Module Summary

In this module, teachers will:

- Identify ways in which schools have traditionally approached the issue of student drug and alcohol use.
- Explain the historical origins of these approaches, and their connection to federal drug policy.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of these approaches, and their impact on students and school communities.
- Identify and explore alternatives.

Key Takeaways

**Essential knowledge:** Schools have historically approached the problem of youth substance use as a discipline issue rather than a public health issue. This approach was formally codified in “zero-tolerance” policies that mandate specific punishments (typically suspension and expulsion) for substance use violations at school (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003; American Psychological Association, 2008; Teske, 2011). There is little evidence that zero-tolerance policies have a deterrent effect on any forms of misbehavior – including substance use (APA, 2008; Sacks et al., 2014). Punitive discipline does not address – and in some cases, may exacerbate – some of the known causes and risk factors for youth substance use. These include: trauma, mental health problems, social isolation, alienation from school, and environmental stress (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003; Anthony et al., 2016; Charles et al., 2015; Conway et al., 2016; Dube et al., 2003).

**Essential skill:** Substance abuse prevention programs can be effective, provided that they meet the following criteria (Anthony et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2016):

- Provide accurate, scientific information about the effect of different substances on the body.
- Focus on helping students develop social interaction and decision-making skills.
- Provide opportunities for students to talk, interact, question, and make sense of information.
- Invite students to share their own experiences.
- Are part of a whole-school approach that encourages positive relationships and connection among students, teachers, and staff.

In addition, there are non-punitive approaches that can provide support and assistance to young people struggling with substance use or other risky (or self-injurious) behaviors. These include:

- Student assistance programs: school-based teams that identify and provide services for young people experiencing problems with drug or alcohol use, mental health disorders, or socialization issues (Biddle et al., 2014; Loneck et al., 2010; Torres-Rodriguez et al., 2010).
- Restorative justice programs: approaches to discipline that are focused on helping students understand the impact of their actions and repair the harm they’ve caused (Ashley & Burke, 2009; Payne & Welch, 2015; Skager, 2013). Students are given responsibility for problem-solving and finding ways to make amends or restitution rather than passively accepting a punishment (Payne & Welch, 2015).

**Essential mindset:** Youth substance abuse is a complex problem that defies simple solutions. However, one thing that we know doesn’t work is punishing and criminalizing vulnerable young people who, more than anything, need help and guidance from caring adults. In order to productively address the problem of youth drug and alcohol use, a key shift that is needed is moving from the mindset of punishing and excluding students to identifying interventions that will provide them the support they need.

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1 See the module resource for more information, as well as a linked module entitled Restorative Justice: Rethinking Discipline.
2 This includes health, mental health, and relational support.
### The Skill in Action

See the resource entitled *Rethinking Zero-Tolerance: Opening a Dialogue* for tips and suggestions on examining the issue of student discipline with your school team. The resource also contains guidance on selecting (or developing) effective drug and alcohol prevention programs.

### Questions for Discussion

*The following is a list of suggested questions for engaging in a reflective dialogue with the teacher, either before or after he or she attempts to implement the skill.*

See the resource entitled *Rethinking Zero-Tolerance: Opening a Dialogue* for discussion questions that can be used to engage teachers (and other school staff) on the issue of punitive student discipline.

### Standards

**InTASC: 3(n)** The teacher is committed to working with learners, colleagues, families, and communities to establish positive and supportive learning environments.