

THE SUNFLOWR PROJECT

SCHOOL-BASED HUMAN TRAFFICKING PREVENTION

*A Comprehensive Implementation Manual for Educators,
Administrators, and Community Partners*

Synthesizing National Research, the HTYPE Demonstration Program Year 2
Evaluation, and the 2026 Human Trafficking Prevention Month Toolkit

Prepared For: K-12 Educational Leaders, School Safety Task Forces, Counselors, and Community Organizations

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(OPRE)

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Partnerships

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Executive Summary & Structural Overview

Human trafficking—encompassing both sex trafficking and labor trafficking—is an egregious violation of human rights and a critical public health and safety concern impacting school-aged youth across the United States. K-12 schools represent one of the most vital frontline environments for early identification, intervention, and primary prevention. Because almost all youth pass through the school system, educational institutions possess an unprecedented operational vantage point to identify vulnerable students, recognize warning signs, build resilience, and establish rapid safety protocols before exploitation occurs or worsens.

This comprehensive deep dive synthesizes evidence-based findings, structural frameworks, and operational strategies from three seminal federal benchmarks issued by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Administration for Children and Families (ACF):

- **School-Based Human Trafficking Prevention: Key Components and Implementation Considerations for Educators, Staff, and School Leaders (OPRE Report 2024-276):** A rigorous synthesis of core curriculum components, staff training strategies, and Human Trafficking School Safety Protocols (HTSSP).
- **2026 Human Trafficking Prevention Month Toolkit (OTIP Directives):** A practical action manual centered on the "Stronger Futures" framework, highlighting protective relationships, community campaign strategies, and multi-sector engagement across four distinct action weeks.
- **Human Trafficking Youth Prevention Education (HTYPE) Demonstration Program - Year 2 Reflections (OPRE Report 2023-133):** A longitudinal evaluation of eight federally funded demonstration projects led by Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) in partnership with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and law enforcement.

Core Mandate for Educational Institutions

Federal evaluation data clearly underscores that prevention in schools cannot exist in isolation. Effective prevention requires a robust tripartite architecture: (1) universal, skills-based student education, (2) mandatory, trauma-informed staff training, and (3) a formalized Human Trafficking School Safety Protocol (HTSSP) backed by multidisciplinary community partnerships.

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1. Legal Definitions & Scope of Youth Human Trafficking

To effectively prevent human trafficking in academic settings, school personnel must understand the exact legal definition established under the **Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000** (as amended). Human trafficking is divided into two primary categories: Sex Trafficking and Labor Trafficking.

Sex Trafficking

Under federal law, sex trafficking is defined as the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act, where the commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age.

Critical Distinction for Minors

For any individual under the age of 18, **proof of force, fraud, or coercion is NOT legally required** to establish sex trafficking. Any commercial sex act involving a minor constitutes child sex trafficking under federal law regardless of consent or perceived agreement.

Labor Trafficking

Labor trafficking is defined as the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery. Youth in school settings are increasingly vulnerable to labor trafficking in agricultural sectors, informal gig economies, hospitality, construction, door-to-door sales crews, and domestic work.

Trafficking Type	Tactics / Mechanics	Primary Exploitation Domains	K-12 Context & Vulnerabilities
Sex Trafficking	Grooming, romance/Romeo tactics, online solicitations, peer recruitment, physical/emotional threats.	Commercial sex, illicit massage businesses, online platforms, hotel networks, informal exchanges.	Frequent truancy, unexplained high-value items, secret social media handles, older romantic partners.
Labor Trafficking	Debt bondage, wage theft, confiscated identity papers, threats of deportation, forced excessive hours.	Agriculture, fast food/restaurants, construction, landscaping, door-to-door sales, informal domestic work.	Chronic exhaustion, missing school during harvesting/peak seasons, working excessive hours, language isolation.

2. Vulnerability Assessment: Risk & Protective Factors

Traffickers rarely recruit through random abductions; instead, they target existing social, economic, and emotional vulnerabilities. Understanding the interplay between risk factors and protective factors allows educational leaders to deploy targeted interventions.

Socio-Ecological Model of Risk Factors

1. Individual-Level Risk Factors

- **Prior Trauma & Abuse:** Youth with histories of physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, or chronic neglect, are disproportionately targeted by traffickers who offer pseudo-affection.
- **System Involvement:** Youth involved in the child welfare system (foster care) or juvenile justice systems face heightened risk. Research shows a significant percentage of minor sex trafficking victims have foster care histories.
- **Runaway and Homeless Youth (RHY):** Youth who have run away from home or are experiencing couch-surfing, unhoused status, or housing instability lack basic necessities, making them vulnerable to survival sex and forced labor.
- **Identity & Marginalization:** LGBTQ+ youth, particularly transgender and gender-nonconforming youth, face higher rates of family rejection, homelessness, and discrimination, inflating their vulnerability.
- **Substance Use Disorders:** Substance use by the youth or family members can be exploited through drug-facilitated coercion or debt leverage.

2. Relational & Family Risk Factors

- Family conflict, severe domestic instability, parental incarceration, or household poverty.
- Lack of supportive, trusted adult connections within the immediate environment.
- Intergenerational trauma and domestic violence exposure.

3. Environmental & Community Risk Factors

- High community poverty rates, systemic economic disinvestment, and lack of youth employment.
- Pervasive gang activity and localized criminal networks that utilize sex or labor exploitation.
- Online exploitation environments: unmonitored access to high-risk social media, gaming channels, and encrypted messaging applications.

The Buffer: Protective Factors

The 2026 OTIP Prevention Month directives emphasize that protective factors actively mitigate risk. When protective dynamics are strengthened, youth develop psychological and social resilience against recruitment tactics.

Key Protective Factors Identified by HHS/OTIP

- **Strong School Connectedness:** Feeling safe, valued, and connected to teachers, counselors, and peers at school.
- **Trusted Adult Network:** Having at least one caring, reliable adult who checks in regularly and offers unconditional support.
- **Healthy Peer Dynamics:** Positive peer groups that reinforce emotional safety and boundary setting.
- **Safe & Stable Housing:** Secure basic needs (shelter, food, healthcare).
- **Critical Digital Literacy:** Ability to identify online grooming, fake job postings, and boundary violations.

3. Comprehensive Matrix of Warning Signs & Indicators

Recognizing signs of trafficking requires a nuanced understanding of subtle behavioral, physical, academic, and social changes. Educators should evaluate indicators holistically rather than relying on a single isolated observation.

Domain	Sex Trafficking Warning Signs	Labor Trafficking Warning Signs
Academic & Attendance	Unexplained chronic absenteeism, sudden drop in grades, frequent tardiness, sudden withdrawal from extracurriculars, missing school on Fridays/Mondays.	Consistent exhaustion during class, missing school during specific labor seasons, falling asleep continuously, drop out to support family under suspicious pressure.
Behavioral & Emotional	Drastic personality shifts (hyper-vigilance, aggression, dissociation), secretive phone usage, carrying multiple cell phones, using commercial sex terminology.	Excessive anxiety regarding work schedule or employer approval, extreme fear of authority or law enforcement, inability to speak freely without handler oversight.
Physical & Material	Unexplained luxury items (expensive clothing, shoes, jewelry, fake nails, tattoos/branding), unseasonable clothing covering bruises/cuts, STI diagnoses.	Signs of physical strain or untreated work injuries, lack of appropriate safety gear for hazardous work, malnutrition, poor personal hygiene despite working full-time.
Relational & Social	New relationship with significantly older romantic partner ("boyfriend"/recruiter), drastic change in peer group, isolation from longtime friends.	Inability to access personal documents (birth certificate, passport), working excessive hours for minimal pay, being picked up/dropped off by non-relatives.

Role-Specific Observation Matrix for School Staff

Classroom Teachers

Monitors daily attendance patterns, drastic shifts in academic focus, sudden acquisition of costly tech or gifts, and secretive phone monitoring during class hours.

School Nurses & Health Personnel

Observes recurrent physical complaints (headaches, stomachaches), unexplained physical trauma, signs of acute exhaustion, repeated STI/pregnancy testing, or branding/tattoos.

Identifies disclosures of abusive romantic relationships, housing instability, runaway behavior, family trauma, and severe emotional distress or dissociation.

School Resource Officers (SROs) & Security

Monitors suspicious vehicles hovering near school grounds during dismissal, unauthorized adults picking up students, and reports of gang-related youth exploitation.

School Counselors & Social Workers

4. Student Prevention Curricula Design & Implementation

OPRE Report 2024-276 emphasizes that prevention education for students must move beyond brief scare-tactics assemblies toward evidence-based, skills-building, interactive curricula integrated into school programming.

Essential Curriculum Components

- 1. **Clear Legal Definitions & Realities:** Age-appropriate, accurate definitions of both sex and labor trafficking, dispelling common myths (e.g., myth: trafficking only happens via kidnapping by strangers).
- 2. **Grooming Tactics & Recruitment Awareness:** Explicitly teaching how recruiters manipulate trust, offer false job promises, target emotional vulnerabilities, build financial dependence, or use "loverboy" tactics.
- 3. **Online Safety & Digital Boundaries:** Educating students on high-risk online interactions, social media recruitment, unsafe gaming forums, and financial sextortion scams.
- 4. **Protective Skill Development:** Assertive communication, establishing healthy interpersonal boundaries, identifying personal support networks, and safely resisting peer pressure.
- 5. **Help-Seeking Pathways:** Actionable guidance on how and where to report concerns, including contacting trusted school staff, national hotlines, or community resources.

Delivery Models & Instructional Modalities

The HTYPE evaluation highlights several structural formats for delivering student instruction, each presenting unique trade-offs:

Delivery Format	Primary Advantages	Operational Challenges	Key Recommendations
Integrated Health / PE Classes	Reaches all students in mandatory courses; fits naturally into wellness, personal safety, and relationships units.	Curriculum pacing constraints; requires training certified health teachers on sensitive topics.	Embed multi-lesson modules into existing middle and high school health curriculum scopes and sequences.

Delivery Format	Primary Advantages	Operational Challenges	Key Recommendations
Advisory / Homeroom Modules	Flexible scheduling across all grade levels; smaller group settings promote dialogue.	Varying comfort levels among non-health teachers delivering sensitive material.	Provide co-teaching models or detailed facilitator guides with counseling staff on standby.
Asynchronous / Blended Digital Modules	Standardized message delivery; accommodates student absences or self-paced learning.	Lower student engagement; reduced immediate oversight during emotional distress.	Pair digital content with mandatory live, synchronous processing sessions led by trained facilitators.

Instructional Best Practice: Scenario-Based Learning

Research demonstrates that static lectures are ineffective for deep learning. Programs must utilize hands-on, scenario-based exercises, case analyses, and role-playing where students practice identifying subtle grooming messages and asserting boundaries in realistic digital and face-to-face environments.

5. Professional Development Framework for School Personnel

School staff are the ultimate safety net for vulnerable students. However, without systematic training, staff may misinterpret trafficking indicators as willful misconduct, truancy, or simple behavioral defiance.

Tiered Training Architecture

Tier 1: Universal Staff Awareness (All School Personnel)

- **Target Audience:** Teachers, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, custodial staff, administrative assistants, and athletic coaches.
- **Core Content:** Basic definitions, common indicators, grooming dynamics, and mandatory reporting obligations under state law and school policy.
- **Frequency & Format:** Annual 60–90 minute synchronous or asynchronous training incorporated into mandatory professional development days.

Tier 2: Specialized Responder Training (Designated Assessment Personnel)

- **Target Audience:** School counselors, school social workers, school nurses, administrators, and
- **Core Content:** Trauma-informed interview techniques, crisis stabilization, safety planning, executing the HTSSP, and coordinating with Child Protective Services (CPS) and specialized CBOs.

6. Architecture of the Human Trafficking School Safety Protocol (HTSSP)

A Human Trafficking School Safety Protocol (HTSSP) is an official operational framework that standardizes procedures for educators and school staff when responding to suspected or disclosed human trafficking.

Core Protocol Workflow & Decision Tree

STEP 1: Initial Observation or Disclosure

Staff member observes unambiguous indicators or receives a direct disclosure from a student. Staff maintains calm demeanor, validates the student, avoids interrogation, and ensures immediate physical safety.

STEP 2: Internal Designated Contact Notification

Staff member immediately contacts the school's Designated HTSSP Lead (e.g., Lead Counselor, Social Worker, or Principal). Detailed, objective factual notes are documented without clinical speculation.

STEP 3: Safety Assessment & Triage

Designated HTSSP Lead conducts an immediate safety assessment to evaluate imminent danger (e.g., presence of trafficker on school grounds, acute threat of harm, abduction risk).

STEP 4: External Reporting & Interagency Coordination

- If immediate physical danger exists: Contact local law enforcement (911) immediately.
- Standard Mandated Reporting: Submit official report to Child Protective Services (CPS) within statutory timeline.
- Specialized Hotline Consultation: Contact National Human Trafficking Hotline (1-888-373-7888) for technical case support.

STEP 5: Multi-Disciplinary Support & Safety Planning

Engage specialized victim-service CBOs, establish an individualized student safety plan (e.g., class schedule adjustments, safe transportation arrangements), and coordinate wrap-around services.

Critical HTSSP Component: Parent/Guardian Notification Protocol

Extreme caution must be exercised prior to notifying parents or guardians. If there is reasonable suspicion that a parent/guardian is involved in the exploitation, facilitating the trafficking, or

7. Practical Community & School Action (2026 HTPM Toolkit)

The OTIP 2026 Human Trafficking Prevention Month Toolkit provides actionable strategies organized around four thematic weeks under the national campaign theme: **"Stronger Futures Through Everyday Connections."**

Four Focus Weeks Implementation Matrix

Focus Week	Core Theme	School & District Action Items	Community Partnership Activities
Week 1	Foundational Awareness & Literacy	Distribute educational fact sheets to staff; host kickoff advisory period presentations; display crisis hotline posters in confidential areas.	Publish local press releases; coordinate multi-agency social media educational blasts; engage local municipal leaders.
Week 2	Strengthening Connections at Home	Host parent/caregiver digital safety webinars; provide guides on identifying online grooming; share family communication tools.	Partner with PTA/PTO groups, family resource centers, and faith-based organizations to offer positive parenting workshops.
Week 3	Strengthening Connections at School & Work	Train CTE (Career & Tech Ed) students on labor rights and worker exploitation; review district youth employment safety guidelines.	Engage local business chambers, youth employers, and labor unions to promote fair wage and child labor compliance standards.
Week 4	Community Mobilization & Sustainability	Host youth-led peer awareness campaigns; organize student art/essay contests focused on dignity, safety, and respect.	Establish permanent interagency task forces; formalize long-term MOUs between school districts and anti-trafficking NGOs.

Practical Prevention Activity Ideas for Schools

- **Wear Blue Day Campaign:** Participate in the national annual #WearBlueDay awareness push to spark peer-led conversations on human trafficking.
- **Confidential Resource Placements:** Place National Human Trafficking Hotline posters and QR-code sticker resources in private locations such as restroom stalls, nurse offices, and counselor waiting rooms.
- **Youth Empowerment Assemblies:** Host survivor-informed, youth-centered interactive workshops highlighting leadership, digital safety, and peer support.

8. HTYPE Demonstration Program Insights & Program Evolution

The OPRE Year 2 Reflections Report (Report No. 2023-133) evaluates the implementation journey of eight federally funded Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) across the United States. Key longitudinal insights demonstrate how programs overcome real-world implementation challenges over time.

Key Longitudinal Implementation Insights

1. Sustainability Through Institutionalization

During Year 1, grant sites focused on pilot curricula and initial stakeholder orientation. By Year 2, successful sites shifted focus toward embedding the HTSSP into official board policy, ensuring that prevention protocols remain active beyond grant funding cycles.

2. Multi-System NGO and Law Enforcement Partnerships

Grant recipients established formal Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) with specialized anti-trafficking non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local law enforcement. NGOs provided crucial technical expertise, survivor-informed feedback, and direct crisis intervention, while LEAs provided structural access to students and staff.

3. Overcoming Operational Implementation Hurdles

Operational Challenge	Year 1 Vulnerability	Year 2/3 Strategic Solution
Instructional Time Constraints	Difficulty finding dedicated instructional hours in crowded academic schedules.	Integrating trafficking prevention modules directly into mandated state Health/PE standards.
Parental Opt-Out / Concerns	Parental resistance or misconceptions regarding sensitive content.	Proactive parent preview nights, clear educational letters, and emphasizing skill-building over explicit content.
Staff Turnover	Trained personnel leaving districts, leaving capacity gaps.	Creating mandatory digital onboarding modules for all incoming new hires district-wide.

9. Operational Checklists, Tools & Quick-Reference Guides

DISTRICT READINESS & PROTOCOL COMPLIANCE CHECKLIST

- ☐ Board-Approved Policy: Human Trafficking Safety Protocol officially adopted by school board.
- ☐ Designated Staff Leads: Identified and trained HTSSP Leads in every school building.
- ☐ Mandated Annual Staff Training: Annual professional development completed for 100% of staff.
- ☐ Evidenced-Based Student Curriculum: Grade-appropriate prevention modules integrated into health/PE.
- ☐ External MOUs Active: Formalized agreements with specialized anti-trafficking CBOs and child welfare.
- ☐ Confidential Help Resources: Hotline numbers (1-888-373-7888) prominently displayed in student spaces.
- ☐ Annual Protocol Audit: Regular reviews of response logs and emergency workflow drills conducted.

Emergency Response Quick Reference Card

IMMEDIATE ACTION PROTOCOL FOR SCHOOL STAFF

1. **Ensure Safety:** If student is in immediate physical danger, notify Principal and Call 911.
2. **Remain Calm & Supportive:** Listen non-judgmentally; do not promise complete confidentiality (explain reporting obligations gently).
3. **Do Not Interrogate:** Gather only essential facts required for mandatory reporting. Avoid detailed questioning.
4. **Notify Building Lead:** Immediately hand off to Designated School Counselor / HTSSP Lead.
5. **File Mandatory Report:** Complete official Child Protective Services report as required by state law.

10. References & Federal Resource Directory

Federal & National Resource Directory

- **National Human Trafficking Hotline:** Call 1-888-373-7888 | Text "HELP" or "INFO" to 233733 | Visit humantraffickinghotline.org
- **Office on Trafficking in Persons (OTIP):** U.S. Department of Health and Human Services | Visit acf.hhs.gov/otip
- **Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE):** U.S. Department of Health and Human Services | Visit acf.hhs.gov/opre
- **National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC):** CyberTipline 1-800-843-5678 | Visit missingkids.org

Formal Citations & Source Documents

1. Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE). (2024). *School-Based Human Trafficking Prevention: Key Components and Implementation Considerations for Educators, Staff, and School Leaders* (OPRE Report No. 2024-276). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://acf.gov/opre/report/school-based-human-trafficking-prevention-key-components-and-implementation-0>
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3. Yu, L., Brown, J., Hendrix, J., Pfeffer, R., Halpin, S., & Charm, S. (2023). *Human Trafficking Youth Prevention Education (HTYPE) Demonstration Program: Year 2 Reflections* (OPRE Report No. 2023-133). Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://acf.gov/opre/report/human-trafficking-youth-prevention-education-htype-demonstration-program-year-2>