

ISTEP Resource Guide

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IOWA Health and Human Services

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Iowa Students Together Empowering Peers (ISTEP)

Youth Behavioral Health Leadership

Youth play an important role in creating healthier schools and communities. Behavioral health challenges—such as tobacco and nicotine use, substance use, mental wellness, stress, decision-making, and coping skills—affect young people in many different ways. Youth are often exposed to mixed messages, peer pressure, and rapidly changing trends that influence how they think and feel. At times, industries and social environments have minimized the risks of certain behaviors or products, leaving young people without the full truth.

Today, young leaders are committed to learning accurate, research-based information about a wide range of behavioral health topics. ISTEP members stay informed about issues like vaping, emerging substances, mental well-being, healthy relationships, and other factors impacting their generation. They use this knowledge to make informed choices for themselves and to open conversations with peers, community members, and school leaders—whether during everyday interactions, community events, or the annual Iowa Youth Empowerment Summit (I-YES).

Iowa teens have a meaningful role in shaping positive social attitudes and building supportive environments. As adults working with ISTEP youth, we can help by offering leadership development opportunities, encouraging their ideas, and providing spaces where their voices are heard and respected. We highlight the value of their perspective and help them grow skills that strengthen both their confidence and their impact. By investing in youth leadership, we support a future generation that is equipped to promote healthy decisions, reduce harm, and strengthen the well-being of young Iowans.

About ISTEP

Led by students and supported by adults, ISTEP is a statewide movement made up of young people in grades 7 through 12 across the state of Iowa. The ISTEP program is held within the Division of Behavioral Health at Iowa Health and Human Services. ISTEP encourages youth to make friends, make a difference and become leaders.

ISTEP Mission

To empower young Iowans to build healthy, confident futures by promoting mental wellness, positive relationships, and safe choices through knowledge and awareness.

ISTEP Goals

- Build leadership skills and confidence to positively influence peers.
- Increase awareness that supports informed, positive decisions.
- Promote mental and emotional well-being.
- Prevent bullying and support healthy, respectful relationships.
- Reduce risks related to suicide, alcohol, tobacco/nicotine, and other substances.

Leadership Opportunities

ISTEP has many leadership opportunities; at the state level by joining the ISTEP Executive Council and at the local level through chapters.

State Leadership

The ISTEP Executive Council is what truly keeps the program youth led. The Council consists of 9th through 12th grade youth across Iowa who serve as leaders of the Program. It's approximately made up of 15-20 members, one in which is elected as the ISTEP President, which is a one-year term. The Council plans annual toolkits, plans and leads the annual I-YES and makes big campaign decisions. This group is supported by Jill Wright the ISTEP Coordinator with Iowa HHS in the Behavioral Health Division.

The Council meets virtually on a regular basis on ISTEP initiatives such as upcoming street marketing events, presentation opportunities and summit planning. However, about three times a year the Council meets in person in the Des Moines area for Council Retreats and the annual I-YES. Council Retreats focus on developing leadership skills, as well as team building to increase rapport and engagement among the group.

To serve on the Council, youth must:

- Live in the state of Iowa.
- Be in grades 9 through 12.
- Serve as a leader and role model for the ISTEP program.
- Attend at least 8 Council meetings/year.
- Serve actively on at least 1 Council Committee (attending at least 2 meetings/year).
- Plan, attend and lead the annual Iowa Youth Empowerment Summit (I-YES).
- Communicate regularly and in a timely manner with the HHS ISTEP Coordinator as needed (email, call, meetings or text).
- Access to joining virtual meetings.
- Be an active member in a local ISTEP chapter, if applicable, or take steps to start a local ISTEP chapter.

Local Leadership

It's pretty amazing when like-minded young people come together for a good cause. And that's exactly what happens in every ISTEP Chapter in our state. ISTEP Chapters consist of one adult chapter advisor and a minimum of 3 young people in grades 7 through 12. Chapters focus on raising awareness and educating their peers and community members at the local level.

To be an ISTEP Chapter member, youth must:

- Live in the state of Iowa.
- Be in grades 7 through 12.
- Serve as a local leader and role model for the ISTEP program.
- Attend chapter meetings regularly (Chapter Advisors may require a specific amount per year).
- Participate in planning and leading at least one ISTEP Chapter outreach activity per year.
- Attend the annual Iowa Youth Empowerment Summit (I-YES), if able.
- Communicate regularly and in a timely manner with your Chapter Advisor as needed (email, call, meetings or text).

Starting an ISTEP Chapter

Chapters can be big or small. Current chapter members range from 3 to 200! But no matter the situation, creating a chapter is simple; one adult chapter advisor and a minimum of three youth members in grades 7 through 12 is needed. Then, the adult chapter advisor registers the chapter on hhs.iowa.gov/istep.

ISTEP Chapters can be formed in any setting where 7 through 12 grade youth meet. Chapters are most commonly formed in a school setting, however the ISTEP program has a goal to expand this. Think outside the box; chapters can be made up of members from a church youth group, scout troop, 4-H group, YMCA program, sports team, or any other community setting where 7-12 grade youth meet.

The structure of the chapter is completely up to the local adult chapter advisor. It is recommended to have separate chapters for youth in middle school versus youth in high school, yet collaboration among age levels is acceptable and encouraged. For example, the high school chapter members can take the lead of an event and model their leadership skills to the younger students, while middle school youth can bring their never-ending energy and excitement.

It is also up to the chapter to decide how they'd like to be structured. It's common to elect a President, Vice President and Secretary. Establishing chapter requirements and rules, keeping meeting minutes and an attendance log is recommended to have a successful active chapter, however, is not required.

How to Register an ISTEP Chapter

1. Visit hhs.iowa.gov/istep.
2. Click “Register your ISTEP Chapter here”. It’s the first bolded bullet.
3. Fill out the form.
    a. Information needed for the form includes: the chapter name, address, member count, advisor name and advisor email address.
4. Click “submit”.

Once the form is submitted, the Iowa HHS ISTEP Coordinator is notified and will send an introductory email to the chapter advisor listed within the form. This email will include helpful links and resources to support the Chapter’s next steps.

Chapter Advisors

An ISTEP chapter advisor can be a teacher, an adult who works with another youth organization in the community (4-H, FFA, church groups, scout troops, etc.) or a Community Based Organization (CBO) staff member. ISTEP takes a youth-led approach to leadership, allowing youth to take the initiative in planning and implementing activities. The role of the adult chapter advisor can include, but isn’t limited to:

- assisting with planning and implementing activities,
- ensuring chapter members follow through with their plans,
- gathering Youth Code of Conduct and Participation Consent forms,
- communicating with the youth members’ parents and the Iowa HHS ISTEP Coordinator, and
- helping youth members get to and from activities such as the annual I-YES.

How much time does an ISTEP Chapter require?

This is completely up to the Chapter. However, ISTEP never has a dull moment and there is always something that can be done. Each chapter is encouraged to participate in the toolkits created by the Council each year. Additionally, Chapters may choose to put on events unique to their community. It’s up to the Chapter to decide how often they’d like to meet, but it’s recommended to meet once a month or every other month to stay up to date on upcoming activities, chapter event planning, etc. At the beginning of the school year, it’s recommended Chapter members decide how many activities they’d like to implement during the year. For reference, it’s common to have three meetings per one event. For example:

1. Planning Meeting – determine details of the event.
2. Implementation of Event – hold the event.
3. Follow-up Meeting – discuss how the event went, what could be done differently in the future, then determine the date of the next meeting to plan the next event.

First Meeting of the Year

The first meeting of the year, also known as the ISTEP chapter orientation meeting, is extremely important. Starting the year with clear expectations is key to having a successful chapter. Below are a few things to think about:

- Establish goals for the year. How many events will be done? Will the chapter participate in the toolkits planned by the Council?
- Determine chapter structure. Will a President, Vice President and Secretary be elected? How will rules be established? Are there attendance requirements?
- Develop a plan of action. When will meetings be held - every second Thursday of the month after school? When and where will events happen for the year - home sporting events, parent teacher conference night, etc.

Iowa Youth Empowerment Summit (I-YES)

Each fall, youth from all across Iowa get together for the I-YES annual event. All Iowa youth in grades 7 through 12 are invited to attend, free of cost. The youth Council members plan and lead the entire event; it's quite impressive to see young people leading other youth for an entire day. I-YES is unlike any other conference. The agenda typically consists of a high-energy, interactive welcoming session, an engaging educational keynote speaker and hands-on activities. At the 2024 event, there was a record-breaking 334 youth and 52 adults.

Outreach Activities and Events

Think big, attention grabbing, flashy, fun and impactful! A street marketing event involves a chapter doing an event in public. These events build chapter awareness; they get a chapter's name, work and mission recognized among peers and throughout the community. These events are also great opportunities to recruit new chapter members.

As your chapter completes activities, let us know about it by tagging @IowaSTEP on Facebook or Instagram, or by submitting the ISTEP Outreach Events and Activities form.

Chapters aren't limited to the toolkits that are provided by the Council. Chapters are also encouraged to plan and implement their own creative, innovative events to keep their youth chapter members excited and engaged. To ensure an event runs smoothly from start to finish, it is recommended to use the 5 Step Planning Process.

5 Step Planning Process

1. Research - What, where and when.
    - What activity/event do you want to do? Will it have a theme?
    - When will it be held? Date, time, etc.
    - Where will the event be held? School, library, YMCA, etc.

- Will you need to get permission to hold the event here?

2. Plan and Prepare - Plan the details and prepare for the event.
   - What materials will you need in order to do the event?
   - Will you need to meet before the event to put materials together? If so, plan a date to do this.
   - All chapter members should be involved. What role will everyone play?
   - Do you need to practice anything before the event to ensure it goes smoothly? If so, plan a date to do this.
   - How will you announce the event? Social media, newspapers, flyers, intercom announcement, etc.
   - Who will take pictures of the event to show off your hard work?
   - Will you be missing class because of an event? If so, you will need permission from parents or teachers ahead of time.

3. Action - This is the day of the event.
   - Have materials ready to go ahead of time.
   - Hold the event. Everyone already knows their role and is ready ahead of time.
   - Clean up after the event. Leave the location looking in the same condition as you found it, if not better.
   - Determine when the next meeting will be.

4. Discussion - This happens after the event to evaluate how it went.
   - Reflect on the event. What went well and why? What could have gone better? What will you do differently next time?
   - Did you work together as a group? Did everyone feel included? If not, how can you improve this?
   - Would you do this type of event again or would you like to do something different?
   - Determine the next meeting date to plan your chapter's next event.

5. Optimize - Plan the next event.
   - Before going through the cycle of planning again by starting back with Step 1 of the process, think about what you could do to make planning the next event even better. Evaluate your strengths as a group and reflect on lessons learned in the process.

Social Media

Chapters can share pictures from their recent activities by either emailing them to the Iowa HHS ISTEP Coordinator (jill.wright@hhs.iowa.gov) to post on the ISTEP social media accounts or by tagging @IowaSTEP on Instagram and Facebook.

- Facebook: www.facebook.com/IowaSTEP
- Instagram: www.instagram.com/IowaSTEP

As a reminder, each young person needs to complete the ISTEP Chapter Youth Code of Conduct and Participation form in order for media such as pictures and/or videos to be shared publicly. It's the chapter advisor's responsibility for collecting these and keeping them on file.

My Life My Quit

My Life My Quit (MLMQ) is a free youth tobacco and nicotine cessation program made especially for teens (ages 13-17 years old). Encourage young people to get the truth about vaping, smoking and other tobacco products so they are not left in the dark when it comes to their future. When a young person decides to quit, MLMQ will give them the tools they need to do it successfully. Coaches are available by phone, by text message (text 'START' to 36072) or by online chat for five, one-on-one coaching sessions. Sessions are usually scheduled every 7-10 days. Coaching helps teens develop a quit plan, identify triggers, practice refusal skills and receive ongoing support for changing behaviors. MLMQ is 100% free, confidential and made just for teens ages 13-17. Find out more about MLMQ here.

Participants Receive:

- Free and confidential cessation support
- 5 coaching sessions by phone, live texting, or online chat
- Dedicated youth coach
- Certificate of Completion

Alternative to Suspension

My Life My Quit is an option for schools to utilize as an Alternative to Suspension. A number of schools across Iowa have already implemented a policy where students who were found to have tobacco and nicotine products, are referred to MLMQ, and work towards completing the coaching process to help avoid suspension. Reach out to Iowa HHS for additional support and technical assistance to discuss model polices, a MLMQ program overview, and any other potential trainings you may need.

Your Life Iowa

When you don't know who to turn to, Your Life Iowa is here for you 24/7. Whether its alcohol, drugs, gambling, mental health, suicidal thoughts, or something else. No judgement. Just help. Call (855)581-8111, text (855)895-8398 or live chat (yourlifeiowa.org).

988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline

At the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, we understand that life's challenges can sometimes be difficult. Our caring counselors are here for you. You aren't alone. Call or text 988, or live chat (988lifeline.org).

Resources

- All supporting documents can be found at hhs.iowa.gov/istep
- Marketing Campaigns and materials can also be found at Your Life Iowa

Recommended Training Topics for Adults

- Youth Mental Health First Aid
- Hart's Ladder of Youth Participation
- Youth-Adult Partnerships
- Authentic Youth Engagement
- Supporting youth in leadership development
- History of tobacco companies targeting youth and how they still do today

Recommended Training for Youth

- Teen Mental Health First Aid
- History of tobacco companies targeting youth and how they still do today
- Vaping: Know the Truth
    - This training is free of cost and can be done in a classroom setting or by individuals.
- Leadership development.
    - Topics may vary from public speaking, effective communication, meeting facilitation, decision making, problem solving, relationship building, healthy relationships, speaking with your peers, emotional intelligence, working as a team, etc.

Supporting Websites

- Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids, tobaccofreekids.org
- Healthiest State Initiative, iowahealthieststate.com
- Iowa Students for Tobacco Education and Prevention (ISTEP) website, hhs.iowa.gov/istep
- Iowa HHS model tobacco free and nicotine free policies
- Iowa Smokefree Air Act, hhs.iowa.gov/smokefreeair
- My Life My Quit, mylifemyquit.org
- Smoke Free Housing, hhs.iowa.gov/smokefreehomes
- The Real Cost Campaign, therealcost.betobaccofree.hhs.gov
- Truth Initiative, truthinitiative.org
- Your Life Iowa, yourlifeiowa.org
- Youth Engagement Alliance, youthengagementalliance.org
- 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, 988lifeline.org

Questions?

Contact ISTEP Youth Coordinator at jill.wright@hhs.iowa.gov or (515)321-7437.