

Healthy Approaches

to addressing alcohol and other drugs in schools

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Shifting attitudes on drugs



Reacting to drug use takes more than getting help for someone following an incident. Instead, a pro-active approach that includes shifting school culture towards a supportive Whole School approach is vital. **Keri Welham** provides an overview of an approach that puts the long-term well-being of students ahead of punishment.

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en Birks Ang says schools have three clear opportunities to signal their approach to alcohol and other drug use. The first is in educating young people about the effects of substance use and good decision making, as required by the national curriculum. The second is in the establishment of a school climate that focuses on student wellbeing. The third is in a school's response to a breach of its rules.

Birks Ang is National Youth Services Adviser at the New Zealand Drug Foundation and Odyssey House. He says students should only be removed from school because of behaviour related to drugs or alcohol as a "last resort".

Education Ministry figures released in 2014 show "drugs (including substance abuse)" was the most common reason for a young person to be expelled from a New Zealand secondary school.

"Removing a student from school can have a large negative impact on a young person's life trajectory, because there are multiple benefits associated with remaining engaged with education," Birks Ang says.

Unsurprisingly, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development data clearly links educational attainment

to higher employment rates, longer life expectancy and enhanced skills.

Keeping young people at school doesn't mean they avoid consequences for unacceptable behaviour, but it does mean the school approaches the alcohol or drug use as a health issue and seeks appropriate care and treatment for the young person.

Schools favouring alternatives to exclusion from school are increasingly working to philosophies consistent with the Whole School approach (see sidebar). The first aim of the approach is creating a school environment that promotes wellbeing and positive social interactions. Supportive school environments are recognised as a vital tool in creating protective forces for young people.

Birks Ang says young people recognise their school as supportive when it encourages them to seek help, when it is clear there will be consequences for unacceptable behaviour but mistakes are seen as learning opportunities rather than opportunities for punishment and when they can have balanced discussions with adults at school about the pros and cons of risk-taking behaviours, such as lingering tension from fighting at a weekend party, and receive sound advice.

Birks Ang's role with Odyssey House takes him into various New Zealand secondary schools to help address the needs of young people battling problematic

“Half of the people in New Zealand who experience alcohol dependence would have developed it by the time they were 19 years of age.”

substance use or dependence. He says students in schools with punitive or zero-tolerance regimes have to work much harder to overcome problem drug or alcohol use. By comparison, students at schools with restorative practice models view teachers as key support people and are empowered for the work ahead.

The signals to move towards restorative practices may seem clear, but Birks Ang says he still sees ambivalence towards the first plank of the framework: the challenge of creating a supportive culture in a school.

Many schools appear to be focusing on the last plank, accessing professional treatment for high-needs students, “and slowly working backwards”.

Martin Henry is an advisory officer with responsibility for pastoral issues with the New Zealand Post Primary Teachers’ Association (PPTA).

Henry says Birks Ang is right about schools focusing disproportionate energy on crisis response rather than school culture.

“The first step is always to flail your arms.”

Wellbeing is a state of mind – a continuous journey – and there is no specific resourcing available to help a school develop it. Instead, many schools tend to invest resources into crisis response – even though Australian research has shown a focus on school climate and student connectedness may be “equally, if not more effective in addressing health and problem behaviours than specific, single issue focused education packages”.

Henry says most schools are moving in a positive direction. Positive Behaviour for Learning, an Education Ministry programme available to all schools, is helping show schools how to build positive environments. Meanwhile, a PPTA and Teachers’ Refresher Course Committee conference on Wellbeing in Schools is scheduled for 6–8 October in Auckland. It will include a workshop on Whole School approaches.

Henry says the media’s fixation with bullying, and society’s warranted concern about its impact on young people, has drawn attention away from the significant

impact of drug and alcohol use among teenagers.

“Drug and alcohol use and its impact on learning is arguably the biggest issue in the pastoral realm,” Henry says.

Recent research shows 24 percent of those surveyed meet the criteria for binge drinking, 23 percent have tried cannabis, and 11 percent use drugs to very high levels and are therefore predisposed to other health risks such as unsafe sex and obesity.

The Education Review Office (ERO) has shown a sharp interest in wellbeing. It released a report in February this year, titled *Wellbeing for Young People’s Success at Secondary School*, which says the most effective schools understand students need opportunities to learn and take risks in a safe environment.

In a 2014 report, ERO assessed the culture of nine schools ranked decile 5 or below. The schools explored alternatives to punitive measures.

The report says: “Once students are excluded or expelled it is often extremely difficult for them to re-engage with their education, have a sense of self-worth, and achieve the skills and qualifications that will help them in the future.”

In 2013, ERO released draft evaluation indicators for student wellbeing. One of the indicators reads: “All staff integrate a focus on student wellbeing alongside a focus on student achievement.”

Henry says this sentiment is key.

“Success is not just about the academic results,” Henry says.

“It might just be about keeping the kid in school or the kid not going to jail [in] the next 40 years.”

University of Auckland research has shown the main barriers to young people accessing health are hoping that the problem will go away not wanting to make a fuss and lack of transport.

Schools are increasingly overcoming these barriers by acting as unofficial community hubs, bringing highly skilled professionals into the school to work with young people in an environment where the young person feels safe. This takes hours of liaison and co-ordination on top of a dean or deputy principal’s existing workload.

Schools are keen to do the work, says PPTA Executive member Jack Boyle, but need effective policy to direct their well meaning efforts and funding to ensure support of high-risk students doesn’t come at the expense of their peers’ needs.

Despite these frustrations, Boyle says there is a lot of optimism in secondary

★ FACTBOX 1

The Whole School approach is aimed at developing student wellbeing. It is based on a World Health Organization philosophy and is gaining traction in New Zealand education as a valuable framework for changing the culture of Kiwi schools to better respond to student need.

The Whole School approach aims to:

- create positive school environments that promote wellbeing and positive social interactions
- deliver effective education as part of the curriculum
- provide school-based support interventions for students experiencing short-term alcohol-related harms
- involve professional treatment interventions for the few young people who need more extensive support.

📄 RESOURCES

Source: Ben Birks Ang, “Secondary school students and alcohol: Multiple levels of intervention can make a difference”, *Alcohol NZ* January 2015 <http://nzdrug.org/alcoholnz-jan15>

education, and the ERO’s focus on wellbeing is a welcome development.

The teaching of wellbeing issues, such as developing skills to think critically and self-manage, is generally limited to the health and physical education curriculum, which is not compulsory after year 10. However, Birks Ang says it’s generally beyond year 10 (13- and 14-year-olds) that many young people begin to encounter the situations for which they need the resilience and strategies taught through health education.

The mid-teens are not only a vital time for building up the skills and reserves of young people but also for intervention.

Birks Ang says dependencies, which could cause a lifetime of pain, are often developed during this time.

“Half of the people in New Zealand who experience alcohol dependence would have developed it by the time they were 19 years of age. Supporting those young people to make changes now would make a significant difference in the coming years.

“To be able to respond, each school needs to have prepared in advance and be resourced to support students with alcohol problems.” ■

Keri Welham is a Tauranga-based writer

“We’re not here to judge.”

At Auckland’s Aorere College, it is rare for young people to be permanently kicked out of school for drug-related incidents. Instead, students are supported to change while remaining within the school community. **Keri Welham** explains.



KERI WELHAM



Mark is 16 years old with a tidy uniform and a proud smile. The year 12 Aorere College student works part-time, plays rugby and tries to steer clear

of trouble at school.

But there was a time earlier in his secondary education when he got into trouble for using “weed and alcohol”. He turned up to class stoned – “just for fun”.

The student believes other schools would have scratched him from their roll, but Aorere College stood him down for three days. As a condition of his return to school, he was made to attend a course run by Odyssey House. It educated him about issues with drug and alcohol use and offered him tools, such as strategies for resisting peer pressure situations.

The investment in him, and the school’s decision to keep him on the roll, illustrated to the student that he was valued. He believes his teachers truly want him to finish school, and he’s grateful his education wasn’t derailed by what turned out to be a fairly short-lived phase of experimental drug use.

Mark is one of 1,550 students at decile 2 Aorere College in Papatoetoe, Auckland. The school is close to the international airport and its motto, *Virtus Caelum Recludit*, translates to ‘character opens the way to the heavens’.

While most Aorere students have home lives that are indistinguishable from those of Kiwi kids throughout the country, the school serves a community of particularly high social need.

A small number of students suffer acute financial, social and emotional deprivation. For this group, gambling addictions, hunger and poverty-related illness are common. Many weeks, at least one parent in the school community dies as a result of poor health.

There are 13-year-old students with babies and many families paying off school uniforms at \$5 a fortnight. Some students live in households where three families cohabit under one roof – victims of Auckland’s rampant housing market and the crippling rents that follow – while others have been found sleeping in cars with their families.

A few are born into gang families and coached in crime from a young age. Some live in households where the proceeds of drug sales are the main source of income.

Counsellor Debbie Binney says it is “normal” for some students to smoke weed with their parents or grandparents or be tasked with selling it on behalf of their family.

“It’s normal. For so many of our kids, it’s normal.”

Social worker Helen Perez says, for those with the most dysfunctional home lives, Aorere College is their “safe haven”.

“And from 8.40am till 3.10pm... this is a place that they know that they can be safe and not worry about the concerns and the issues that are going on at home. The kids know we’re not here to judge them.”

Tom Brown is Director of the Aorere College Student Services and Engagement Centre. He says the school has worked hard at creating an atmosphere where young people feel supported – a philosophy consistent with the first goal of the Whole School approach – and Aorere staff now increasingly help students with difficult personal problems usually considered beyond the notice and capability of a school.

Young and experienced staff often need to be educated in the Aorere approach to discipline. Brown says new teachers can over-react to behaviour issues and quickly escalate a situation that, in the context of the issues the school faces, is fairly minor. Educating newer staff to pick their battles, with a view to helping shape well rounded students capable of making good choices, is key to maintaining the school’s culture of support.

Brown says students respond to being trusted and treated as individuals. If a student breaks a rule, but it’s in the context of a small blip on a path of steady improvement, the school might opt to put them ‘on notice’ rather than deliver more severe consequences. Many students will learn more from that support and forgiveness, and the opportunity to

From left (clockwise): student services director Tom Brown, counsellor Debbie Binney and social worker Helen Perez.



Photo credit: Peter Meecham



continue on a positive path, than if they'd been punished.

"Work with the kid," Brown says, "not with the rules and regulations."

Brown helps co-ordinate student access to a variety of community services, from mental health care to Police support. The school uses drug dogs to educate students and warn off the few that are tempted, but not urine testing, which the school's nurses find unreliable and expensive. If a young person is found using drugs at school, they are generally stood down and a reintegration programme is drawn up to support them with their return to school.

Claire Ferguson has been a long-time counsellor at Aorere. She says, in the early 2000s, the school was as harsh in its discipline as any other school. Today, the climate within the school is one of support for young people falling short of expectations.

"I'm thinking of a couple of kids that, at any other school, they'd have been history."

She says the move to a restorative approach at Aorere has coincided with an improvement in the school drug problem. She says there are noticeably fewer drug problems than during times of more punishing consequences.

A year 12 student called Richie has often been in trouble for fighting but never for drugs. If he ever had a problem with drugs, he says he'd talk to the school counsellors. He says he trusts them.

Another year 12 student, Samuel, is engaging, bright and a little shy.

In year 9, his first year of secondary school, Samuel attracted attention for using cannabis.

"I got snapped taking it, and [I was] stoned in class."

He wasn't expelled; in fact, he didn't even appear in front of the school board.

"They just like sat me in one of the counsellor's room and waited for me to sober up and then they had a talk with me."

Samuel's previous misdemeanours range from violence to wagging, but this year, he's turned a corner and is keeping out of trouble. When asked to imagine his life if he'd attended a school with a 'zero tolerance' policy towards alcohol and other drugs, he's quick to reply.

"I'd probably be like one of those people that quits, eh, that are like struggling with life and that."

Samuel wears a black school jacket, short hair and a giant smile. He is well known to school staff – it's clear the absence of punitive measures in the school hasn't enabled him to escape notice. Teachers and support staff keep a close eye on him. He laughs: "They won't leave me alone, eh." ■

Keri Welham is a Tauranga-based writer

“ And from 8.40am till 3.10pm... this is a place that they know that they can be safe and not worry about the concerns and the issues that are going on at home. The kids know we're not here to judge them. ”

HELEN PEREZ

A school's core business

This is the second in our series of articles looking into new approaches to protecting young people from drug-related harm being adopted by New Zealand schools. **Rob Zorn** visited Ōtaki College where a restorative practice approach is keeping young people caught with drugs engaged and in class – instead of out on the streets.



ROB ZORN

“It doesn't take a rocket scientist to work out that there's a back story to why these young people are doing these things, and you've got to get to that back story. You can't do that by excluding them.”



Ōtaki College is a decile 4 school, averaging between 400–450 students, nestled in Horowhenua north of Wellington. More than half the students identify

as Māori, and a large percentage come from poorer backgrounds. Sadly, both these demographics punch way above their weight in terms of alcohol and drug use, youth crime, violence and exclusions from school.

I'm only there for a couple of hours but sense a real calmness in the atmosphere. Principal Andy Fraser has a warm smile, and he's never far from a laugh. There's an openness about him, too. He admits the school's had problems (still has them) and that its journey is far from complete. As he leads me around the school, I see a similar openness reflecting from the students he interacts with.

Unsurprisingly now, Ōtaki College is a demonstration site for the Ministry of Education's Positive Behaviour for Learning (PB4L) initiative. This means other schools can visit the college to learn how to build similarly positive environments.

Things were not always this way.

“When I started teaching here back in 2007, the standard approach to students caught with alcohol or drugs was just to stand them down or get rid of them,” he says.

“Attendance rates were poor, and our suspension rates were significantly above national and decile averages. Things just weren't flash.”

He tells me that, at the same time, there was a lot of youth crime in the local community.

“It was all angry stuff like smashing windows, breaking letterboxes and that sort of mindless, wilful damage, and invariably, the young people who were doing these things were those who had been disenfranchised from school.

“But as we started making changes to the way we looked at these young people and these problems and as our stand-downs fell away and our exclusions approached zero, you could just about map over that the reduction of youth crime and all the destructive stuff.

“It doesn't take a rocket scientist to work out that there's a back story to why these young people are doing these things, and you've got to get to that back story. You can't do that by excluding them.”

The Ōtaki College Board of Trustees Chair agrees that community youth



Ōtaki College gate.

crime has declined dramatically and in close correlation to culture change at the college. He should know. He's Sergeant Slade Sturmeay, in charge of Ōtaki Police.

"Even things like behavioural issues at the community library have gone down a lot. We used to have to deal with 20 or more of these each year. Now, there's maybe just one, but because we have such a useful relationship with the school, we just come in here and deal with it together," Slade says.

Andy says the students see Police units at the college all the time, and they're here for a lot more than to deal with offending. They provide educational programmes, support driver licensing and coach sports teams, so "it's normal for students to see the Police in a positive way".

So how and why have things changed?

Andy says the journey commenced in about 2008 shortly after he became Deputy Principal. It was based on 'student voice', particularly from Māori students who felt they weren't getting the right deal from some teachers.

"They said that, where they had good relationships with teachers, they would work hard for them, but where they didn't, they would be disruptive or not care, and student management became more

problematic. That's telling you something right there, and we now listen to the student voice a lot.

"I would have some teachers banging on my door saying they never wanted a particular student in their class again and insisting we boot the kid out. It took about four years before we started seeing a shift becoming embedded in the school-wide culture, where teachers were feeling the place was calmer and that they could engage much better with students.

In 2008, Ōtaki College began developing its Te Whakaruruhau initiative, which collaboratively involves staff, students, whānau, victims, professional counsellors and the Police. It's a restorative practice approach targeted at students with drug and alcohol issues. It encourages them to take responsibility for their actions while being supported by teachers and qualified professionals. In line with Whole School objectives, a restorative school is one that has a culture of care that is about enhancing mana and is solution focused.

When a student is caught with or under the influence of drugs or alcohol, they may be stood down for one to three days to allow for the college to prepare for a restorative conference. Then the student and their whānau meet with the Board of Trustees to discuss a way forward that will not result in exclusion.

“During the process, they come to see it's not about tripping the young person up and kicking them out of school but about putting as much support as possible around them.”

The contract

"It was found to be more effective if there was some sort of contractual agreement at the end of these meetings that outlines decisions attributing accountability," Andy says.

Through the contract, the student agrees to undergo counselling, to address their wrongs and to submit to random drug testing. Whānau and teachers agree to what they will do to support the student. Students invariably sign, and the contract has never once been questioned by a parent.

"During the process, they come to see it's not about tripping the young person up and kicking them out of school but about putting as much support as possible around them," Andy says.

"And I think students understand that the drug testing is not a punitive thing so that, if they fail, they're down the road. It's a way for them to see their own progress, and many use it as a deterrent, a reason to give their mates as to why they don't want to use."

This is no soft option. Slade says the consequences of not fulfilling the contract are also explained to the student at signing – that the matter will be handed back to the Police or to the courts.

"There may be further hours of community work or even a criminal conviction, depending on their age.

Andy Fraser by the school gate. Māori carvings either side depict Maia (representing the mana of women) and Manawanui (representing the mana of men).



““ No young person needs a drug conviction on their record. ””

““ Hopefully, when the students come through the gate, they understand the richness, the importance of each other’s mana – but also of working collectively, regardless of gender, to strengthen their community. ””

ANDY FRASER

That can have devastating consequences for life, but fortunately it has never gotten to this stage. No young person needs a drug conviction on their record.”

Drug and alcohol counselling is provided by Margaret Smith who works for Whaioro Trust, an iwi service covering Horowhenua. Ōtaki College is one of two schools she visits weekly. Assisted by school Guidance Counsellor Jo McNerney, she assesses referred students and follows up with weekly or fortnightly counselling sessions. The number of students she’s regularly seeing has fallen to 10 (her contract actually provides for 15 per school).

“The main focus is education,” Margaret says.

“We see it as a health matter. If they’re using at this age, the main thing should be supporting them to make better choices.”

So Te Whakaruruhau is working then, I ask.

“Hell, yeah, absolutely,” says Andy.

“As a restorative school, we’re working with people, rather than doing it to people. In an overall sense, the programme is very much about the whole community. Once students understand that everyone cares, it’s so much easier – when they come to you with a problem and immediately see you stop and say, ‘Let’s deal with that.’

“In terms of drugs and alcohol, well, they come at a huge cost to young people and to families, so as a school, you’ve got to see dealing with that as part of your core business.”

Jo McNerney says the college has noticed a real difference between students who start in year 7 – and travel all the way through – and those who come in from outside.

“Some of these young people have been pretty challenging, but when they’ve been here for a bit, they don’t seem to feel they have to behave in the same way as at their previous schools. Perhaps that’s because they don’t get backed into as many corners by teachers or other students. They understand they can talk to people here and explain stuff and be honest about what’s happening

at home. It’s hard work for teachers, but they do see the benefits of getting these young people into the school and socialising.”

Drix

An example is Drix, who became part of the school’s core business early this year.

Drix was living in Hastings and spent 18 months on the streets when things broke down with his whānau. Though not even midway through his teens, he ended up with a massive youth justice record (Andy says it’s the size of a small novel). The offences were mostly assaults and robberies. As part of the family group conference process used to address his offending, he ended up coming to live with his uncle in Ōtaki.

“So he was an interesting one, but in the end, Ōtaki College agreed to enrol him and give him a chance,” Andy says.

“He’s actually quite a personable fellow now, though he was pretty wild and woolly around the edges when he first arrived. There were soon some issues involving theft and cannabis, so he has gone through the programme and is now back on track.”

Drix is just 15. He’s pretty tall for his age and, reportedly, a very good rugby player – like amazingly good – and when I get to meet him, I find him open, approachable and calm. I like him

From left to right: Hamish Wood (Deputy Principal), Andy Fraser (Principal), Margaret Smith (Whaioro Trust), Sgt Slade Sturmev (Board of Trustees Chair), Ōfo McInerney (Guidance Counsellor).



immediately and can't imagine him assaulting anyone.

He's been using cannabis for the last three years. While in Hastings, he was stoned pretty much all the time, but he cut back using weed significantly when he started at Ōtaki College because of the way it affected his sport training.

One day, he arrived pretty red eyed after smoking up on the way to school and was 'snapped' by Andy while in class. He was stood down for a day and then was asked to attend a meeting with Andy, Slade and some of the Board to work out a restorative process.

"My uncle was there too, and he was pretty disappointed. He gave me a real growling about it, and that was pretty hard," Drix says.

"They asked me to sign this contract giving them the right to drug test me whenever they want, but they didn't kick me out. I think they actually gave me quite a big chance, and I'm pretty thankful, eh. I don't mind the drug tests. They mean I have a reason not to do it – to say no to it."

Drix has been drug tested only once so far (it's still early days). He doesn't know the result of the test yet, but he doesn't appear too worried. He says he's not really missing the cannabis at all and is enjoying having "heaps more spare money".

"They sort of did a deal with me, talked about me staying on Cactus (a

school fitness programme run by Police) and still being able to do what I normally do here at school. That was important to me. I really like all the exercise stuff. I play rugby and touch, but I'll play any sport where you can run around and get hurt."

He tells me about how weed made him tired all the time, which was no good for his training, but he just laughs when I say he might be slipping on the black jersey one day.

Drix didn't go to school while on the streets in Hastings but says the education he has had has been exclusively Māori.

"I'm not good at English, and when I came here, I didn't know how to write in English at all, but I can spell some pretty big words now."

So what does he think would have happened had they expelled him?

"I think if they kicked me out, I probably would have ended up just walking around all day, smoking weed and being really bored – just waiting for my mates to get out of school."

He says he likes the teachers and thinks they've been really good to him, and he tells me about one or two of his favourites.

"But actually," he says, "I've got heaps of mean teachers around here" – and I'm sure he means that in a good way.

"Schools may be reluctant to talk about these issues because they don't

“ In terms of drugs and alcohol, well, they come at a huge cost to young people and to families, so as a school, you've got to see dealing with that as part of your core business. ”

want people to think they have a drug problem," Andy says.

"But every college in New Zealand and every community has a drug problem. We don't have the perfect model, but we have one that is making a difference, and if it's a model that could work for other schools and communities, then we're more than happy to talk about it."

I leave thinking I'd have been happy to have my own children go here, and I'm also making a mental note to watch out for Drix in future All Blacks line-ups. Thanks to the Whole School restorative approach at Ōtaki College, that may very well become a reality. ■

Rob Zorn is a freelance journalist based in Wellington.

Photo credit: flickr.com/photos/jesstern



To test or not to test

A very good question for schools

Schools drug testing their students has long been a controversial issue. In this fourth instalment of our Whole School series, **Naomi Arnold** hears from all sides of the issue. It's not the quick fix some think it may be.



NAOMI
ARNOLD

There's been a change of heart at Hicks Bay's Te Kura Kaupapa Māori o Kawakawa Mai Tawhiti. The old attitude towards drug use is gone,

and in its place is a new suite of approaches that local CAYAD coordinator Moki Raroa says is proving very successful.

The old way, he says, was "basically sending them home and saying, 'Come back and talk to a discipline committee'."

"Generally, those kids got kicked out. Four or five years ago, we said, 'Let's try something different', and we've never looked back."

The focus instead is on trying to keep students engaged at school rather than letting them go. "What use is that?"

If a student is using drugs, a plan kicks into place. It involves assessing their dependency, giving them information

from local health agencies, explaining what drug convictions will mean for future travel and work opportunities and education from the local Police. It offers support to family and whānau if there are issues at home, along with mandatory counselling.

But success requires everyone to pitch in and be on the same page, Raroa says – school, local health and social workers, whānau and student.

"I think it's a very good option for some schools if they want to take a holistic approach, but it's getting everyone to work together," he says. "If that happens, it'll succeed."

The kura's Tumuaki (Principal) Campbell Dewes says the kura is no different from any other community in New Zealand.

"Mind-altering substances are prevalent throughout society, and it would be naive of us to think that we would be immune to drug use amongst our students."

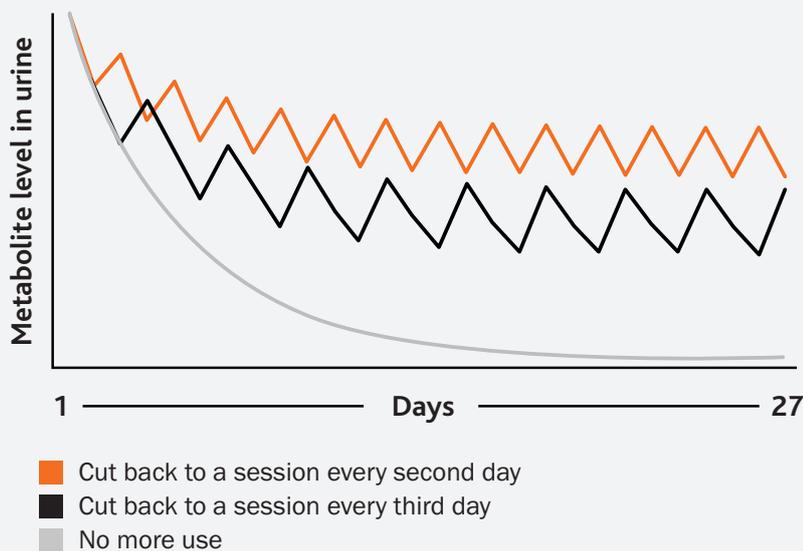
He says the school wants to work on rehabilitation, examining every incident on a case-by-case basis in order to address its severity.

"We, the kura, don't have the drug problem – if there are drugs in the home, then there's the problem. So we've drawn a circle around our school so that all of us are drug-free, alcohol-free and smoke-free," he says.

"When we do suspect there has been partaking of drugs among our students, we let the parents know. We usually go and see them face to face at home on their patch, and we talk to them about a urine test, which isn't totally foolproof but is an indicator that there have been drugs.

"It is an agreed practice that we want students to be drug-free for their future tenure at this kura, so they must pass a series of tests until they are. Their names are also given to the Police for their files, and drug and alcohol counselling is put in place as well."

Urine drug testing for cannabinoids



Interpreting test results

After getting the results of a drug test back from the lab, interpreting the results is pretty black and white, right? Think again. Setting aside the accuracy of the test and the actual levels of substances detected, when it comes to cannabis, there is actually room for misinterpretation.

Here's what can happen. Urine tests measure the substances made by the body when THC from cannabis is broken down. They don't directly measure the THC from cannabis itself. Cannabis stays in the body for much longer than the psychoactive effects do, which means that urine tests can pick up these THC byproducts for days after use.

Someone who has been regularly smoking cannabis will find it hard to cease using. They may dramatically cut back but could still reuse. Remember, a drug is a powerful thing that someone may turn to in order to relieve anxiety, when they're stressed or for comfort. This can happen regardless of the potential consequences.

A single instance of reuse can lead to a disproportionate spike in the urine test levels, especially if the body has not got rid of all of the cannabis yet. Remember, this can take days.

In other words, urine tests can identify recent cannabis use, but they cannot identify if someone is 'stoned'. Higher levels indicate that use was closer to the test being done, but if the tests are too spaced out, they do not give enough of the picture to show if someone is reducing their use or not.

This pattern needs to be considered when deciding on what action to take (or not) after results are returned. When there is a danger of misinterpretation, erring on the side of caution is recommended. Giving a second chance, opening up dialogue and understanding what is driving drug use will have more beneficial outcomes than, strictly adhering to a 'fail and you're out' policy.

"So far, of the few students we have had to put through this programme, just two have failed to come through the other side."

The kura's use of drug testing is part of a host of initiatives and is the beginning of a journey rather than its end. Evidence shows that a punitive approach to drugs leads to worse life outcomes for students, and how a school reacts can have lasting consequences on the student's education and life. But there is no one drug-testing policy across New Zealand. Each school decides how best to serve its community.

Drugs are a leading cause of students missing out on schooling. Nationally, Ministry of Education statistics show that, in 2014, drug use was the second-most common reason both for suspensions (23.7 percent) and exclusions (16 percent), but it was the main reason for expulsions, accounting for 26.7 percent of cases. Many of those students will have been given a drug test at some point.

New Zealand Drug Foundation Youth Services Adviser Ben Birks Ang says many schools don't have a policy on alcohol and drugs, instead dealing with things on a case-by-case basis. Some test for drugs on a student's smell, behaviour or appearance; others on a rumour. Some rely on their suspicion and then get the friend group tested as well.

However, he says, if a good drug policy is in place, especially one that offers lots of support, drug testing is "essentially irrelevant".

Some schools strongly defend their right to test for drugs and to exclude or expel anyone found with drugs in their body. Others say testing is inappropriate, leads to a breakdown in relationships with students and does little to ensure people get the advice and help they need.

As for the results, schools might quietly tell a student it's best to jump before they're pushed and enrol in another school; many parents, not wanting the blemish on their child's school record, would likely agree.

Birks Ang says some schools take a more holistic approach.

"Some schools have a strong belief that the social side of things is a part of their role at school, so they do a lot to keep young people there," he says.

"But at other schools without a holistic focus, it is harder for schools to discuss drugs without worrying that it could negatively affect their image. Families choose which school to send their child to, so the image of the school is important, and schools often do not want to be associated with substances. This limits their options."

If there aren't clear policies and practices, a school can take a skewed



approach. “This can include over-emphasising the place of testing,” he says.

“A lot of this is on the assumption that, if a young person is using drugs, they’re a risk to other people’s safety. That’s the main concern boards or principals talk to me about, but I haven’t seen much evidence to prove that’s the case.”

Patrick Walsh is the Principal of Rotorua’s John Paul College and quotes Principal Youth Court Judge Andrew Becroft on the matter.

“He says drugs in school ought not to lead to stand-downs and suspensions, because he deals with kids who are suspended for those offences, and it can lead to a spiral for crime. The best way to rehabilitate the students is to keep them in school.”

He believes that a one-size-fits-all approach doesn’t work and the “critical factor” for success in a testing regime is the attitude of the students.

“When kids are consuming drugs, it indicates they’ve got things going on in their life and there are mitigating circumstances,” he says.

“It seems to me that most students who get involved with it just for experimental reasons are testing it out. There’s not a huge number who have an actual drug problem. On that basis, I think schools do need to be very careful in those

“Some schools strongly defend their right to test for drugs and to exclude or expel anyone found with drugs in their body. Others say testing is inappropriate [and] leads to a breakdown in relationships with students...”

circumstances that they don’t move very quickly to ultimate disciplinary action.”

YouthLaw Aotearoa barrister and solicitor Joanna Maskell says schools cannot test students for drugs without their consent but can refer testing to a third party (with student consent) for example, as a condition of return to school after a suspension hearing.

“They are not able to randomly search students either,” Maskell says, adding that students have the same rights as all citizens under the Bill of Rights Act.

The Ministry of Education has procedures set out in the Education (Surrender, Retention, and Search) Rules 2013. It allows schools to have a third-party agency bring in a drug sniffer dog to search lockers if there is a suspicion of drug use. In terms of testing, the guidelines say it should be for a prescribed period only – it should not go on randomly for the rest of the year. It emphasises that students should seek treatment for drug issues, and the school should aim to make sure the student has genuine, informed options and knowledge of the consequences and potential outcomes of those options.

It also says students may be encouraged to participate in a voluntary drug treatment programme that involves testing of bodily samples, even when a student continues to attend school. “Schools should not, however, insist on a drug treatment

programme as an alternative to suspension,” it says.

Maskell says most schools will suspend students under section 14 of the Education Act if they are found to be using or dealing drugs on school property. The board of trustees makes a decision about whether the student is excluded or expelled from school or whether they can return. The board has a right to impose “reasonable conditions” upon the return of a student to school.

“Sometimes, a board will make it a condition that a student undertake drug testing and can show they are free of drugs before they return to school and that they continue to produce drug-free tests for a period of time after their return.”

YouthLaw’s recommendations are that schools should not be testing students at school for drug use.

“They are, however, able to stand down or suspend a student if they have a reasonable belief they have taken or dealt drugs at school, as this may fall under the category of ‘gross misconduct’ under section 14 of the Education Act,” Maskell adds.

New Zealand School Trustees Association President Lorraine Kerr says the school is obliged to ensure that every student has the right to education.

“While they’re under the influence of drugs, we’re not meeting our obligation – particularly from the point of view of whether it has an effect on other students’ rights to learn as well as their own,” she says.

Drug testing is indeed a thorny business, ethically, legally and biochemically. Many of those issues aren’t well understood, Nelson-based CAYAD coordinator Rosey Duncan says.

Duncan has written a guide on effective alcohol and drug policies, *More Than Just a Policy*, available at healthaction.org.nz. The policy notes that research shows a strong case can be made against drug detection and screening strategies in schools, and policies that “address key values, attitudes and perceptions [of peer drug use]” may prove more important in drug prevention than drug testing.

Duncan says different tests – blood, breath, urine or hair – take different amounts of time to process, detect differing substances and have differing windows of detection, so they may or may not show whether a person is currently under the influence of any particular substance or has used it at some time in the recent past.

“I would say drug testing is often an invasion of privacy. If someone’s using a substance in their recreational time, which isn’t impacting on their ability to work or study, is there a need to drug test?”

“Why do they want to know? Is it because they think a person is a drug user? How does that information help the school or the person? Do they want to know if a person is under the influence of a substance at the time? Is it something that is required by their health and safety policies? Schools need to have planned procedures in response to the results they get, such as providing counselling, or engaging other support services.”

She says schools need to be very clear about why they’re doing a drug test and consider the need to maintain ongoing trust with the student. Usage doesn’t necessarily mean they’re an addict or have a dependency.

“If an organisation or a school imposes drug testing on a group, it potentially erodes trust, whereas if it’s something the young people feel is going to be beneficial to them, it can help. The primary thing is to have that positive caring relationship. If the young people know the organisation is acting to support their health and wellbeing rather than coming from a punitive approach, it’s much more likely to be received in a way that’s going to be useful.”

However, she says not every drug test is unwarranted. There might be some times when the user would prefer to be drug tested so they can say to their peers, “I’m not allowed to use X.”

“It gives them an out in a situation they might otherwise find tricky to extract themselves from,” she says.

Patrick Walsh agrees with Duncan and Birks Ang that there is potential for misinterpretation of the tests.

“I think that area is probably something that’s not well understood, and certainly, I don’t think the tests they do in schools, which are at the very basic level, would be sufficiently robust. Having said that, most schools have reasonably conservative parent communities, so they do expect a tough line on drugs. That’s the tension principals have to work with.”

At Burnside High School in Christchurch, Principal Phil Holstein says, if there are suspicions, they generally ask, as part of the discipline process, for evidence of blood tests and a return to school under conditions. (He does, however, lean more towards exclusion if a student is actually dealing drugs.)

“ YouthLaw’s recommendations are that schools should not be testing students at school for drug use. ”

“We’re wanting a clear drug test, and what we quite often do with some people is make sure it’s reducing all the time. Some schools have said they can’t return until there’s a clear blood test. We have to, hopefully, work to show that being drug-free is going to impact positively on their learning.”

Parents have generally been “hugely supportive”.

“We’re assisting them, and we’re working together, which I like. It works really well, but the students themselves have to be committed or the whole process breaks down, and we might have to go to another stage.”

The outcome used to be exclusion – now, they’re looking at individual needs and considering wrap-around services that might help.

“I think that’s in response to our more restorative practices,” he says. “Things have changed in society.” ■

Naomi Arnold is a Nelson-based journalist.

Secondary school student drug use stats

The third Youth2000 survey shows drug use by secondary school students continues to drop.

Findings presented in the *Problem substance use among New Zealand secondary school students* report, released in November 2014, show declines in the numbers smoking cigarettes, binge drinking and using cannabis. Nevertheless, 11 percent of students met the criteria for very high substance use, with binge drinking the most common problem use.

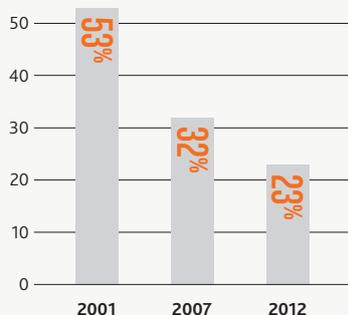
The Youth'12 survey was completed by 8,500 students from 91 schools (3 percent of the national school roll).

Key findings are presented here. The full report is online: nzdrug.org/youth12_drug_use

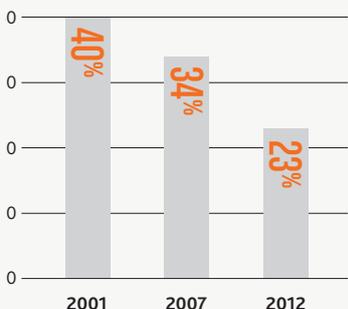
REFERENCE

Fleming, T. Lee, A.C., Moselen, E., Clark, T.C., Dixon, R. & The Adolescent Health Research Group. (2014). *Problem substance use among New Zealand secondary school students: Findings from the Youth'12 national youth health and wellbeing survey*. Auckland, New Zealand: The University of Auckland.

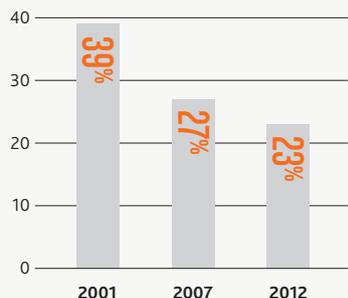
STUDENTS WHO HAVE EVER SMOKED A CIGARETTE



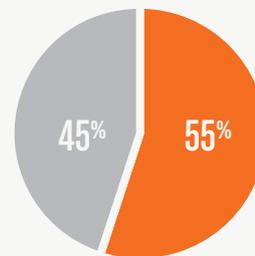
BINGE DRINKING BY STUDENTS IN THE LAST FOUR WEEKS



STUDENTS WHO HAVE EVER USED MARIJUANA



CURRENTLY USE ALCOHOL



● NO ● YES

AMONG STUDENTS WHO CURRENTLY DRINK ALCOHOL

DRINKING FREQUENCY



APPROXIMATELY 7 OUT OF 10 CURRENT ALCOHOL DRINKERS HAD HAD A DRINK IN THE LAST FOUR WEEKS



APPROXIMATELY 2 OUT OF 10 CURRENT ALCOHOL DRINKERS HAD HAD A DRINK WEEKLY OR MORE OFTEN

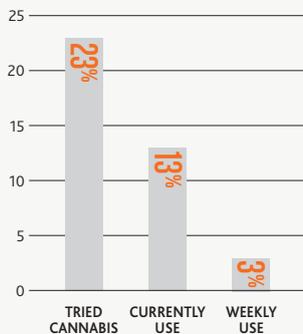
BINGE DRINKING*

24%

*UNDER 16 YEARS DRANK FIVE OR MORE ALCOHOLIC DRINKS IN ONE SESSION TWO OR MORE TIMES IN THE PAST FOUR WEEKS

OVER 16 YEARS DRANK FIVE OR MORE ALCOHOLIC DRINKS IN ONE SESSION EVERY WEEK OR MORE

CANNABIS USE



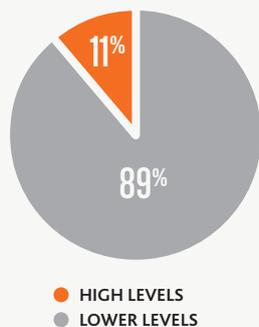
OTHER DRUG USES ARE UNCOMMON

4% USED PARTY PILLS

3% USED ECSTASY

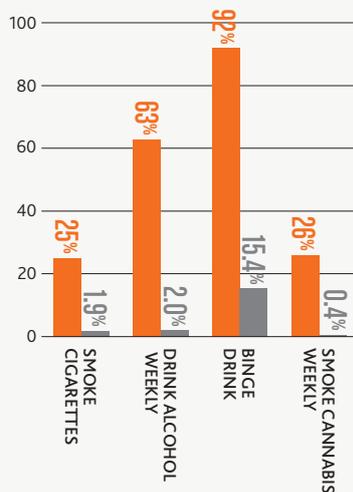
<1% USED P

LEVELS OF DRUG USE



OF THE 11% OF STUDENTS WITH VERY HIGH LEVELS OF DRUG USE

MORE LIKELY TO



● HIGH LEVELS OF DRUG USE
● LOW LEVELS OF DRUG USE

WHAT IS PROBLEM (VERY HIGH) SUBSTANCE USE?

The Adolescent Health Research Group (AHRG) definition is based on the following factors: alcohol frequency, binge drinking, cannabis and other substance use. There are criteria for students aged under 16 years and those aged 16 years or over.

STUDENTS WITH VERY HIGH USE HAD POORER HEALTH AND WELLBEING ACROSS ALMOST EVERY AREA EXAMINED

THEY WERE MORE LIKELY TO:

- report negative family experiences
- have witnessed or experienced violence or abuse
- report negative experiences of schooling
- have had an injury that needed treatment
- be overweight or obese
- gamble
- have been in trouble with the Police in the last year (39% compared to 7%)
- have had sex (68% compared to 18%)

OF THE 11% OF STUDENTS WITH VERY HIGH LEVELS OF DRUG USE

30%

WORRIED ABOUT HOW MUCH THEY ARE DRINKING

18%

HAD TRIED TO CUT DOWN OR GIVE UP DRINKING

37%

WORRIED ABOUT HOW MUCH MARIJUANA THEY USED

36%

HAD TRIED TO CUT DOWN OR GIVE UP MARIJUANA

ALMOST 2/3rds

HAD EXPERIENCED PROBLEMS BECAUSE OF THEIR ALCOHOL USE

31% had done things that could have got them in serious trouble, **33%** were injured, **25.5%** had unsafe sex and **24%** had friends or family members tell them to cut down

MOST YOUNG PEOPLE WITH SUBSTANCE USE PROBLEMS ARE NOT WORRIED ABOUT THEIR USE, NOR ARE THEY SEEKING OUT HELP

CONCLUSIONS

Efforts must be made to reduce the level of substance use (and related harm) by school students.

Holistic or systemic approaches will be more effective at meeting the needs of students than those that focus on single issues, i.e. they need to also address such things as problems in a student's family and school life, experiences of violence, risky driving, poor mental health etc.

Social norms, such as high rates of use among peers and family, and the availability of alcohol and other substances in communities must be tackled in efforts to reduce high levels of substance use among young people.

Enhancing young people's protective factors, such as family and school connections, is equally as important as access to counselling or other social services. ■

Shifting to a Whole Schools approach



We want to help schools to support their students. Conversations about drugs in schools can be tricky.

People sitting around a table to discuss a stand-down or consider policy after an incident come from very different life experiences and perspectives. We understand this, and can help to foster conversations in schools about evidence-based and principled approaches to proactively addressing alcohol and other drugs problems in schools.

You can keep in touch with our work ensuring young people stay in education (sign-up for more case studies, etc), or if this rings bells for you and you'd like to talk it over, please get in touch.

Ben Birks-Ang
Youth Services Adviser



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USEFUL RESOURCES



Did you know?

Help to have conversations about alcohol and drugs with a young person.

RESOURCE:
aodcollaborative.org.nz/didyouknow



Preparing students to live in a world where alcohol and drugs exist.

Request our discussion starter available to assist boards of trustees and senior staff introduce effective approaches to alcohol and other drugs.



More Than Just a Policy: Best Practice Drug Policy for Youth Organisations.

Health Action (Nelson) guidelines and workbook
RESOURCE:
nzdrug.org/28Ppw5F

AT THE HEART OF THE MATTER, NZ DRUG FOUNDATION.

Te Tūāpapa Tarukino o Aotearoa

Sign-up for updates

We'll send irregular emails with new cases studies and related information. Your email address is safe with us.

nzdrug.org/aod-in-schools-list

The New Zealand Drug Foundation was founded in 1989 to bring a public health voice to policy making and support people to make good choices. Our vision is an Aotearoa New Zealand free from drug harm.

REGISTERED CHARITY: CC27025.

www.drugfoundation.org.nz
P 04 801 6303



ODYSSEY
changing lives

Odyssey provides a wide range of treatment services for people with substance use issues, and are passionate about supporting young people to remain engaged in education. Our youth services are vibrant and growing, working actively with young people to help them learn and develop skills to feel on-track, and to be in control of their lives.

www.odyssey.org.nz