

## YOUTH SUBSTANCE USE

School health providers are concerned about youth substance use because it impacts a student's long-term health outcomes and their academic performance. Substance use is linked to lower grades, student absenteeism, and higher rates for high school dropout.<sup>1</sup> Adolescent substance use is also highly predictive of adult substance abuse because the adolescent brain is still developing making it more susceptible to addiction. Nine out of ten people meeting the clinical criteria for a substance use disorder began using one or more addictive substances before the age of 18.<sup>2</sup> Schools, school-based health programs, and school support services are ideally positioned to educate, prevent, and intervene early in youth substance use, preventing experimentation from escalating to misuse or addiction.

In California, 20% of 9th graders and 29% of 11th graders used alcohol or drugs at least once in the last month.<sup>3</sup> Risk factors such as trauma, mental health conditions, and environmental factors can increase a young person's likelihood of substance use.

On the other hand, school connectedness<sup>3</sup> has a significant impact on whether students are using alcohol or other drugs. Compared to their peers with high school connectedness, students with low levels of school connectedness are more than twice as likely to use alcohol and other drugs in the past month (see Figure 1).

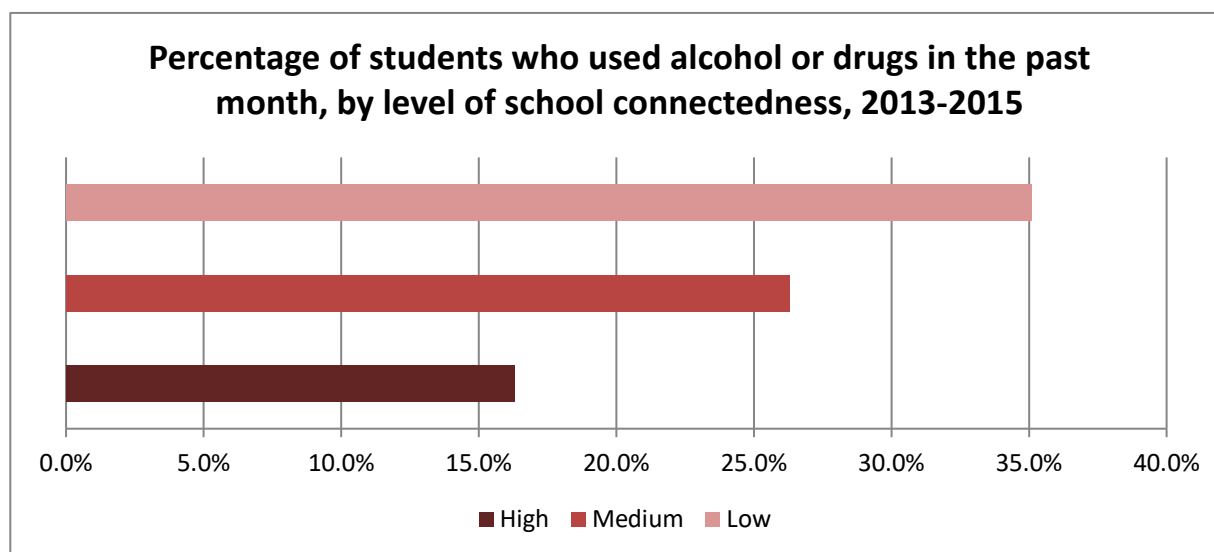


Figure 1: [As cited on kidsdata.org](https://kidsdata.org), WestEd, California Health Kids Survey (CHKS) and Biennial State CHKS. California Dept. of Education (March 2019).

Schools and school-based health centers (SBHCs) are ideally positioned to address the underlying risks that contribute to substance use and strengthen protective factors by improving school climate, implementing trauma-informed practices, screening for early substance using behavior, and providing mental health services on the school campus.

<sup>a</sup> "School connectedness" is a measure based on student responses to five questions on the California Healthy Kids Survey about feeling safe, close to people, and a part of school, being happy at school, and about teachers treating students fairly.

## SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

Many schools have “zero-tolerance” policies for alcohol and drug-related offenses, including students being under the influence of drugs or alcohol and students selling controlled substances on campus. Zero tolerance policies often reduce school connectedness and exacerbate other risk factors associated with substance use. These policies grew in popularity in the 1990s, first as a reaction to a rise in school violence, then as an approach to deterring substance use behaviors. However, there is limited evidence of the effectiveness of zero-tolerance policies in reducing problem behaviors.<sup>4</sup>

In California, nearly one in seven out-of-school suspensions and 29% of expulsions were drug-related<sup>b</sup> in the 2017-18 school year; there were 50,547 drug-related suspensions and 1,545 drug-related expulsions that year. Overall, suspensions and expulsions disproportionately impact students of color, further contributing to educational disparities. Nearly 70 percent of drug-related suspensions involve Latinx or Black students although these students make up 63 percent of the overall student population. A student who was suspended or expelled is twice as likely to repeat their grade and nearly three times as likely to be in contact with the juvenile justice system the following year.<sup>5</sup> Not only do suspensions and expulsions increase the chances of incarceration, they make students feel shame, alienation, and rejection, leading to higher instances of depression, substance abuse, and other negative mental health outcomes.<sup>6</sup>

**1 in 7 out-of-school suspensions were drug-related in 2017-18 school year.**



Instead of suspending or expelling students for substance using behaviors, which pushes students out of school, away from protective factors, and can further exacerbate substance use, schools can and should play a role in identifying, intervening, treating student substance use, and supporting educational equity for all youth.



**By intentionally moving away from punitive discipline policies and instead linking students to services and resources that can address some of the underlying causes of substance use, schools and school-based health partners can best address student substance use.**

<sup>b</sup> Tobacco-related suspensions are not included in this data.

## CALIFORNIA LAW

Education code (EC) establishes parameters for the student behaviors that *require* suspension and expulsion, and behaviors that *may* result in a suspension or expulsion. The table below provides an overview of the state laws that inform school response to student substance use. This code provides some discretion to school administrators when deciding an appropriate response. With a movement to support alternatives to punitive discipline policies, many districts and schools are using discretion offered to them in state law to respond to student substance use with treatment rather than suspension and expulsion.

Greatest school discretion	
<p>A student <i>may</i> be suspended or recommended for expulsion if they:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unlawfully possessed, used, furnished, or been under the influence of a controlled substance, alcoholic beverage, or intoxicant (48900(c))</li> <li>• Unlawfully offered, arranged, or negotiated to sell a controlled substance, alcoholic beverage, or intoxicant (48900(d))</li> <li>• Possessed or used tobacco or tobacco products (48900(h))</li> <li>• Unlawfully possessed, offered, arranged, or negotiated to sell drug paraphernalia (48900(j))</li> </ul> <p>For discipline cited above, a superintendent or principal may use their discretion to provide alternatives to suspension or expulsion that are designed to address the student's specific behavior (48900(v)).</p>	<p><i>This section of education code enumerates the acts that students can be suspended or expelled for but it does not require suspension or expulsion, except for the cases below.</i></p>
Some school discretion	
<p>A student <i>must</i> be recommended for expulsion for the following act, <i>unless</i> an alternative means of correction would address the conduct:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unlawful <b>possession</b> of any controlled substance, except for the first offense of less than an ounce of marijuana (48915(a)(1)(C))</li> </ul>	<p><i>While duplicative of aspects of the above section, this section is specific to expulsions and allows alternatives to expulsion.</i></p>
No school discretion	
<p>A student <i>must</i> be immediately suspended and recommended for expulsion for the following act:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unlawfully <b>selling</b> a controlled substance (48915(c)(3))</li> </ul>	<p><i>This is considered one of the "Big 5" offenses where suspension is clearly required.</i></p>

Education code (48900.5) also states that ***suspensions should be imposed only when other interventions fail.***

Alternative interventions cited in education code include, but are not limited to:

- A conference between school personnel, the pupil's parent or guardian, and the pupil.
- **Referrals to the school counselor, psychologist, social worker, or other school support service personnel for case management and counseling.**
- Referral for a comprehensive psychosocial or psychoeducational assessment, including for purposes of creating an IEP or 504 plan.
- Enrollment in a program for teaching prosocial behavior or anger management.
- A positive behavior support approach with tiered interventions that occur during the school day on campus.
- After-school programs that address specific behavioral issues or expose pupils to positive activities and behaviors.

## EXAMPLES OF ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO STUDENT SUBSTANCE USE

### Los Angeles Unified School District

The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) passed a resolution to ensure that students who are intoxicated on campus or during school hours are referred to appropriate substance use services rather than immediately being suspended or expelled. The district allows each school administration to “use a variety of measures to address [substance use disorder] issues, including education, intervention, and discipline...In accordance with state and federal law, whenever possible, positive, non-punitive interventions that are designed to help the student shall be used. In other words, the initial administrative response to drug offenses shall be to address the psychoeducational needs of the student...” (Los Angeles Unified School District, BUL-3277.1, January 22nd, 2009).

### San Fernando High School

At San Fernando High School (SFHS), a school within LAUSD, students with an on-campus minor substance use violation can opt to attend four sessions of substance use counseling in lieu of suspension. Counseling is provided by behavioral health clinicians at the SBHC run by Northeast Valley Health Center. The referral process includes a contract signed by the SFHS Dean, the student, and the parent or guardian. Suspensions decreased by 64% during the first year of implementation, and the program has continued with support from campus administrators, SBHC clinicians, and parents.

64% ↓  
in suspensions

As the examples above show, multi-level changes (at the district and at school sites) are needed to create alternative school discipline approaches to student substance use. Districts can play a leadership role in interpreting state law and providing schools with guidance and flexibility to address student substance use in ways that prioritize prevention and supportive interventions. School sites and school site leadership can identify assets on campus (such as school health services) that can be leveraged to provide better supports for students.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

- ✓ Assess your school’s discipline policies regarding student substance use. Create discipline policies that prioritize prevention and refer students to treatment, supports, and services that can address the underlying causes of a student’s substance using behavior. Check out the [Fix School Discipline](#) website for model policies, alternative to suspension programs, and advocacy toolkits.
- ✓ Get training in substance use prevention, identification, and early intervention approaches. Learn how to integrate [Screening](#), [Brief Intervention](#), and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) into your school health services or school-based health center.
- ✓ Leverage other resources in your school community to increase substance use prevention and early intervention services. Some examples include: [Tobacco Use Prevention Education \(TUPE\)](#), [school-based mental health](#), [Friday Night Live](#), [expanded learning programs](#), and [treatment including medication assisted treatment](#).
- ✓ Engage students! Use existing peer health educators or a Youth Advisory Board or bring together a leadership group of youth to authentically hear their ideas about how to address substance use on campus.

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<sup>1</sup> D'Amico, E.J., et al. (2016). Alcohol and Marijuana Use Trajectories in a Diverse Longitudinal Sample of Adolescents: Examining Use Patterns from Age 11 to 17. *Addiction*, 111(10), 1825–1835; Engberg J., Morral A.R. (2006). Reducing substance use improves adolescents' school attendance. *Addiction*, 101(12), 1741-1751.

<sup>2</sup> The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University. (2011). *Adolescent Substance Use: America's #1 Public Health Problem*. New York: CASA.

<sup>3</sup> California Healthy Kids Survey. (2017). *Alcohol/drug use in past month, by grade level* [data file]. Retrieved from [www.kidsdata.org](http://www.kidsdata.org).

<sup>4</sup> Skiba, R., & Rausch, M. K. (2006). Zero tolerance, suspension, and expulsion: Questions of equity and effectiveness. In C. M. Evertson & C. S. Weinstein (Eds.), *Handbook of classroom management: Research, practice, and contemporary issues* (pp. 1063-1089). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

<sup>5</sup> Council of State Governments Justice Center. (2011). *Breaking Schools' Rules: A Statewide Study on How School Discipline Relates to Students' Success and Juvenile Justice Involvement*. New York, NY: Tony Fabelo, Michael Thompson, and Martha Plotkin.

<sup>6</sup> American Psychological Association. (2006). Zero Tolerance Task Force, Are Zero Tolerance Policies Effective in the Schools: An Evidentiary Review and Recommendations, available at <http://www.apa.org/pubs/info/reports/zero-tolerance.pdf>.