



Narrative-Based Substance Use Education in Schools

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Traditional school-based prevention education is often unengaging and leaves gaps across grade levels, demanding a more continuous and effective approach. This brief examines how this challenge can be addressed through the implementation of policy focused on incorporating narrative-based substance use education modules into school curricula.

II. OVERVIEW

Adolescent substance use in the United States remains a widespread issue that continues to negatively impact students' mental and physical health, decision-making, and future well-being. This is often perpetuated by ineffective education approaches and stigma around seeking help. While many schools provide some form of substance use education, it typically follows more of a passive, lecture-based approach. This can reduce engagement and minimize impact on behavior. There continues to be a gap in impactful, engaging, and accessible substance use education that helps students understand real-life risks and consequences. Hence, this paper investigates how narrative-based educational modules can improve prevention, better support adolescents in making informed decisions, and decrease stigma associated with seeking help.

A. Relevance

The prevalence of substance use among adolescents continues to be a significant issue. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) notes that 31.6% of high school students reported current use of alcohol, marijuana, or tobacco products. Many existing school-based prevention efforts rely on passive, more traditional lecture-based instruction, a style of teaching that may not meaningfully impact prevention behaviors (Ennett et al., 1994) or reduce stigma. Research from the National Institute on Drug Abuse emphasizes that effective prevention should be interactive and focused on real-life decision-making. This illustrates a gap in current approaches and suggests that while students may receive some level of substance use education, they often lack the engagement, emotional connection, and knowledge of support resources necessary to make safer decisions and engage in preventative behaviors.

III. HISTORY

A. Current Stances

The issue of adolescent substance use has remained a long-standing concern and has driven decades of education and prevention efforts. However, historically, school-based approaches have often focused on messages emphasizing complete avoidance of substance use, such as “say

no to drugs” and on emphasizing the dangers of drug and alcohol use. They have also been delivered using more traditional teaching methods. These approaches often didn’t engage students or address the underlying factors influencing their decision-making. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a significant proportion of high school students continue to report substance use, suggesting that existing strategies are not as effective as intended.

In recent years, there have been shifts in prevention efforts toward more interactive approaches that emphasize real-world application. However, these programs are not implemented consistently across school districts and may require additional training or resources, limiting their scalability. Research from the National Institute on Drug Abuse highlights that effective prevention must be engaging, and focus on practical decision-making skills, yet many current curricula still rely heavily on passive information delivery.

Additionally, stigma surrounding substance use remains a significant barrier to prevention and intervention. While students may understand risks related to drug and alcohol use, they may resist seeking help due to fear of judgement. Additionally, they may lack awareness of the resources available and how to access them. While some programs have begun incorporating personal stories, these approaches are not standard or required across schools. As a result, there remains a gap between existing educational practices and the need for more engaging, relatable programs that increase awareness of resources and effectively support prevention

efforts to address ongoing adolescent substance use.

IV. POLICY PROBLEM

A. Stakeholders

It is given that the primary stakeholders are students themselves, especially those who are more vulnerable to substance use risks, such as due to their environment. These gaps in the quality and effectiveness of substance use prevention programs can limit students’ abilities to make informed decisions, increasing the stigma surrounding substance use and reducing awareness of available support resources. As a result, many students may struggle to realize the real-life consequences of substance use or feel uncomfortable reaching out for help. Ideally, these students should have access to engaging and relatable educational programs that better support prevention.

Schools and educators are also stakeholders as they are responsible for implementing these educational programs and supporting their students. Furthermore, schools have a direct stake in effective prevention, as successful programs can lead to better academic success among students while poor methods could negatively impact student performances and learning outcomes. However, many current substance use programs rely heavily on lecture-based instruction, which may reduce student engagement and the program’s overall effectiveness. Therefore, it is important for schools to implement more relatable and narrative-based approaches that encourage connection, attention, and prevention.

B. Risks of Indifference

The risk of indifference to adolescent substance use education lies in the continuation of ineffective prevention efforts and the resulting harm to students' health, future, and decision-making. If stakeholders continue to neglect the problem at hand, it is likely that rates of substance use and stigma surrounding seeking help will persist. Students may continue to lack awareness about available resources and may feel discouraged to seek help out of a fear of judgement. Furthermore, inaction could contribute to worsening mental and physical health outcomes among adolescents, and consequently affect their social lives and families. Indifference, apart from these broader societal consequences, can also limit students' ability to make informed decisions and engage in preventative behaviors. Therefore, action is a significantly better answer than inaction.

C. Nonpartisan Reasoning

Because adolescent substance use does not only affect individual students, but rather schools, families, and communities themselves, it is imperative that nonpartisan intervention takes place. The benefits of such intervention include but are not limited to the following:

- 1) **Improvement in prevention and decision-making:** More engaging and narrative-based substance use education can better prepare students to make informed decisions about drugs and alcohol. By helping students understand real-life consequences and situations, these programs can encourage preventive behaviors and reduce risky

decision-making. In fact, empirical research shows that storytelling-based curricula significantly reduce an adolescent's overall vulnerability to substance use (Moghadam et al., 2016). Therefore, enhancing prevention education benefits not only the students individually but also society as a whole.

- 2) **Reduction of stigma and increased willingness to seek help:** Narrative-based approaches can assist students in developing empathy and understanding for individuals dealing with substance use issues. As a result, students may feel more comfortable seeking support for themselves or for others without the fear of judgment. By increasing awareness of available resources and reducing stigma, we can strengthen support systems within schools and communities.
- 3) **Improvement in student and community well-being:** Research shows that substance use among adolescents can have detrimental effects on mental health, academic performance, relationships, and overall well-being. By offering more effective prevention education and raising awareness of available support resources, schools and communities can create healthier environments that promote long-term success for students.

V. TRIED POLICY

To begin with, a widely implemented policy in the United States aimed at preventing adolescent substance use was the Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.) program, introduced in 1983. This program focused on educating

students about the dangers of drugs and alcohol through school-based lessons led by police officers. At its peak, D.A.R.E. was implemented in a majority of school districts across the country and became one of the most recognizable school-based prevention programs in the United States (Ennett et al., 1994).

However, the policy received significant criticism regarding its effectiveness. Multiple studies conducted by organizations such as the National Institute of Justice and the American Journal of Public Health found that D.A.R.E. had little to no long-term impact on reducing adolescent substance use (Ennett et al., 1994). Researchers argued that the program relied too heavily on passive, lecture-based instruction and fear-based messaging rather than interactive and relatable approaches that better engage students and support practical decision-making. As a result, while D.A.R.E. increased awareness surrounding substance use, it struggled to achieve its intended long-term prevention goals and highlighted the need for more engaging and emotionally impactful prevention strategies.

VI. POLICY OPTIONS

Narrative-based substance use education modules

Many current substance use education programs rely heavily on passive, lecture-based instruction, which can reduce student engagement and limit long-term effectiveness. Students may struggle to emotionally connect with statistics and generalized warnings, making it more difficult for them to understand the real-life consequences of substance use.

To overcome this, schools can implement short narrative-based educational modules within existing health curricula. These modules can include videos, written narratives, or guest speakers sharing personal experiences with substance use and recovery. This format aligns with Narrative Engagement Theory, which demonstrates that the communication quality and delivery of a story directly influences its success in school-based interventions (Shin et al., 2023). By incorporating more relatable and emotionally engaging content, schools can better support prevention efforts and informed decision-making among adolescents.

Local support resource guides

Many adolescents may not know where to seek help regarding substance use concerns for themselves or others. Additionally, stigma surrounding substance use may discourage students from reaching out for support, even when resources are available within their communities.

To address this issue, schools can provide students with a standardized one-page local resource guide alongside substance use education modules. These guides can include counseling services, recovery organizations, school support staff, and national hotlines. Increasing awareness of available resources can encourage help-seeking behaviors and strengthen prevention and intervention efforts. These guides should be updated at least annually, prior to the start of each academic year, to ensure all contact information and service listings remain accurate.

Guidance materials for educators

Although schools may implement narrative-based substance use education, educators may need support in facilitating classroom discussions surrounding prevention, recovery, and stigma. Without guidance, implementation may vary significantly across classrooms and districts.

To improve consistency while maintaining flexibility, state education departments can provide optional guidance materials for teachers and school counselors. These materials can include discussion prompts, lesson ideas, and recommendations for selecting age-appropriate narratives. Because these supports would not require formal training programs, schools can implement the policy more easily while keeping costs relatively low.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I have explored the issue of adolescent substance use and the limitations of many existing school-based prevention approaches, while examining several policy options aimed at improving prevention efforts and reducing stigma. However, out of these options, the most practical and implementable solution is the incorporation of short narrative-based substance use education modules within existing school health curricula, accompanied by local support resource guides.

With that said, adolescent substance use prevention remains an important public health issue, and effectively addressing it requires greater focus on student engagement, awareness of support resources, and practical decision-making. Although there is still significant progress to be

made in reducing substance use and the stigma surrounding seeking help, these challenges can be better addressed through more relatable and emotionally engaging educational approaches. By implementing policies that emphasize prevention, connection, and accessibility, schools can better support the long-term well-being of students and communities alike.

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