

# National Center Brief

## Key Strategies for Violence and Substance Abuse Prevention II: Working with the Classroom and the School Environment

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The school's contribution to solving the problems of substance abuse and violence among youth lie in comprehensive approaches. Schools must implement substance abuse and violence prevention programs in the classroom. They also need to create a positive school climate by building the school's capacity to manage itself and plan for change in a democratic and collaborative fashion; create and enforce prevention policies; communicate norms inconsistent with violence, disruptive behavior, and substance abuse; and enhance classroom climate through improved instructional and management approaches. This discussion explores these strategies.

Note: The numbering of the key strategies described in this prevention brief continues the numbering used in [Key Strategies for Violence and Substance Abuse Prevention I: Working with Children and Families](#).

### Key Strategy 4: School-Community Collaboration in Program Design and Delivery

Schools in which the administration and faculty communicate well and work together with parents, students, and community members to plan for change and solve problems have higher teacher morale and less student disorder. (Gottfredson, 1997) Practices that help schools build their capacity to foster and sustain innovation involve teams of staff, parents, students, and community members in planning and carrying out activities to improve the school. In programs that apply this type of strategy, school-based teams “diagnose school problems, formulate school goals and objectives, design potential solutions, monitor progress, and evaluate the efforts” (Gottfredson, 1997). These teams are especially crucial in carrying out school-based strategies or programs designed to affect the surrounding community or larger environment discussed in Key Strategies for Violence and Substance Abuse Prevention III: Working with the Community.

Several key factors are essential for changing policies and practices to promote health (Vince Whitman, 1995; Quinn, Osher, Hoffman, and Hanley, 1998).

Schools must do the following:

- Possess a clear vision for promoting health, well-being, and social competence among young people. A vision or goal of how schools and their communities can improve student wellbeing, social competence, and attachment to school can be an important factor in galvanizing interest and motivation.
- Use devoted program champions or leaders to guide planning and delivery efforts. It is essential to designate an individual or small group, with primary responsibility for creating and coordinating the program. Top-level administrators must also support and allocate resources for the program.
- Base prevention programming on an assessment of local and institutional needs and resources. This should include an assessment of the levels of substance abuse and violence in the school and community as well as the presence and effectiveness of current school-based and community-based practices and programs designed to reduce substance abuse, violence, and other risk behaviors among youth.
- Apply current information on effective prevention programming.
- Create a critical mass of people who support program efforts. This can be done through public meetings and parent outreach, enlisting the support of community groups, and using the media to generate support for programs.
- Provide ongoing professional development for school faculty and staff, and training for parents, students, and other community members as needed.
- Adapt program strategies to local concerns and involve parents, students, and community members in program delivery.
- Obtain administrative support early to leverage needed resources. Top-level administrative support is critical because the implementation of any new program requires an institutional commitment of staff and financial resources. Administrators can help define roles, responsibilities, and communication channels, as well as convey program progress and success to other key stakeholders in the school district and surrounding community.
- Mesh political, economic, and social trends at the national, state, and local levels with local and institutional needs. Pay attention to the major trends and policies in child and adolescent health, substance abuse and violence prevention, educational reform, as well as state and Federal funding for schools. Think about how these trends can be translated into local programs.
- Start slowly with realistic expectations about what can be accomplished. Multi-strategy prevention programming takes time to implement, institutionalize, and produce results.
- Schools need to set realistic short-term objectives.

## Key Strategy 5: Clear School Policies to Deter Substance Abuse and Violent Behavior

School policy changes to promote a safe environment and prevent violence and substance abuse make a difference. These policy changes are usually formal and could include tobacco-free, drug-free, and gun-free zones; random locker inspections; identification cards or limited access for unauthorized personnel; and increased supervision around the campus. Other policies should focus on behaviors that lead to substance abuse and violence. These include clearly articulated expectations around behaviors like using violent language and making threats, or broader expectations about how individuals treat one another.

Policy change is most effective when schools do the following (Hawkins, Catalano, and Associates, 1992):

- Provide a rationale for the policy that clearly describes what the school hopes to achieve by implementing the policy.
- Include a clear, positive statement about student and staff behavior.
- Include provisions for prevention, intervention, and rehabilitation or treatment.
- Coordinate school policies with community policies regarding substance abuse and violence.
- Include clear consequences for infractions and compliance.
- Include rewards and recognition for those who behave appropriately.
- Communicate policy information to students, faculty, parents, and the community. Students and parents should receive written information that clearly outlines their rights and responsibilities.
- Explain the rationale for the policy to faculty and staff.
- Train faculty and staff to implement the policy.

## Key Strategy 6: Enforcement of School Policies with Clear Reward Structures and Unambiguous Sanctions

How policies are administered and enforced can be as important as the content of the policies themselves. Schools governed by clear rules and reward structures experience less disorder. Such schools are likely to signal appropriate behavior for students (Corcoran, 1985; Gottfredson, 1987; Gottfredson and Gottfredson, 1985; Gottfredson, Gottfredson, and Hybl, 1993). Most schools already have policies about substance abuse, violent behavior, weapons, and harassment. Therefore, consistent enforcement, rather than policy creation, is the priority. There is little evidence to suggest that suspension and expulsion for aggressive behavior prevents school violence (Bumbarger and Brooks, 1999).

There are times when students must be removed from school to ensure the safety of other students and staff. Many schools are using alternative school settings for educating violent and weapon-carrying students or students expelled for substance abuse on school grounds or at school events. The rationale for this approach is that students who are not at school face greater risks than those who are at school.

Out of school and unsupervised, they are missing some of the supports needed to bolster their resilience to substance abuse or violent behavior.

Raywid (1994) describes three types of alternative schools:

- Last-chance schools, which provide short-term as well as long-term placements for chronically disruptive students. These schools focus on behavior modification with little attention to skill building. Students are either returned to their regular school or allowed to "fail out."
- Schools with a remedial focus, which offer short-term remediation in school subjects, social skills, or both and then return the student to a mainstream classroom.
- True alternative schools that focus on altering school structure and classroom management to better engage students in learning.

True Alternative schools are less costly and produce more pronounced and longer lasting successes than last-chance schools and remedial-focus schools (Raywid, 1994; Quinn, Osher, Hoffman, and Hanley, 1998).

Enforcement need not always be synonymous with punishment. Enforcement is about making sure that certain policies are implemented and also might include rewards for those who abide by policies or behave in an exemplary way. Enforcement can mean that school personnel and students convey messages that behaviors such as name calling, substance abuse, fighting, and carrying weapons are wrong and will not be tolerated.

In general, effective enforcement should do the following (Drug Strategies, 1988; Hawkins, Catalano, and Associates, 1992; Gottfredson, 1997):

- Promote and consistently enforce specific rules or policies, including those regarding discipline, smoking, alcohol, weapons, and harassment.
- Be paired with communication strategies that emphasize changing certain norms or beliefs that support substance abuse, violence, disruptive behavior, weapons, and harassment in school. Schools can challenge beliefs that support substance abuse and violence.
- Include rewards and recognition for those who behave appropriately.

## **Key Strategy 7: Schoolwide Communication Campaigns to Influence School Norms about Substance Abuse and Violence**

Schoolwide programs that set, communicate, and reinforce norms and provide clear, consistent messages that the abuse of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs and violence are harmful and unacceptable reduce alcohol and marijuana abuse as well as delinquency (Olweus, 1981; Olweus, 1992; Gottfredson, Gottfredson, and Hybl, 1993). Schools can communicate prevention messages to students, parents, and other community members through newsletters, posters, educational campaigns, and ceremonies. Schools engaging in a social norms communication campaign should:

- Conduct an assessment to increase awareness and knowledge about a specific problem or audience. Educational or media campaigns should be tailored to the particular beliefs and attitudes of the audience.
- Form a committee or task group to coordinate campaign activities. Members should have clearly defined roles and responsibilities.
- Involve parents, teachers, and students. Their involvement is critical to planning and delivering a program. Critical aspects of campaigns include increasing communication with parents about school policies and campaign activities, offering teachers opportunities to reinforce or build knowledge and skills related to conveying important messages associated with a given campaign, and inviting students to develop and discuss these messages.
- Clarify, implement, and enforce norms against substance abuse, violence, and carrying weapons. One effective communication strategy is to correct student beliefs about the prevalence of substance abuse, violence, and the carrying of weapons among their peers. Students are more likely to engage in a particular behavior if they believe that their peers are engaging in this behavior (Battistich, Schaps, Watson, and Solomon, 1996). Students may be surprised to learn that most of their peers don't smoke marijuana, drink alcohol, carry weapons, or smoke cigarettes.

## Key Strategy 8: Classroom Restructuring for More Engaging and Interactive Education Environments

Classroom-management techniques and instructional methods designed to increase student engagement in the learning process promote academic performance and bonding to schools. Some classroom-management strategies also appear to reduce the risk factors and promote the protective factors associated with substance abuse and violence (Battistich, Schaps, Watson, and Solomon, 1996). Schools that want to create more engaging and interactive classrooms should do the following:

- Maximize the time students spend on learning with, for example, classroom control and transition methods that maintain a positive classroom environment and reduce the time spent on managing and disciplining students.
- Incorporate and provide opportunities for teamwork in lessons, including activities that teach social skills such as listening, helping, and empathizing; that emphasize cooperation in student teams to master material; and that provide incentives for effective teamwork.
- Monitor the progress of each student or group of students and advance the student or students to the next level once they have mastered the required material.
- Regroup students to achieve smaller, less alienating within the school (Felner, Ginter, and Primavera, 1982). Schools can reorganize classes or grades to create smaller units, different mixes of students, and greater instructional flexibility. They can also change the school schedule, adopt a school-within-school arrangement, create grade-level "houses" or "teams," and decrease class size.

## Conclusion

These strategies are more likely to be effective when combined with strategies that work directly with children and families and try to create and maintain a community environment to complement and reinforce the changes in the school. More information on these additional strategies can be found in the following National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention publications:

- [Key Strategies for Violence and Substance Abuse Prevention I: Working with Children and Families](#)
- [Key Strategies for Violence and Substance Abuse Prevention III: Working with the Community](#)

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