SCHOOL-BASED SUBSTANCE ABUSE PREVENTION PROGRAMS: KEY CONSIDERATIONS

In South Carolina, it is estimated that approximately 31,000 youth aged 12 to 17 use illicit drugs and 43,000 use alcohol. National rates of substance use among youth are similar to South Carolina (see Table 1). Of particular concern is the average age when initial substance use can begin, which can be as early as thirteen years old. Research suggests that when youth begin using alcohol at these earlier ages, they have higher percentages of developing alcohol dependence and/or abuse later in life compared to those that begin using alcohol at 18 or above. This demonstrates a great need to intervene early in order to prevent substance abuse and/or delay initial onset of substance use. Given that youth spend a majority of their time at school, schools are important contexts to provide prevention programs that aim to reduce youth substance use and abuse.

**KEY QUESTIONS**

Deciding to implement a school-based substance use prevention program can be challenging. When practitioners, administrators, and teachers are making this decision, they often will have many questions in mind. These questions likely relate to three primary areas:

1. **WHAT PROGRAM SHOULD WE SELECT AND USE IN OUR SCHOOL?**
2. **WHAT IS REQUIRED TO IMPLEMENT THE PROGRAM?**
3. **HOW SHOULD THE PROGRAM BE EVALUATED?**

Some of key considerations to consider relative to each of these three questions are described next.

**PROGRAM SELECTION**

The first step in selecting a substance use prevention program is to identify the needs of the school community. To do this, it can be helpful to gain information from a variety of stakeholders, such as students, teachers, and parents. A survey is a very useful tool to gather this information. For some resources on tools to assess substance use, please visit: [http://lib.adai.washington.edu/instruments/](http://lib.adai.washington.edu/instruments/).

Once data have been collected to understand local community needs, and areas of concern have been identified and prioritized by key stakeholders, the next step is to identify a program that addresses those specific needs. When making this decision, it is important to keep in mind the following:

- **Evidence:** What does the research say about this program’s effectiveness? In what settings has this program been shown to be effective/ineffective?
- **Student population:** With which grade level(s) has this program been demonstrated effective? Has the program been successful with groups of similar socioeconomic status and/or racial/ethnic background?
- **Community:** Is the school in a rural, urban, or suburban setting, and how does that relate to the program being considered? Has the program been demonstrated as effective in your type of school community?
- **Resources/Staff:** What resources are needed to implement this program and how will they be secured? Do current staff have the skills needed to implement the program?
PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

Any program is only as effective as it is implemented by staff, which is why considering implementation fidelity (or the extent to which a program was implemented as intended) is so important. Training staff is a critical component in ensuring implementation fidelity. Other areas to consider in relationship to implementation are how to enhance the buy-in of the school community and deciding how to integrate the program into the school context.

- **Training:** Training helps ensure that staff have the abilities and skills needed to administer the program. Training often can take multiple forms, such as online webinars and in-person workshops. In addition, training is often a useful vehicle to communicate the importance of implementing the program as it was intended.

- **Staff Buy-In:** In order for a program to have long-term success, administrators, school faculty, and the community must support it. Failure to have buy-in during the initial implementation of a program can often hinder the implementation, success, and/or sustainability of the program.

- **Integration:** Some programs are designed for use as part of existing curriculum offered during the school day, while other programs are intended to be offered after school. It will be important to consider the number of students involved in after school activities, faculty availability, and transportation of students when deciding which type of program to use. Also, ease of blending the program in with current curriculum and school practices must be considered.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

Once a program has been selected and implemented, it is critical to know whether or not the program is having the desired effect on youth served. Program evaluation can help in this area. Specifically, an evaluation can help determine whether a program worked or not, and if not, why. Key questions around program evaluation include:

- What data collection strategies will be used to evaluate the program?
- How frequently will the program be evaluated?
- How will program implementation be tracked and monitored?
- How will evaluation information be shared after it is collected?

Evaluation data is not only useful to demonstrate the effectiveness of a program, but also can be used to secure continued funding and resources to support the program.

CONCLUSION

Substance use prevention programs can be critical to reducing youth substance abuse, and schools provide an excellent context for this type of programming. This brief can be used during the initial planning stages, particularly as it offers key questions to consider when selecting, implementing, and evaluating such programs.
REFERENCES


3) U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality. (2013). Results from the 2012 national survey on drug use and health: Summary of national findings. Rockville, Maryland.


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