



REPORT

Review of K-12 School Alcohol Policy Research: Findings, Conclusions & Recommendations

Introduction

The Cobb Alcohol Taskforce's Policy Strategy Team reviewed available K-12 school alcohol policy research for this report. This activity was designed to meet the following objectives:

- Assist policy makers in assessing and evaluating the effectiveness of school alcohol policy strategies for reducing underage and high-risk youth drinking in schools and communities
- Help identify gaps, loopholes, and areas for improvement
- Provide research and support for change

This report summarizes the results of the committee's findings, with the hope it will help policy-makers and school officials implement and evaluate evidence based alcohol policy strategies to help reduce underage and high-risk youth drinking in schools and in our community.

Overview of Findings

Schools have long been central to community-based alcohol prevention programs. These programs often focus on educating children when they are very young in the hope that they will learn to avoid the pitfalls of alcohol-related problems.¹

Research consistently shows that school educational programs have only a marginal effect on student substance use and community alcohol problems. Schools are only one of the many influences on young people, and even the best curriculum will fail if not supported by policies and practices that discourage youth alcohol use.^{1, 2, 3}

Media literacy programs have shown some effect at making youth more sophisticated about the manipulative techniques of advertisers. Research evidence of the effectiveness of popular school prevention curricula, social norms programs, and peer programs is minimal.²

Current substance abuse prevention theory and practice focus on policies, norms, and attitudes from an environmental or systems approach. In this context, change in school policies, norms, and attitudes are key to successful school-based substance abuse prevention programs.³

The potential of policy strategies to bring about relatively quick, dramatic and enduring reductions in school alcohol related problems is based on evidence of community alcohol laws and regulations which have contributed to reductions in community alcohol related problems.³

Federal regulations require schools to establish, enforce and evaluate alcohol policies.⁴

School alcohol policies that encourage and support strict enforcement of laws that prohibit minors from possessing alcohol and adults from furnishing alcohol to minors can be especially effective at advocating for increased enforcement of such laws in the community.^{3, 5, 6}

Every school year millions of student athletes across the country sign a code of conduct. A poorly written code is common and of concern, but a well written code can have just as many problems if the people charged with enforcing the code do not apply the rules and regulations fairly, uniformly and without prejudice.⁷

Most schools now have formal policies that prohibit alcohol and other drugs in schools and provide sanctions for violations. Some have created drug-free zones around schools with enhanced criminal penalties imposed on violators. No research has assessed the impact of drug-free-zones on youth drug use.^{2, 4}

Factors identified as contributing to student alcohol use/abuse include; weak and inconsistent enforcement of school policies; extensive marketing directed at students by the alcohol industry; the availability of alcohol; and social norms supportive of use.^{5, 6, 8}

Strategies identified to combat these contributing factors include; school policies that are clear, concise, well communicated and consistently enforced; parental notification of student alcohol policy infractions; more alcohol-free activities provided for students; restrictions on student exposure to alcohol marketing; media literacy and media advocacy programs; social norm campaigns; school-community coalitions.^{5, 6, 8}

Research on school alcohol policies is a relatively young field. Schools across the country do not regularly base their prevention efforts on policy strategies identified and tested for effectiveness.^{3, 6}

Tracking local data (student surveys, i.e. GSHS II, and school incident reports) provides useful information for assessing and evaluating various school alcohol policies determined as having evidence or promise of effectiveness.^{7, 8}

Schools can significantly improve their responses to student alcohol use and reduce their risk of exposure to liability. U.S. tort law concepts of duty compliment federal DFSCA regulations as the background against which schools should assess their approach to school alcohol policy.⁴

Criteria used to measure the effectiveness of school alcohol policies include: promotes student learning; manages liability and risk; complies with federal mandates; effectively communicates standards for behavior; clearly defines sanctions for violators; accessible and understood by students, staff and parents; regular and uniform enforcement and evaluation.^{7, 8}

Although each school must carefully develop its own set of policies based on multiple considerations, there is consensus on the need to enforce policies firmly and consistently. The active, regular and uniform enforcement of alcohol-related laws and policies both in schools and in communities is critical to reducing underage and high-risk youth drinking.^{2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8}

A close collaboration between schools and their surrounding communities is a key factor in successful comprehensive approaches that include changes to existing conditions that contribute to local alcohol-related problems.^{1, 5, 6}

Without the expertise of the research community, school administrators are at a disadvantage in trying to identify and implement policy strategies or combinations of strategies to address alcohol problems specific to their schools.^{3, 5, 6}

Conclusions

- More than any other community institution, schools play a critical role in addressing education, health and safety issues. To create healthy alcohol environments in a community, school districts can provide leadership, resources, people power, and experience.
- Evidence supports adopting, implementing, enforcing and evaluating comprehensive school alcohol policies as particularly effective strategies for reducing underage and high-risk youth drinking.
- Effective alcohol policies minimize opportunities for underage and high-risk drinking. They can maximize opportunities for effective enforcement, adjudication, educational and other social interventions, and minimize schools' exposure to risk.
- There is consensus on the need to enforce school alcohol policies firmly and consistently. Active, regular and uniform enforcement of alcohol-related laws and policies both in schools and in communities is critical to reducing underage and high-risk youth drinking.
- Use of local school data (student survey and incident reports) is important and can inform the planning, implementation and evaluation of school alcohol policy strategies.
- Mutually reinforcing interventions between the school and community can change the broader environment and help reduce alcohol abuse and alcohol-related problems over the long term, in schools and in the community.

Recommendations

1. Ensure sanctions and interventions for violating school alcohol policy are clearly articulated in the policy and are not weaker than sanctions and interventions for violating other illegal substance use/abuse policies.
2. Include parents, youth, coaches, and administrators in school district alcohol policy review committee annually; to help assess evidence of alcohol policy effectiveness and suggest improvements.
3. Actively and regularly monitor schools enforcement of the school district's alcohol policy to ensure consistent, fair and equitable adjudication of all cases involving school district alcohol policy violations.

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