

Developing Healthy Drug Policies

School policy is the framework that provides students with a safe context in which to grow and learn. But often policies are developed in response to or in anticipation of problems. Policies related to alcohol and other drugs, for example, tend to have a problem focus, with punishments such as suspension and expulsion as the ultimate end. Yet evidence suggests schools are less likely to have drug-related incidents—and students are less likely to suffer harms—when drug policies are integrated into an overall strategy that promotes a positive school ethos and nurtures healthy behavioural choices.

Staff and students are better off when drug-related issues are built in to a school community's conversation on human health, experience and education (just as nutrition and exercise often are). What can schools do to give drugs a more realistic place in policy formation, implementation and evaluation?

Embrace the Core Values

When building or revising school policies, the following value-based actions provide a useful guide.

See policy as a never-ending learning process: it's not about getting the perfect policy but rather engaging in on-going conversations with the people impacted by the ideas and decisions involved.

Reflect on issues with curiosity: understanding and addressing any human issue involves listening, asking questions and using evidence in a dynamic, open-minded, sincerely positive way.

Ensure everyone has a voice: taking the time to understand diversity and find common ground helps to build trust within a school community. It makes people feel safe, valued and more motivated to contribute.

Focus on education, not punishment: schools are for learning how to explore, enjoy and succeed in the world. Mistakes are opportunities to learn and to take responsibility.

Keep the real goal in sight: positive policies contribute to a positive school ethos, where expectations are clear, people feel connected, and students develop the skills and resilience needed to keep going.

Assess Your Policies

One way to start is by considering the origin and impact of all of your current policies, particularly those related to drug use and other complex-but-common human behaviours. Use an assessment tool or simply ask how your school's existing policies ...

- contribute to a safe, trusting school environment?
- encourage social rehabilitation in responding to conflict or broken relationships?
- contribute to academic success?
- help people learn from mistakes?
- encourage the development of social skills?
- take into account unique needs related to cultural differences, gender differences and various sub-populations of disadvantage?
- require engagement from students, teachers, administrators, staff, parents and other stakeholders?

- take a whole-school approach and promote multi-level interventions that address both individual and environmental factors?
- respond to individual needs?

Adopt a Comprehensive Approach

Reflecting on your current policies will provide a foundation on which to begin revising and implementing evidence-informed policies that together both promote health and wellness and protect students from developing drug-related problems, now and in the future.

Using a comprehensive school health approach (see the work of the Joint Consortium for School Health) helps ensure that the focus is broader than individual behaviour and gives attention to building a healthy school environment. After all, if the frogs in a pond started behaving strangely, our first reaction would not be to punish them or even to treat them. Instinctively, we'd wonder what was going on in the pond.

This comprehensive approach suggests that drug policy complements other elements of a healthy school including:

- positive physical and social environment
- excellence in teaching and learning
- positive intervention for students experiencing (or at risk of) problems
- school–community partnerships to support young people and their families

Use a Clear Process to Ensure Relevance and Effectiveness

Policy making involves a continuous succession of development, implementation and evaluation. The classic Deming cycle may provide a useful framework.

Keep in mind each stage requires time, commitment from leadership and the broad engagement of stakeholders. You may find our process tool helpful.



A Quick Summary of Current Evidence

Schools can have enormous influence on the way young people understand and experience the world. Next to families, they are the social institution with the greatest potential impact on children and their health. Since drug use (like sex) is part of the human experience and can both negatively and positively influence health, schools have an opportunity to help young people understand its place in society.

The relationship between drug use and educational outcomes is complex. On one hand, drug use can interfere with learning (Suhrcke & de Paz Nieves, 2011). This may be due to the impact of acute intoxication on brain functioning. That said, the social context of drug use—and how we respond to that use—may have an even greater effect than the drug itself (Lynskey & Hall, 2000). On the other hand, learning problems can lead to drug use. Students who fail to do well in school (particularly in the early years) are at significantly higher risk for developing harmful patterns of substance use (Loxley et al., 2004). In fact, poor academic performance is the most significant predictor of school drop-out which, in turn, is associated with higher

substance use (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000). It is also important to remember that, for some students, drugs help them function in the school setting (Bottorff, Johnson, Moffat, & Mulvogue, 2009).

School policies that focus on building connectedness and fostering social, emotional, and cognitive competence are strongly supported in research (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Faggiano et al., 2008; Roche et al., 2008). Strategies that focus on improving competence and connections increase student resilience (Greenberg, 2006; Kumpfer & Summerhays, 2006). School policy is a powerful tool for enhancing resilience in that it shapes one of the most important environments in children's lives and it impacts on the opportunity for students to develop the range of internal competencies required (Kumpfer & Summerhays, 2006). Students who develop strong connections with school, positive relationships with teachers or other school staff, and good social skills show less involvement with risky behaviours and are also less likely to develop mental health or substance use problems (Bond et al., 2007; Resnick et al., 1997; Tobler et al., 2000). Schools that promote a positive ethos and increased student participation experience less substance use and other risky health behaviours (Fletcher, Bonell, & Hargreaves, 2008).

However, school policies often emerge as a response to a problem or potential problem rather than in a proactive way. This problem-focused approach has led to many well-intentioned but ineffective (and even damaging) policies. For example, evidence suggests that surveillance techniques (like drug testing or searches) and punitive consequences such as suspension and expulsion are ineffective and may have unintended negative consequences (Justice Policy Institute, 2011; Norden, 2008; Roche et al., 2008; Skiba, 2004).

There are good alternatives to these punitive responses. Restorative practices (that promote social inclusion and community competence) may be more effective in dealing with classroom management and behavioural problems including drug-related infractions (Karp & Breslin, 2001) and have been demonstrated to result in enhanced learning, better relationships within the school setting and significant reductions in disruptive behavior and disciplinary actions (McCluskey et al., 2008; Mirsky, 2003; Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, 2004). Given that education theory suggests that school effectiveness is significantly influenced by community-building within the school, restorative practice can be seen as a more appropriate educational tool than punitive approaches.

A growing body of evidence suggests that effective strategies use coordinated programming and incorporate health promotion, competence enhancement, and youth development elements to reduce risk factors and enhance protective mechanisms. The most promising include multiple components to address changes in the school environment as well as person-focused interventions to build individual capacity and resilience (Bonell et al., 2010; Fletcher, Bonell, Sorhaindo, & Strange, 2009; Greenberg et al., 2003).

The conclusion from the current evidence? As Norden (2008) observes, "The critical issue that emerged ... was the importance of 'keeping them connected'."

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