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It is unlikely that a completely drug-free environment can be created in schools until solutions are found for the much more serious problems of alcohol and drug abuse in American society as a whole.

# Drug Control in Public Schools

Jerry A. Giger and Floyd Delon

Drug abuse, one of the nation's most serious problems, was recognized by Congress with numerous enactments. For example, in 1984 Congress adopted a statute (21 U.S.C. Sec. 845a) that provides enhanced penalties for any person who distributes a controlled substance within 1000 feet of a school

building. There is widespread awareness of this most frightening dimension of this problem, its threat to school-age children. Gallup polls of recent years indicated that the general public believes that "the use of drugs" is the most important problem facing schools. In 1989 "drinking/alcoholism" in schools was ranked ninth in importance. A 1989 Gallup poll of teachers resulted in rankings of seventh (use of drugs) and twenty-third (drinking/alcoholism) although 62 percent of the teachers said that drug abuse among students was either very or fairly serious. Almost one-third of the teachers responded that the use of drugs and selling drugs occurred most of the time or fairly often in schools.

Much of the research to date is concerned with assessing the extent of drug usage among school children. This article is based on a more global approach which examines the current status of the policies and procedures used in American public schools to deal with drug and alcohol use by students.

## Survey of School Principals

This national survey of middle/junior high school and high school principals, completed last year, provided data for the assessment of the status of policies and procedures. The sample to which questionnaires were mailed consisted of 435 principals, one in each Congressional district. Two hundred fifty-four principals responded for a return rate of 58 percent. The participating school districts enrolled a total of 179,401 students.

Table 1. Does the school have student alcohol and drug policies?

Respondents Response	Middle/Junior High		High School		All	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Yes	101	95	130	94	231	94
No	5	5	9	6	14	6
TOTAL	106	100	139	100	245	100

The first information sought concerned the existence of written school policies on substance abuse. School officials have recognized the need for such policies as evidenced by data listed in Table 1 showing that over 94 percent of the principals responded affirmatively. Middle/junior high schools were just as likely to have policies as high schools.

The responses to the question as to whether the policy distinguished between drug and alcohol offenses, again tabulated by level in Table 2, showed no difference. In both junior high school and senior high schools over two-thirds of the school policies made no distinction between the offenses. According to the respondents from those school districts having separate policies, the drug abuse policies tend to carry more severe penalties than alcohol policies and to require rou-

tine notification of the police.

The questionnaire items that followed examined practice. Each presented a possible drug-related occurrence in schools. The responding principal could either select one or more of the listed responses that described procedures used in his/her school or list other procedures should they differ. Table 3 contains the listing of principals' responses to a situation in which the students voluntarily report that they are using drugs. Because of the similarity of responses, the data from middle/junior high schools and senior high schools were combined. The findings revealed that under such circumstances, school officials are most likely to contact parents and provide assistance to eliminate the student's problem. A smaller percentage of the principals reported that they would notify the

Table 2. Does the policy distinguish between alcohol and drug offenses?

Respondents Response	Middle/Junior High		High School		All	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Yes	33	31	45	32	78	32
No	73	69	94	68	167	68
TOTAL	106	100	139	100	245	100

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police and/or suspend or otherwise punish the student. Most of the practices described under "other" were specific counseling or treatment programs, in some instances, required in connection with suspension or alternative placement.

**Table 3**

**What actions are taken when the student volunteers that he/she is under the influence of drugs?**

Response	All Respondents	
	Number	Percent
Nothing happens	0	0
Parent notified	186	76
Referred to school counselor	143	58
Referred to community resource	112	46
Law authorities are notified	59	24
Suspended for ____ days	93	38
Suspended until parents come to school	35	14
Suspended until students goes to treatment center	16	7
Expelled from school	10	4
Other	88	36

As seen in Table 4, students suspected of being under the influence of drugs are even more likely to have their parents contacted. The second most frequent response again was referral to the school counselor. Although only 9 percent of the principals indicated that urinalysis or other drug testing would be used, the comments supplied under the "other" category focused on verifying the suspicions. It is somewhat surprising that 29 percent of the administrators would suspend the student even without such verification.

**Table 4**

**What actions are taken when the student is suspected to be under the influence of alcohol or drugs?**

Response	All Respondents	
	Number	Percent
Nothing happens	7	3
Parent notified	176	72
Referred to school counselor	117	48
Require urinalysis or other drug test	22	9
Suspended for ____ days	72	29
Suspended until testing is completed	15	6
Other	109	44

When school officials suspect drug possession, searches of some kind typically take place. The principals' responses, compiled in Table 5, indicate that desk and locker searches are most frequently used. With the exception of car searches, the percentages decline as the focus of the search becomes

more intrusive. In spite of the legal difficulties that could likely result, as many as 4 percent of the principals expressed a willingness to conduct strip searches of students.

**Table 5**

**What actions are taken when students are suspected to be in possession of illicit drugs at school?**

Response	All Respondents	
	Number	Percent
Nothing happens	1	> 1
Student's locker or desk searched	214	87
Student's gym bag, book bag searched	195	80
Student's purse or billfold searched	175	71
Student's car searched	81	33
Student's person searched	155	63
Student strip searched	10	4
Police are called to conduct search	72	29
Other	66	27

One of the more controversial techniques, the use of drug-detection dogs was the subject of the next item (see Table 6). The question asked each principal to indicate the school district's position. Only 10 percent reported that dogs were used routinely and 24 percent stated that dogs would be used only when the problem became extremely serious. Twenty-two percent said that dogs would not be used in the district under any circumstance.

**Table 6**

**What is the position of school officials on the use of drug-detection dogs?**

Response	All Respondents	
	Number	Percent
Dogs will not be used under any circumstances	55	22
Dogs will only be used if drug-related problems become serious	58	24
Dogs have been used but are no longer used	19	8
Dogs are currently used routinely	25	10
Other	96	39

**Table 7**

**What actions taken in response to possession of alcohol or drugs?**

Response	First Offense		Second Offense	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Parent notified	216	88	194	75
Referred to school counselor	121	49	97	40
Referred to community resource	84	34	88	36
Law authorities are notified	134	55	139	57
Suspended for ____ days	169	69	132	54
Suspended until parents come to school	39	16		
Suspended until student goes to treatment center	25	10	36	15
Expelled from school	27	11	83	34

When school officials know that the student is in possession of drugs or alcohol, most of them notify parents. Notification is more likely to occur with the first than with repeat offenses. As one would expect, the principals tend to be more lenient with first offenders. The responses to this item are presented in Table 7.

The school officials' approaches in dealing with student drug sellers are predominantly punitive. In approximately 80 percent of the schools, the administrators notify parents and call the police. Over one half of the offenders face suspension or expulsion from school although some schools begin efforts to rehabilitate the student either by school personnel or referral to some community resource. The responses are shown in Table 8.

**Table 8**  
What actions do school officials use in response to student sale of alcohol or illicit drugs?

Response	All Respondents	
	Number	Percent
Parent notified	196	80
Referred to school counselor	75	31
Referred to community resource	61	25
Law authorities are notified	193	79
Suspended for ____ days	133	54
Suspended until parents come to school	34	14
Suspended until student goes to treatment center	21	9
Expelled from school	110	45
Other	59	24

The final item concerned programs established by the school in response to the drug and alcohol problem. It should be noted that more junior high/middle schools (82 %) had these programs in place than did high schools (71 %). Since the other responses were similar for the two levels, only the combined data were included in Table 9.

**Table 9**  
What programs are used to deal with drug problems?

Response	All Respondents	
	Number	Percent
A K-12 program is in use	186	76
No program is in use	10	4
Only a program for high school abusers is used	8	3
One a high school prevention is used	20	8
Require urinalysis or other test for suspected users	9	4
A community support group is active	104	42
Other	51	21

### Concluding Observations

The study provided ample evidence that the "war on drugs" is being waged in the public schools. Most school districts have written drug policies and the courts have been generally supportive of school officials' efforts to deal with this important problem. Practices, such as searches by drug-detection dogs and drug testing about which the law remains unsettled, are not widely used in public schools. The prevailing attitude of school officials appears to be a desire to help rather than punish students with drug problems. However, it is unlikely that a completely drug-free environment can be created in schools until solutions are found for the much more serious problems of alcohol and drug abuse in American society as a whole.

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