

# Listen to the Kids

*When it comes to drug education, students confirm what research says*

BY JOEL H. BROWN

Nothing is as simple as it seems—especially for educators in search of a cure for the increasing number of young people who are using and abusing drugs. The enormous pressure to find abuse-prevention programs that report positive results has resulted in a situation where, at best, some organizations present drug-education information that does not examine the whole picture. At worst, some organizations and scientists seem to be confederates who are intent on trying to *prove* the effectiveness of specific programs rather than examining programs objectively for their effectiveness—or even asking students what they think about programs designed for them.

This pressure was evident when Drug Strategies, a Washington, D.C.-based non-profit organization, announced last year that it had reviewed 47 substance-abuse prevention programs and identified the most effective ones. *The American School Board Journal* featured these programs in a January 1997 article, "More Than Just No," as a service to readers.

But was it a service? Has Drug Strategies revealed possible cures for the epidemic of drug abuse now rising in our schools? Many researchers—myself included—think not. Even the rating system Drug Strategies used raises questions: How is it possible for a program to receive grades of B on some of the components being rated

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and still receive an A grade overall? A close look at Drug Strategies' recommendations provides somber lessons concerning fundamental problems in policies and programs aimed at reducing drug abuse.

First, though, I must point out where I agree with Drug Strategies: Research has shown repeatedly that Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE), the popular program promoted by law enforcement agencies,

"I guess the best education would be the education that would allow you to evaluate yourself and allow you to evaluate your own personal beliefs and your morals and your values and take a strong look at what you're feeling and how you might have the possibility to be a substance abuser."

—High school student

has not proven effective in combating drug abuse.

But neither have many of the programs endorsed by Drug Strategies. Research shows, for instance, that alcohol use actually appears to *increase* among youngsters in the highly touted Life Skills Training program when, as is common, not all components of the program are taught. And not everyone agrees with Drug Strategies' endorsement of abuse-prevention programs that, on the surface, appear to stress the development of students' social skills. In a recent comprehensive review of social skills research, D. M. Gorman of Rutgers University found

that the "majority of studies show that social skills programs, while not detrimental, have little or no impact upon participants" in regard to alcohol or drug use.

In my view, the trouble is twofold: Students cannot develop real social skills and real decision-making skills when they are taught that only one decision is the right decision. And kids who don't make the right decision are removed from the system (and any possibility of help) through zero-tolerance policies that force suspensions and expulsions.

These problems stem at least partly from the fact that drug programs largely ignore research on youth development and education. As a result, the "education" in drug education is more myth than reality.

## What students say

The California Drug, Alcohol, and Tobacco Education (DATE) evaluation, conducted by a team of 20 researchers in 1991-94, examined all drug education programs in California, including DARE, Red Rib-

bon Weeks, and social skills programs.

Our peer-reviewed study, reported in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* and elsewhere, constitutes one of the nation's most comprehensive evaluations of drug abuse prevention programs. It includes in-depth interviews with more than 400 educators, administrators, and community members. And it is one of the first studies to include the voices of students, through surveys of more than 5,000 randomly selected students and 240 in-depth interviews with students in 40 focus groups.

Listening to what kids, adults, and researchers say about drug abuse pre-

vention programs has led our research team to the following conclusions:

- **Even apparently "effective" programs are of questionable utility.** Only 15 percent of the California students felt that drug, alcohol, and tobacco education programs affected them "a lot" or "completely." Seventy percent of the students said they felt either neutral or negative about their drug educators, with 30 percent stating they disliked drug educators "a little" or "a lot." And more than 55 percent felt the programs had no effect or an unknown effect on their decisions about substance abuse.

But these programs were not only ineffective. They were also detrimental for three reasons: First, they caused cognitive dissonance among students; second, those in need of help were removed from the school system; and third, students did not receive complete and accurate information that could prevent problems.

As education research demonstrates, deep learning will not occur unless students believe their teachers are credible. But as early as fifth grade, students in our study described a mixed message between the overt or covert "no substance use" messages they received at school versus the variable social contexts, types of drugs, and levels of drug use they witnessed outside of school. Drug education is one of the few educational circumstances in which students can compare what they hear in school with what they see in real life.

These comparisons lead some students to conclude that adults and educators are lying to them. And these students might well wonder, "If we can't believe adults about the drug use we can see in the real world, why should we believe them about algebra and history and all the other subjects we can't see around us?"

School drug policies also give students an indication of whether adults care about their well-being. In 39 of 40 focus groups, students described their school's primary drug policy as a matter of detention, suspension, and/or expulsion. Many described dismay at seeing classmates with substance-abuse problems removed from school, rather than being given help by trusted adults in the school setting. And they expressed interest in participating in drug education in a more supportive environment.

In addition to telling us what didn't

work, students told us how drug-prevention programs could become more effective. Nearly all student groups expressed an interest in more comprehensive drug information presented in a judgment-free, informal, frank, and confidential format, and they desired help for those students who need it. And what these kids told us is supported by other research.

- **Most drug education focuses on youth deficits, not capabilities.** Less than 10 percent of young people grow into adults with substance-abuse problems, yet drug programs designed for the general student population are driven by the needs of a few students.

That need not be the case. After following the development of 698 children since 1954, Emmy Werner of the University of California at Davis has identified what she calls "resilient" youth who have survived several stress factors, such as family alcoholism and poverty, without developing serious learning and behavior problems.

Werner identified several "protective factors"—such as disposition, emotional support, and external support—that these resilient children shared. Designing programs aimed at developing these strengths could lead to improved drug education.

- **Students need more honest information about drugs and their effects.** Back in the 1970s, the National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA) recommended that educators "assist students in learning how to weigh the consequences of possible decisions they could make on drug issues." NIDA recognized that the "'drug problem' (however it may be defined) is not inherent in the mere existence of pharmacological substances," but stems from "the way people decide to use those substances." In order to head off "problem drug use," NIDA said, teachers need to "help students learn how to use drugs responsibly and learn how to find alternative solutions to personal problems that might otherwise lead to drug abuse." To that end, said NIDA, drug education should take on a "process-oriented or problem-solving approach," with the teacher serving "more as a facilitator of learning than as an imparter of knowledge."

- **State and federal mandates prevent the implementation of promising "best-practice" alternatives.** According to the federal Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act, all

students must be provided with a "clear and consistent message that the illegal use of alcohol and other drugs is wrong and harmful." And according to a 1989 White House directive, anti-drug programs must also be enforced "with real consequences for those who use" drugs. The result has been continued funding targeted at no-use drug education—at ineffective programs based on deceptive premises.

When young people recognize that they are being taught to follow directions, rather than to make decisions, they feel betrayed and resentful. As long as federal mandates force this charade, drug education programs and policies will continue to fail.

### So what can we do?

We are at the point where we must begin again. And I am not alone in believing that. In 1991, a U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) report concluded: "Because there is no evidence that the no-use approach is more successful than alternative approaches, or even successful in its own right, examining only no-use models may result in the failure of the recognition efforts to identify other strategies that are also helping to reduce drug use." Adolescent substance-use policies must now include the possibility of funding, developing, and evaluating programs stressing what the GAO report called

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## For more information

Following are selected references reporting results from the California Drug, Alcohol, and Tobacco Education evaluation. For a complete list of references, contact the author at [jbb@dnai.com](mailto:jbb@dnai.com).

Brown, J. H.; D'Emidio-Caston, M.; and Pollard, J. "Students and Substances: Social Power in Drug Education." *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis (EEPA)*, 19, January 1997, pp. 65-82.

Brown, J. H., and D'Emidio-Caston, M. "On Becoming At-Risk through Drug Education: How Symbolic Policies and Their Practices Affect Students." *Evaluation Review*, 19, April 1995, pp. 451-92.

Brown, J. H., and Horowitz, J. E. "Deviance and Deviants: Why Adolescent Substance Use Prevention Programs Do Not Work." *Evaluation Review*, 17, May 1993, pp. 529-55.

## Governance

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student population. (As a superintendent, I used to receive complaints from teachers who claimed to have been "evaluated" in their classrooms by certain school board members. You can imagine the friction this caused between the board and school principals.)

But the situation doesn't have to be this way. Relic described the ideal relationship between the school board and the superintendent as "neither arcane nor complex. The one adopts policy, the other administers that policy. For all to see, the partnership is open, rational, and productive. Functioning properly, it is a superb system of checks and balances."

6. Is the board quick to buy out superintendents' contracts? That superb system can fall apart when board members and superintendents don't agree on an issue. Disagreements between board members and superintendents are natural, perhaps inevitable, but when they go unchecked, boards can develop the habit of dismissing superintendents. A troubled board often uses the superintendent as a convenient scapegoat for problems, but dismissing a superintendent can create more problems than it solves.

The price of switching superintendents is expensive, both emotionally and financially. When a board decides to dismiss a superintendent, it will usually "buy" the remaining years in a superintendent's contract as a payoff for leaving. One superintendent told *Education Week* that his "school district was paying three superintendents simultaneously—two to stay home and one to come to work."

Rather than waste taxpayers' dollars, school boards need to work toward mediating conflicts with superintendents and closing chasms without putting the district through the ordeal of a dismissal. Consultants who can help in the mediation process are available from the state board of education, the state school boards association, and even the local bar association.

These consultants can help with other problems as well. If you've answered Yes to more than one or two of these questions, you need to face the fact that your board isn't functioning properly—and could use some professional help. ♦

## Drug Education

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"informed decision making" and efforts to "reduce the riskiest forms of use."

The report—"Drug Abuse Prevention: Federal Efforts to Identify Exemplary Programs Need Stronger Design"—does "not condone the use of drugs, alcohol, or tobacco." Nor do I. But our research shows that drug education is most effective when it includes these elements:

- An educator who acts as a facilitator, not an imparter of knowledge.
- Accurate drug information provided during teachable moments.
- A focus on helping students develop real, age-appropriate decision-making skills and self-awareness of how they think, feel, and act in various situations.
- Promotion of the well-being of all young people by helping them become more resilient.
- Counselors for those who need help.
- An active role in changing policies that punish children. This includes eliminating zero-tolerance policies that multiply youngsters' difficulties by removing those who need help from the school system.

We are at a critical crossroads in drug education: We can maintain the same failed programs, or we can try programs that focus on youth development and provide help for those who need it. School board members and administrators can lead the way by rejecting new programs that are based on old, failed principles, and by demanding that the federal government allow drug education to be rooted in effective education. ♦

## Books

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surely be impatient with talk of numbers as merely the shadows cast by ideal forms in Plato's cave.

Nonetheless, the book does offer a rationale for revamping a stagnant curriculum. Schoolfolk trying to convince parents that memorization of arithmetic procedures and numerical recipes is wrongheaded will find support here.

So the value of this volume rests with how policy makers choose to use it. I worry that the book is a call for curricu-

lum uniformity, but I applaud the fact that the contributors show that mathematics is something people do, not a set of procedures to be memorized. ♦

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