Developing Healthy Drug Policies

School policy is the framework that provides students with a safe context in which to grow and learn. But often policies are developed in response to or in anticipation of problems. Policies related to alcohol and other drugs, for example, tend to have a problem focus, with punishments such as suspension and expulsion as the ultimate end. Yet evidence suggests schools are less likely to have drug-related incidents—and students are less likely to suffer harms—when drug policies are integrated into an overall strategy that promotes a positive school ethos and nurtures healthy behavioural choices.

Staff and students are better off when drug-related issues are built in to a school community's conversation on human health, experience and education (just as nutrition and exercise often are). What can schools do to give drugs a more realistic place in policy formation, implementation and evaluation?

Embrace the Core Values

When building or revising school policies, the following value-based actions provide a useful guide.

it's not about getting the perfect policy but rather engaging in on-going conversations with the people impacted by the ideas and decisions involved.

understanding and addressing any human issue involves listening, asking questions and using evidence in a dynamic, open-minded, sincerely positive way.

taking the time to understand diversity and find common ground helps to build trust within a school community. It makes people feel safe, valued and more motivated to contribute.

schools are for learning how to explore, enjoy and succeed in the world. Mistakes are opportunities to learn and to take responsibility.
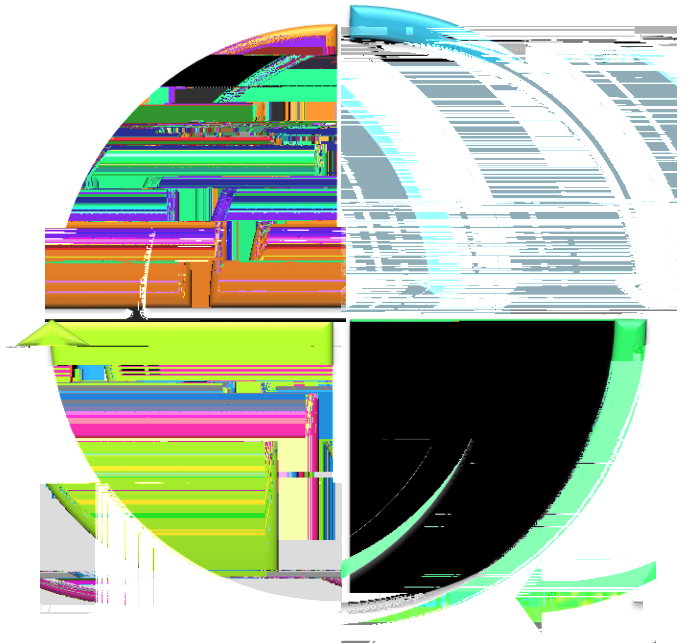
positive policies contribute to a positive school ethos, where expectations are clear, people feel connected, and students develop the skills and resilience needed to keep going.

Assess Your Policies

One way to start is by considering the origin and impact of all of your current policies, particularly those related to drug use and other complex-but-common human behaviours. Use an assessment tool or simply ask how your school's existing policies …

contribute to a safe, trusting school environment?
encourage social rehabilitation in responding to conflict or broken relationships?

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substance use (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000). It is also important to remember that, for some students, drugs help them function in the school setting (Bottorff, Johnson, Moffat, & Mulvogue, 2009).

School policies that focus on building connectedness and fostering social, emotional, and cognitive competence are strongly supported in research (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Faggiano et al., 2008; Roche et al., 2008). Strategies that focus on improving competence and connections increase student resilience (Greenberg, 2006; Kumpfer & Summerhays, 2006). School policy is a powerful tool for enhancing resilience in that it shapes one of the most important environments in children's lives and it impacts on the opportunity for students to develop the range of internal competencies required (Kumpfer & Summerhays, 2006). Students who develop strong connections with school, positive relationships with teachers or other school staff, and good social skills show less involvement with risky behaviours and are also less likely to develop mental health or substance use problems (Bond et al., 2007; Resnick et al., 1997; Tobler et al., 2000). Schools that promote a positive ethos and increased student participation experience less substance use and other risky health behaviours (Fletcher, Bonell, & Hargreaves, 2008).