

PREVENTING SUBSTANCE ABUSE

FINDING THE BALANCE BETWEEN DISCIPLINARY AND NON-DISCIPLINARY RESPONSES TO STUDENT SUBSTANCE USE AND ABUSE

POLICY ISSUES

The primary purpose of school policy regarding student use of alcohol and other drugs should be to establish a drug-free community. This is because:

- use of alcohol and other drugs violates trust, school rules, parental wishes, and the law
- use of alcohol and other drugs requires secrecy, leads to poor decision making, and poses serious health and safety issues
- knowledge of drug use and/or the presence of drugs places a burden on those who choose not to use and on those who are worried about their friends who use
- substance use by students can interfere with the social, emotional, and intellectual development of adolescents
- substance use is inconsistent with the values and purpose of an educational community dedicated to the growth and well-being of its students.

Schools can best establish a drug-free community by implementing comprehensive prevention strategies. These strategies need to focus on the following goals:

- 1) preventing initial drug experimentation
- 2) protecting and supporting students who choose not to use alcohol and/or other drugs
- 3) responding appropriately to students suspected of and/or known to be using

1) Preventing initial drug experimentation

This first goal is achieved through education and the establishment of non-use as the community norm. Such education is most effective when taught from a health perspective. Patronizing, moralistic, and threatening messages close down communication with students. Studies show that *interactive* drug education programs such as FCD's, in which students engage in discussion, role-play, and other learning activities, are significantly more effective in changing attitudes and behaviors than are programs based on lectures, films, and other passive activities. It's also important to recognize that prevention education is not a one-time inoculation. It must be long-term, ongoing, and responsive to the changing cognitive, emotional, and social worlds of the growing child. And finally, children and adolescents are most likely to make responsible choices and refrain from alcohol and other drug use when they are:

- presented with accurate information
- nurtured, respected, and listened to
- given clear, consistent expectations, and consequences for behavior
- exposed to positive role models, and
- rewarded for choosing to live drug-free.

2) Protecting and supporting students who choose not to use alcohol and/or other drugs

FCD's "Rights of Passage"

All students have the right to attend school without being harmed, harassed, or compromised by the drinking and/or drug-taking behavior of their peers.

All students have the right to a school climate in which the choice to not use alcohol and other drugs is supported and celebrated.

All students have the right to receive up-to-date information about the issues and dangers surrounding alcohol and other drug use.

It is more important than ever that school administrators develop comprehensive prevention and intervention strategies, not only to deal with substance abuse, but to *support students who opt for drug-free lifestyles*. Achieving this goal requires a community-wide commitment to non-use. Such a commitment is critical because research shows that *normative beliefs* (perceptions about the prevalence and acceptability of drug use among one's peer group and close friends), are the strongest predictors of adolescent drug use among many variables considered. Studies repeatedly show that teens think alcohol and other drug use among their peers and elders is more prevalent than it really is (and parents, teachers, and school heads consistently believe it to be *less* prevalent than it really is!). The overestimation of drug use leads to increased rates of experimentation. When non-use is recognized and respected as the school norm, drug use drops. And, to the extent that first use of alcohol or other drug use can be delayed, the chances that a child will become a substance abuse later in life decrease significantly.

Many strategies work together to create a community in which non-use is seen as a "cool," acceptable, and honorable choice. Schools can best develop an overall prevention plan that reinforces the non-use of alcohol and other drugs by:

- encouraging adults who don't use to reveal and celebrate their choice
- implementing comprehensive drug prevention and education programs
- supporting groups such as S.A.L.S.A. (Student Advocating Life without Substance Abuse)
- addressing some of the contributory factors to alcohol and other drug use (e.g., anxiety, isolation, depression, poor social and refusal skills) through health services, counseling, and course offerings
- organizing "alcohol-free" parties and "alternative high" nights
- considering non-use contracts for athletes and others who represent the school
- having coaches talk to athletes about their influence as role models
- focusing on drug use as a health issue, rather than one of morality or character
- establish "confidentiality groups" in which students can discuss their use and/or non-use
- providing a means by which students in trouble who take the initiative to help themselves and/or their friends can do so without incurring disciplinary penalties
- reinforcing non-use by adhering to penalties and disciplinary measures laid out for infractions
- training teachers, advisors, and dorm prefects to reinforce non-use as a healthy norm, and to recognize the subtle ways in which drinking is condoned or "winked at"
- creating a structure by which all students can find adult mentors and advisors with whom they can develop close and continuing relationships

- maintaining an active student assistance group that actually intervenes when it suspects or identifies a problem
- mobilizing non-using students as a powerful and untapped prevention force
- encouraging students to make explicit commitments to not use alcohol or other drugs at this point in their lives
- letting drug-free kids show new students around
- making sure that all students understand and agree to abide by the school's drug policies
- verbalizing the school's respect and gratitude for students who choose not to use.

3) Responding appropriately to students suspected of and/or known to be using

This third goal is best achieved via timely intervention that holds students accountable for their behavior. This approach usually involves:

- clear, consistent rules and expectations that apply to alcohol and other drug use
- a non-disciplinary "health services" intervention process that offers early support to students in trouble
- a firm disciplinary response that may be engaged along with the non-disciplinary intervention, or held in reserve for situations that are more severe and/or repetitive.

NON-DISCIPLINARY RESPONSE

The fear of getting a student "in trouble" often inhibits students and faculty from expressing concerns about potential student drug use. The non-disciplinary approach encourages early intervention. When balanced with a clear, consistent, and strong disciplinary response, early intervention procedures that are separate from the disciplinary system – but not immune from consequences – are of great benefit to the student and the school. Intake into the intervention system occurs when a troubled student comes directly for help, or when classmates, faculty, and/or parents register a concern about a particular student's well-being. All community members need to be informed of the process so that they will know to whom to go with their concerns, and what to expect.

Once a concern is voiced, a "health team," ideally composed of trained faculty and health care professionals, looks into the situation. Members of the team then decide how they wish to proceed. Options include tabling the issue until more evidence surfaces, speaking directly with the student, counseling, support groups, drug testing, evaluations, and/or leaves of absence if needed to successfully address substance abuse or other health-related problems.

Students who resist the non-disciplinary process must be held accountable by the school. In such a situation, or when parents are resistant, the school can require a professional evaluation with recommendations released to the school. Refusal to participate in an evaluation may require a leave of absence or withdrawal from the school. Although the approach is non-disciplinary, there is a bottom line for the sake of the student's health, and the well-being of the school community.

DISCIPLINARY RESPONSE

An appropriate disciplinary response to first use of alcohol or other drugs (tobacco policy might not be included here), is to combine a consequence (e.g., probation, suspension) with accountability (e.g., amends to the community, a substance abuse evaluation). Such an evaluation requires the student and parents to meet with an off-campus abuse professional to

assess the student's drug use, and to offer recommendations for treatment, counseling, and/or support. Typically, the evaluator would keep confidential any information about the family that is not relevant to the student's school situation. Once the recommendations are made, the school and parents will need to determine whether the school can fulfill them, or whether outside support will be required.

The evaluation after the first incident allows the school to weight the extent and seriousness of problem, the student's cooperation and commitment to obeying the rules, and the degree to which the school can expect the student to refrain from substance use in the future. If the student does use again, the school can choose to dismiss him or her, or allow a leave of absence to address what might be a more serious problem than was originally evident. Again, the procedures and options should be spelled out and known to all members of the school community.

Students benefit from a strong disciplinary response. It shows them that substance abuse is considered a serious enough health risk and threat to the school community to trigger immediate consequences, greater scrutiny, and loss of freedom. When the student demonstrates the ability and willingness to change his or her behavior, refrain from use, accept greater responsibility, and make healthy decisions, drug testing and counseling can be relaxed. And, a consistent, strict disciplinary response makes the *non-disciplinary* response more attractive.

THE GREATER COMMUNITY

These two approaches to intervention overlap and support each other. They foster the norm of non-use, send a message that the school cares about the well-being of every member of the community, and offer avenues for students in need to get help. The balance of these two "tracks" encourages students to obey school rules and the law (via the disciplinary response), and to take care of themselves and others (via the non-disciplinary response). By the thoughtful interplay of these two approaches, schools have many options available for balancing the needs of individual students with the needs of the community. The right mix can only be determined by a thoughtful and extensive assessment of the school's values, structure, purpose, and constituency.