



REDUCING THE RISK OF HARM

SOBERING STATISTICS

A recent report released by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health indicated that 23% of students reported that they had been offered, sold or were given a drug at school. This percentage represents 219,000 Ontario students.

The 2009 Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey, which was released on November 18, 2009, indicated that 16% of all students reported that they were intoxicated at school at least once in the 12 months before the survey. The survey indicated that males (17%) are more likely than females (14%) to report getting drunk or high at school.

The survey focuses on binge drinking as being a particularly serious problem for Canadian youth. It found that 25% of students reported binge drinking at least once during the four weeks before the survey. This percentage represents about 250,700 students in grades 7 through 12. About 9% of all students reported

binge drinking two or three times during the past month. It also should be noted that binge drinking increases significantly with grade. Only 3% of students in Grade 7 were involved in binge drinking, while it climbed to a high of 49% among Grade 12 students.

The survey also indicated that one-in-five students (21%) drink hazardously, in that their drinking puts them at risk for current or future physical and social problems.

Another area of public health concern involves alcohol, drugs and vehicles. The survey indicated that there are about one-in-eight (12%) licensed students who drink and drive. A higher percentage of licensed students reported driving after using cannabis. Especially worrisome is that one-quarter (23%) of all students report being a passenger with a driver who had been drinking and 13% rode with a driver who had been using drugs.

POSSIBILITIES FOR PREVENTION

With respect to prevention, the research has shown that preventing adolescents from using drugs, including alcohol and tobacco, is difficult and, at best, the effects are usually short term. The survey states that delaying the initiation of use could have a positive effect regarding prevention. Prevention efforts should include a component that targets youth's beliefs and attitudes about drugs, specifically the risk of physical harm that can occur from use.

The research also shows that attitudes and beliefs about the risk of harm and disapproval are drug specific. Thus, the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health recommends that any prevention effort should provide drug-specific information.

The research also suggests a strong relationship between use and the availability of certain drugs, such as alcohol, cannabis, ecstasy and LSD. While prevention efforts cannot control access to drugs through peer groups, the availability and accessibility of cigarettes and alcohol can be controlled by stricter government policies. The survey reports that government regulations, such as increased taxes, enforcement of minimum age laws and reducing the number of sales outlets, will have an impact in reducing alcohol and drug use among youth.

Given the results of this survey, principals should consider a school-wide education program regarding drug and alcohol use. The program should not only target students and school staff, but should also include the parent community. The education program should specifically address the risks of physical harm that can occur from drug and alcohol use. It should also provide information about the dangers and effects of specific drugs.

MINIMIZING LIABILITY

Under the provisions of the *Education Act*, the principal has a duty to maintain proper order and discipline in his or her school. The principal also has a duty to give "assiduous attention" to the health and comfort of students under their care.

While the principal and school staff may not be able to prevent students from using drugs and alcohol entirely, in the context of student dances and other social events, there are steps that school administrators can take to reduce the risk of harm to students and others and minimize legal liability. These steps include:

- Make it clear to all students, before school-sponsored events, that drugs and alcohol will not be tolerated and outline disciplinary measures that may result from a breach of the school's code of conduct. Encourage student leaders, such as student council representatives or team captains to act as role models.
- Be proactive by notifying parents before events of school policies regarding student drug and alcohol use, with a particular emphasis on discouraging *pre-parties* where drugs or alcohol will be present.
- Monitor entrances and bathrooms at school dances/formal events. Engage in conversation with students as they arrive at the event.
- Do not turn away a student who shows up to school or a school-related event intoxicated. Instead, call the student's parent or guardian.
- Do not send intoxicated students home unattended either on foot or in a taxi. Ensure that someone is available either to escort the student home or to receive the student at home upon his or her arrival.
- Ensure that a student who brings a guest to a school-related event is aware that he/she is responsible for the behaviour of the guest.
- Where appropriate, circulate a contract to be signed by students and/or parents for events where intoxication is anticipated to be an issue, such as proms or semi-formals. The contract could include an undertaking by the student to adhere to the school's code of conduct as well as an outline of the procedures and disciplinary action that may result from a breach of the code.



CONCLUSION

The reality of drug and alcohol use among students is such that it will continue to be a challenge for schools across Ontario. School administrators should initiate school-wide education programs informing students and parents and other members of the school community about the dangers and risks of drug and alcohol use. By working with students, school staff and parents and taking pro-active measures to address these issues, school administrators will minimize risks to school safety and help preserve a positive and healthy learning environment in their school.

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