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Report: Schools Can't, Shouldn't Shoulder Prevention Burden

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News Feature

By Bob Curley

Most American kids receive some drug education in the classroom, but a new report contends that schools should not be relied upon to prevent early use of alcohol and other drugs and its consequences.

The report, "[Preventing Education in America's Schools: Findings and Recommendations from a Survey of Educators](#)," noted that 37 states require schools to teach students about the dangers of alcohol and other drugs. However, "Teachers don't have the time, training or other resources needed to do the job effectively, regardless of what the state-mandated standards say," according to the report by Join Together and [Communitas Online](#).

For example, the report noted that 26 percent of educators who actively teach prevention in the classroom said they have had no training to do so.

David Rosenbloom, director of Join Together, said that schools have become the primary source of prevention education "by default," and should not be faulted for their inability to deliver services effectively. "Schools

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are only one part of the community solution," he said. "This report points out the need for each community to develop an effective prevention strategy and not just assume the schools will take care of things."

Nor should the report be taken as an attempt by schools to simply "punt" a difficult issue, he added. "We found that teachers were willing to be involved, but they're telling us they simply don't have the time to do it," said Rosenbloom.

Mathea Falco, president of Drug Strategies -- which produced the seminal "Making the Grade" reports on effective school-based prevention -- said she still believes there is a role for prevention in the schools. "It's the one place you have a captive audience outside of prison," she noted. "We can't abandon the goal of having effective prevention programs in our schools."

However, she added, "I think that, pragmatically, the pressures schools are now under to meet the academic testing standards under No Child Left Behind essentially leave them without any extra time that might be devoted to prevention." Combined with a 21-percent cut in federal prevention funding since 2002, testing mandates leaves school-based prevention "off the radar screen," said Falco.

The report authors recommended that:

- Schools should not be the principal provider of general prevention education. However, "they can and should play a role as part of a comprehensive community prevention strategy

including parents and other social institutions."

- School systems should carefully reevaluate money and time spent on outside programs and speakers and unfocused printed materials, because they are likely to have no lasting impact on what students know about alcohol and other drugs or on their drinking or drug-taking behavior." Both teachers and past research have found these types of interventions to be ineffective, the report noted.
- Schools should adopt proven, research-based prevention programs and curricula for use in after-school and extracurricular activities.
- Teachers should be given easier access to proven prevention materials that can be used within the actual time constrictions in schools.
- Teachers and administrators with alcohol and other drug prevention as part of their job responsibilities should be held accountable in formal evaluations.

The survey found that only about a quarter of the educators surveyed said their schools had one or more courses devoted to alcohol and other drug prevention. The subject was most likely (42 percent) to be covered as part of other courses, such as health.

But 32 percent of respondents said that prevention is taught inconsistently or not at all, and more than three-quarters

of educators said they spend less than 10 hours annually on the subject of alcohol and other drug prevention. "You need to spend at least 10 hours on prevention to be effective; otherwise, it's just a complete waste of time," said Falco.

When prevention is taught, 77 percent of educators said the information is delivered via teacher lectures and demonstrations, although 53 percent also reported using outside experts, and 32 percent used D.A.R.E. In elementary schools, however, D.A.R.E. officers were the most likely to deliver prevention education, followed by guidance counselors (38 percent), outside speakers (31 percent), physical-education teachers (26 percent), and health-education specialists (25 percent).

"Schools continue to use D.A.R.E. when the program has been proven repeatedly and at huge public expense to be ineffective," said Falco.

At the middle-school level, health teachers most commonly taught prevention, followed by guidance counselors. High-school students were most likely to learn about alcohol and other drugs from health specialists.

Only 39 percent of educators surveyed rated their prevention programs "very effective" or "somewhat effective," while 32 percent called their programs "not very effective" or "not at all effective" (29 percent said they didn't know how effective their programs are).

The report, funded by the Gift of the Magi Foundation, was based on online

surveys of more than 3,500 teachers,
school administrators, and other
educators from across the U.S.

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