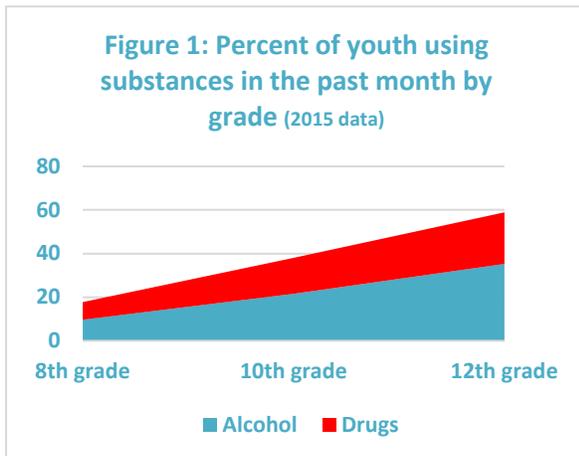




Youth Substance Misuse and Academic Performance: The Case for Intervention

Substance misuse during adolescence is linked to lower academic performance, student absenteeism and higher rates of high school dropout^{i ii}. Many young people ages 12-17 actively use substances, and that use [increases](#) during high school as shown in Figure 1ⁱⁱⁱ. Youth who start using substances during adolescence are more likely to develop substance use disorders later in life. In fact, [90 percent](#) of adults with addiction started using before the age of 18.



Schools have the opportunity to improve academic and health outcomes by building supportive responses to youth substance use. This fact sheet highlights the evidence linking youth substance use to lower academic performance and describes actions schools can take to support student health and success.

Substance misuse and school outcomes

Grades: Youth who misuse substances are [more likely](#) to receive failing grades in school.

However, young people who reduce their use or stop using have demonstrated improved academic outcomes that can mirror those of students who never used substances^{iv}. This means that school-based substance use prevention and early intervention services can make a difference in improving student grades and academic achievement. [Evidence](#) suggests that Screening, Brief Intervention and Referral to Treatment – or SBIRT – is one effective strategy for schools to reduce and delay youth substance use.

Graduation: Youth who use substances – including the misuse of prescription drugs, alcohol, tobacco and/or cannabis – are [more likely](#) to drop out of high school than students who do not^v. A [2011 study](#) shows that drug use reduces the likelihood of graduation even when taking into consideration other social factors associated with lower academic achievement.

Chronic absenteeism: Youth substance misuse is linked to increased truancy^{vii}. Reductions in the frequency of substance use as well as delays in the initiation of substance use improve attendance^{viii}. In fact, one report highlights an estimated 10 percent increase in attendance for every year that a young person delays using^{ix}.

School actions to reduce substance use and improve student success

Schools can mitigate the consequences of student substance misuse. Positive student engagement, supportive school environments and connection to needed services are key to any successful initiative. Here are two actions schools can take to build supportive environments, positively engage students, and address substance misuse to improve academic outcomes and school success:

1. *Review your school's disciplinary policy:* Make sure your school has a clear policy for responding to youth substance use and possession. Policies should be supportive and engage youth in conversations about why they use and what support they need. Students who disclose substance use or are caught with possession of substances should be referred to school-based health centers, school nurses, school counselors or other school personnel who are trained in screening and brief intervention. These school personnel should also be prepared and able to refer students to needed services. Trauma, mental illness and other adversities often co-occur with youth substance use. Health and mental health professionals are better equipped to identify these co-occurrences and get young people support that works.

Many [school policies](#) on student substance use and possession focus on punishing students. Punitive policies in response to any student behavior – not just substance use and possession – hurt academic outcomes^x and often lead to suspension and expulsion of students who need support. Such policies disproportionately harm students of color, who are more likely to be disciplined than their white peers^{xi}, and prevent students from receiving the services they need. While supportive responses to youth substance use improve academic outcomes, punitive policies disrupt student engagement in school and in many cases – more often for youth of color – lead to involvement in the juvenile justice system and a higher likelihood of dropout.

Changing school policies to ensure supportive responses to youth substance misuse can restore trust between students and school personnel and improve the likelihood of students receiving services they need to thrive academically. Schools may consider learning about restorative approaches to student discipline as currently practiced by the [Oakland Unified School District](#) and many other schools across the country.

2. *Provide prevention and early intervention services to all students:* [Youth SBIRT](#) is an evidence-based practice that proactively identifies substance use and [engages young people](#) in conversations about their use. If needed, youth are referred to treatment and other services. Take time to learn about different models, such as [Project Amp](#), [Checkpoint](#), and [Massachusetts' statewide school-based SBIRT](#) implementation.

ⁱ Elizabeth J. D'Amico, et al. Alcohol and Marijuana Use Trajectories in a Diverse Longitudinal Sample of Adolescents: Examining Use Patterns from Age 11 to 17. *Addiction*, 2016.

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- ^v Townsend, L., Flisher, A.J. & King, G. *Clin Child Fam Psychol Rev* (2007) 10: 295. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-007-0023-7>
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- ^x Gregory, A., Skiba, R. J., & Noguera, P. A. (2010). The Achievement Gap and the Discipline Gap: Two Sides of the Same Coin? *Educational Researcher*, 39(1), 59–68. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X09357621>
- ^{xi} Welsh, R. O., & Little, S. (2018). The School Discipline Dilemma: A Comprehensive Review of Disparities and Alternative Approaches. *Review of Educational Research*, 88(5), 752–794. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654318791582>