Schools and Drug Abuse Prevention Programming

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Schools and their approach to drug abuse prevention

A somewhat unique aspect of American culture involves an expectation that local school districts should take the lead in responding to any major social problem involving young people. From immunizations to integration, socially important issues often are deferred into the local school system. It is unlikely that anything will change that expectation; however, the school district needs to define and express what it can and cannot be expected to provide, especially in a controversial area such as drug abuse. It also needs to keep its focus on education.

Regarding "drug abuse," or "the pursuit of intoxication," marijuana is the contemporary lightning rod issue. A reasonable role of the school district is to truthfully educate and help persuade students to avoid use, and especially abuse, of marijuana and other drugs. How that responsibility can best be honored has been and still is both necessary and enigmatic.

There have been 40 years or so of substance abuse prevention programming in schools. That is also how long our organization, the Environmental Resource Council (formerly the Minnesota Institute of Public Health), has been working with federal and state agencies and school districts on issues of health and safety, including substance abuse. Over that time, we have developed concepts that we think are important about what schools should and should not do in this regard. This is simply our perspective, realizing that each district or school is unique. We realize, too, that there is institutional investment and established traditions in certain approaches, and that emotions can run high in addressing this challenge.

The American school is neither an arm of law enforcement nor a primary substance abuse therapy provider. It is at its best when operating somewhat like a quality parent—educating, guiding and persuading a child to his or her advantage. As the legalization of marijuana in some states changes the landscape of drug use and how schools adjust their response requires consideration. The accepted reality now is that marijuana is or will be openly part of the world into which our children mature. There are risks that responsible education programming can address and diminish. In our view, there are certain approaches in which school drug education should and should not engage.

What We Believe School Districts Should NOT Do

1. ***Do not subordinate responsibility to law enforcement agencies.*** A relationship with law enforcement can be valuable (child protection referrals etc.), but the fundamental culture of enforcing the law is often a mismatch with education. Identifying and arresting a drug dealer operating within the school is different from realistically communicating the nature of intoxication and discussing its risks in a classroom setting. Law enforcement can both uphold drug laws and contribute within the context of an education dynamic, but a line is crossed when law enforcement dominates the manner in which drug use is addressed in the educational experience.

2. ***Do not institutionalize quasi-treatment as education.*** Selectively reaching out to students who suffer from substance abuse, especially compulsive or addictive use, through professional counseling has become an accepted role within many school districts. In some states, vigilance for problems and therapeutic assessments and responses are mandated. Yet, therapy, by definition, is designed to create dynamic and fundamentally profound changes

within a person's life. Treatment is often traumatic and reaches beyond education or persuasion. Institutionalizing life-changing therapeutic interaction as a standardized component for all students as part of the drug education experience is neither a reasonable goal nor a responsible approach.

3. ***Do not just recite facts.*** The pursuit of intoxication is personal, powerful, and can involve intensely pleasurable or outright dangerous behavior. Dispassionately presented technical information that focuses only on chemistry and biology is unlikely to meaningfully penetrate the magical/emotional "teenage Friday night."

There should be acknowledgement that intoxication can cause pleasure as well as promote dangerous decisions and lead to disease; this needs to be imprinted onto the minds of students. The intoxication dynamic should be presented in a way that will be remembered, taken seriously, and presumably prevent harm. Education at its best focuses on sharing accurate information in a pattern or style that reflects reality and is likely to positively influence behavior. It involves honest persuasion and must go beyond dispensing facts in topic areas this intense.

What We Believe School Districts Should Do

1. ***Create a realistic drug policy and an age-sensitive, quality, education plan.*** The district should establish a realistic drug policy that provides for unique situations, relies on common sense and allows judicious tolerance. The policy and subsequent plan should encompass a defined, careful relationship that includes the education component, law enforcement, and professional substance abuse assessment and treatment. The policy should be centered around a K-12 education plan that is age-sensitive and has a history of positive evaluation or, at a minimum, includes ongoing third-party evaluation and student feedback loops.

2. ***Conduct a reality check.*** Through focus groups or confidential surveys, students should be asked to provide information involving both their use of and exposure to drugs, and their reaction to a drug education experiences over time. There are well-vetted federal forms and formats that can be used as a baseline. Some are included in our D.A.R.E. Program Evaluation, which is attached. The primary questions should be, "Will the educational experience impact the real-life experiences and challenges of the students? Is there a disconnect between the drug education approach and the students' real world?" Obviously, in a universe where, for decades, at least one-third of students have tried marijuana, a zero tolerance policy could be seen as detached from reality. This does not mean that advocating the avoidance of any use should not be promoted.

3. ***Involve and support parents.*** The clearest, researched postulate regarding preventing substance abuse is that parents/guardians have the most power to prevent harm. The most consistent element in avoiding both use and abuse involves the concern of young people regarding "disappointing" their parents. To the extent that the district can support this parent/guardian dynamic, everyone benefits. A booklet for parents (*Marijuana and the Responsible Parent*), which includes a description of marijuana use and its risks and advice regarding parental interaction with their children, is available on our Home Page.

While law enforcement can strictly enforce the law, and the therapeutic community can address mental health issues involving chemical dependency, families and schools are the principal institutions for guiding, enlightening, and persuading young people. Family is by far the most powerful player in making a difference. It is important for parents to understand that reality and be motivated and supported in using their power. Where parents won't or can't be part of the process, the school's historic role of "loco parentis," or taking on some of the responsibilities of parents, kicks in. Law enforcement and therapy have a place, but learning to thrive in a world where recreational intoxication is part of life and a source of risk is primarily a matter of quality education for the vast majority of young people.

A brief discussion of contemporary drug education

In 1970, in reaction to what the federal government had termed the "marijuana problem," Pres. Richard Nixon appointed and secured funding for a prestigious commission that included many leading American academics, along with a well-appointed team of staff and consultants, to provide an assessment of, essentially, what use of marijuana was doing or was likely to do to the United States.

Also in 1970, for the first time in American history, marijuana use, even for medical purposes, had become a scheduled illicit drug in the same criminal category as heroin and cocaine.

The Presidential Commission was expected to present an outline for a national "war on drugs," focusing on what was typically termed, "the marijuana epidemic."

In 1972, when the 183-page federal report of the National Committee on Marijuana and Drug Abuse ("Marijuana: A Signal of Misunderstanding." First Report of the National Commission on Marijuana and Drug Abuse; U.S. Government Printing Office, #5266-0001) was released, it began with a somewhat surprising quotation from Alfred North Whitehead:

> *There are no whole truths; all truths are half-truths. It is trying to treat them as whole truths that pays the devil.*

The report included several unanticipated findings, including the determination that marijuana use negatively correlated to violent crime. It said that, as near as science could tell, marijuana use created an "…inverse or negative statistical correlation" to violence.

Among other things, the report warned against the establishment of a "polarizing" law enforcement bureaucracy being charged with an unrealistic challenge. More than one chapter discussed the limits and potential, unanticipated social problems of relying on criminal prohibitions. The importance of education was stressed. One specific recommendation was that the nation's school drug education programs be formally evaluated. It had found many programs "irrelevant," "misleading," and "of questionable value." It also called on the states to review how their schools approached marijuana education.

A year after the federal report was released, our organization (then named The Minnesota Institute of Public Health) was contracted by the State of Minnesota to present a description to the Governor's Office and the Minnesota State Legislature of what some of the options would be for the state in light of the federal marijuana report.

We recommended decriminalization of possession of a "small amount" of marijuana, or around 20 marijuana cigarettes, but requiring drug education program participation for those found in possession of a small amount. We adamantly supported the elimination of any criminal record if the small-amount possession offense was not repeated. Our recommendations were accepted and, in Minnesota, possession of a small amount, while still illegal, was now treated more on the order of a traffic ticket. We also contracted with the State to establish a statewide system of drug education classes for violators, working in conjunction with the State Supreme Court.

Among other things, it became obvious in our research that the State's marijuana law was being selectively enforced, based on interviews with police officers. Essentially, so many young adults were using marijuana that law enforcement officers could often pick and choose

which individuals would be arrested. For example, protesters at anti-Vietnam War rallies were often targeted and arrested for marijuana possession. During one focus group with law enforcement participants, a suburban police officer misunderstood our question regarding selective enforcement and began listing names of people he intended to arrest under the marijuana possession law because of their behaviors and social status, which had nothing to do with marijuana possession or any other illegal activity.

The National Commission's report was never officially acknowledged by Pres. Nixon, but the Minnesota law decriminalizing small amounts of marijuana did go into effect. Consequently, thousands of small-amount marijuana possession cases were handled through drug education classes (overseen by our organization), as opposed to incarceration in a jail or county workhouse. This approach saved substantial tax dollars and avoided affecting violators' career development, i.e. they would not have to list a criminal conviction on any employment application, be limited in post-secondary education options, or denied admission into a labor union. The education programs continued quietly for over 25 years. In our direct dealings with thousands of "small amount" violators, we became convinced that the decriminalization law was good civics and that responsible drug education in schools was seriously needed.

During the Reagan Administration, First Lady Nancy Reagan was named official spokesperson for the national "War on Drugs." As the worldwide Cold War wound down, a huge, well-funded preoccupation with enforcement of all drug laws, including those involving marijuana, was institutionalized federally. Without any formal institutionalization of martial law, the military was used extensively to help enforce civil drug laws, causing concern among Civil Libertarians. Locally, it even created confusion among the Minnesota Association of County Weed Inspectors. National Guard infantry units were dispatched, sometimes using military aircraft, in force and full battle gear, to surround and destroy rural marijuana patches. This was a task previously handled, without incident, by the County Weed Inspector, using a corn knife.

Throughout this period, to the extent one can rely on school marijuana personal-use research, it appeared rather consistently that about 40–50% of the graduating high school seniors had tried marijuana. Asking young people to admit on a government form to violating a law, even anonymously, could, of course, be subject to the "Hawthorne effect," or the well documented under-reporting of socially undesirable behaviors. Interestingly, as research into marijuana use continued over the decades, it also appeared that the vast majority of users simply stopped using marijuana by their mid-30s. In the 1970s and 1980s, three future presidents (and at least a substantial minority of Americans) would violate marijuana laws.

In 1983, during the height of the federal war on drugs, the Los Angeles Police Department developed a program termed, the Drug Abuse Resistance Education Program, or D.A.R.E., which soon became a national phenomenon, eventually spreading to many other Western nations. Essentially, the program involved trained, uniformed police officers going into schools, typically elementary schools, to provide information and supportive skills to help students resist drug use.

The explosive expansion of D.A.R.E. is unequalled in terms of organizational success of a social program. It received priority funding from several federal agencies. The Justice Department, State Department, Bureau of Justice, Defense Department, and especially the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency, virtually competed with each other to fund D.A.R.E. programs. In addition, D.A.R.E. sometimes involved a sort of, "local franchise," arrangement, which created an aggressive entrepreneurial approach toward marketing. Funding also came from state legislatures, state agencies, counties, cities, law enforcement, and school districts. D.A.R.E. executives became adept at requesting funding from both large and small local corporations and foundations. It was hard to question a law enforcement program that helped children stay off drugs.

Success in terms of documented public health impact was another matter. Long before the institutionalization of D.A.R.E., researchers and various studies determined that any "zero tolerance" program was unlikely to have long-term impact, since it was at such an obvious mismatch with reality. Since the fundamental basis of

D.A.R.E. was "zero" or no tolerance, the only option open to the law enforcement culture, there were only a few early skeptics. Children in elementary schools, who typically had no exposure to drugs, found the D.A.R.E. program a positive experience. Small gifts, such as tee shirts, coloring books etc., helped make the program enjoyable for young children. It was considerably less appreciated among middle school students and seems to have had less impact. It was far less appreciated, and even created subdued hostility, among some high school students. Our attached 1997 evaluation of D.A.R.E. reviews much of the published research of the time.

Those who seemed to really appreciate the program were the adults. The irony was that the most negative impact was arguably among the most vital group to reach—middle and high school students. The solid support of adults, however, was, and is, the key to continued financial and institutional support of the D.A.R.E. Program.

The sheer size and profound financial strength of the program were hard to comprehend. According to D.A.R.E., 36 million children have participated, with 75% of American schools actively institutionalizing the program. A fascinating fixture of the program was the D.A.R.E. car, typically, a high-end performance car "seized" in drug raids. Program providers were unable to explain exactly what message the car was supposed to communicate, but participants did find it interesting.

Institutional success eventually began to conflict with questions about programmatic success. The 1972 Presidential Report on marijuana use had resulted in federal funding awards to major universities and other research organizations for evaluation of drug education programs. By the early 1990s, these well-documented evaluations showed little or even negative impact in terms of drug use and abuse among D.A.R.E. graduates as they matured.

In 1994, the internationally respected Research Triangle Institute published a detailed analysis criticizing the D.A.R.E. Program. Shortly after the RIT publication, the Los Angeles Times reported that the D.A.R.E. organization had spent over $40,000 to try to prevent distribution of the evaluative research. The Director of Publications for the American Journal of Public Health reported to USA Today that, "D.A.R.E. had tried to interfere with the publication…" of research suggesting potential psychological damage among some participants. "They tried to intimidate us," he stated.

The director of D.A.R.E. fundraising in New York, Ronald Brogan, publicly used profanity in responding to another technical publication that criticized D.A.R.E.'s impact on drug use/abuse over time. Instead of discussing possible weaknesses in research approach, he was widely quoted as pointing out that the research was meaningless, since everything degrades over time. His formal response to the research was, "No shit, Sherlock." This odd rebuff of respected researchers gave the issue a national audience and rather stunned the research community, which, it is fair to say, didn't quite know how to respond to Mr. Brogan. Shortly thereafter, we published our evaluation of D.A.R.E. in Minnesota, which is attached.

Finally, the National Institute of Justice provided a major grant to the University of Maryland to complete a comprehensive, unbiased assessment of existing related research. They reported, simply and clearly, "D.A.R.E. does not reduce substance use." Soon, all federal funding was formally terminated, but the sheer popularity of the program allowed it to not only survive but thrive, in spite of mounting negative research findings. In 2001, the Surgeon General quite publicly placed the program in a category of drug education programs labeled as, "Ineffective Primary Prevention Programs."

According to D.A.R.E. officials, the program was consistently judged unfairly by researchers. They argued that researchers were sympathetic toward legalization of marijuana, or were retaliating out of envy for D.A.R.E.'s financial success. In some cases, D.A.R.E. does seem to have been inappropriately criticized. For instance, the New Republic was required to run a retraction of certain statements, and there always have been a substantial number of anecdotal but documented stories about the program's ability to help individuals avoid drug use.

Based on our 1997 analysis, the program seemed to have had little or no meaningful impact on substance abuse; however, interaction between law enforcement and the schools was often enhanced. Our 1997 report is dated in terms of specifics regarding present-day D.A.R.E. programs, but we felt that the survey instruments and our

approach to drug education programming evaluation may be of contemporary value. The report is attached.

In 2007, the American Psychological journal, Perspectives on Psychological Science, reported that the D.A.R.E. Program had the potential to "harm" participants. At that point, D.A.R.E. began to refocus its approach, and it is now described as being more geared to connecting with older students and those more culturally diverse. Recently, D.A.R.E. has developed a program variation called, "Keeping it Real," in which somewhat limited clinical trials seem to demonstrate a positive impact, particularly among multi-cultural groups. At this point (2014), our sense is that we cannot quantify the program's impact on drug use or abuse. As always, it remains popular among young children and adults.

One of the most controversial aspects of the program relates to the introduction of a law enforcement culture within the school. Essentially, children are, or have been, recruited to act as informants. There are a number of documented and, in some instances, widely publicized cases in which children reported their parents' marijuana possession to law enforcement, leading to arrest of the parents. In terms of civics, this was problematic to many, and by most standards, deemed outside the school district's traditional role in the community. A particularly dramatic case in Colorado involved a 10-year-old boy reporting his parents for marijuana possession, assuming the police would explain to his parents the dangers of marijuana use, as they had in his classroom. Instead, his action resulted in an aggressive public arrest of his parents, and the boy's tearful separation from them and temporary placement in a foster home. It has been speculated that this highly public case had significant influence on the Colorado becoming the first state to legalize recreational use of marijuana.

The school has a responsibility to persuasively teach young people how to safely thrive in a society where recreational intoxication and its accompanying risks are now and always will be a reality. How that responsibility is honored is one of the toughest, yet most important, for school leaders to get right.

D.A.R.E. Program Evaluation Attachment

Published well over a decade ago, the following detailed assessment and evaluation of the Minnesota and National D.A.R.E. Programs, created by our organization in 1997, received significant distribution throughout the country. We are told this publication contributed to positive changes in the D.A.R.E. Program and helped guide the development of how many school districts chose to approach drug education. We believe those research approaches and programmatic insights may have value today.

Given the evolving legalization, in some states, of marijuana use among adults, our sense is that there will likely be a renewed focus on providing drug education outreach programs to prevent the spread of marijuana use to young people. It seemed to us that this document might be of special value to school districts that are trying to design the best educational path to follow, as the paradigm of drug use in America changes.

The Minnesota Attorney General actively chaired the "D.A.R.E. Advisory Council," in which practicing D.A.R.E. officers participated. We reported to that Council, which also included representatives from the treatment community, parent groups, and the State Commissioners of Human Services and Public Safety. Our reports, meetings, and processes were public, transparent, and accurately reported by local media.

We were given adequate resources to conduct a detailed assessment of past research and to conduct original surveys. Most significantly, we never were required to respond to outside pressure directed toward influencing our findings or analysis.

There were three findings regarding the D.A.R.E. Program that we believe should be of interest:

1. A preponderance of academically accredited research made it clear that the D.A.R.E. Program did not prevent substance use or abuse among older student populations.

2. The acceptance and appreciation for the D.A.R.E. Program among the general adult community was overwhelming. One interesting finding was that many superintendents indicated that even if the D.A.R.E. Program did not prevent substance use or abuse, they would keep the program because of positive community interaction and public relations value.

3. An overwhelming majority of school administrators, school board members, teachers, chemical health coordinators, parent organization representatives, and even local law enforcement, wanted the D.A.R.E. Program strengthened, in terms of reaching out to parents.

While it is important to recognize that the D.A.R.E. Program itself has evolved since our report, and there is more recently published program evaluations, we understand that many of our findings have been helpful to schools in creating and evaluating drug and alcohol prevention and education programs in their own schools.

Hopefully, the attached report will be of value as schools move to develop responsive drug abuse prevention programming.