

INTRODUCTION

Opioid prevention through the lens of what works and what does not work in preventing substance use among school-age youth

For many years, the risk of dying from an opioid (morphine, codeine, oxycodone, hydrocodone, heroin) overdose was primarily seen as a risk to middle-aged white males. With the advent of inexpensive synthetic opioids, such as fentanyl, overdoses in school-age youth have been increasing dramatically. While the majority of funding in this crisis has been allocated to treatment, policymakers and practitioners have called for prevention efforts to be directed to school-age youth.

The purpose of this resource is to offer considerations for educators, school administrators, law enforcement, parents, policymakers, and other community partners on engaging with schools to help prevent youth from using and overdosing on opioids, including fentanyl. Considerations are based on the best available evidence regarding what works and what does not work in preventing substance use among school-age youth. Schools are an attractive and effective venue for prevention interventions. Quite simply, schools are where one finds the vast majority of teens. Educators are charged with caring for and nurturing the students in their building. Additionally, the primary purpose of schools is educating youth, and a significant component of effective prevention includes education. Thus, teachers, counselors, coaches, and nurses employed in schools have essential roles in supporting prevention programming.

For decades, prevention scientists and program developers have focused on developing substance use curricula and other school-based programs and strategies aimed at delaying the onset of substance use and mitigating any harm that could result from use. In dealing with the crisis of opioid/fentanyl overdoses, we can draw upon the vast literature and lived and living experiences of trained professionals who have identified effective as well as ineffective prevention strategies. Sharing the expertise from decades of research and experience is the foundation of this resource. It is important to note that no materials or strategies have been evaluated rigorously that specifically target the prevention of opioid use or overdoses. This resource provides direction based on measures that have been effective in delaying onset and reducing the harm of using other substances such as tobacco, alcohol, marijuana, and other drugs.

An essential component of any school-based prevention strategy is a positive school climate. Students' everyday interactions with the adults in their building form the base for other prevention activities. An intervention will not be as effective when students experience bullying, inconsistent routines, anger, unsupportive discourse, or intimidation from adults. A protective climate in the school is the foundation for all prevention work, including secondary and tertiary strategies, which address emerging or existing substance use and associated consequences. The possibility for the best possible outcomes occurs when all members of the school community have a positive view of their school and feel protected and cared for. The adults in the school, especially leadership, are responsible for creating and maintaining such a prevention-focused environment.

This resource may appeal to people with a range of experiences:

- For the reader who has little experience or contact with school-based prevention, this resource can offer an overview of effective prevention.
- For the reader with experience working with schools in prevention, this resource can provide the most current information and serve as a refresher.
- For the reader who has worked frequently with schools in evidence-based prevention, this resource can serve as a blueprint for expanding substance use prevention to include opioid/fentanyl prevention.