



Schools and the Community Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drug Environment: Opportunities for Prevention

Introduction

Schools have long been central to community-based alcohol, tobacco, and other drug (ATOD) prevention programs. Schools are often the first resort when ATOD problems become obvious; policymakers, media, and citizens demand more comprehensive educational programs for students. These programs often focus on educating children when they are very young in the hope that they will learn to avoid the pitfalls of ATOD problems.

Yet research consistently shows that school programs have only a marginal effect on student substance use and community ATOD problems. This should not come as a surprise; schools inevitably reflect and respond to the community environment, as well as its norms and values. Schools are only one of the many influences on young people, and even the best curriculum will fail if not supported by the community through policies, norms, and attitudes that discourage ATOD use.

New prevention theory and practice focus on these policies, norms, and attitudes from an environmental or systems approach. Environmental prevention recognizes that individual behavior is shaped by the social, cultural, political, and economic processes of the community. In this context, change in community policies, norms, and attitudes is the key to successful school-based prevention programs.

This document is divided into three sections. The first discusses the importance of community institutions generally and schools specifically in developing and implementing environmental strategies of substance abuse prevention.

The second examines the potential role of schools in implementing specific policies for change, focusing on the environments that directly affect schools and students. The third outlines the roles school boards, administration, faculty,

parents, and students can play in the implementation process.

I. The Role of Schools in a Changing Community

A. Environmental prevention strategies: The importance of institutional policies

Implementing environmental ATOD prevention strategies requires a fundamental shift in perspective from individual to collective behavior. In the environmental approach, ATOD problems are viewed as a community issue, reflecting community norms and practices. Individual behavior is influenced by a range of factors. These can be visualized as a series of concentric circles emanating from the individual, moving from the most immediate (family and peers) to the everyday (school, work, and church) and finally to spheres far removed from the individual (media, economic policies, and restrictions on ATOD availability).

Because environmental strategies address collective behavior, they involve reforming policy—that is, the rules and regulations that govern community interactions. These policies can come from governmental agencies and legislative bodies or from subgroups such as workplaces, schools, and other community institutions. Families, neighborhoods, and social clubs also establish collective agreements regarding members' behavior. The policies can be explicit, formally codified and enforced, or informal, assumed, and unwritten.

This focus on policy reveals the importance of community institutions in environmental prevention strategies. Schools, government, employers, social services agencies, churches, and other institutions all establish ATOD policies, the

effects of which reach beyond the membership of the particular group to the community at large. Thus, these policies are an important point of intervention in any program seeking to change a community's ATOD environment.

B. Schools as community institutions: Implications for prevention

Shifting prevention strategies from an individual to an environmental focus carries implications for the role of schools in the community. As the institutions most likely to be exposed to youth ATOD problems, schools can offer the most insight into the impact of environmental factors on young people. Schools also have credibility and expertise, and they maintain close ties with other community institutions. Therefore, instead of taking the community environment as given, schools can play a critical role in promoting environmental change. Environmental change in this respect is consistent with the traditional school mission, particularly when these environments have an immediate impact on students and schools; environmental changes will promote a healthier lifestyle for students, improve their academic performance, and bring consistency to the messages students receive in school and outside.

The next section provides specific examples of environmental policy areas that fall within these educational goals. It is not a comprehensive review of environmental interventions but focuses on the practical steps a local school can take to change those aspects of the community environment that have an immediate impact on the school and its students.

II. The School's Role in Specific ATOD Environmental Strategies

A. Reducing physical availability

1. Research overview

Research has established a close link between ATOD availability and the rates of associated use and problems. Limiting physical availability includes regulating who may sell; who may purchase; and how, when, and where commercial sales may occur. Several studies show that consumption and traffic crash rates decrease when the purchase age of alcohol is raised to 21 and, conversely, increase when the purchase age is lowered. Research has also demonstrated a link between alcohol outlet density and the incidence of violence and traffic crashes. Certain types of alcohol (and tobacco) outlets may be more likely to engage in problematic practices. For example, research suggests that conve-

nience stores and stores that hire young, inexperienced clerks are more likely to sell to underage purchasers.

Fewer studies have been done concerning tobacco, but those that have been done show that enforcement efforts designed to reduce illegal sales to minors have led to at least modest declines in youth sales and smoking rates. Studies also show that bans on smoking in schools, workplaces, restaurants, and other public venues reduce prevalence and daily consumption rates.

Recent studies have reported that programs to reduce the availability of illegal drugs through various community means have led to decreased fear of crime, reduced neighborhood decay, reduced drug sales activity, and increased neighborhood cohesion. These studies did not measure the impact of these efforts on drug use.

Unfortunately, studies of ATOD physical availability (other than those examining minimum purchase age laws) generally have not focused on the impact on youth consumption and problems.

2. Specific strategies

Restricting the number, type, and location of alcohol and tobacco outlets

Though licensing and regulation of alcohol outlets varies widely across the States, most States allow communities to exercise at least some regulatory power, usually through zoning ordinances that regulate land use. Schools should have a powerful voice in these decisions because they have a direct interest in the number and kind of alcohol and tobacco outlets in their immediate vicinity. Two issues specifically affect schools: (1) expanded availability will increase opportunities for youth to illegally purchase alcohol and tobacco; and (2) expanded availability will foster a climate that undermines the school's educational mission.

Closing problem alcohol and tobacco outlets or reforming their sales practices and curtailing neighborhood retail and drug markets

Communities should complement limits on new licenses with efforts to close down or reform existing problem outlets. Local ordinances can target public nuisance activities, along with sales and serving practices that encourage use among young people. Schools can play an important role in targeting problem outlets by documenting sales practices, conducting surveys and educational workshops for the community, promoting and participating in local coalitions, working with local businesses and officials, and providing written and oral testimony at relevant governmental hearings and small claims courts.

Strictly enforcing laws that prohibit sales of alcohol and tobacco to minors

All States now prohibit sales of alcohol and tobacco to young people—those under 21 for alcohol and, in most cases, those under 18 for tobacco. Despite the proven effectiveness of such limits, law enforcement typically accords them low priority. Schools have a direct interest in better enforcement of these limits because better enforcement will lead to lower consumption, fewer health problems among students, and reinforcement of the schools' educational message. Schools can translate their concern into actions by using several of the techniques and strategies listed above. In particular, schools can encourage and support stricter enforcement, and students can be especially effective advocates for increased enforcement.

Restricting alcohol sales at youth- and family-oriented community events

Making alcohol readily available at large community events poses serious public health and safety risks. Because uncontrolled consumption can lead to assaults, harassment, rioting, and drunk driving, many event planners impose limits on how alcohol is served. Many community groups have taken this a step further by developing criteria to determine whether alcohol should be made available at a particular event in the first place. Schools can play an active part in assessing the role of alcohol in community celebrations. They can sponsor alcohol-free events to encourage student and family participation and enhance the school's educational mission. Schools also can seek to reduce alcohol's role in traditional events—for example, county fairs—and can work with planners to eliminate alcohol availability to underage participants at these community events.

Creating ATOD-free zones near schools, in parks, and in other areas where children are present

Most schools now have formal policies that prohibit alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs on campus and provide clear penalties for violations. Some communities have extended these policies, creating drug-free zones around schools with enhanced criminal penalties imposed on violators. These zones are largely symbolic; no research has assessed the impact of drug-free-zone legislation on youth drug use. Drug-free zones nevertheless enhance the school's educational message regarding the risks of illegal drug use. The ATOD-free geography concept can be expanded to other venues where children congregate, such as beaches and parks. Schools can play a lead role in developing ATOD-free zones by promoting the concept in the community, working with local officials in the implementation process,

soliciting support from parents and local residents, and integrating the ATOD-free zones into school activities.

B. Restricting alcohol and tobacco advertising that targets young people

1. Research overview

The impact of alcohol and tobacco marketing on young people is a subject of intense debate. The alcohol and tobacco industries argue that their marketing affects only adult choice of brands and does not influence youth attitudes or behavior. Many public health advocates disagree vehemently. They point to the industries' enormous expenditures and to research that suggests new consumers are most likely to start using alcohol and tobacco in their teens. Research, especially on tobacco, also presents compelling evidence that marketing influences young people's beliefs, intentions, and behavior. Other studies have shown that young people are familiar with and attracted to alcohol advertising and that such familiarity in preadolescent children correlates with their drinking knowledge, beliefs, and intentions.

Researchers are just beginning to develop new theoretical frameworks and methodologies to assess the impact of marketing on youth alcohol and tobacco use. Schools have a particular interest in this topic because industry marketing is essentially a massive disinformation campaign designed to undercut schools' educational messages concerning the risks of alcohol and tobacco use. Schools therefore have a strong interest in limiting students' exposure to alcohol and tobacco marketing.

2. Strategies and potential roles for schools

Restricting where advertising and promotions are placed
One means of limiting students' exposure to marketing is to restrict locations for such activities. For example, several jurisdictions prohibit alcohol and tobacco billboards and other forms of advertising near schools and other locations where children are likely to be. Communities have also requested that local radio and television stations not air alcohol ads during programming that attracts a significant number of underage listeners or viewers. Several communities have terminated industry event sponsorships, notably those associated with Native American pow wows and Latino celebrations of Cinco de Mayo. Schools can play an important role in reducing youth exposure to alcohol and tobacco marketing. Schools and students can document the extent of exposure and make those findings available and known to parents, policymakers, and other officials. School

representatives can join local coalitions to restrict such marketing and statewide or national campaigns calling for voluntary limits from the media and alcohol industries. Schools can work with local officials to end industry sponsorships of community events and to limit outdoor advertising, especially in the vicinity of school facilities. All parts of the school community can provide important voices to these community efforts.

Restricting the content of alcohol advertising

Alcohol and tobacco marketing often uses images, promotional materials, logos, and messages that are particularly attractive to young people. For example, Joe Camel, a favorite icon among children and young adolescents, inspired the Camel brand's huge share increase in the youth cigarette market. Again, schools have a number of potential roles in addressing these youth-oriented marketing strategies. Students can research advertising campaigns and document responses to them. Schools can integrate the study of these images into their curricula. Schools can also join local coalitions, such as the Hands Off Halloween campaign (which demands that brewers cease using Halloween imagery in their marketing). School officials can work with local businesses and community leaders to remove youth-oriented alcohol and tobacco promotional materials or restrict their distribution to students.

Implementing counter-advertising campaigns

Finally, schools can play an instrumental role in developing local counter-advertising campaigns. Many schools already provide opportunities for students to create their own counter-ads, an effective media literacy technique. Community-sponsored counter-ad contests offer opportunities to display winners at local events and high-visibility locations, including billboards.

C. Altering the community's physical, transportation, and economic environments

1. Research overview

A third category of environmental strategies addresses the community's broader physical, transportation, and economic environments, which may have an indirect but powerful influence on youth ATOD use and problems. The focus here is not on ATOD use exclusively but on those specific community conditions that may aggravate youth ATOD problems and that schools have an immediate stake in changing.

Various drug prevention programs have changed the community's *physical environment* to reduce illegal drug activ-

ity, and many of these strategies could be adapted to locales where young people consume alcohol. Though no studies have evaluated the impact of such interventions, the approach builds on broader crime prevention practices that have been shown to be effective.

A community's *transportation environment* may influence youth alcohol-related motor vehicle problems. Many communities have instituted "safe rides," designated driver programs, and other deterrents to drunk-driving behavior, but research has not documented the impact of these programs on youth crash rates.

A community's *economic status* may have profound implications for ATOD problems. Research shows that low-income communities have higher concentrations of alcohol outlets and higher levels of drug dealing. They also have lower per capita alcohol consumption rates than middle- or upper-income communities, yet they experience significantly higher rates of alcohol problems. Similarly, low-income communities endure elevated rates of illegal drug problems disproportionate to their per capita levels of consumption. This suggests that the circumstances of poverty increase the likelihood of ATOD problems.

2. Specific strategies and potential roles for schools

Changing physical environments that promote illegal drug activities near schools

As suggested in the research above, various changes to the physical environment may help prevent illegal drug problems. For example, drug dealing and use may occur in abandoned buildings or in isolated areas of public parks. Shoulder tapping (minors requesting adults to purchase alcohol for them) may occur in unlighted parking areas near liquor stores. Enforcing local ordinances can require owners to upgrade abandoned properties. Changing the layout of public parks and the lighting in public buildings or liquor store parking lots can deter illegal drug and alcohol transactions by making it more difficult to hide the transaction and by increasing the ease of law enforcement surveillance.

Schools can help implement these changes in the physical environment. They can document locales where problems exist, publicize the dangers to children and the need for action, and work with local officials to develop and implement policy reforms.

Instituting alternative transportation options to reduce drinking and driving

Schools can assist in developing "safe ride" programs for students so that they have a convenient alternative to riding

with intoxicated adult drivers. The programs can target specific events or nights of the week, when drunk driving is most likely to occur. Schools can also encourage public transportation agencies to participate. These programs should be integrated into a comprehensive underage drinking prevention strategy, so that they do not appear to condone drinking and intoxication as long as drunk driving is avoided.

Promoting community economic development

Schools can play an important role in changing the economic status of their communities. They can implement job training programs for students and adults and integrate community betterment projects into their curricula. Schools are clearly not in a position to take the lead in community economic development strategies. However, they can be important partners in development strategies and develop meaningful roles for students and families in the process.

III. The Roles of School Boards, Administration, Faculty, and Students in Community Environmental Prevention

This section discusses the roles of four school constituencies—the school board, administration, faculty, and student body—outlining in broad terms their potential contributions as a starting point for more detailed discussion. The focus is on potential action at the school district level and in the school. Although higher-level agencies can bring important contributions to school-based prevention, schools need not wait for State and Federal action.

School Boards

As the political leadership for a school district, the school board can make environmental strategies a formal priority, providing overall direction and resources and instructing administrators to follow through with specific action. Equally important is a school board's role in building partnerships in the community and relaying concerns and priorities to local officials. These connections can be critical to the implementation of many of the strategies discussed in this document.

Administration

Administrators also play a critical role, even if their school board has not yet endorsed environmentally based prevention programs. First, they can take steps to lead their district by encouraging their board and other officials to adopt

environmental prevention strategies. Second, they can develop data-gathering strategies so that environmental factors will be better understood. Finally, they can authorize teacher training and assistance in understanding environmental strategies and developing classroom activities that will support action in the surrounding community.

Faculty

Teachers can direct classroom and extracurricular activities designed to engage students in environmental strategies. Even before their superiors take formal action, teachers can take important steps, incorporating various components of environmental prevention into classroom activities. In turn, these activities can inform administrators and school boards of the need to address environmental factors. Teachers can also promote extracurricular activities that engage students in environmental prevention. They can sponsor student clubs or organizations, and they can develop liaisons with local community groups and promote student participation in those groups. In these ways, teachers can provide opportunities for students to engage in media advocacy and participate in the life of the community.

Students

The cornerstone of environmental change is an active citizenry, concerned with and involved in community life and participating in decisions regarding local ATOD policies. Where traditional educational programs view students primarily as passive recipients of information, environmental prevention programs challenge students to be involved in community life as actors and change agents. Students may be the most effective community group to communicate problems in the ATOD environment. Their experience of that environment, especially when educational and community messages are in conflict, gives them an authentic voice that can be highly effective in the policy arena. Schools should use environmental prevention programs to complement traditional courses, enhance students' educational experience, bridge the chasm between community and school, and promote healthy decisions.

Conclusion

Environmental strategies are the new frontier of ATOD prevention. Communities across the country are now actively involved in what is becoming a national movement to address the epidemic of ATOD problems, particularly among young people. Research provides a science-based set of strategies and technologies that hold great promise.

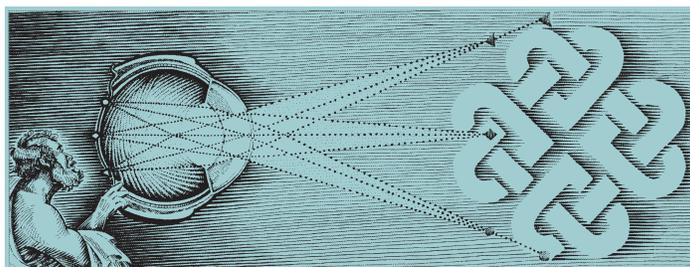
More than any other community institution, schools play a critical role as they interact with young people. They have credibility in addressing educational and health issues, and their mission already requires them to deal with ATOD problems. In a community effort to create a healthy ATOD environment, schools can provide leadership, a powerful set of resources, people power, and experience.

This document was derived from an original written in 1998 by James F. Mosher, J.D., Division Director, Pacific Institute. For a copy of the original document, complete with references, please contact Pacific Institute.

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FOR RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

In support of the
**OJJDP Enforcing the
Underage Drinking Laws Program**



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