

Making the case for alternatives to suspension



While students who violate tobacco-free school policies may be subject to discipline, including suspension and expulsion, CA state law is clear that other means of correction that address the student's conduct should be implemented instead of suspension or expulsion (Education Code 48900.5).



Punitive school policies, like suspension and expulsion, do not address the underlying issues contributing to tobacco use and/or addiction.



According to the CDC, the most effective approaches to helping youth reduce tobacco use are through counseling and educationⁱ - two approaches that schools and school-based health centers are well-positioned to support.



School connectednessⁱⁱ can have a positive impact on whether a student uses tobacco or other substances. Exclusionary discipline responses, like suspension and expulsion, decrease a student's school connectedness.

What does it take to implement an alternative response?

A written policy is critical and must be paired with thoughtful implementation to support the policy in practice. Providing alternatives to suspension is aligned with schools' commitments to address school climate and equity and may require a different framework and approach to students and their health needs. Below are some recommendations for adopting a policy framework and the relevant implementation considerations.

POLICY	IMPLEMENTATION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a written policy that can be implemented universally, regardless of existing staff-student relationships and skills. • Identify tiered interventions based on severity and repeat violations. • Engage students and parents in the crafting of the policy. • The policy should designate staff that will be the point person/people for student substance use (i.e. school nurse, school counselor, vice principal, etc.). • Connect to other policies such as those addressing the whole student, PBIS, school climate, student mental, and behavioral health, and school wellness. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify staff and/or school-based partners that can offer training, health education, and more intensive services that address student substance use. • Train staff on brief intervention skills and initial responses to students that are supportive. • Tie responses to student substance use into the school's overall approach to school climate and student engagement - a response is about supporting students, not punishing them.

Alternative Interventions

- Referrals to school-based health center (SBHC) for individual or group tobacco cessation counseling, substance use, and/or behavioral health interventions.
- Leverage community-based providers, SBHCs, and/or the district's Tobacco Use Prevention and Education (TUPE) program to provide tobacco cessation and health education classes.
- Utilize student (peer) health educators to provide individual or group education on tobacco and substance use.

Examples and Case Studies

As these examples show, multi-level changes (at the district and at school sites) are needed to create alternative school discipline approaches to student tobacco and substance use. School 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.

Crespi Middle School, West Contra Costa Unified

Crespi Middle School's response to student substance use is part of the school's overall school site plan, which includes a goal to reduce suspensions, especially for African American students. The school utilizes its community partner, [Project Success](#) through the Center for Human Development, to support alternative responses to student substance use. The program helps educate students on tobacco and substance use through group health education and support and through one-on-one counseling and mentorship. While the current response to student substance use is not a formal written policy, the school administration is planning to formalize the policy over summer 2021 in advance of the next school year. Currently, the response is implemented on a case-by-case basis but does not rely on punitive responses to student substance use. For a first offense, a student meets with the Project Success coordinator. The student enrolls in 4-week sessions, can choose three other peers to attend the group with them, which can help create peer support and decreases the perception that the program is a punishment. The program educates students about student substance use and usually concludes with a student-to-student presentation about the substance they were caught using. Importantly, participation in the program is not framed as a consequence *instead* of suspension. Participation is just expected from students caught using substances and relies on the camaraderie and trust cultivated between students and the principal, who usually responds to these behaviors. The response is also aligned with an overall approach to student behaviors, one that intentionally avoids pushing students out of the classroom or school. For subsequent and ongoing offenses, a student may be referred to external substance use counseling which sometimes includes parent/guardian participation.

Policy: 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).

Implementation: San Fernando High School, LAUSD

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.

Resources

- Sample alternative policies from Public Health Law Center:
<https://www.publichealthlawcenter.org/sites/default/files/resources/Addressing-Student-Tobacco-Use-in-Schools-2019.pdf>
- Sample board policies from California School Boards Association:
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/he/at/tobpolicyregs.asp>
- More information about California State Law and student substance use: https://cshca-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/YOR-School-Discipline-and-Student-Substance-Use_Final.pdf

ⁱ PHS Guideline Recommendations: How to Help Adolescents Quit Smoking, CDC (last accessed January 10, 2018). https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/quit_smoking/cessation/pdfs/phs_adolescents_508.pdf.

ⁱⁱ “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.