SUBSTANCE USE

There are potentially life-long brain effects for students who use substances in adolescence.

What is Substance Use?

Substance use refers to the consumption of alcohol or other drugs such as nicotine, marijuana, and prescription drugs. Students who use substances may either misuse and/or abuse them. When a student engages in substance misuse or abuse, it often has an impact on their friends, school community, and family. While the distinction between misuse and abuse may not impact how schools support students, it's important to understand a student's substance use behaviors in order to refer students to specific health services.

1. **Substance misuse** occurs when drugs are consumed outside of medical need or prescription.

2. **Substance abuse** is a set of related symptoms linked to the consumption of mind and behavior altering drugs that have negative health and behavioral outcomes which often have a cumulative effect.

Researchers have found that the adolescent brain is wired to seek out new experiences and take risks in order to find one's own identity. Trying substances for many students may be a part of this risk-taking behavior that can lead to serious long-term consequences. By the time students reach 12th grade, nearly 70% will have tried alcohol, 50% will have taken an illegal drug, 40% will have smoked a cigarette, and 20% will have used a prescription drug for nonmedical purposes in their lifetime.

Research suggests that there are a number of factors that may influence a students' likelihood to engage repeatedly with risky behaviors, such as: stress, anxiety, problems at home, lack of trustable adults, and struggling in school. However, many of these factors are not exclusive to substance use, so it is important to create a school community that encourages open communication between students and adults. In these conversations adults suspend judgment, ask open-ended questions, validate the student's perspective, listen with curiosity, and affirm the student's strengths.

⚠️ Consider if a Student is Involved in Substance Use

There are a number of signs that a student may need additional support from trusted and caring adults. However, these signs are not exclusive to substance use and could indicate other behaviors or health concerns. Therefore, adults in the school community should first speak with the student before taking action to better understand the situation.

Sudden bouts of depression or hostility

Loss of interest in their favorite activities

Missed classes or skips school regularly

1

The likelihood of developing a substance use disorder is greatest for those who begin using substances in their early teens.

What Are The Effects of Substance Use?

The younger a student is when they try a substance, the greater their chances of continuing to use substances, as well as developing substance use problems later in life. Substance misuse and abuse among students can lead to a variety of detrimental outcomes, including but not limited to:

- An inability to fulfill age-appropriate responsibilities, such as regularly attend school or maintain a job.
- Legal problems, such as arrests for using a substance or disorderly conduct.
- Impaired brain development impacting cognitive function in adulthood.
- Mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety.
- Increase in other risky behaviors, such as driving under the influence and unprotected sex.
- Increased risk of contracting an infectious disease, such as Hepatitis C or HIV.
- Increased chronic health problems later in life, such as heart disease and sleep disorders.

By the time students graduate high school, approximately 46% of teens will have tried marijuana at least once.

What Can Schools Do To Prevent Substance Use?

Schools can positively influence the behaviors and choices of students by creating environments that promote school connectedness and a positive school climate. Some broad strategies include:

- Create or strength a district and/or schoolwide substance-free policy and communicate the policy to the whole school community.
- Implement a substance education program in your school.
- Establish protocols for positive disciplinary action (e.g. alternatives to suspension) and referrals to support for students who violate the drug-free policy.
- Address your school community's perceptions and attitudes about youth substance use by sharing accurate information and data to shift beliefs and behaviors.
- Incorporate interpersonal communication strategies, such as refusal skills and boundary setting, into classroom instruction across grade-levels.

BY THE NUMBERS
The Disproportionate Effects of Substance Use

When selecting a program or approach to address substance use in your school community, use an equity framework that considers the diversity of experiences. The statistics highlighted below are to encourage you to examine your own data to understand how diverse identities and marginalized students are disproportionately impacted by specific substances. Certain substances will uniquely impact different sub-populations; not all populations are significantly impacted by every substance.

Regardless of gender, adolescents who have been diagnosed with a behavioral or emotional disorder are found to have an increased risk of substance use or abuse.

18%

About 18% of adolescents who report substance use also experience depression.

2X

Due to discrimination and social stigma, LGBTQ youth are 2x more likely to have used marijuana in the past year (52.1%) compared to their heterosexual peers (25.1%).

Substance Use and the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child Model

The Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model is designed to guide all school community stakeholders to collaboratively address health behaviors and create environments that promote health and wellness for students by integrating the ten component areas. Through this interconnected and collaborative approach, the WSCC model aims to support the whole child to be healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged. For any given health issue at any given school, the resources and involvement of each component area may vary. In regard to Substance Use prevention, health education, social & emotional climate, and physical environment component areas may be more involved in efforts.

Example strategies for aligning and coordinating substance use prevention-specific practices across the ten WSCC component areas:

Community Involvement
- Have school representation in local coalitions and/or organizations that are planning and implementing substance-free programs.
- Partner with community organizations, such as local public health, to develop comprehensive prevention programs.
- Coordinate with community organizations that provide after-school enrichment programs for students.

Family Engagement
- Promote family involvement on planning committees to update substance-free school policies and select curricula.
- Communicate with families to explain district policies, prevention goals, and enforcement strategies.

Employee Wellness
- Share resources with staff who want to quit using a substance (e.g., Colorado QuitLine for tobacco 1-800-QUIT-NOW; National Drug Helpline 1-800-662-HELP).
- Provide information and training to staff on legal and illegal substances, associated harmful effects, misconceptions, and impacts of peer pressure.

Physical Environment
- Prohibit substance use by students, staff, and visitors on school property, including school vehicles, or at any school-sponsored off-campus event.
- Post signs and information about substance-free policies in school buildings and at school functions.
- Create procedures for communicating the substance-free policy to students, school staff, families, and visitors and consistently enforce the policies for everyone on the school campus.

Health Education
- Incorporate substance use prevention curriculum into health education classes starting in middle school.
- Teach students refusal skills and boundary setting to address peer-pressure around substance use.
- Teach students healthy coping mechanisms (e.g. mindfulness, physical activity, prosocial interaction with peers).

Social & Emotional Climate
- Provide opportunities for peers to engage in prosocial behaviors to promote school connectedness (e.g. after school clubs, mentoring programs, community service projects).
- Implement a comprehensive social and emotional learning program to help adults and students manage emotions, increase empathy, establish healthy relationships, make decisions, and set goals.

Physical Education & Physical Activity
- Equip students with the knowledge and skills to engage in different types of physical activity with their peers outside of school hours.
- Encourage students to use physical activity as a coping mechanism for stress.

Nutrition Environment & Services
- Invite a health professional from the community to speak to students about how food choices can help stabilize mood and reduce stress.
- Educate students about elements in foods that may impair healthy growth and development (e.g. caffeinated beverages, sugar-sweetened beverages).
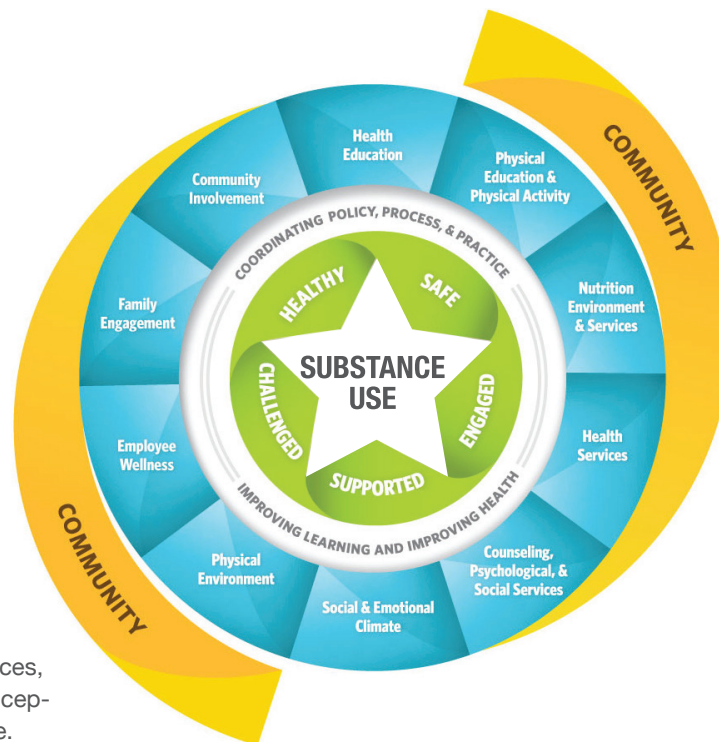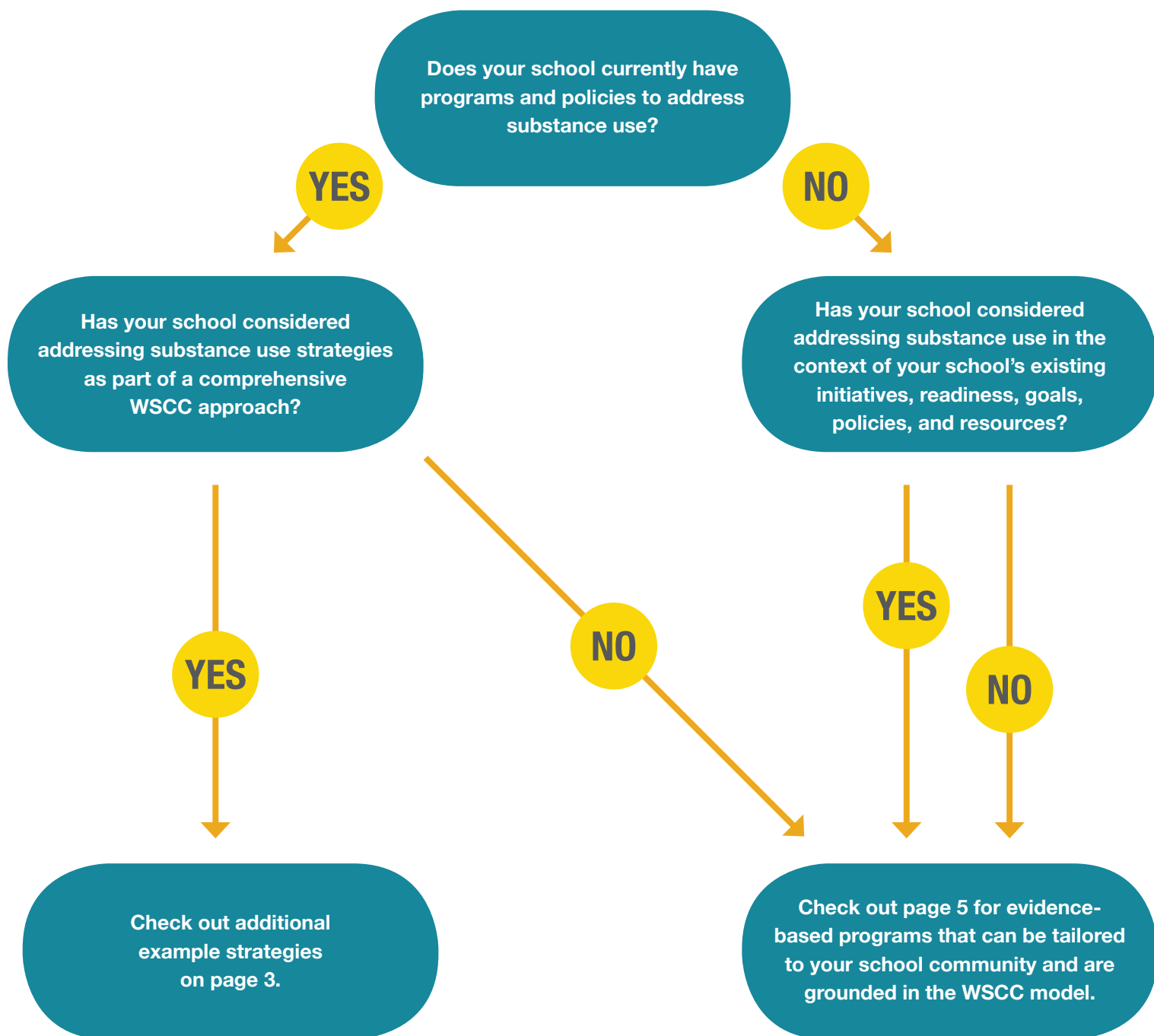
Health Services
- Provide referrals to programs to help students quit using substances.
- Screen for mental health conditions and substance use risk factors as part of routine health services.

Counseling, Psychological, & Social Services
- Provide counseling for students who violate a school substance-free policy.
- Teach students how to confidentially report and seek support if they or someone they know is using substances.
- Screen for student substance use dependency and readiness to quit.

Next Steps

One of the most effective ways to address youth substance use is to implement a comprehensive policy and program that teaches students personal and social skills. When selecting programs for your school for embedding substance use prevention, a comprehensive analysis of existing initiatives, readiness, and aims and goals is important to be effective and sustainable for your school community. This flowchart will help you determine what is already in place in your school, what can be added, and how best to select strategies that meet your school needs.

Does your school currently have programs and policies to address substance use?

YES

NO

Has your school considered addressing substance use strategies as part of a comprehensive WSCC approach?

Has your school considered addressing substance use in the context of your school's existing initiatives, readiness, goals, policies, and resources?

YES

NO

YES

NO

Check out additional example strategies on page 3.

Check out page 5 for evidence-based programs that can be tailored to your school community and are grounded in the WSCC model.

For additional information, including the Menus of Best Practice, visit HealthySchoolsHub.org.

When considering prevention and intervention strategies, it is important to implement policies and programs that are proven to be effective in school settings. The programs highlighted below are rooted in health education and are meant to be incorporated into a comprehensive school-wide approach to address substance use.

Life Skills Training:

GRADES 3-12

Life Skills Training is a classroom-based program designed to prevent adolescent tobacco, alcohol, marijuana use, and violence. Program materials include resources to facilitate the development of important personal and social skills through: personal self-management skills, social skills, and information and resistance skills specifically related to substance use.

Project Towards No Drug Abuse:

GRADES 9-12

Project Towards No Drug Abuse (TND) is a prevention program for high school youth who are at risk for substance use and violence-related behavior. Project TND curriculum contains twelve 40-minute interactive sessions taught by a content teacher or health educator over a 3-week period. Sessions provide instruction in motivation activities to not use substances; skills in self-control, communication, and resource acquisition; and decision-making strategies. The program is delivered universally and has been used in both traditional and alternative, high-risk high schools.

Positive Action:

GRADES PreK-12

Positive Action is a schoolwide program that includes school climate change and classroom instruction. Materials for each grade level are composed of the same seven units with age-appropriate instruction, unifying and reinforcing the messages across the school community. Positive Action emphasizes social emotional learning focusing on: self-management; positive and negative actions/behaviors; and physical, intellectual, social, and emotional health.

! The following policies and approaches should be considered in order to maintain a safe school environment.

- Replace "zero tolerance policies" that result in automatic suspension or expulsion with alternatives that are safe, equitable, and appropriate for your school community.

- Create structures and procedures that promote consistent enforcement of the school's substance-free policy.

- Integrate substance use prevention into schoolwide health initiatives.

The example WSCC aligned strategies (pg. 3), flow chart (pg. 4), and suggested evidence-based programs (pg. 5) are distilled from a comprehensive, systematic, and rigorous review of relevant research. This research compilation and supporting tools are available on HealthySchoolsHub.org.

Youth.Gov (n.d.). Substance use/misuse. https://youth.gov/youth-topics/substance-abuse

National Institute on Drug Abuse (2014). Introduction. https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/principles-adolescent-substance-use-disorder-treatment-research-based-guide/introduction

National Institute on Drug Abuse (2014, January). What are signs of drug use in adolescents, and what role can parents play in getting treatment? https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/principles-adolescent-substance-use-disorder-treatment-research-based-guide/frequently-asked-questions/what-are-signs-drug-use-in-adolescents-what-role-can-parents-play-in-getting-treatment

Youth.Gov (n.d.). Warning signs. https://youth.gov/youth-topics/substance-abuse/warning-signs-adolescent-substance-abuse

Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2020, February 10). Teen substance use & risks. https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/fasd/features/teen-substance-use.html

National Institute on Drug Abuse (2014, January). Principles of adolescent substance use disorder treatment. https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/principles-adolescent-substance-use-disorder-treatment-research-based-guide/principles-adolescent-substance-use-disorder-treatment

Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2019, November 21). Fostering school connectedness: Improving student health and academic achievement. https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/protective/factsheets/connectedness_teachers.htm

Youth.Gov (n.d.). Prevention. https://youth.gov/youth-topics/substance-abuse/evidence-based-programs-youth-substance-abuse-prevention-and-treatment