

**Highlands County SDFS Needs Assessment 2003-2004**

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**Highlands County  
SDFS Needs Assessment  
2003-2004**

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# Highlands County SDFS Needs Assessment 2003-2004

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## HIGHLANDS COUNTY NEEDS ASSESSMENT 2003-2004

### Introduction

#### Highlands County

Highlands County is a rural county located in the geographic center of Florida. The county was named for its rolling countryside surrounding the ridge. It has an elevation of 145 to 160 feet above sea level.

The county includes 1,028 square miles. This represents 1.9% of the land mass of the state of Florida. Groves, ranches, and farmland comprise about 70 percent of the county. The three major urban areas, Sebring (the county seat), Avon Park, and Lake Placid account for about 20 percent. Fresh water lakes and streams compose the other 10 percent.

Sebring is nine square miles with a population of approximately 10,567. The city encircles Lake Jackson, a natural 3,020 acre lake. The city is famous for the "12 Hours of Sebring" American Lemans Series annual car race.

Avon Park, a heavy citrus producing area, is the northern-most city in the county. It is three and six-tenths square miles with a population of approximately 8,183. Avon Park is the home of South Florida Community College (SFCC).

SFCC was founded in 1965, and serves the tri-county area that includes Highlands, Hardee and DeSoto counties. The College enrolls 19,000 credit and non-credit students on its six campuses and many community sites throughout the Heartland. It provides a college preparatory program, a vocational curriculum, and a program for adult education. Currently, the College provides several opportunities for students to earn bachelor degrees through participating four-year colleges and universities.

Lake Placid is the "Caladium Capital of the World" and a fisherman's paradise. The town is one and twenty-five hundredths square miles with a population of about 1,427. Its main industry is agriculture.

According to the 2000 Census Bureau Report, the total county population was 87,366. Compared to the 1990 Census, the population grew 27.7%. The 2000 racial demographics included:

- Caucasian 84%
- Black 12%
- Hispanic 8%
- Asian 1%
- Other 3%

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The percent of the population over 25 years of age with a Bachelor's degree or higher was 13.6%. Fifteen and two tenths percent of the county's population was below the poverty level.

In 2002, the per capita personal income in Highlands County was \$22,004 per year compared to the state of Florida's \$29,758. In 2003, the county unemployment rate was 5.9%. Florida Hospital Heartland Division was the largest private sector employer with 1,100 employees.

The 2002 crime rate per 100,000 persons in Highlands County was 3,763.7; a drop of (-1.2) from the previous year. The percent of births to unwed teens was 13.5% compared to only 10 percent for the state.

The median age of Highlands County residents was 50 years as opposed to 38.7 years for the state of Florida. Public administration, retail trade, service-oriented occupations, and agriculture are the main venues of employment. In 2002, residents aged 65 years and older comprised the largest segment of the population—33 percent. Children aged 0-14 years were the fourth largest group of residents, or 15 percent of the county's population. The smallest group of residents was those individuals between the ages of 15-22, or 9.8 percent of the population.

There are nine domestic banks with 28 branches located in the county and one credit union with two branch offices. There are three newspapers, four A.M. radio stations, and two F.M. stations. Television cable is available. Residents can receive non-cable channels. Sprint is the countywide telephone service company. Progress Energy is the main power provider. The majority of the residences have private wells.

There are twenty motels with 681 rooms available. The county supports six hotels with 575 rooms. There are 159 food establishments with 13,800 seats.

The county has five Catholic churches, two Jewish synagogues, 120 Protestant churches, and five "other" places of worship. There are many tennis courts, golf courses and country clubs, parks, lakes, and boating facilities. Residents also have access to public swimming pools, museums, a county symphony orchestra, and a local "Little Theater".

### Highlands County Schools

Highlands County has 15 public schools—eight elementary schools, four middle schools, and three high schools. There is also an alternative school for middle and high school students and a charter school for grades 3-5. The total number of School Board employees (Table 1) for all provided services is 1,493 (348 males and 1,145 females). Included in this is a full-time instructional staff of 790—171 males and 619 females.

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**Table 1: Total Full-Time Staff by Gender and Race  
Within Gender**

<b>Race</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>
<b>White, Non-Hispanic</b>	<b>278</b>	<b>947</b>
<b>Black, Non-Hispanic</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>133</b>
<b>Hispanic</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>Asian</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>American Indian</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>348</b>	<b>1,145</b>

*FDOE 1/16/04*

The Highlands County Schools' enrollment for the Fall of 2003 (FDOE—Profiles of Florida School Districts, Student and Staff Data), for PK-12 was 11,649. The student population included 2,466 who were enrolled in Exceptional Student Education. Four and one tenth percent of the student population was identified as Limited English Proficient. Fifty-six percent of Highlands County students passed the reading portion of the FCAT( state average—59%). Seventy-six percent of the students passed FCAT math (state average—73%). The total student population was:

- Caucasian 57.11%
- Black 19.68%
- Hispanic 19.76%
- Asian 1.12%
- Indian 0.59%
- Multiracial 1.73%

In 2002, the county ranked 35<sup>th</sup> in the state in overall student membership. Highlands County had a 5.83 percent increase in student population for 2002 to 2003, ranking 29<sup>th</sup> of the 67 counties.

In the Fall 2003 (FDOE Survey 2 demographic data as of January 16, 2004), 51 employees were designated administrators:

- 15—Officials, Administrators, and Managers—District Office
- 4—Consultants/Supervisors of Instruction
- 16—Principals
- 16—Assistant Principals

Based on the February 2004, Highlands County Economic Survey; 7,092 students, or 60.46 percent were eligible and included in the Free and Reduced Lunch Program. Elementary schools had 66.01 percent; middle schools had 61.67 percent; high schools had 49.32 percent. The alternative school, The Academy at Youth Care Lane, included 88.88 percent. Homebound students accounted for 51.51 percent and the Charter School, Hopewell Academy, 85 percent of its student population.

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As of May 2004, there were six non-public schools in the county with a total enrollment of 620 students (elementary—363, middle school—178, and high school—77).

There were 308 students (156 males and 152 females) enrolled in Home-School Education in Highlands County. As of May 2002, there were 44,460 students enrolled statewide. Broward County had the most registered students—3,211. Liberty County had the least—12 students.

### Stability Rate

In 2003, the state conducted a stability rate analysis. Stability rates can be compared to performance indicators to determine whether any relationship exists between stability rates and school performance. The stability rate demonstrates the percentage of students in the October school membership count who were still present in the second semester.

In 2001-2002, the state stability rate was 95.6%. During this year, the stability rates ranged from a low of 91.4 percent (Glades County) to a high of 97.2 percent (Hardee County).

Of the 10 districts with the highest percentages of high performing schools, only half of them had stability rates higher than the median rate of 95.1 percent. Of the ten districts with the lowest percentages of high performing schools, three had stability rates higher than the median rate of 95.1 percent. The other seven had stability rates lower than the median rate. The amount of schools with As and Bs ranged from 100 percent to zero percent. The state average was 57.2 percent. Thus, the state researchers determined that there did not appear to be a strong association between stability rates and school performance grades.

Highlands County had a stability rate of 95.1 percent. Of its 15 graded schools, 53.3% (below the state average) of the schools earned As and Bs.

Another indicator of performance that can be compared to stability rates is FCAT scores. The state's research determined that there appeared to be some relationship between stability rates and FCAT performance, with a slightly higher correlation for the math portion than the reading portion.

The five districts with the highest percentages of schools achieving proficiency on the math portion of the FCAT had stability rates of 95.2 percent or higher (compared to the median stability rate of 95.1 percent). The five districts with the lowest percentage of schools achieving proficiency on the FCAT math had stability rates of 94.8 percent or lower. Four of these districts had stability rates of 93.7 percent or lower. The highest math percentage was 67 percent and the lowest was 31 percent. The state average was 51 percent.

The five districts with the highest percentages of schools achieving proficiency on the reading portion of the FCAT all had stability rates of 94.4 percent or higher. Four of these

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districts had stability rates of 95.8 percent or higher. The five districts with the lowest percentages of schools achieving proficiency on the FCAT reading all had stability rates of 94.6 percent or lower. Four of these districts had stability rates of 93.7 percent or lower. The highest reading percentage was 75 percent and the lowest was 35 percent. The state average was 55 percent.

Highlands County, with a stability rate of 95.1 percent, had 51 percent (below the state average) of its students score a Level 3 or higher on the Reading portion of the FCAT and 46 percent (also below the state average) on the Math section.

However, the state concluded that there appears to be a relationship between the stability rate and student performance on the district level, with performance improving as the stability rate increases. The correlation is more apparent when the performance indicator is FCAT scores instead of school performance grades.

Table 2 illustrates the state accountability report for Highlands County schools. Only two schools (Park Elementary and Avon Park Middle) had a lower school grade in 2004 than in 2002. Two schools (Lake County and Fred Wild Elementary) were ‘bouncing’ up and down. There does not appear to be a relationship between the school’s minority rate and or the percent of free and reduced lunch that correlates to the school’s FCAT results and its state grade.

**Table 2: Highlands County Schools Accountability Report**

SCHOOL	Percent Tested	2004 GRADE	% of Free/ Reduced Lunch 2003-04	Minority Rate 2003-04	2003 GRADE	% of Free/ Reduced Lunch 2002-03	Minority Rate 2002-03	2002 GRADE
AES	100	A	72	56	B	79	55	B
CTE	100	A	47	24	A	53	24	B
FWE	100	C	74	44	B	71	45	C
LCE	100	C	69	51	A	66	47	C
LPE	100	B	68	53	B	75	54	B
PES	99	D	71	56	C	74	55	C
SNL	100	A	56	49	A	59	49	A
WES	100	B	69	48	B	74	50	C
APM	99	C	72	54	B	70	54	B
HGM	99	A	57	40	A	50	40	A
LPM	98	B	62	42	B	60	39	B
SMS	98	A	56	31	A	58	29	A
APH	99	D	59	53	D	58	50	D
LPH	99	C	50	39	C	47	41	C
SHS	98	C	42	30	C	41	30	C

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### Graduation Rates

Florida's four-year graduation rates for 2002-2003, averaged 69 percent. Liberty County recorded the highest graduation rate at 90.7 percent. Miami-Dade County had the lowest at 57.9 percent.

Florida's dropout rate was 3.1 percent. However, while the majority of dropouts were white students (43.3 percent), dropout rates were highest among black and Hispanic students (Table 3).

**Table 3: Florida's Dropout Rates by Ethnicity:  
1998-99 and 2002-03**

Ethnic Group	1998-99	2002-03	% Change from 98-99
White	4.2%	2.5%	-1.7%
Black	6.6%	4.1%	-2.5%
Hispanic	8.3%	3.6%	-4.5%
Asian	2.8%	1.8%	-1%
Am. Indian	4.8%	2.8%	-2%
Multiracial	4.2%	2.2%	-2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>5.4%</b>	<b>3.1%</b>	<b>-2.3%</b>

Thirty-four of Florida's 67 school districts had a dropout rate lower than the state's rate of 3.1 percent. Glades County had the highest dropout rate at 7.3 percent and Liberty County the lowest at 0.6 percent.

Highlands County's graduation rate was 66.9 percent (below the state average). The dropout rate was 4.4 percent, in excess of the state average. However, Florida's overall dropout rate has steadily decreased since 1999 and the graduation rate has increased (Table 4).

**Table 4: Graduation and Dropout Rate Information for the SBHC  
1997-2003**

	1997		1998		1999		2000		2001		2002		2003	
	DO*	G*	DO	G	DO	G	DO	G	DO	G	DO	G	DO	G
Avon Park High	9.1%	**	6.2%	**	5.2%	54.8%	6.9%	61.7%	4.6%	66.4%	5.4%	66.1%	6.4%	67.6%
Lake Placid High	1.8%	**	3.8%	**	2.3%	74.1%	3.2%	69.8%	2.5%	76.6%	1%	66.3%	2.2%	78.4%
Sebring High	4.5%	**	4.1%	**	3.5%	68.2%	3.6%	62.6%	6.7%	66%	4%	51%	3.1%	63.6%
District Total	5.2%	65%	4.6%	77%	4.2%	70%	5.9%	64.7%	5.8%	68.6%	4.3%	58.6%	4.4%	66.9%
State Total	4.3%	73.2%	3.9%	71.9%	5.4%	60.2%	4.3%	62.3%	3.8%	63.8%	3.2%	67.9%	3.1%	69%

SBHC MIS 1/04

\*DO—Dropout Rate

\*G—Graduation Rate

\*\*NO Data

## TESTING

### SCHOLASTIC ASSESSMENT TEST

During a five-year study from 1998 to 2002 for Highlands County students, the number of those who took the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) each year varied from a low of 156 to a high of 174 (Table 5). The Mean Score declined from a high of 503 in 1998 to 488 in 2002. The lowest score in this period was a 472 in 2001.

**Table 5: Highlands County Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) Five Year Study**

SAT	Number Tested	Mean Score
1998	159	503
1999	166	488
2000	152	497
2001	174	472
2002	156	488

SBHC MIS 7/04

In 2003 (Table 6), the Highlands County students' averages surpassed the state averages in the Scholastic Assessment Test. The state average in Verbal and Math was 498. Highlands County's average was 500 in Verbal and 505 in Math. The National Verbal average was 507 and the Math average was 519. Avon Park High School attained a 518 in the Verbal section exceeding the state, county, and national averages. Sebring High School far exceeded all the averages by scoring a 525 on the Verbal and 536 on the Math. Lake Placid High School with scores of 451 (Verbal) and 478 (Math) did not even attain the lower state average levels.

**Table 6: 2003 Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) Average Scores**

SCHOOL	VERBAL	MATH
<b>APHS</b>	<b>518</b>	488
LPHS	451	478
<b>SHS</b>	<b>525</b>	<b>536</b>
<b>HIGHLANDS</b>	<b>500</b>	<b>505</b>
<b>FLORIDA</b>	<b>498</b>	<b>498</b>
<b>NATIONAL</b>	<b>507</b>	<b>519</b>

### AMERICAN COLLEGE TEST

Table 7 analyzes the same five-year period (1998-2002) for the American College Test (ACT). The number of student test-takers varied from 219 to 239 students. The Mean Score fluctuated from a high of 20.2 (2000) to a low of 18.2 in 2002.

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**Table 7: Highlands County American College Test (ACT)  
Five Year Study**

ACT	Number Tested	Mean Score
1998	233	20
1999	219	19.4
2000	226	20.2
2001	239	19.6
2002	233	18.2

*SBHC MIS 7/04*

In 2003, Table 8 illustrates that the ACT scores in Highlands County were below both the state and national scores. However, Sebring High School is the only high school to meet and or exceed all documented scores. Again, Lake Placid High School demonstrated the lowest scores.

**Table 8: 2003 American College Testing (ACT) Average Scores**

SCHOOL	COMPOSITE
APHS	19.5
LPHS	18.3
<b><i>SHS</i></b>	<b><i>20.9</i></b>
HIGHLANDS	20.1
<b><i>FLORIDA</i></b>	<b><i>20.5</i></b>
<b><i>NATIONAL</i></b>	<b><i>20.8</i></b>

## Highlands County SDFS Needs Assessment 2003-2004

### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the risk and protective factors in Highlands County to provide an assessment of the prevention needs for the county's educational facilities. The information that was gathered and reported can be used as baseline data to which future assessments can be compared so changes in prevention programming can be measured.

### Summary

#### Information Collected

The information collected for this needs assessment included currently available reports from all the Highlands County individual schools, school board reports, and summaries, the Florida Department of Education, the county justice system including the County Clerk's Office, Sheriff's Department, and Department of Corrections, student records, and census data that represented information on the state and county level, Division of Children and Families Services District, County, School, and individual student level for Highlands County.

The focus was on the best available reports for the past two years. During this period, the discipline reporting procedures and other data collection methods had been standardized throughout the district. The Evaluator conducted a secondary data analysis and archive review for this needs assessment. Reviewed documents included formal reports completed at the State, District, and School level:

Community Risk Factor Profile Data Sources Sheet  
County Commitment Tables: 2000-2002 Florida Department of Corrections  
Florida Needs Assessment Project Student Survey  
Florida Department of Education Florida School Indicators Report—Highlands  
County  
Highlands County's FCAT Florida Writes! Scores—Fourth, Eighth, Tenth Grades  
Highlands County's FCAT Math and Reading Scores 2002-03 and 2003-04  
Highlands County Profile 2003  
Highlands County Title I Economic Survey, February 2004  
Highlands County District Prevention Needs Profile  
Highlands County's results of the *Florida Youth Substance Abuse Survey (FYSAS)*  
Highlands County Juvenile Division Annual Report 2003  
Highlands County Clerk of Courts 2003 Statistics  
Highlands County Uniform Crime Reports Arrest Form  
Highlands County Sheriff's Office Comparative Data—Arrest Totals 2002-2003  
Middle School Suspension Records for 2003-2004  
School Advisory Council Reports for 2002-2003  
School District Prevention Needs Profile  
School Environment Safety Incident Report  
State of Florida Risk Factor Report for Highlands County 2003

## **Highlands County SDFS Needs Assessment 2003-2004**

The SDFS committee made the decision that the assessment would include the established fifteen public schools within the School Board of Highlands County (SBHC). Hopewell Academy for the Arts (grades three and four), the county's first Charter School, is in its first year of operation. The county is predominantly rural. Although the county has a very diverse population exhibiting the gamut of economic statuses, each of the three main communities experience similar risk and protective factors. None of the fifteen school attendance areas demonstrated a consistent pattern of fewer problems and or at-risk areas. (There was no comparison data for the Charter school.) Numerous conferences and meetings with students, parents, teachers, and administrators occurred during the course of this assessment. Key informants within the community were also utilized.

All information was collected and analyzed by the Program Coordinator and Evaluator. She attended and received extensive education through the University of South Florida and in-service leadership, assessment, and evaluation training through the federal grant-funded Middle School Coordinators Initiative, the USDOE, and the Florida Department of Education. Such education included the recognition of risk and protective factors, their relationship to student academic achievement, and the identification of critical elements that would be both measurable and point to possible causes for children to experience problems in the Highlands County School system, and report the information.

All information analysis, group and individual interviews, and conclusions of this report are those of the consulting staff and no student assistants or other less qualified individuals were used in any phase of the report, data gathering, or analysis.

### **Methods of Collection**

The Director of Student Services, the SDFS Coordinator, and the Evaluator met and discussed logistics, initial report requests, assessment of school resources for assisting in the assessment, and the level of involvement/knowledge/commitment of the school representatives. The Director of Student Services, a Middle School Drug Prevention and School Safety Coordinator (MSC), and the SDFS Coordinator were the primary District participants in the meetings and discussions.

The MSC guided the data collection and the community assessment. She was also the primary liaison for all interviews and report preparation.

### **Involvement of the SDFS Advisory Committee**

The SDFS Advisory Committee for Highlands County is composed of the same members known as the Health Advisory Committee (Appendix A). The collection of reports and existing data, organization of the activities, identification of key informants, and participation in planning meetings were all activities of the SDFS Advisory Committee in this assessment.

### **Process of Data Analysis**

Original compilation, data collection, and analysis of the school archival records were completed by the Informational Systems of the SBHC. District, County, and State departments had compiled their respective reports prior to this assessment and independent of the requirements of the SDFS report. Although all reporting systems have their limitations and margin for error, it is assumed that the reports are accurate and complete. All other data summarized for this report including interview evaluations that were generated for this report came from the needs assessment evaluator.

The computation of correlations, cross tabulations, development of figures, interpretation of data, selection of variables, decisions about inclusion or exclusion of results from the report, determinations about the structure and content of the final report, and the conclusions drawn from the overall assessment process were completed by Project Coordinator, the evaluator.

### **Inclusion of Student Performance Indicators**

Inclusion of student performance indicators was a primary goal of this assessment, in both the records selected for analysis and the formation of questions for key informant interviews. Academic performance indicators were collected and analyzed from elementary, middle, and high school levels within the county, as well as comparison reports at the district, state, and national level whenever possible. Specific academic performance indicators cited in this report include Grades Three, Four, Six, Nine, and Ten FCAT NRT Reading Scores; Grades Three, Five, Seven, and Nine FCAT NRT Math Scores; Grades Four, Eight, and Ten Florida Writes! Results; Scholastic Aptitude Tests, and American College Testing Profiles. Other performance and behavioral indications focused on the areas of anti-social behaviors (arrests, suspensions, etc.) that are correlated with substance abuse, and reported use rates from the Highlands County Report of the 2002 Florida Youth Substance Abuse Survey.

### **Urban and Rural Inclusion**

Highlands is a rural county with a population of 87,366 (2000 US Census Bureau). The largest municipalities are Sebring (County Seat—9,667), Avon Park (8,542), and Lake Placid (1,668). The city of Lakeland, in Polk County, and 60 miles to the northwest is the nearest metropolitan area.

### **Non-Public School Inclusion**

There are six private schools in Highlands County with an enrollment of approximately 620 students. Their standards of selective admission, discipline, tracking methods, data recording, or lack of previous participation in drug use surveys, and other variables severely limited their ability to make county-wide comparisons and excluded them from their involvement in this analysis.

## Sharing the Results with the Public

The results of this assessment will be shared with the public in three ways. First, the report will be formally presented to the School Board of Highlands County in January 2005, by the SDFS Committee with the Program Coordinator/Evaluator. The report will also be presented to the SDFS Advisory Committee at the January 2005 meeting. This Committee will then share the report countywide. Finally, the Program Coordinator will also present the report to the Highlands County Community Coalition for Substance Abuse Reduction (HCCC) for review. The HCCC can then plan future activities and events to augment school board strategies for students and parents.

Presentation of the assessment results must be complete and in context. The results of this inquiry are intended to reflect the alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs (ATOD) and violence prevention risk factors currently in Highlands County.

## Data Presentation, Analysis, and Findings

### Methods of Identification

Highlands County has a student population of 11,428 public school students in eight elementary and seven secondary schools (2003-04). After the most critical at-risk and behavior problem elements were gleaned from the existing reports, the Committee decided to target all schools in this intensive assessment investigation. There are three county high schools that receive their students from four middle schools. Hill-Gustat Middle School is a feeder school for both Sebring High and Avon Park High Schools.

Information was derived from individual school reports, school district information, countywide data, and or state statistics. Since all the documents and data groupings are not always comparable, it was necessary to identify patterns of extreme at-risk and risk-related indicators to be able to focus the needs assessment on the most critically affected areas. After the records review, further information was gathered from key informants. Reviewed documents consisted of formal reports completed by the state, district and schools that included:

Community Risk Factor Profile Data Sources Sheet  
County Commitment Tables: 2000-2002 Florida Department of Corrections  
Florida Needs Assessment Project Student Survey  
Florida Department of Education Florida School Indicators Report—Highlands  
County  
Highlands County's FCAT Florida Writes! Scores—Fourth, Eighth, Tenth Grades  
Highlands County's FCAT Math and Reading Scores 2002-03 and 2003-04  
Highlands County Profile 2003  
Highlands County Title I Economic Survey, February 2004  
Highlands County District Prevention Needs Profile  
Highlands County's results of the *Florida Youth Substance Abuse Survey (FYSAS)*  
Highlands County Juvenile Division Annual Report 2003

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Highlands County Clerk of Courts 2003 Statistics  
Highlands County Uniform Crime Reports Arrest Form  
Highlands County Sheriff's Office Comparative Data—Arrest Totals 2002-2003  
Middle School Suspension Records for 2003-2004  
School Advisory Council Reports for 2002-2003  
School District Prevention Needs Profile  
School Environment Safety Incident Report  
State of Florida Risk Factor Report for Highlands County 2003

### **IDENTIFICATION: STEP 1**

The first document examined in this assessment was the *2002 Florida Youth Substance Abuse Survey* (FYSAS) to identify student risk factors. The high risk variables fell within the categories of antisocial behaviors at school, economic factors, favorable attitudes toward drugs, truancy, student suspensions and births to teenagers under age 18.

The birth rate for mothers under the age of 18 in Highlands County was 11.2 (most recent data—2002). Hardee County, the neighboring county to the west, was ranked first with a rate of 24.9 per 1,000 population.

These variables were used to help develop the focus questions, key informant interview questions, and identifying the most at-risk schools. They were also used to begin a list of measurable data elements to judge the future effectiveness of prevention programming.

Table 9 reviews the reported SESIR (School Environmental Safety Incident Reporting) incidents within each Highlands County elementary school during the 2003-2004 year. The total elementary enrollment was 5,459 students. There were 101 incidents reported. One elementary school, Avon, did not report any incidents. Lake Placid Elementary reported the most incidents, 65.

## Highlands County SDFS Needs Assessment 2003-2004

**Table 9: School Board of Highlands County Elementary Schools  
Environmental Safety: Reported Incidents 2003-2004  
(Refer to Appendix B for Incident List)**

Type of Incident	Avon	Cracker Trail	Fred Wild	Lake Country	Lake Placid	Park	Sun 'N Lake	Woodlawn	Total # Incidents
ALC									
ARS									
BAT		4	1		6	6	2	3	22
BRK					2				2
DOC						1			1
DRG				1	4	1			6
FIT					39	8	1		48
HOM									
KID									
MVT									
OMC									
ROB									
STL			1		1	1			3
SXB									
SXH					4	1			5
SXO						1			1
TBC					2				2
TRE					3	1			4
TRS									
VAN								1	1
WPO					4		2		6
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>101</b>
<b>SCHOOL ENROLLMENT</b>	<b>670</b>	<b>714</b>	<b>772</b>	<b>664</b>	<b>623</b>	<b>675</b>	<b>774</b>	<b>731</b>	<b>5,459</b>

Table 10 illustrates the reported statistics for the County's four middle schools. The schools had a combined enrollment of 2,768 students and reported 341 incidents. Avon Park Middle reported the most incidents, 136. Lake Placid Middle reported the least, 65.

## Highlands County SDFS Needs Assessment 2003-2004

**Table 10: School Board of Highlands County Middle Schools  
Environmental Safety: Reported Incidents 2003-2004**

Type of Incident	Avon Park MS	Hill-Gustat MS	Lake Placid MS	Sebring Middle School	Total # of Incidents
ALC	8				8
ARS				1	1
BAT	7	18	6	9	40
BRK			2		2
DOC	13	2			15
DRG	1	4	4	5	14
FIT	63	29	39	11	142
HOM					
KID					
MVT					
OMC	3	1			4
ROB					
STL	2	2	1	1	6
SXB	1			2	3
SXH	3	4	4	18	29
SXO					
TBC	4	7	2	7	20
TRE	14	4	3	6	27
TRS					
VAN	4			6	10
WPO	13		4	3	20
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>136</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>341</b>
SCHOOL ENROLLMENT	749	662	651	772	2,768

Highlands County's three high schools have a total enrollment of 3,179 students. Sebring High School (SHS) has almost double the student population of Lake Placid High School (LPHS). However, they had the same number of reported incidents. SHS had more incidents of tobacco use; while LPHS reported more problems with fighting among its students (Table 11).

## Highlands County SDFS Needs Assessment 2003-2004

**Table 11: School Board of Highlands County High Schools  
Environmental Safety: Reported Incidents 2003-2004**

Type of Incident	Avon Park HS	Lake Placid HS	Sebring High School	Total # of Incidents
ALC		9	3	12
ARS				
BAT	4	2	12	18
BRK			1	1
DOC	1	1		2
DRG	2	1	11	14
FIT	24	46	17	87
HOM				
KID				
MVT				
OMC	5	3	2	10
ROB				
STL	2		2	4
SXB				
SXH	2	4	1	7
SXO	1			1
TBC	17	10	37	64
TRE	4	8	3	15
TRS			1	1
VAN	2	7	2	11
WPO	4	5	4	13
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>260</b>
School Enrollment	971	760	1,448	3,179

A comparison of all three levels of public education in Highlands County demonstrated a majority of the incidents occurred in the middle school environment (Table 12). The four middle schools with a combined population of 2,768 students (elementary schools—5,459; high schools—3,053) had the greatest number of reported incidents (341) during the 2003-2004 academic year.

Highlands County's middle schools reported a higher rate of incident reports for Battery (attack), Disorderly Conduct, Fighting, Larceny/Theft; Sexual Harassment, Threat/Intimidate, and Weapons Possession than either the elementary or high schools. However, the high school students had over three times the amount of incidences of Tobacco (possession and use) than the middle school students.

## Highlands County SDFS Needs Assessment 2003-2004

**Table 12: Comparison of the School Board of Highlands County Schools  
Environmental Safety: Reported Incidents 2003-2004**

Type of Incident	Elementary Schools	Middle Schools	High Schools
ALC		8	12
ARS		1	
BAT	22	40	18
BRK	2	2	1
DOC	1	15	2
DRG	6	14	14
FIT	48	142	87
HOM			
KID			
MVT			
OMC		4	10
ROB			
STL	3	6	4
SXB		3	
SXH	5	29	7
SXO	1		1
TBC	2	20	64
TRE	4	27	15
TRS			1
VAN	1	10	11
WPO	6	20	13
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>341</b>	<b>260</b>
Student Enrollment	5,459	2,768	3,053

*Total Student Enrollment of Highlands County Schools=11,335*

The Florida School Environmental Safety Incident Reporting (SESIR) system collects data on incidents of crime, violence, and disruptive behaviors that occur on school grounds, on school transportation, and at off-campus, school-sponsored events, during any 24-hour period, 365 days per year. Incidents are reported by schools to the districts which, in turn, provide the data to the DOE. The annual SESIR report includes:

- an analysis of the SESIR and Discipline data statewide
- data totals and trends statewide
- totals and trends by individual district

Table 13 compares the SESIR reported totals for 2001-2002 and 2002-2003 for both the state and county figures per 1,000 students. Except for fighting, the students of Highlands County were above the state averages in unacceptable behaviors per 1,000 students. From the year 2001-2002 to 2002-2003, Highlands County's and the state's statistics decreased in incidents except for harassment, threat/intimidation, fighting, and weapons possession. While the state figures decreased in 2002-03 in each of these areas, the Highlands County's figures increased in each of the afore-mentioned categories.

## Highlands County SDFS Needs Assessment 2003-2004

**Table 13: School Environmental Safety Incident Reporting (SESIR)  
Figures for 2001-02 and 2002-03**

<b>Incident per 1,000</b>	<b>Highlands County 2001-02</b>	<b>Florida 2001-02</b>	<b>Highlands County 2002-2003</b>	<b>Florida 2002-2003</b>
Violent acts against persons	13.05	4.43	12.83	4.05
Battery	13.05	4.26	12.83	3.89
ATOD	10.40	6.08	7.23	5.59
Drugs	3.99	2.31	2.64	2.19
Alcohol	1.02	0.42	0.54	0.42
Tobacco	5.39	3.36	4.04	2.98
HARASSMENT	10.87	4.87	11.04	3.98
Threat/Intimidation	6.96	3.70	7.31	3.06
Sexual harassment	3.91	1.18	3.73	0.92
Fighting	18.13	20.35	18.82	19.02
Weapons Possession	2.35	1.30	2.72	1.27
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>62.93</b>	<b>46.16</b>	<b>61.13</b>	<b>42.48</b>

The total number of juvenile arrests for violent crimes in Highlands County was 37. This was a rate of 41.6 per 100,000 of population. The total domestic violence crime arrest rate for the county was 597, or an increase of 5.3 percent for 2002-2003 ([www.fdle.state.fl.us](http://www.fdle.state.fl.us)).

In 2002-03, there were a total of 2,944 Individual Study Services placements; 1,118 out-of-school suspensions; and three expulsions. During 2003-2004; 6,068 male and 2,857 female (a total of 8,985) students received Individual Study Services for the violation of a standard(s) in the Highlands County Code of Conduct. A total of 2,859 students (2,196 males and 663 females) received out-of-school suspensions for code violations. Seventeen students were recommended for expulsion for a violation of drugs and or weapons possession.

Table 14 reflects the percent of student absences, individual study services, and out of school suspensions for each of the schools. The report includes documented data from the Florida Department of Education, Florida School Indicators Report (<http://info.doe.state.fl.us>).

## Highlands County SDFS Needs Assessment 2003-2004

**Table 14: 2002-2003 Individual School Data on Absences, Individual Study Services, and Out-of-School Suspensions**

SCHOOL	% Absences for 21+ days	% Individual Study Services	% Out-of-School Suspensions
<b>ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS</b>			
Avon	8.3	9.7	2.3
Cracker Trail	5.6	.0	1.4
Fred Wild	8	6.1	2
Lake Country	5.5	1.4	1
Lake Placid	3.9	.5	3.2
Park	4	8.5	6.1
Sun 'N Lake	4.2	4.5	3.3
Woodlawn	5.2	11.4	5.4
<b>MIDDLE SCHOOLS</b>			
Avon Park	13	43.5	12.9
Hill-Gustat	8.9	22.5	4.4
Lake Placid	12.1	39.7	15.6
Sebring	13	32.7	16
<b>HIGH SCHOOLS</b>			
Avon Park	16.8	41.6	15.1
Lake Placid	13.8	40.3	11.9
Sebring	10.5	35.8	13.2

### Florida Youth Substance Abuse Survey (FYSAS)

A primary document examined to provide guidance to this assessment was the 2002 *Florida Youth Substance Abuse Survey (FYSAS)*. The *FYSAS* is based in the *Communities That Care® Youth Survey*, developed from the nationally recognized work of Dr. J. David Hawkins and Dr. Richard F. Catalano. It not only measures the prevalence of alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use and delinquent behavior, but also measures the risk and protective factors related to these behaviors. The 2002 *FYSAS* was administered to 1,056 Highlands County students in grade 6 through 12 in the spring of 2002.

The Florida Youth Survey is a collaborative effort among the Florida Departments of Health, Education, Children and Families, Juvenile Justice, and the Florida Office of Drug Control. According to the state report prepared by Channing Bete Company, Inc., Highlands County students produced a high percentage (93.7%) of valid surveys. Only 71 surveys were deemed invalid.

Highlands County middle school students constituted one-half of the samples (50% middle school versus 49.2% high school). Females (50.9%) represented a higher percentage of respondents than males (44.9%). White, non-Hispanic students were 51.2 percent of the sample.

## Highlands County SDFS Needs Assessment 2003-2004

The largest minority population was African-American students (17.6%). Those students of Hispanic/Latino backgrounds represented 16.1 percent. The remainder of the breakdown ranged from 0.3 percent for Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students to 10.1 percent of the students who indicated Other/Multiple ethnic backgrounds.

*FYSAS* comparison data for risk and protective factors came from research (the Six-State Study) funded by the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, Department of Health and Human Services. This project collected school survey data from six states and provided the normative data on risk and protective factor prevalence.

Key Survey results included:

### *Drug-Use Trends: 2000-2002*

- Reflecting the drug use trend statewide, past-30-day use of alcohol by surveyed Highlands County students declined from 33.3 percent in 2000 to 30.2 percent in 2002.
- Marijuana use also appeared to mirror the state pattern. Past-30-day use declined from 14 percent in 2000 to 10.9 percent in 2002. However, grade-cohort analysis demonstrated the overall decline resulted from the 5.8 percentage-point reduction reported by high school students. Past-30-day use of marijuana among middle school students increased 0.3 percent between 2000 and 2002.
- Cigarette use among our students declined sharply during the two-year period from 19.9 percent to 14.3 percent. However, a grade-cohort analysis showed and overall 10.4 percentage point reduction in high school students; but, produced a 0.2 percent increase among middle school students.
- Inhalant use by our students showed little change over the two years. In 2000, 2.7 percent of students reported some use of inhalants compared to 2.5 percent in 2002.

### *Drug-Use Prevalence Rates*

- Alcohol was the most commonly used drug among the students—54.1 percent for lifetime use and 30.2 percent for past-30-day use.
- There was a 17 percent binge drinking rate (defined as the consumption of five or more drinks in a row in the last two weeks). This rate is more prevalent than past-30-day tobacco, marijuana, inhalant, or other illicit drug use.
  - Highlands County's middle school students' binge drinking rate of 11.6 percent was higher than the state reported rate of 8.6 percent.

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- However, the high school students reported a rate of 21.2 percent which was lower than results across the state of Florida of 22.3 percent.
- After alcohol, the students reported cigarettes (40.1% lifetime and 14.3% past-30-day) and marijuana (22.3% lifetime and 10.9% past-30-day) as the most commonly used drugs. Rates for most other drugs were substantially lower.
- The prevalence of smokeless tobacco use is usually substantially lower than cigarette use. Overall, 17.3 percent of surveyed Highlands County students reported using smokeless tobacco in their lifetimes—13.3 percent among middle school students and 20.7 percent among high school students.
- Reflecting state patterns, 1.5 percent of the surveyed students reported the use of Ecstasy in the past 30 days. Experimentation, however, was higher (5% lifetime with a peak rate of 6.5% among high school students).
- Use of other club drugs was very low. Only 0.2 percent of the students in Highlands County have used GHB in the past 30 days, 0.1 percent used Rohypnol®, and 0.3 percent used ketamine.
- Students reported the use of OxyContin ® without a doctor's prescription at 2 percent for a lifetime prevalence rate and 0.7 percent for the past 30 days.

### *Attitudes toward Drug Use*

- The fear of marijuana declines as the students get older. While 63 percent of middle school students believe marijuana use poses a “great risk” of harm. That number drops to 60.1 percent among high school students.
- Disapproval of substance use appears to decline as the students get older.
  - Alcohol use—77.1 percent in middle school; 59.2 percent in high school
  - Cigarette use—84.1 percent in middle school; 67.4 percent in high school
  - Marijuana use—89.9 percent in middle school; 77.3 percent in high school

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**Table 15: Percentages of Highlands County Youth and Florida Youth who reported engaging in delinquent behaviors**

	Middle School	High School	Female	Male	Ages 10-14	Ages 15-17	Total Highlands County	Total FL
Carrying a handgun	5.2	4.9	2.2	8.1	5.0	4.5	5.0	3.7
Selling Drugs	3.7	6.4	2.7	8.1	3.9	7.0	5.3	5.8
Attempting to steal a vehicle	2.7	2.9	1.6	4.2	2.6	3.0	2.8	3.0
Being Arrested	8.5	4.8	5.1	7.9	7.2	6.0	6.4	5.6
Taking a handgun to school	2.2	1.9	0.7	3.4	2.1	1.7	2.0	1.1
Getting suspended	13.9	11.3	9.6	15.8	13.0	11.7	12.3	14.9
Attacking with intent to harm	11.2	12.2	7.5	16.4	11.2	12.7	11.6	12.1
Being drunk or high at school	8.3	16.0	10.4	15.3	8.4	16.4	12.8	12.7

### *Other Antisocial Behaviors*

The survey also measured the following antisocial behaviors: *Carrying a Handgun; Selling Drugs; Attempting to Steal a Vehicle; Being Arrested, Taking a Handgun to School; Getting Suspended; Attacking Someone with Intent to Harm, and Being Drunk or High at School.*

The prevalence rates reported by the middle school and high school students differed substantially across the eight antisocial behaviors measured in this survey (Table 15). Highlands County's reports of:

- *Taking a Handgun to School (2%),*
- *Attempting to Steal a Vehicle (2.8%), and;*
- *Carrying a Handgun (5%)*
- *Selling Drugs (5.3%)*
- *Being Arrested (6.4%)*

were considered rare. However,

- *Getting Suspended (12.3%),*
- *Attacking Someone with Intent to Harm(11.6%), and;*
- *Being Drunk or High at School (12.8%)*

were more common. Male students were more likely than females to report other antisocial behaviors.

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It should be noted that the following anti-social behaviors were in excess of the reported state percentage.

Behavior	State	Highlands County
• <i>Carrying a Handgun</i>	3.7	5.0
• <i>Being Arrested</i>	5.6	6.4
• <i>Taking a Handgun to School, and</i>	1.1	2.0
• <i>Being Drunk or High at School</i>	12.7	12.8

Sixteen percent of high school students reported *Being Drunk or High at School* compared to 8.3 percent of middle school students. Six and four-tenths percent of high school students reported *Selling Drugs* contrasted to 3.7 percent of middle school students. Conversely, reports of *Being Arrested* peaked in middle school (8.5%) rather than high school (4.8%).

Overall, antisocial rates reported by Highlands County students were similar to students across the state. The largest difference occurred for *Getting Suspended*. Highlands County students (12.3%) reported a lower rate than students statewide (14.9%). It is important to consider that the questionnaire did not define “suspension”. It was left to the respondent to define.

## Risk and Protective Factors

### Risk Factors

The terms “risk” and “at-risk” have become so widely used that it is sometimes difficult to determine what *risk* implies. Risk may denote a potentially negative state or be a well-defined entrance for a delivery of services. Either way, *risk* leads practitioners to consider needs and strategies that promote the well-being of our youth.

The concept of risk factors is based on the identification of the underlying conditions of alcohol problems and other drug use, teen pregnancy, delinquency, violence and school dropouts. These are believed to be the influences that increase the likelihood of an individual engaging in destructive behaviors.

Risk factors exist in various *domains* including the peer group, family, school, and community. The characteristics and influences that exist in each of these domains shape an individual’s experience in life. There are also a number of individual risk factors of personality traits, including genetic predispositions, that may place a child at risk, including attitudes, intellectual ability, and social ability. Table 16 outlines these domains and associated risk factors.

## Highlands County SDFS Needs Assessment 2003-2004

**Table 16: Risk Factors**

DOMAIN	RISK FACTOR
Individual/ Peer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alienation/Rebelliousness</li> <li>• Friends Who Engage in Problem Behavior</li> <li>• Favorable Attitude Toward problem Behavior</li> </ul>
Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family Management Problems</li> <li>• Family Conflict</li> <li>• Family History of Problem Behavior</li> </ul>
School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Early Academic Failure</li> <li>• Early Conduct Problems</li> <li>• Lack of Commitment to School/School Affiliation</li> <li>• Lack of Clear Policies at School</li> </ul>
Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Availability of Drugs and or Weapons</li> <li>• Community Laws and Norms Favorable Toward Problem Behavior</li> <li>• Low Neighborhood Attachment and Community Disorganization</li> <li>• Severe Economic Deprivation</li> </ul>

### Protective Factors

The concept of protective factors shifts the focus from what is wrong with youth to what could be done to facilitate the healthy development of youth. Protective factors are often described as “personal, social, and institutional resources that promote successful adolescent development or buffer risk factors that might otherwise compromise development” (Garmezy and Rutter, 1985).

Based on the work of many (Norman Garmezy, Emmy Werner, Michael Rutter, Bonnie Bernard, J. David Hawkins, and others), protective factors are identified as the conditions that foster the development of *resiliency* in youth. These are factors that “facilitate the development of youth who do not get involved in life-compromising problems of school failure, drugs, etc.” (Bernard, 1991).

Table 17 lists conditions that promote the three key protective factors (Bernard, 1991) in schools of Caring and Support, High Expectations, and Opportunities for meaningful Participation. The greater numbers of protective factors that exist in the key systems affecting children, the more likely children are to develop resiliency.

## Highlands County SDFS Needs Assessment 2003-2004

**Table 17: Protective Factors**

PROTECTIVE FACTOR	CONDITIONS
Caring and Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nurturing Staff and Positive Role Models</li> <li>• Creative, Supportive School Leadership</li> <li>• Peer Support, Cooperation, and Mentoring</li> <li>• Personal Attention and Interest from Teachers</li> <li>• Warm, Responsive School Climate</li> </ul>
High Expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minimum Mastery of Basic Skills</li> <li>• Emphasis on Higher Order Academics</li> <li>• Avoidance of Negative Labeling and Tracking</li> </ul>
Opportunities for Meaningful Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leadership and Decision-Making by Students</li> <li>• Student Participation in Extracurricular Activities</li> <li>• Parent and Community Participation in Instruction</li> <li>• Culturally Diverse Curricula and Experiences</li> </ul>

### **FYSAS—Risk and Protective Factors**

The *FYSAS* documented the research during the past 30 years that supports the view that delinquency; alcohol and tobacco and other drug use; school achievement; and other important outcomes in adolescence are associated with specific characteristics in a student’s community, school and family environments, as well as with the individual’s characteristics (Hawkins, Catalano, and Associates, 1992). It further acknowledged that these characteristics are more important in understanding these behaviors than ethnicity, income, or family structure (Blum, Beuhring, Shew, et al., 2000).

Several Risk and Protective factors are measured by the *FYSAS*. As stated in the 2002 Highlands County report of the *FYSAS*, risk and protective factor scale scores were compared against the *Communities That Care* © normative database. A student’s risk or protective factor scale score is expressed as a number ranging from 0 to 100. A score of 50 indicates that 50 percent of the respondents reported a higher score and 50 percent reported a lower score. A score of 75 indicates that 25 percent of the sample reported a higher score and 75 percent reported a lower score. Because risk is associated with negative behavioral outcomes, it is better to have lower risk factor scale scores than higher scores. Conversely, because protective factors are associated with better behavioral outcomes, higher protective factor scale scores are better than lower.

The *FYSAS* measures a variety of risk and protective factors across four domains:

- Community Domain;
- Family Domain;
- School Domain; and,
- Peer and Individual Domain.

## Highlands County SDFS Needs Assessment 2003-2004

In 2002, Highlands County had scores for 21 risk factors and nine protective factors. Scores across the protective factors ranged from a low of 39 to a high of 59, with an average score of 49. The score of 49 was one point higher than the average for the state of Florida. According to the FYSAS, the most suppressed protective factor was for *School Rewards for Prosocial Involvement* indicating that focusing prevention planning in this area could be especially beneficial.

The most elevated protective factor scale was *Religiosity*. The high score represented a strength on which the Highlands County communities could build. The students reported a score of 59, six points higher than the statewide average of 53 and nine points higher than the national average.

The Highlands County youth's scores across the 21 risk factor scales ranged from a low of 38 to a high of 62, with an average score of 49—one point lower than the state. The two most elevated risk factor scales were *Personal Transitions and Mobility* and *Low Neighborhood Attachment*. When a student makes a transition to a new environment, the student no longer has the bonds he or she had in the old environment. Higher rates of drug problems, delinquency, and violence occur in communities or neighborhoods where people feel little attachment to their community (FYSAS, 2002). These high scores suggest that directing prevention programming in these areas could be especially beneficial.

The two most suppressed risk factors scales were *Low Perceived Risks of Drug Use* and *Perceived Availability of Drugs and Firearms*. These low scores tended to represent strengths on which the county's communities can build.

- Surveyed students in the FYSAS reported lower scores on the *School Rewards for Prosocial Involvement* (39) and *Community Rewards for Prosocial Involvement* (47) protective factor scales, compared to the national average of 50. Translation: The students did not feel as appreciated or rewarded for their involvement in school, and are less likely to feel recognized and rewarded by their community relative to students in other parts of the country.
- Students reported higher scores on the *Personal Transitions and Mobility* (62) and *Low Neighborhood Attachment* (58) risk factor scales, compared to the national average of 50. Translation: The students in Highlands County are at greater risk for involvement in drug use and other antisocial behaviors because of a lack of long-term neighborhood connection and the lack of an attachment to the community.

As stated in the FYSAS, the perceived availability of drugs, alcohol, and firearms in a community is directly related to the prevalence of delinquent behaviors. The perception of availability of drugs is also associated with increased risk. Highlands County students reported a score of 40 on the *Perceived Availability of Drugs and Firearms* scale. This is one point higher than the state average of 39 and 10 points lower than the national average of 50.

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The FYSAS also conducted several analyses to investigate alcohol, tobacco, and other drug (ATOD) use results. The earliest age of onset reported by the high school students was for cigarette use (12.6 years of age); followed with “more than a sip or two” of alcohol (14 years of age); and drinking at least once a month (14.7 years of age). Students assigned the highest risk of harm to regular use of marijuana (64.6%), followed by the daily use of cigarettes (59%), and the near daily use of alcohol (39.4%).

It appears that the fear of marijuana use declines as students get older. Sixty-nine percent of middle school students believed regular marijuana use poses a “great risk” of harm, only 60.1 percent of high school students held that belief. Perceptions of harm from daily alcohol use were relatively stable across grade levels—40.9 percent for middle school students and 38 percent for high school students. Perceptions regarding cigarette use followed the same trend—60.5 percent in middle school to 57.3 percent in high school.

Student disapproval of other illicit drug use remained above 94 percent for both middle and high school students, as also reported in the *FYSAS*. However, the other three categories (marijuana, cigarettes, and alcohol) show reductions as the students enter high school. One example is the disapproval of drinking alcohol regularly declines from 77.1 percent among middle school students to 59.2 percent among high school students.

Additionally, the perceived risk of harm and disapproval can be affected by the expectations of how one’s peer group might react has an impact on whether or not youth may choose to use drugs. The *FYSAS* documented through the students’ responses that peer approval of drinking alcohol regularly increased from 9.3 percent among our middle school students to 12.4 percent among high school students. However, peer approval ratings for both smoking cigarettes and marijuana use decreased as students entered high school.

These results of the *FYSAS* appear to illustrate the complexity of drug use and antisocial behaviors of Highlands County youth. These key findings illustrate behaviors that negatively affect the lives of our youth.

### **Identification: Step 2**

In an effort to investigate County Risk Factors and School Environment predictors of high risk behaviors, the team first evaluated free/reduced lunch data.

#### **Free and Reduced Lunch**

The Highlands County Economic Survey of February 2004 (Table 18), documented there were 11,730 students enrolled in its schools. Of the total number, 7,092 students, or 60.46 percent were eligible and included in the Free and Reduced Lunch Program. Elementary schools led with 66.01 percent; middle schools had 61.67 percent; high schools documented 49.32 percent. The Academy at Youth Care Lane included 88.88 percent. Homebound students and the Charter School, Hopewell Academy, accounted for 51.51 percent and 85 percent respectively of their student populations on the free and reduced lunch program.

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Two elementary schools in Avon Park, Avon (72.98%) and Park (70.80%) had the highest number of students on free/reduced lunch. Avon Park Middle School (71.69%) had the highest percentage of the all the middle schools. Avon Park elementary schools and the middle school have high percentages of students receiving free/reduced lunches. However, that rate was not sustained at the high school level. Avon Park High School (59.01%) did, however, have the highest number of high school students on this lunch program in the county.

**Table 18: Highlands County Economic Survey  
February 2004**

School	K-12 Enrollment	Number Free/Reduced Lunch	Percent Free/Reduced Lunch
AES	670	489	72.98%
CTE	714	332	46.49%
FWE	772	569	73.70%
LCE	664	456	68.67%
LPE	623	439	70.46%
PES	675	478	70.80%
SNL	744	418	56.18%
WES	731	511	69.90%
<b>Total Elementary</b>	<b>5,593</b>	<b>3,692</b>	<b>66.01%</b>
APM	749	537	71.69%
HGM	662	375	56.64%
LPM	651	403	61.90%
SMS	772	433	56.08%
<b>Total Middle School</b>	<b>2,834</b>	<b>1,748</b>	<b>61.67%</b>
APH	971	573	59.01%
LPH	760	378	49.73%
SHS	1,448	617	42.61%
<b>Total High School</b>	<b>3,179</b>	<b>1,568</b>	<b>49.32%</b>
Academy@ Youth Care	18	16	88.88%
Homebound	6	34	51.51%
Hopewell Academy	40	34	85.00%
<b>District Total</b>	<b>11,730</b>	<b>7,092</b>	<b>60.46%</b>

### Achievement and Substance Abuse

The *FYSAS* was administered to middle and high school students. Researchers attested that a direct relationship between favorable attitudes toward drugs and lower school achievement was indicated based on previously documented data. However, a major limitation of the *FYSAS* was that statistics were for the district and not individual schools.

## IDENTIFICATION: STEP 3

The team conducted an analysis for each school in the district on specific risk factors related to substance abuse and violence, incidents of use or acts of anti-social behavior and elements that contribute to a disruptive or a needy environment.

### High School Data Patterns

There are three high schools in the county that provide comparable data: Avon Park, Sebring, and Lake Placid High Schools. The three communities occupy distinct geographic locations in the county.

Factors selected after examining the high school records included learning environment risk factors (graduation rates, SAT and ACT scores, critical risk factors from the *FYSAS*), achievement factors (FCAT test scores, graduation rates), and other factors including student mobility, school suspension rates, and dropout percentages. Additionally, several other factors from related research were included to provide a more complete view of the school learning environment and its stability and resources. These included the educational level of the staff, and the amount of money expended on those students who are defined to be at-risk.

The results of this examination supported conclusions from community records: The Sebring and Avon Park areas contained the most at-risk factors. There were several categories where Lake Placid High School exceeded the levels of either Sebring or Avon Park. Avon Park appeared to be the 'leader' in most categories. Although Avon Park High School (APHS) is similar to Sebring High School (SHS) in many respects, SHS is about twice as large as APHS.

In 2002, (Table 19) Avon Park High School reported the highest dropout rate followed by Sebring High. Both rates were higher than the state average (3.2%). None of the county's high schools equaled the state graduation rate (67.9%).

In 2003 (Table 19), the dropout rate increased at APH and LPH while decreasing at SHS. However, all the high schools increased their graduation rate. Additionally, Lake Placid High School (2.2%) is the only school to be below the state average (3.1%) in the dropout rate and surpass (78.4%) the state graduation rate (69%).

It is important to note that, although Lake Placid High reported lower scores on several of the standard tests (Table 6—SAT Scores and Table 8—ACT Scores) but also had lower dropout rates. This may indicate greater retention of students with lower abilities. This may also reinforce a value on education in the community that may need nurturing in other parts of the county. A more thorough examination of the feeder schools for Avon Park and Sebring High Schools might help to differentiate these two and indicate why Lake Placid seems to retain more of its students.

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**Table 19: Graduation and Dropout Rate Information for the SBHC Comparing School Years of 2002 and 2003**

SCHOOL	2002		2003	
	Dropout Rate	Graduation Rate	Dropout Rate	Graduation Rate
Avon Park High	5.4%	66.1%	6.4%	67.6%
Lake Placid High	1%	66.3%	2.2%	78.4%
Sebring High	4%	51%	3.1%	63.6%
District Total	4.3%	58.6%	4.4%	66.9%
State Total	3.2%	67.9%	3.1%	69%

*SBHC MIS*

### Middle School Data Patterns

A collection of factors similar to those chosen to examine the three High Schools were picked to differentiate the four Middle Schools in the county. The differences were generally the types of tests used to measure student achievement at the lower grade levels. This was done with the understanding that the higher community risk factors for the Avon Park and Sebring areas continue to weigh heavily in the analysis.

**Table 20: Comparison of Middle School State Grades and FCAT Test Scores 2002-2003**

Middle School	Grade	FCAT Reading	FCAT Math	FCAT Writing (Combined Score: Max 6.0)
Avon Park	B	*287	*287	3.4
		**290	**281	
		***296	***306	
Hill-Gustat	A	*298	*298	4.2
		**308	**304	
		***312	***318	
Lake Placid	B	*294	*294	3.4
		**288	**288	
		***296	***301	
Sebring	A	*300	*300	3.9
		**303	**306	
		***306	***323	
District	-----	*295	*305	4.0
		**297	**295	
		***303	***313	
STATE	-----	*295	*302	3.9
		**297	**296	
		***301	***310	

\*6<sup>th</sup> grade; \*\*7<sup>th</sup> grade; \*\*\*8<sup>th</sup> grade

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Table 20 compares the four middle schools in the county to their FCAT reading, math and writing scores and school grades for 2002-2003. Sebring Middle School (SMS) and Hill-Gustat Middle School (HGM) received a school grade of “A”. Both Lake Placid Middle (LPM) and Avon Park Middle (APM) received a “B”. SMS equaled the combined state FCAT Writing score of 3.9. Only HGM (4.2) exceeded the combined score for the state and the district. APM and LPM both averaged only a 3.4 score.

Once again when data is distilled and the school ranked on overall risk levels, Avon Park Middle School stands out as the school most consistently displaying risk characteristics related to violence, substance abuse, and achievement. Lake Placid Middle School is a close second place finisher.

No middle school met or exceeded the state and district averages in FCAT reading and or math at all grade levels. HGM and SMS were at or above the averages in each test save the sixth grade students in FCAT math. Both APM and LPM were below state and district averages in both math and reading at all grade levels.

In addition to Avon Park Middle School’s lower FCAT scores in Reading, Mathematics, and Writing; they had higher school suspension rates, a higher minority population, a lower stability rate, and higher Free and Reduced Lunch Rates (71.69%). Only Avon Elementary and Fred Wild Elementary schools had higher free and reduced lunch rates (Table 17).

APM and SMS shared the number one slot for the greatest percentage of student days absent (Table 14). APM had the highest percentage of students (43.5%) involved in Individual Study Services (ISS). Lake Placid (39.7%) and Sebring (32.7%) were close behind. Sebring Middle (16%) had the highest percentage of Out-of-School Suspensions (OSS). Lake Placid (15.6%) and Avon Park Middle (12.9%) were following closely. HGM was a distant fourth at 4.4 percent. All of the high schools were also in double-digit figures regarding OSS and ISS statistics. Fred Wild Elementary, LPM, SMS, and Avon Park High School had double-digit percentages of students with 21+ days of absences for 2002-2003 and 2003-2004 (Table 21).

**Table: 21: Comparison of Schools Examining  
the Percentage of Students who have 21+ Absences**

SCHOOL	01-02	02-03	03-04
Fred Wild	8%	11.6%	12.2%
Lake Placid Middle	14%	13%	11.4%
Sebring Middle	12.9%	15.1%	16.2%
Avon Park High	18.9%	22.1%	11.7%

## Schools Identification: Step 4—The Decision

Avon Park, Lake Placid, and Sebring consistently displayed that their middle and high schools had the highest composite risk factors and the strongest relationship between drug use, school safety, and lower achievement within the county. HGM was the exception in the area of ISS and academic achievement. Combined, there were more reportable incidents in the middle schools (341) than either the elementary (101) or high school levels (260) per student population.

It was interesting to note that the elementary schools had very low numbers of reportable incidents (Table 9) for 2003-04 (Avon-none; Lake Country-one; Fred Wild-2; Woodlawn and Cracker Trail-four; and Sun ‘N Lake—five). However, other indicators such as the percent of Individual Study Services and Out-of-School Suspensions appeared to present conflicting information (Table 14). Table 22 presents a comparison of this data.

**Table 22: Comparison of Highlands County’s Elementary Schools Relative to Reportable Incidents, Individual Study Services, and Out-of-School Suspensions**

SCHOOL	Reportable Incidents	% Individual Study Services (ISS)	% Out-of-School Suspensions (OSS)	Student Population
Avon Elementary	0	9.7	2.3	670
Lake County	1	1.4	1	664
Fred Wild	2	6.1	2	772
Woodlawn	4	11.4	5.4	731
Cracker Trail	4	.0	1.4	714
Sun ‘N Lake	5	4.5	3.3	774
Lake Placid	65	.5	3.2	623
Park	20	8.5	6.1	675

The question arises how a school can have no reportable incidents and have an out-of-school suspension (OSS) rate of 2.3 percent; and Individual Study Services of 9.7 percent. The other two schools (Table 22), Lake Placid and Park Elementary Schools, display like ISS and OSS percentages for greater numbers of reportable incidents. It is very difficult to analyze needs with such discrepancies in data reporting.

Avon Park Middle School had approximately twice the reported incidents of any of the other middle schools (Table 23). However, Lake Placid Middle had only 65 reported incidents, but 15.6% of the students had Out-of-School Suspensions. Sebring and Lake Placid High Schools each had 96 reported incidents. While Avon Park High School (APH) had only 68. However, APH had the highest percentage of ISS (41.6) and OSS (15.1) and had only about two-thirds the student enrollment of Sebring High School and approximately the same number of reported incidents.

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**Table 23: Comparison of Highlands County’s Middle and High Schools Relative to Reportable Incidents, Individual Study Services, and Out-of-School Suspensions**

SCHOOL	Reportable Incidents	% Individual Study Services (ISS)	% Out-of-School Suspensions (OSS)	Student Population
<b>MIDDLE SCHOOLS</b>				
Avon Park	136	43.5	12.9	749
Hill-Gustat	71	22.5	4.4	662
Lake Placid	65	39.7	15.6	651
Sebring	69	32.7	16	772
				2,768
<b>HIGH SCHOOLS</b>				
Avon Park	68	41.6	15.1	971
Lake Placid	96	40.3	11.9	760
Sebring	96	35.8	13.2	1,448
				3,179

The evaluator believes that there should be a continued investigation focused on all the elementary, middle, and high schools in Highlands County. The reports only give the number of out-of-school suspensions, not the offense. The assessment team needs to develop lists of key elements for each of the schools to use in describing their current situation and identifying future program measurement elements to determine the risk factors present or the manifestation of problematic behaviors.

### A Focused Assessment

#### Risk Factor Analysis

##### School-related Risk Factors

- **Early Academic Failure**
- **Early Conduct Problems**
- **Lack of Commitment to School/School Affiliation**
- **Lack of Clear Policies at School**

Individual and group discussions with middle and high school students focused on violence. The conversations ranged from fights to the presence of weapons (knives and guns) to gang-related activities. Fighting at school was the first and most frequently cited reason for individual study services. Students clarified that the more serious fighting, i.e. battery, resulted in out-of-school suspensions. *This is consistent with the information used from archival reports on ISS and OSS.* Students suggested that much of the violence at school appeared to be related to drugs. They stated that the selling and using of drugs at school occurs regularly. Students suggested that drugs are easily attainable “on the street” and close to schools.

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Another source of violence related to intense rivalry between the county's three high school football teams. This rivalry had manifested in numerous ways, ranging from acts of vandalism to school property to drive-by shootings.

A further school-related factor that puts students at risk is a high incidence of truancy. Students skip classes without leaving campus and or do not report to school at all. Students stated they did this to avoid getting in trouble at school or in a particular class.

Extra-curricular activities are limited, and students with a grade average below 2.0 are ineligible to participate in those that are available. This creates a situation where the most at-risk students are left on their own, usually on the streets, with no opportunity to participate in constructive, structured activities.

Further focused discussions led the students to contend that some students were dealing with a great amount of peer pressure at school. Their friends urged them to take risks, misbehave, experiment with drugs and alcohol. Some of this experimentation led to habitual behavior.

### **Community-related Risk Factors**

- **Availability of Drugs/or Weapons**
- **Community Laws and Norms Favorable Toward Problem Behavior**
- **Low Neighborhood Attachment and Community Disorganization**
- **Severe Economic Deprivation**

Violence also dominated the discussions of community-related risk factors. The county is described as one in which drugs and weapons are easily accessible and where fighting is commonplace in neighborhoods and communities. Students believe the community is unsafe. *This is consistent with the records (Highlands County Sheriff's Office) on adult and juvenile arrest rates, number of liquor licenses per thousand, and other community factors found in the records analysis.* Additionally, students reported there are several gangs present in the area (and on campuses) causing violence and fear.

Another serious risk factor is the degree of community rivalry between the three major cities. This rivalry is particularly evident during football season. Most students appear to believe that football is the source of the rivalry. However, several key informants stated that a mutual dislike and intolerance between the communities is pervasive, a "tradition" that is instilled in the children by their parents. Students reported they know that if they are in the wrong place at the wrong time, trouble will follow. Fighting is the predictable consequence if students from one community attempt to attend a party or other social functions in the rival community.

According to students and key informants there is a lack of sufficient structured activities, cultural events, etc. available for the students within the county. Students complained that they

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have no acceptable place to ‘hang out’ together. Most of the places and programs that exist tend to cater to younger children rather than teenagers. Additionally, the county is populated by and accommodates a geriatric population of retirees. Students tend to feel the retirees are resentful and intolerant of the younger population within their communities. Also, according to the students, the retirees do not support, but complain about attempts to provide structured activities and meeting places for young people.

In summary, students are trying to mature and prepare for the future in a county that offers a lack of resources and support structures. Young people are all too often left on their own in an environment characterized by the availability of drugs and weapons, with violence at all levels that are a part of their everyday life, and an antagonism between its communities.

### **Family-related Risk Factors**

- **Family Management Problems**
- **Family Conflict**
- **Family History of Problem Behavior**

Highlands County is largely agrarian and has a high migrant population. Many of the students come from home environments characterized by low socioeconomic status and low levels of parental education. *Records demonstrate that many of the Highlands County schools have high percentages of free/reduced lunch participants.* Students are often required to work at night to help supplement family incomes. Many appear to be pressured to drop out of school so they may work on a full-time basis. Additionally, many parents seem unaware of what the term “High Risk” means. Consequently, many risk factors may be present, but go unnoticed and or not addressed.

Students repeatedly stated that parents do not care whether the children attend school or not, whether they passed or failed. Many parents work long hours (16-18 hours a day) to support their families and or are poorly educated and are not prepared to assist their children succeed academically. Many parents have more problems than their children which lead to a totally dysfunctional family life. *The arrest rates for adults, reported cases of child abuse, and sexual statistics related to school risk factors from the Sheriff’s Office indicate these observations are supported with documentation.*

Key informants further reported a high incidence of parental drug and alcohol abuse, physical abuse of children, domestic violence and arguments, and a lack of safety, security, and or sanitary living conditions in homes. Separation and divorce are also problematic for students. Many students live in foster homes or single-parent families. Some live with a friend or wherever they can find a place to stay. The Children’s Home Society (originally funded by the deceased owner of the Wendy’s chain) in Sebring is a haven for children removed from unsafe home environments. Students realize and readily admit they turn to peers, gangs, and or other negative influences in search of the love, attention, and acceptance they do not receive from their parents.

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In some instances, aged grandparents are struggling to raise several children ranging in age from infants to teenagers. Some students are expected to care for and assume responsibility for their younger siblings. Such responsibilities put pressure on these students to skip school and or neglect homework.

According to teachers and administrators, the schools receive very little support from parents assisting in providing direction, guidance, and discipline for children. Parents may recall their personal unpleasant school experiences and project those memories onto their children's teachers. These parents can be very defensive of their children and refuse to acknowledge or address behavior problems. According to some students, there are some parents who are actually afraid of their children and do not enforce discipline.

### **Individual/Peer-related Risk Factors**

- **Alienation/Rebelliousness**
- **Friends Who Engage in Problem Behavior**
- **Favorable Attitude Toward Problem Behavior**

Key informants, students, teachers, and administrators identified promiscuity and teen pregnancy as problems within the county. *Highlands County ranked 15<sup>th</sup> out of the 67 Florida counties in the number of teen birth rates (2002).* Students complained that they lack sufficient factual information concerning unsafe issues such as pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, etc. They blamed this as the leading reason for the practice of unsafe sex. Girls stated that others were motivated to become pregnant because they believed that having a baby would provide them with someone who would love them.

Students indicated that there is a large amount of peer pressure to engage in high risk behaviors, i.e. sexual activity, gang involvement, and drug and alcohol abuse. Violence is widely considered as an acceptable avenue to deal with problems in the home, community, and or the schools. From fights to battery and rape, violence appears to be the way many students handle their problems.

Students also expressed feelings related to low self-esteem. Key informants and school personnel supported this assertion. They recognized its manifestation in harmful behaviors such as substance abuse and bullying. They described at-risk students as trapped in conditions of poverty, lacking positive role models, and experiencing emotional and physical abuse at home. These circumstances can lead to low self-esteem, depression, anger, and be manifested in acts of violent rebellion.

### **Summary of Risk Factor Analysis**

Many students are living in conditions where the financial, physical, and emotional resources necessary to foster success are absent. Family life for these students is dysfunctional,

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filled with conflict and violence, fueled by alcohol and drug abuse, and devoid of the acceptance, support, encouragement, and modeling necessary to raise healthy, achieving children. Positive role models, learning resources, nurturing, and supervision are scarce. Drugs, weapons, and peer pressure are abundant. Gang activities and bullying incidents are increasing within the school environment.

Lacking the necessary resources at home, students are vulnerable to negative influences present in the community such as, gang activity, drug, alcohol, and weapons. Students encounter a tremendous amount of peer pressure to engage in high risk behaviors. Many succumb to this pressure in an effort to obtain a sense of love and or acceptance they do not have at home.

According to parents, school personnel, and key informants, problems that arise in the home and community are brought to school. Parents of many of the at-risk students provide little support to the school system. However, these parents expect the schools to address every problem a student may have, whether it falls within their jurisdiction or not.

Available extra-curricular activities and sports are restricted to students who maintain a required grade-point average. Consequently, the under-achieving students have very limited access to positive and structured activities (scouts, church, etc.). The majority of these children often come from dysfunctional families who have little to offer regarding security and support and are often the source of violence and abuse. These students are essentially left to their own devices, unsupervised in the community. Consequently, these students are at-risk to become easy targets for gang-related activities, drug dealers, and peer pressure.

The listing of decreasing risk factors is considered successful prevention efforts, the increase in protective factors in a community or school can also be an indication of success. These also have to be measured and reported.

### **Protective Factor Analysis**

#### **School-related Protective Factors**

Students indicated that teachers, counselors, and coaches who care about them are a source of help and support. They described these personnel as willing to “do what it takes to help a student”. Students also praised teachers who relate to the students on their level and make learning fun.

Students recognized that school lunch programs, counseling opportunities, and health services are beneficial and expressed appreciation of these supportive services. Students, administrators, and key informants agreed that sports, extracurricular clubs, and activities such as “Renaissance” are constructive and positive for students. All the middle schools have the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Grant—Safe and SMART Schools program for students performing on Level 1 or 2 on the FCAT reading and or math tests. The elementary schools have instituted After-School Day Care programs for working parents. These programs also provide time for students to do

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homework and participate in tutoring sessions. However, all the above-mentioned participants indicated there is a need for more such activities to provide a wider range of students with structured, supervised opportunities for interaction and recreation.

The county also has an alternative school. It is used as a possible option to expulsion. However, The Academy at Youth Care Lane is only available to middle and high school students.

### **Community-related Protective Factors**

Students, school personnel, and key informants mentioned churches and Youth Ministers as protective factors as they provide social activities for young people. Students also mentioned individuals in their neighborhoods who watch after them. There is a YMCA that many attend and others can either not afford or have no transportation. Students discussed community-sponsored scholarships and the dual enrollment agreement with South Florida Community College. This arrangement offers high school students the opportunity to take vocational training and or college credit courses.

Administrators praised the individuals and businesses in the community who support the extracurricular activities of the schools. Fundraising activities are often the task of students, school personnel, and parents. However, when funds are needed, it seems that the same community members consistently support school efforts.

City police, the county sheriff's office, DCF, and other government agencies also provide assistance for students. According to key informants there are programs in the community to provide help to teenagers in need such as the "I Care Hotline", teen parenting programs, counseling and mentoring programs, etc. However, as one informant discussed, there is some distrust among families for DCF and other government agencies. Therefore, the problem appears to be convincing individuals to utilize available services as needed.

### **Family-related Protective Factors**

Students and key informants agreed that parental involvement and caring are the most important protective factors at home. School personnel agreed. They indicated that most successful students come from stable families with concerned, involved parents. Key informants also stated that caring parents who respect and listen to their children are critical for healthy child development and positive self-esteem. Students stated that family members, including parents, older siblings, grandparents, aunts, and uncles, provide positive role models.

### **Individual/Peer-related Protective Factors**

Students stated that they try to look out for each other and encourage positive choices and behaviors. They distinguish their friends as sources of caring, support, and encouragement. Some indicated that they feel support from their friends and frequently this is the only support they receive.

## Summary of Protective Factor Analysis

Although there are sources of help and support available to students in the school and community, these resources are limited in scope and availability. One of the most critical factors appears to be the amount of support the students receive at home from family members. The students who are high-performing academically and socially seem to come from stable home environments. Their parents are able to provide for their basic custodial care and are involved in their children's academic and personal lives. Students lacking such an environment are more likely to depend on the limited resources of the school and community to meet their needs for safety, guidance, structure, and encouragement.

## Integration of Analysis

The quantitative records, qualitative interviews, and observations converge on a general pattern of risk factors. There is a high degree of consistency in the various data collected.

It appears that in Highlands County, where a problem exists there are often common elements regardless of where one lives in the county or what school one attends. Many of the risk factors are brought to school with the children at a very young age. These factors reflect the home environment to which they must return at the end of the day. Some of these children remain in school to complete an education. Others drop out and become a part of the adult community risk factors that help to perpetuate the cycle.

## Conditions that Keep Risk Factors High

Conditions that keep risk factors high for many students in the county include, but are not limited to:

- The educational level of the parents
- Elevated unemployment
- Lack of community cultural and recreational resources
- Lack of diversity of opportunity in the community to generate hope and goals
- Lack of an adequate number of role models for at-risk students
- Easy access to alcohol and other drugs
- A cultural norm of violence in some communities
- High mobility rates within the county
- Elevated rates of child abuse and domestic violence

The buildings and grounds in the school district may not be at a level the staff and students desire, but the general condition of the facilities exceeds the standards for many of the students' neighborhood environments and is improving. An increase in gang activity, the sale of illegal drugs, and the production of methamphetamine also adds to the elevation of environmental risk factors, negative peer pressure, and feelings of fear within the county. Poverty, unemployment, and the perceived lack of alternatives in a rural county are fertile ground for the spread of gang activity organized from outside the county.

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The geographic isolation and the lack of a diversified major industry and other benefits of a closer proximity to a major metropolitan center also helps keep the risk factors high in Highlands County. However, despite the lack of these amenities and sources of funding, people in Highlands County are creative and generous. It is important that they are because this is a very rural county that has all the problems of any big city and none of the attention or resources to be effective in fighting them.

### **Influence of Risk Factors on Student Performance**

The influence of the highest level risk factors focused upon in this study on lowered academic performance can be seen directly in some areas and safely inferred in others. Higher consumption levels of alcohol can be correlated to lower GPA scores. Several of the major risk factors found in the Highlands County schools remove students from the learning environment, thus precluding achievement. These include drug arrests, suspensions, and dropout rates. Violence seems to be a normal occurrence in several communities and families. As either a victim of it or trying to avoid the consequences of violence interferes with student achievement.

For many at-risk students, pervasive problems in the home or the need of the family to depend on them for child care or income are not conducive to good study habits. There are few available resources outside the schools for academic support.

The best predictor of school success in many studies is maternal educational level. The general education level of parents in the most at-risk schools is low. There seems to be little current opportunities for many families living at subsistence to change this either.

### **Improvement Planning and the Response to the Issue**

A review of the Highlands County SDFS District-Wide Program Plan and Budget and the School Improvement Plans of the schools revealed that the school district and community are aware of many of the problems highlighted in this report and have initiated actions to address these issues. It appears that the school system is the only coordinated effort in the community that is addressing the multitude of risk factors in an organized manner.

The SDFS Budget attempts to spread resources to key areas across all levels, but is severely limited. It appears that most of the planning for many substance abuse issues is done at the district level. However, the Health Advisory Committee (HAC), the Highlands County Community Coalition for Substance Abuse Reduction (HCCC), and the SDFS department are planners within the district and composed of members from all aspects of the school system and county.

Programs have or are being implemented in schools in the county. They include, but are not limited to: homework hotlines; before- and after-school tutoring; Safe and Smart middle school programs; teen parenting; "gang-related" and bullying in-service activities; Youth Crime Watch in all school levels; Renaissance Reward Programs; FCAT Reward Programs; parent-friendly curriculum reference materials; a Parent Guide to schools, administration, and curriculum requirements; improved transition programs for students going from one grade level

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to another; articulation among schools; improved technology; and multicultural activities. Although all the schools did not have all the programs in place to address the at-risk problem in its entirety, they each appear to be prioritizing their responses based on concerns expressed from surveys and other data, available resources, and the standards and guidelines of the district and the State Department of Education.

### **The Program Plan Development Team**

The Program Plan Development Team assigned to address the information generated in this report is composed of a committee of the SDFS and Health Advisory Committee, led by the SFDS Coordinator, Sherry Koehler. The members include Dr. Rodney Hollinger, Coordinator of Student Services for the School Board of Highlands County; members of the Health Advisory Committee; and Dr. Laura Van Horn, Middle School Drug Prevention and School Safety Coordinator.

### **Usefulness and Accuracy of the Data**

There were many useful reports and summaries of data available for this study from a variety of sources. The impression of the assessment team was that the information contained in this report accurately reflects the conditions that were found in the schools. This needs assessment should add to their confidence in using these reports for their decision making related to safer schools in Highlands County.

### **Additional Information**

Although the *FYSAS 2002* did not separate responses by individual schools, there was useful information about attitudes toward drug use throughout the district. The survey was contrasted to the *FYSAS 2000* and demonstrated increases in many areas regarding student attitudes through self-reporting.

An unofficial review of Highlands County's 2004 *FYSAS* revealed that:

- Overall alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana were the most reported with inhalants and illegal use of prescription drugs (Oxycontin, Darvocet, Adderall, and Ritalin) next.
- There was some use of Rave/Club drugs (Ecstasy, Rohypnol) and random use of other drugs.
- A surprising number of students admitted to carrying handguns to school.

The tabulated results will not be available until Spring 2005. However, there appear to be some emerging trends that are school specific:

- APHS
  - Selling illegal drugs
  - Being drunk or high at school
- LPHS
  - Illegal use of prescription drugs
  - Being drunk or high at school

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- SHS
  - Alcohol use
  - Being drunk or high at school
- APM
  - Bringing handguns to school
  - Use of a wide variety of drugs
- HGM
  - Inhalant abuse
- LPM
  - Being members of gangs
- SMS
  - Attack with the intent to seriously hurt someone

**APPENDICES**

**APPENDIX A**  
**Highlands County Health Advisory Council Members**  
**(SDFS Committee)**

**Darlene Dick, The Academy  
at Youth Care Lane**

**American Heritage Private  
School**

**American Red Cross**

**Pam Maxwell, Principal  
Avon Park Elementary**

**John Russ, Principal  
Avon Park High School**

**Dan Johnson, Principal  
Avon Park Middle School**

**Richard Demeri, Principal  
Cracker Trail Elementary**

**Jane Banks, Homebound,  
Exceptional Student Education**

**Faith Lutheran School**

**Florida Hospital Heartland Division**

**Ruby Handley, Principal  
Fred Wild Elementary**

**Grace Academy**

**Heartland Christian School**

**Highlands County Health  
Department**

**Highlands Regional Medical Center**

**Dave Robinson, Principal  
Hill-Gustat Middle School**

**Lake Placid Christian School**

**Majel Bowerman, Principal  
Lake Country Elementary**

**Carol Disler, Principal  
Lake Placid Elementary**

**Laura Van Horn, Middle School  
Drug Prevention and School  
Safety Coordinator**

**Ruth Heckman, Principal  
Lake Placid High School**

**Derrel Bryan, Principal  
Lake Placid Middle School**

**Patricia Landress, Principal  
Park Elementary School**

**Orange Blossom Baptist  
Association**

**APPENDIX A (Continued)**

**Toni Stivender, Principal  
Sebring High School**

**Sandi Whidden, Principal  
Sebring Middle School**

**Diane Lethbridge, Principal  
Sun ‘N Lake Elementary**

**Walker Memorial Junior Academy**

**Kay Bowers, Principal  
Woodlawn Elementary**

**APPENDIX B**  
**Incident List**  
**(Florida Department of Education Reportable)**

<b>ALC</b>	<b>Alcohol</b>
<b>ARS</b>	<b>Arson</b>
<b>BAT</b>	<b>Battery (Attack)</b>
<b>BRK</b>	<b>Breaking &amp; Entering</b>
<b>DOC</b>	<b>Disorderly Conduct</b>
<b>DRG</b>	<b>Narcotics</b>
<b>FIT</b>	<b>Fighting (mutual)</b>
<b>HOM</b>	<b>Homicide</b>
<b>KID</b>	<b>Kidnapping</b>
<b>MVT</b>	<b>Motor Vehicle Theft</b>
<b>OMC</b>	<b>Other Major Crime</b>
<b>ROB</b>	<b>Robbery with Force</b>
<b>STL</b>	<b>Larceny/Theft</b>
<b>SXB</b>	<b>Sex Battery &amp; Attempts</b>
<b>SXH</b>	<b>Sex Harass</b>
<b>SXO</b>	<b>Sexual offenses</b>
<b>TBC</b>	<b>Tobacco (possession/use)</b>
<b>TRE</b>	<b>Threat/Intimidate</b>
<b>TRS</b>	<b>Trespassing</b>
<b>VAN</b>	<b>Vandalism</b>
<b>WPO</b>	<b>Weapons Possession</b>