

# WHAT WORKS IN SCHOOL-BASED FENTANYL AND OTHER DRUG PREVENTION

Whatever your level of experience in the field of substance abuse prevention, it is important to understand that not all prevention strategies are effective or even helpful. Many of the most common strategies being used by well-meaning parents and caregivers, schools, and communities have been shown by careful research to be ineffective or even to cause harm by unintentionally reinforcing and promoting pro-use attitudes, behaviors, and norms. **The use of approaches, curricula, and policies with demonstrated effectiveness is required to safeguard the health of students from the effects of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs, including fentanyl and opioids. In other words, fentanyl education should be aligned with the best available evidence for educating youth on any substance to prevent use.** (Additional considerations related to fentanyl and the outcome of overdose can be found on page 12 in the section on harm reduction.)

Past research has identified the characteristics of effective substance use prevention programs for youth.<sup>5,6</sup> These include: (1) going beyond merely raising awareness about the risks associated with substance use by focusing on building specific skills that empower youth to make healthy choices; (2) equip youth with competencies in life skills like self-management, interpersonal, assertive communication, and responsible decision-making<sup>7</sup> (3) offer a sufficient dose to create changes on substance use behaviors; (4) increase youth perceptions of risk and perceptions of anti-substance use norms, and (5) incorporate interactive and engaging delivery methods.

## Effective programs, curricula, and approaches incorporate the following core elements:

- **Development of personal and social skills:** This includes decision-making, stress management, identifying risk situations, goal-setting, and resisting peer pressure.<sup>5</sup>
- **Interactive and engaging methods:** Utilizing interactive techniques like role-playing, group discussions, and peer-led activities helps maintain student engagement and facilitates deeper understanding and retention of prevention messages.<sup>8,9</sup>
- **A comprehensive approach:** Programs that integrate multiple components—such as classroom instruction, family involvement, and community engagement—provide a more holistic strategy that reinforces positive behavior changes.<sup>10</sup>
- **Developmentally appropriate content:** Tailoring content to the age and cognitive abilities of students ensures relevance and effectiveness.<sup>12</sup> (Educating on the specifics of any substance is typically not introduced until middle school.)
- **Ongoing support and follow-up:** Including booster sessions and periodic evaluations helps sustain the effectiveness of the prevention efforts over time.<sup>13</sup>

### What Works

- Drug resistance skills training
- Social norms change
- Peer education

### What Does Not Work

- Informational approaches
- Awareness raising
- Bio-medical approaches
- Guest speakers/assemblies
- Scare tactics
- Dramatizations
- Affective approaches

