

SPOTLIGHT: Operation Snowball



Background

Operation Snowball is a school and community-based alcohol and drug use prevention program founded on the principle that youth can make their own positive decisions when given relevant information and empowerment. The program was founded in 1977 after several Rockford, IL students attended the week-long Illinois Teen Institute (now the Cebrin Goodman Teen Institute). After this conference, the students wanted to share what they learned on a local level. This resulted in the creation of Operation Snowball based on the idea that, "If I have a positive impact on you, you can have a positive impact on someone else and the effect snowballs."¹

How It Works

Operation Snowball is first and foremost a partnership between students and adults. It is run through school or community-based chapters. Anyone interested in starting a chapter can simply go to Operation Snowball's website (www.operationsnowballinc.org). Once created, the chapters are implemented entirely by youth, with adults available on an advisory level. Using the Strategic Prevention Framework from the Substance Use and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), Operation Snowball uses five prevention strategies.

1. Provide information about drug misuse, addiction, underage drinking, mental health, etc.
2. Help youth develop skills in decision-making, refusal skills and problem solving which are key for youth to internalize and practice for their ongoing success as students and community members.
3. Train local impactors (youth leaders, adult key stakeholders) to deliver key messages regarding drug and alcohol information and skills to influence peers to avoid the pitfalls of drug misuse and destructive behaviors.
4. Create healthy norms in schools and communities, address negative social attitudes, destructive behaviors, and allows youth to voice their concerns about school/community policy concerning drug misuse and underage alcohol use that hinders theirs and their peers' opportunities for success.

"Through the development of leadership skills, Operation Snowball shall be a youth and adult partnership, providing awareness and prevention of alcohol, tobacco and other drug use, while encouraging healthy decision-making in an active community of caring."

-Operation Snowball Mission Statement

5. Compliment the educational system's Social Emotional Learning standard that create healthy and competent adults as well as develops community and statewide partnerships and resources to enhance opportunities for student success.

While Operation Snowball provides curricula and technical assistance, chapters have the agency to adapt the program based on their local needs. Chapters hold regular meetings to teach leadership and facilitation skills to youth and to give accurate information about drug misuse and underage drinking. Chapters hold various types events, planned and led by youth, year-round. These programs range from prevention awareness days to overnight retreats that may happen on a school-wide or even community-wide level. These events are the key to Operation Snowball's success. They allow youth to take on active roles in changing social norm perceptions of drug misuse and underage drinking and gives participants experiences through peer-to-peer teaching.

How It Is Innovative

This programs views youth as being at the heart of the solution, not the problem. Operation Snowball is a process rather than a single event thus creating longevity and a social bond that extends far beyond the school year. Operation Snowball does not use scare tactics, rather it gives youth the facts and empowerment tools to make healthy choices. The program creates an

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environment of students as leaders and role models, with adults as non-judgmental supporters fostering the idea of a “community of caring.”

This program is not just about drugs and alcohol. Operation Snowball gives youth the opportunity to build confidence, helps them be a positive influence on each other, and share accurate information for healthy decisions about their lives. Drugs and alcohol are just one part of the conversation. At events, youth discuss a wide range of topics including mental health, diversity, cyber-bullying, suicide, and relevant community topics.

The program has been replicated in all demographic areas; there are Operation Snowballs in urban, suburban, and rural areas of Illinois. Initially implemented as a program for high school students, the program has expanded to middle and junior high school students with Operation Snowflake and even to preschool and elementary school students with Operation Snowflurry.

Demonstrating Success

Over its forty-year history, Operation Snowball has proven its adaptability. It has over seventy-five chapters in Illinois, reaching over 100,000 students. Operation Snowball also has chapters in New York, Indiana, and Wisconsin. The program even has thirty-five international chapters in Belarus, Lithuania, and Poland.

Operation Snowball is currently working with the Rehabilitation Institute at Southern Illinois University to determine the outcome-based results of the program. However, qualitative feedback touts the efficacy of the program. For instance, survey results from a 2016 chapter retreat show:

- **78%** of participants felt that they were encouraged at the retreat.
- **87%** of participants thought they learned information that would help them make a difference in others.
- **87%** of participants felt that they developed trusting relationships with others at the retreat.

When asked, “What skills did you learn or improve on at the event?,” 73% said ‘leadership,’ 78% said ‘team building,’ 78% said ‘trust,’ and 62% said ‘taking a healthy risk.’

Stakeholders & Partners

Operation Snowball is funded in part by the Illinois Department of Human Services, Division of Substance Use Prevention and Recovery of the and from the Cebrin Goodman Center an affiliate of the Lillian and Larry Goodman Foundations. To reinforce the leadership skills learned, Operation Snowball’s partner program is the Cebrin Goodman Teen Institute.

References

<http://www.operationsnowballinc.org/>

<http://cg-ti.org/>

<https://sites.google.com/d211.org/snowball/information-for-parents>

¹ <http://www.operationsnowballinc.org/about-us>