable variation across grant recipients; some had all staff working remotely at all three time points, and others had all staff working in person throughout these periods.

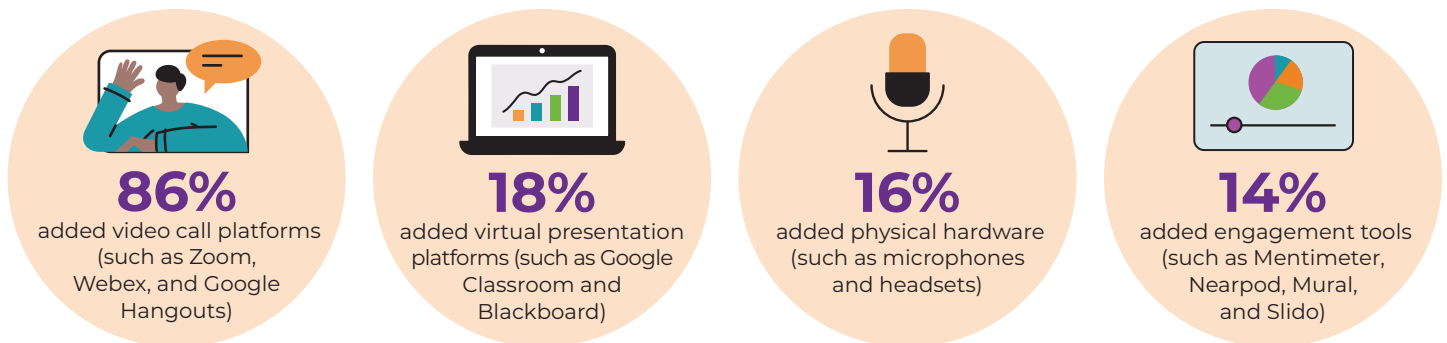


Note: These percentages were based on 98 respondents for fall 2020 and spring 2021, and 96 respondents for fall 2021.

“The option of remote [work] was helpful with keeping staff healthy and for staff being able to stay home ... if [their children were] sick or quarantined from school.”

Technology

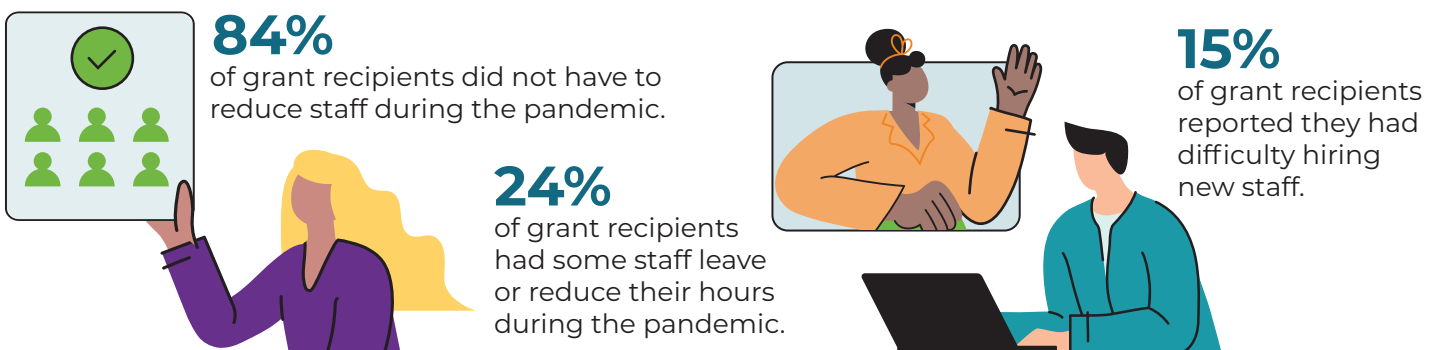
During the pandemic, 90 percent of grant recipients added new technology to better communicate with staff and provide programming to youth, and 90 percent of those who adopted new technology planned to keep the technology moving forward.



Note: Percentages were calculated out of 91 grant recipients.

Staff retention

Generally, grant recipients did not report drastic changes to their number of staff from fall 2020 to fall 2021, and most grant recipients (78 percent) reported that they had enough staff for their projects in fall 2021.



Staff communication

To communicate within their teams, most grant recipients used a combination of in-person and virtual meetings, and this hybrid meeting approach grew more popular over time from 59 percent in fall 2020 to 77 percent in fall 2021.



Grant recipients shared successful strategies for communication during the pandemic:

84% of grant recipients mentioned **video calls**

40% of grant recipients mentioned **email**



38% of grant recipients mentioned **group chats**

35% of grant recipients mentioned **in-person meetings**

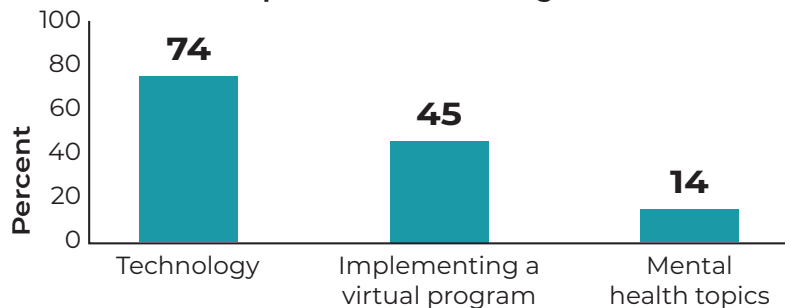


Although grant recipients found successes with communication during the pandemic, 29 percent noted that virtual communication was challenging because it was less personal or efficient, and 20 percent noted technological or Internet issues made virtual communication harder.

Staff training and supervision

Many grant recipients recognized the need for additional staff training during the pandemic, and given that programming was more limited and staff traveled less while working remotely, some grant recipients found staff had more time to engage in trainings. Common training topics included how to use new technology and how to implement programming virtually.

Percentage of grant recipients that provided staff training on...



Most grant recipients (54 percent) changed the way they supervised staff during the pandemic.



44% held supervision meetings virtually, rather than in person



33% asked staff to use new ways to document their work so their supervisors had a better sense of what they were doing while working remotely



22% increased the frequency of check-ins between supervisors and supervisees, to maintain personal connections and check on staff's mental health and commitments outside of work, such as child care

“We went from 100 percent in office and classrooms to 100 percent at home and virtual classes. I had to have trust and confidence that my staff could manage their time and productivity levels without direct supervision. We had to move to more management based on goal achievement rather than just fulfilling an hours requirement.”

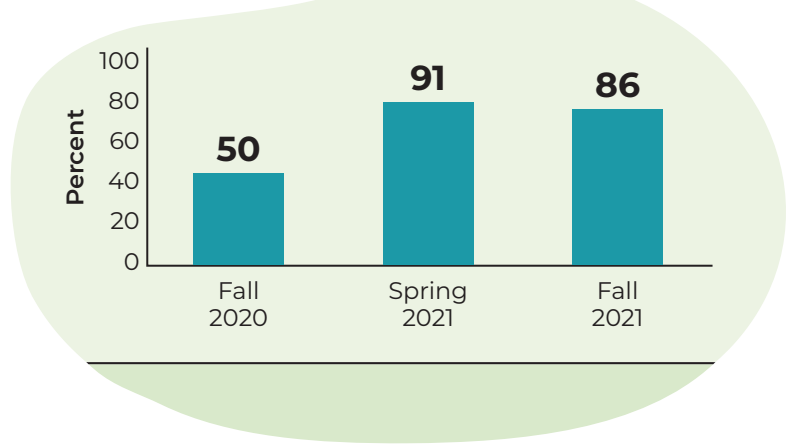
Seventy percent of grant recipients that implemented new trainings planned to keep them, whereas a smaller percentage of grant recipients expressed interest in keeping virtual supervision check-ins (27 percent) or more frequent check-ins between supervisors and staff (25 percent).

Programming for youth

Many grant recipients had to halt programming for youth during the pandemic, particularly during fall 2020. By spring 2021 and fall 2021, most grant recipients were able to implement programming, either virtually or in person, in at least one site, such as schools, clinics, or community-based organizations.

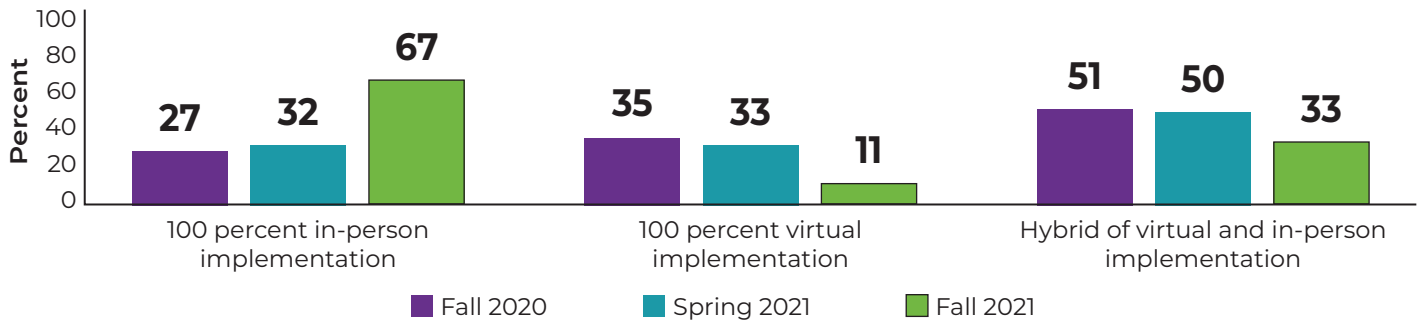
Grant recipients reported whether they implemented programming 100 percent in person, 100 percent virtual, or a hybrid of in person and virtual. In fall 2020 and spring 2021, hybrid implementation was popular, and by fall 2021, there was a large shift to 100 percent in-person programming.

Percentage of grant recipients with at least one site implementing programming for youth



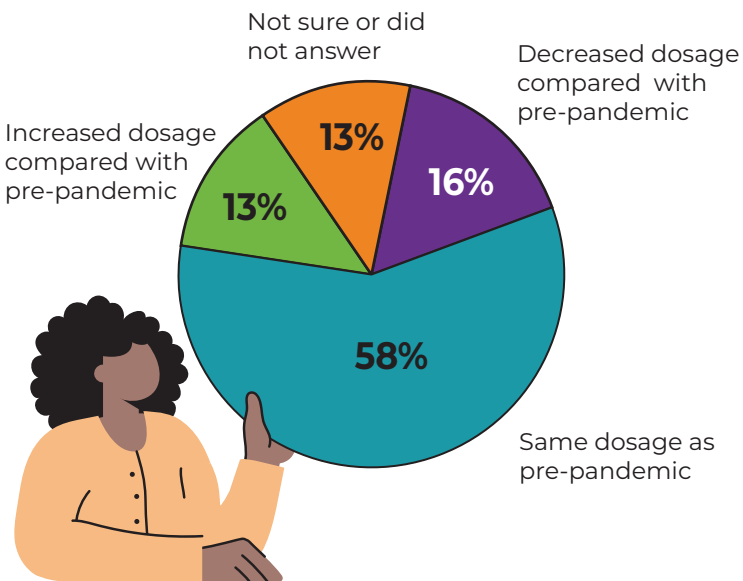
Note: Two grant recipients did not respond to these questions, so their response was assumed to be zero sites.

Percentage of grant recipients delivering their program in at least one site using...



Note: The sample includes grant recipients who had at least one site implementing programming: 51 grant recipients in fall 2020, 92 grant recipients in spring 2021, and 87 grant recipients in fall 2021. Grant recipients could select multiple modes if they were implementing different modes across different sites, so percentages across modes do not add to 100 at each time point.

Expected program dosage in Fall 2021



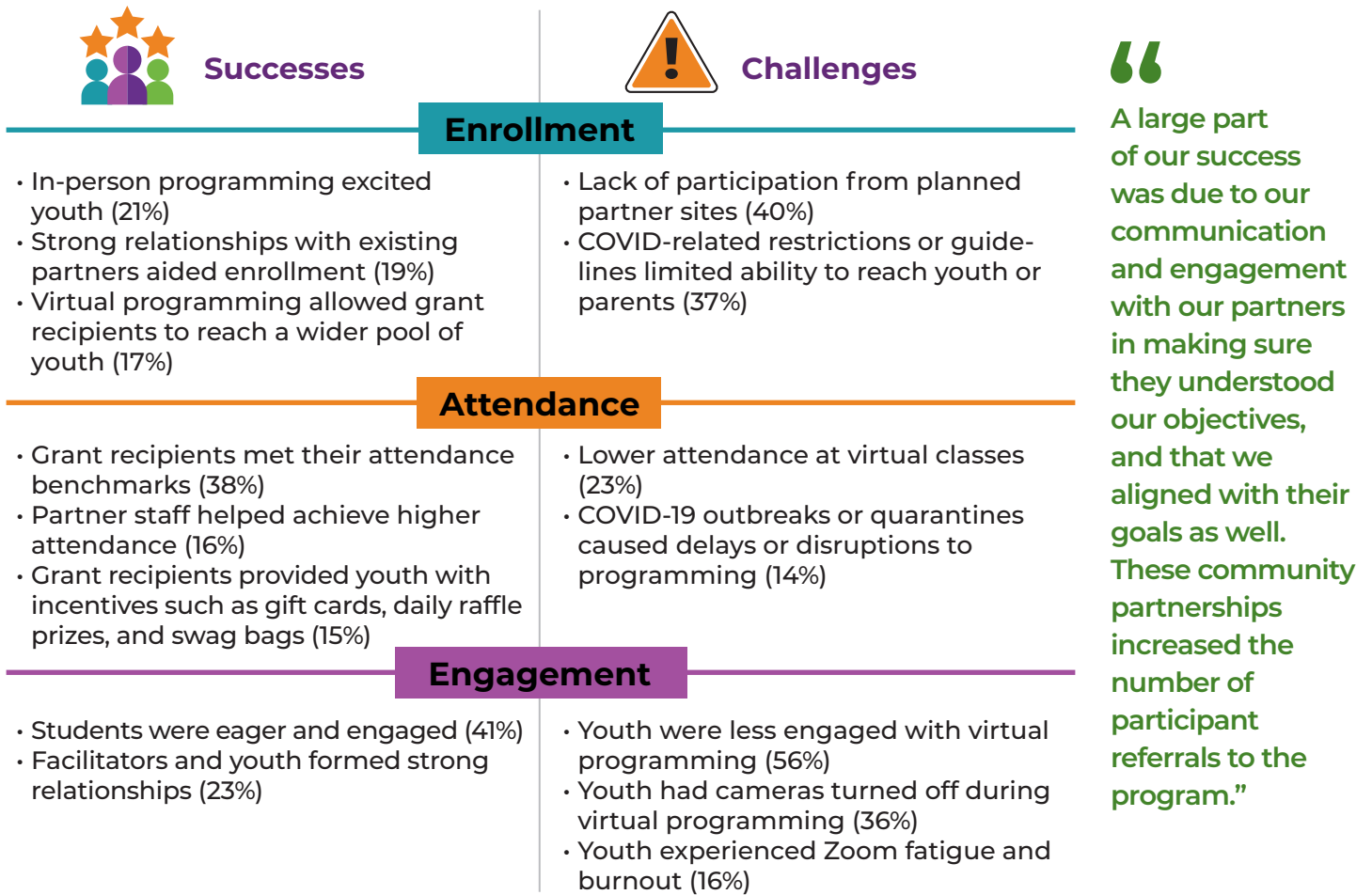
Program dosage

During the 2020–2021 school year, some grant recipients (22 to 29 percent) reduced their program dosage by shortening their programming time from what they had planned. However, the changes to dosage did not seem to be permanent, as most grant recipients hoped to match or exceed their pre-pandemic dosage moving forward.

“Many health teachers [had] lost time with their students due to COVID-19 restrictions and partial-year shutdowns. They could not justify giving an outside group time [to implement SRAE programming].”

Youth enrollment, attendance, and engagement

During the pandemic, many grant recipients found successful strategies to enroll youth and maintain attendance and engagement, but they also faced new challenges that were difficult to address.



“A large part of our success was due to our communication and engagement with our partners in making sure they understood our objectives, and that we aligned with their goals as well. These community partnerships increased the number of participant referrals to the program.”

Note: Percentages were calculated based on the number of grant recipients that reported at least one success or challenge related to each topic. For enrollment and attendance successes and enrollment challenges, there were 75 respondents. For attendance challenges, there were 67 respondents. For engagement, there were 86 respondents for successes and 64 respondents for challenges.

Challenges youth face

Looking toward the future and the services they will provide youth, grant recipients felt that youth would continue to face significant hardships as they deal with the aftermath of the pandemic in the coming school year.

Grant recipients expected these future challenges for youth:



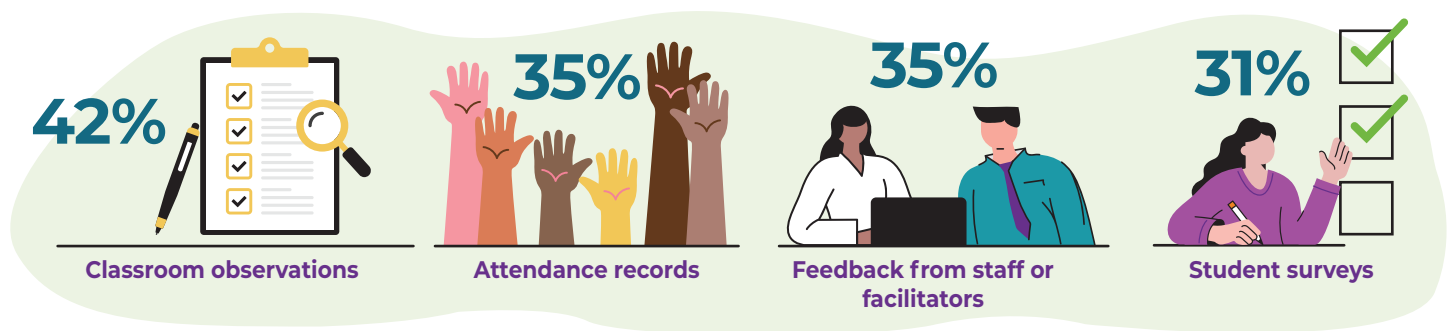
“So much has changed [in] the past few years with how youth perceive themselves, the nation, and the world they live in. I think our biggest challenge is going to [be] getting youth to believe in themselves, their future, and their roles in that future.”

Data collection

The pandemic caused some grant recipients (44 percent) to adapt their strategies for collecting performance measures during the 2020–2021 school year. A majority of grant recipients who made adaptations (80 percent) shifted from in-person surveys to electronic methods, such as online survey platforms like SurveyMonkey, REDCap, or Qualtrics.

Some grant recipients (37 percent) collected data beyond the performance measures for their own evaluation purposes. Among those that collected data, 54 percent changed their data collection procedures during the pandemic, mainly switching to virtual rather than in-person methods. Eighty percent of grant recipients that made changes plan to keep those changes in the future.

Most grant recipients (88 percent) collected data on youth engagement during the 2020–2021 school year, and common data sources included:



Note: Percentages were calculated out of 89 grant recipients.

“We will continue to use online data collection, as we feel it gives our youth more of a sense of anonymity and removes the chance of transcription errors. We will likely continue to do qualitative interviewing via Zoom, because of what our youth expressed about feeling more open online than in person.”

You can find more information on SRAENE at <https://sraene.com/>.

Suggested citation: Keating, Betsy, Sarah Wagner, and Susan Zief. “Adapting to a New Reality: Lessons from SRAE Grant Recipients’ Experiences During the COVID-19 Pandemic.” OPRE Report No. 2022-327. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022.

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