Drug Use in Schools: A New Look at an Old Problem
Resource Bundle

I. Rethinking Zero-Tolerance: Opening a Dialogue – Resource

II. References
This document is meant to serve as a guide for starting a dialogue about how your school community responds to youth substance\textsuperscript{1} use. It is rooted in two core beliefs:

1. The goal of a school’s substance use policy should be to promote the highest levels of safety and quality of life for all students.
2. School or district-level substance use policies should be grounded in research and data.

\textbf{Who should be invited to participate?}

All stakeholders:
- Teachers, administrators, students, and parents
- Other school staff: psychologists, social workers, school nurses, and security officers
- Professionals from outside the school: district personnel, local law enforcement, and medical professionals

\textbf{How should the dialogue be structured or set up?}

Keep the following considerations in mind:
- The dialogue can be initiated by any of the stakeholder groups listed above, but building administrators should be looped in (and invited to participate) as soon as possible.
- Critically evaluating existing practices and identifying possible alternatives will almost certainly require multiple conversations that take place over a period of time.
- It may be wise to begin this dialogue with a “task force” made up of representatives from the various stakeholder groups listed above. This group can then present its findings and recommendations to the larger school community.
- The group should establish norms to ensure that all perspectives are heard and considered.
- Each meeting or discussion should end with the identification of next steps\textsuperscript{2}.

\textbf{BEGINNING THE DIALOGUE}

\textbf{PART I: Examining Existing Policies}

\textbf{Questions for investigation:}
- What are we seeing at our school? What does school-level data say about the prevalence of student substance use?
- How does our school respond to students who use or possess banned substances?
- Do we tend to treat student substance use as a discipline issue or a health issue?
- What is the rationale for these policies? What are they intended to accomplish?
- What research are they based upon?
- What evidence from research supports the benefits or harms of our existing policies toward student substance use?
- If our school uses punitive discipline, what effect is it having?
- If these policies were to change, who would have to approve the change?
- Does our school have a process for identifying students who may have a substance use disorder\textsuperscript{3}?
- To what extent are we able to connect these students with specialized services (e.g. counseling, treatment)?

\textsuperscript{1} “Substance” here refers to any and all substances that are banned in school (e.g. alcohol, tobacco, illicit drugs, etc.).
\textsuperscript{2} For example: In preparation for the next meeting, each member of the task force agrees to review a particular piece of research, or come to the next meeting with some form of data (e.g. student surveys, information on student suspensions vs. academic performance, etc.)
\textsuperscript{3} If not, the creation of a student assistance program can be an extremely helpful intervention.
### PART II: Prioritizing Prevention

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<tr>
<th>Characteristics of Effective Prevention Programs</th>
<th>Characteristics of Ineffective Prevention Programs</th>
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<tr>
<td>Provides accurate, scientific information about the effect of different substances on the body.</td>
<td>Uses exaggeration and scare tactics.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focuses on helping students develop social interaction and decision-making skills.</td>
<td>Focuses on abstinence only, and just saying “no.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Provides opportunities for students to talk, interact, question, and make sense of information.</td>
<td>Delivers information in a didactic or lecture-oriented way.</td>
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<td>Invites students to share their own experiences.</td>
<td>Uses graphic images or unrealistic scenarios.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Part of a whole-school approach that encourages positive relationships and connection.</td>
<td>Part of a whole-school approach that focuses on punishment and deterrence.</td>
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(Anthony, Jenson, & Howard, 2016; Lee et al., 2016)

### PART III: Finding Alternatives to Punishment

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Suggestions</th>
<th>Resources</th>
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<td>Implement <strong>restorative justice</strong>: an alternative to punitive discipline focused on helping students understand the impact of their actions and repair the harm they caused (Ashley &amp; Burke, 2009; Skager, 2013).</td>
<td><strong>Implementing Restorative Justice: A Guide for Schools</strong>, created by the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority. Teaching Tolerance’s <strong>Toolkit for Restoring Justice</strong>. <strong>Safer, Saner Schools: Whole-School Change Through Restorative Practices</strong>.</td>
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<td>Implement <strong>student assistance programs</strong> (SAPs): school-based programs whose purpose is to identify and provide services for students experiencing personal problems that may include – but are not limited to – substance use (Loneck et al., 2010).</td>
<td><strong>California SAP Resource Center</strong>: Provides resources for setting up a SAP program and models for how it might be organized. <strong>Getting Started With Student Assistance Programs</strong>, created by Prevention First. <strong>Identifying Mental Health and Substance Use Problems of Children and Adolescents</strong>, published by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).</td>
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<td>Create <strong>peer support</strong> and counseling groups, in which students are trained to help peers navigate personal problems and mediate conflicts (Skager, 2013).</td>
<td><strong>Teen Addiction Anonymous</strong>. <strong>A Quick Guide to Implementing a Peer Mediation Program</strong>.</td>
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### PART IV: Moving Forward

- Share findings with the wider school community, including the people (or groups) that have the power to approve any changes in policy⁴.
- Provide training to staff on any new strategies or policy changes.
- Engage in an inquiry cycle⁵ to gather data on the impact of these changes and make adjustments as needed.

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⁴ In some places, this might be the building administrator. In others, it might be the district superintendent, the school board, or administrators with the state board of education. It is recommended that you first ask these people/groups permission to begin the dialogue, then invite them to participate.

⁵ For additional guidance on initiating an inquiry process, check out the module entitled *Teacher Inquiry*. 

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References


