

# School-Based Prevention



## Policy Brief

March 2006

### Federal Commitment to School-Based Drug Prevention Diminishing

#### Overview

School-based substance abuse prevention programs have long been a staple and key component of a comprehensive national prevention system. Unfortunately, federal support for these programs is diminishing. Despite evidence that links school-based substance abuse prevention programs to lower rates of drug use, the Bush administration's national drug control strategy seeks to end federal support for these programs.

#### Prevention Stronghold

Schools are a logical venue for prevention programs. As epidemiologic evidence suggests, the age of onset for substance abuse is in early adolescence and peers are a primary influence of adolescent behavior. Schools reach many adolescents in a single location while providing a controlled environment for delivering prevention curricula.

While researchers are quick to point out that school-based prevention is not a "silver bullet" against substance abuse, most agree that it is a critical part of a comprehensive approach employing a range of strategies across multiple sectors of a community.

The important role of schools in delivering prevention programming is supported by recent findings from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) National Survey on Drug Use and Health. The survey indicates that 78.2 percent of youths enrolled in school in 2004 reported that they had seen or heard drug or alcohol prevention

messages at school in the prior year.

According to the survey, indicators of alcohol, cigarette, and illicit drug use were uniformly lower for youths exposed to school-based substance abuse prevention messages than for those not reporting such exposure.

- Past month use of marijuana was 7.1 percent by youths reporting exposure to prevention messages at school compared to 10.6 percent by those not reporting such exposure.
- Only 12.2 percent of youths reported in 2004 that they had participated in prevention programs outside of school in the past year. This highlights the importance of school-based programming in reaching adolescents.

#### Effective Strategies

Thanks to federal agencies like the National Institute on Drug Abuse and SAMHSA, much progress has been made over the past three decades in developing effective prevention strategies. However, funding for the research to evaluate these strategies is limited, so progress has been slow.

Sophisticated prevention research takes years to complete since the outcomes of interest—actual use behaviors—usually occur one to five years after exposure to prevention programming.

Since the mid-1990's, a heavy emphasis has been placed on funding "evidence-based practices" by funding sources at all levels of government. In fact, a significant

#### Quick Facts

- Illicit drug use among children with access to school-based prevention programs was reported by 7.1 percent of youths compared with 10.6 percent for youths reporting no such access.
- In 2004, 78 percent of youths enrolled in school reported they had seen or heard drug or alcohol prevention messages at school in the past year.
- One recent study found that in 1999, 47.5 percent of 1,593 randomly selected schools were delivering an evidence-based prevention program.
- Youth drug use declined somewhat between 2002 and 2004, but was unchanged between 2003 and 2004
- From FY 2001 to FY 2007, federal funding for prevention declines by 21 percent; by comparison, supply reduction increases by 66.1 percent.

Sources: 2004 National Survey on Drug Use and Health; Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America; and National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices; and Carnevale Associates, FY 2007 Drug Budget Policy Brief.

# School-Based Drug Abuse Prevention Programs

percentage of the prevention model programs developed with assistance from SAMHSA were developed and evaluated in school settings. The good news is that this emphasis is having a great impact on prevention programming in schools. For example, in their 2005 paper, Rohrbach, et al found that in 1999, 47.5 percent of 1,593 randomly selected schools were delivering an evidence-based prevention program.

## Declining Federal Support

Solid, evidence-based programming is now more available than ever before for use in school settings, and signs of success have been well documented. Nevertheless, federal support for school-based prevention programming is being withdrawn. The administration's FY 2006 budget as well as the FY 2007 budget call for the elimination of the state grants portion of the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Program (the SDFSC program).

According to the Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America, close to 37 million youths are served annually by the SDFSC program and the states grant portion provides the prevention infrastructure for 97 percent of U.S. Schools. The U.S. Department of Education claims that the state grants "are spread too thinly to support quality interventions." Unfortunately, this analysis does not take into account that school-based prevention is viewed by experts as the backbone of a comprehensive community prevention effort, especially since no other programming reaches youth and their peers in such a controlled setting. Further, this analysis does not consider the documented role

that substance abuse prevention plays in enhancing readiness to learn and academic achievement.

## Prevention Cuts in Context

The SDFSC program is not the only demand reduction strategy on the administration's chopping block in its FY 2007 budget request. The demand reduction portion of the Drug Enforcement Administration's budget has been zeroed out, along with the National Alliance for Model State Drug Laws Program. The Center for Substance Abuse Prevention's Programs of Regional and National Significance has been cut from \$193 million to \$181 million.

The real question is whether prevention cuts reflect a policy decision by the administration to reduce the federal government's role in supporting substance abuse prevention programming. A review of the drug control budget since 2001, the year the administration uses to track its performance in achieving its targets for reducing substance abuse, suggests that the cuts are policy driven. According to federal budget data:

- Federal funding for substance abuse prevention programs declined by 21 percent over the FY 2001 to FY 2007 period.
- By comparison, funding for supply reduction programs increased by 66.1 percent. Within this broad spending area, funds for international programs grew by 137 percent and interdiction programs grew by 64 percent.

Cutting prevention while substantially increasing funds for supply reduction—particularly those programs targeting the border and

beyond—indicates that the administration views overseas programs as the best way to reduce substance abuse among our nation's youths.

## Future of Prevention

Over the past 30 years, a substantial body of data and literature on the epidemiological, etiology, and prevention of substance abuse has given us a better understanding of the factors that either enhance or diminish the incidence, prevalence, and consequences of substance abuse problems. Many well-evaluated programs are now available for dissemination.

Researchers and practitioners have a greater understanding of how prevention strategies work, for whom they work, and how they work together in the community to create positive behavioral change. Institutional supports such as SAMHSA's Strategic Prevention Framework are enabling states and communities to build the necessary infrastructure to think strategically and implement programs based on epidemiological data.

It is curious that the federal government is effectively abandoning prevention just as science is demonstrating positive outcomes. Prevention must be a permanent component of school-based programming, especially to protect new generations from making unhealthy choices. Research shows that substance abuse prevention programs are effective in reducing the likelihood that young people will start using drugs. This fact alone makes it clear that prevention must remain center stage in our nation's drug abuse control policy.



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