

POLICY ISSUE BRIEF: DRUG, ALCOHOL, AND OTHER SUBSTANCES

Issue at a Glance

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) in 2024 reported 2.1 million people in the U. S. are suffering from an addiction to either prescription or illicit opioids.

The number of individuals addicted to drugs like heroin and cocaine continues to rise as has drug abuse related deaths with over 105,000 Americans dying from drug overdoses in 2023; a twofold increase in a decade. In 2024, 10% of American adults—one in ten individuals—met the criteria for alcohol use disorder. Underage drinking also continues to rise, as over 4,300 deaths have been the result of alcohol consumption by underage youth each year since 2010. Approximately 775,000 youth ages 12–18 meet the criteria for an alcohol use disorder.

In 2025, the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) at the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) released its [HEAL Opioid Use Disorder and Overdose Strategic Plan](#), to combat the synthetic drug crisis and devastating impacts of fentanyl, which claimed nearly 50,000 lives last year according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The DEA has developed targeted prevention outreach to increase public awareness through the following initiatives:

- One Pill Can Kill
- Red Ribbon Week
- National Prescription Drug Take Back Day
- Together for Families Network
- Every Day is Take Back Day
- Operation Engage
- Operation Prevention
- Diversion Outreach

While drug and alcohol abuse by a parent may play a more indirect role in a student's ability to succeed in the classroom, it does not make it any less impactful. For example, students living with a parent or guardian struggling with opioid addiction are missing more days of school. There has also been an increase in students who are displaced or orphaned due to a parent's drug abuse, leaving these students to now live with either their grandparents or in foster care (Rafa, 2018). Furthermore, substance abuse often leads to health problems for individuals, which can directly impact a guardian's ability to provide the necessary care students need.

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Students involved in substance abuse often have more absences, social issues, memory problems, and suffer from a higher risk of health issues and suicide. As more students are affected by substance abuse, schools have been called upon to provide services and support. Unfortunately, many areas are ill-equipped to handle the drastic increase in affected students. For example, by the 2021–22 school year, there was an average of only one school counselor for every 405 students. The recommended ratio from the American School Counseling Association is one school counselor for every 250 students. The lack of funding for schools to address these issues has made it increasingly difficult for them to offer the necessary training, education, and support needed to properly aid students affected by substance abuse.

National Principals Association Position

- National Principals Association supports the development of strategies to reduce stigma and improve parent engagement in services, assess safety and risk factors with families affected by substance use, and strengthen protective capacities in families.
- National Principals Association supports the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration initiative of “Fentanyl Free America,” a public awareness initiative designed to address the growing threat of synthetic opioids, reduce the supply of illicit fentanyl and the demand for these dangerous substances through strengthened enforcement efforts and expanded public education.
- National Principals Association supports increased comprehensive research to address the ongoing addiction and overdose crisis among youth to develop safeguarding national and state policies.
- National Principals Association encourages planning and prioritizing the advancement of prevention, treatment, and recovery strategies, expanding access to evidence-based care, and accelerating innovative approaches to reduce opioid-related harms.
- National Principals Association supports working with education and community leaders and health and mental health related agencies to reduce and eliminate opioid use disorders and prevention of overdose.
- National Principals Association supports fostering and nurturing an intentional focus to educate students on the negative impacts of drug and alcohol abuse, promote mental health and wellness, and work closely with parents for productive conversations and intervention.

Recommendations for Federal Policymakers

- Provide flexible use of funding streams in education and mental health services.
- Improve staffing ratios of mental health providers to allow delivery of a full range of services and effective school-community partnerships.
- Fully fund programs, like Supporting Effective Instruction State Grants, that accommodate educator professional development to support students dealing with trauma.
- Provide additional support for federal agencies to better educate the public about the dangers of substance abuse.
- Provide training, access, and resources from the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration which reach school leaders.

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Recommendations for State Policymakers

- Implement a statewide model that helps schools move from a model of policing drug and alcohol abuse to prevention and intervention.
- Build federal and state partnerships for personnel and student training from local and national DEA officers.
- Provide training for school nurses or other school personnel to maintain and administer life-saving measures to combat overdoses on school grounds.
- Require the inclusion of age-appropriate substance misuse and abuse instruction in health curricula.

Recommendations for District Leaders

- Ensure that substance abuse components being used in current curricula are up to date. An updated curriculum should include information on substance abuse at all levels of education.
- Make arrangements either inside or outside of school to offer effective substance abuse treatment.
- Ensure training opportunities and resources provided to the district from the DEA reach each school leader.
- Create one point-of-contact at the district who serves as the intermediary staff with DEA initiatives, awareness, training, and resources to each school leader ensuring training is continuous throughout the year.
- Implement multi-tiered systems of support for students that encompass prevention, wellness promotion, and interventions.
- Allow schools to employ qualified staff whose sole purpose is to focus on student wellness.
- Focus on prevention and effective interventions as responses to disciplinary matters for students dealing with drug issues, including positive behavioral interventions and supports, mentoring, mental health counseling, restitution, and community service programs.
- Develop partnerships with local substance abuse programs to aid students and families.

Recommendations for School Leaders

- Create a safe environment and positive culture to support all students.
- Contact your local DEA for partnership and ongoing training in school for students and personnel.
- Contact your local DEA to implement prevention supports from the “Fentanyl Free America” initiative.
- Train school personnel on how to aid students suffering directly or indirectly from substance abuse.
- Create a support network for students in recovery and students whose family members are suffering from addiction; incorporate student voice through the school’s student council.
- Incorporate trauma-informed practices and instruction in schools.
- Work with staff to identify and assist students displaying risk factors, like chronic absenteeism.
- Introduce measures that aid students dealing with substance abuse and enforce consequences that could lead to further behavioral or academic issues, such as suspensions, as a last resort.