

Policies to Combat Substance Abuse in Texas Must Include Youth-Focused Prevention and Intervention Strategies

Testimony to House Select Committee on Opioids and Substance Abuse

An important component of combating substance abuse, addiction, and their effects across the lifespan is preventing and treating substance misuse among youth. Schools can — and should — play an important role in stemming the tide of Texans affected by substance abuse and substance use disorder as well as reducing the flow of youth who enter the juvenile justice system. The Legislature should increase the availability of effective school-based substance abuse prevention and intervention programs administered by the Health and Human Services Commission. The Legislature should also establish a trusted center (similar to the Texas School Safety Center) that schools can turn to for reliable information on selecting and implementing practices shown to protect students from the ill effects associated with substance abuse, mental health concerns, and childhood trauma. While increased prevention programs will likely decrease juvenile probation involvement for some youth, the Legislature should look to opportunities to get youth substance use interventions and treatment outside of the juvenile justice system or, when the justice system is necessary, outside of secure lockups whenever possible.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony on the Committee's interim charges regarding substance abuse and opioids. Addressing substance use among youth is a critical component of combating substance abuse, addiction, and their effects across the lifespan. Prevention, early intervention, and treatment of substance use among youth can change young people's trajectories — and help stop the growing tide of substance use among adults.

Adolescence is a Key Time to Address Substance Use

Substance misuse typically begins in adolescence, making it a critical time to provide interventions.

- People typically begin to use substances during adolescence. The likelihood of using increases dramatically as people get older, peaking in a person's twenties.¹
- Substance use during childhood increases the likelihood of developing a substance use disorder later in life.²
- The younger the age at which substance use or experimentation occurs, the greater the risk of serious health problems.³
- Early alcohol use is associated with higher rates of using other substances in later adolescence, engaging in risky behavior, and delinquency. Early alcohol use is also linked to employment problems and criminal and violent behavior in adulthood.⁴

Substance use/misuse among Texas high school students is trending downward — but still occurring at alarming rates.⁵

- Alcohol is the most widely used substance among high school students in Texas. Marijuana is the most commonly used illicit drug among Texas students.⁶
- The GOOD news: Recent data indicate drug and alcohol use among Texas high school students decreased between 2013 and 2017.
- The BAD news: Alarming numbers of high school students report having their first drink before age 13, recently drinking alcohol, engaging in binge drinking, and riding in a car with a driver who had been drinking. One in seven high school students (15 percent) reported having used prescription pain medication inappropriately.

Youth Risk Behavior Survey, Texas Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)		
High school students (9 th -12 th grade) in Texas were if asked if they...	2013	2017
Alcohol		
Ever drank alcohol (at least one drink during their life)	67.2%	60.8%
Had their first drink before age 13 (other than a few sips)	18.1%	16.9%
Drank alcohol in past month (at least one drink)	36.1%	26.8%
Binge drinking in past month (4+ drinks in row for females; 5+ drinks in row for males)	--	11.8%
Rode with a driver who had been drinking alcohol within past month	28.7%	20.8%
Drove when they had been drinking alcohol within past month	11.2%	7.1%
Illicit Drugs		
Ever used marijuana	37.5%	34.4%
Tried marijuana for first time before age 13 years	8.2%	7.9%
Used marijuana in the past month	20.5%	17.0%
Ever used heroin	3.8%	2.4%
Ever injected any illegal drug into their body	2.9%	2.4%
Prescription Pain Medicine (e.g., codeine, Vicodin, Oxycontin, Hydrocodone and Percocet)		
Ever took prescription pain medicine without a doctor's prescription or differently than how doctor told them to use it	--	14.9%
Suicide Attempts		
Attempted suicide in the previous year	10.1%	12.3%
Suicide attempt resulted in an injury, poisoning, or overdose that had to be treated by a doctor or nurse in the previous year	3.5%	4.5%

Effectively addressing youth substance use can help Texas confront the high school suicide crisis in our state.⁷

- In 2017, 12 percent of high school students in Texas – one out of eight – reported attempting suicide in the past year.⁸

- Substance abuse, suicidality, and depression can share symptoms and risk factors, and often co-occur. The use of alcohol or other drugs by youth can be an attempt to ease the pain and suffering associated with depression, family conflict, and other problems that are associated with suicide risk.
- The use of alcohol or other drugs might directly contribute to suicide by affecting critical thinking skills and lowering inhibitions."⁹
- Almost 96 percent of drug-related suicide attempts by adolescents ages 12-17 who are seen in emergency departments involved prescription drugs.¹⁰

Fortunately, There are Effective Strategies to Address these Challenges

Substance abuse prevention and early intervention programs work.

- Studies show effective substance abuse prevention programs reduce rates of substance use, delay the age of first use, and reduce the high financial costs associated with substance use and abuse.¹¹
- Even after a youth has started using substances, evidence-based interventions can stop the progression from use to problematic use or to a substance use disorder.¹²
- Substance use prevention programs also prevent a range of other issues like poor academic performance, bullying, depression, violence, and unsafe sexual practices.¹³

Coordinating substance abuse prevention services with other youth prevention programs can support and enhance cross-system goals.

- Substance use, bullying, suicidality, delinquency, and violence among youth are all influenced by poor coping and decision-making skills, feeling disconnected from peers and school, and difficulty managing emotions and behavior. Prevention and intervention strategies that target these common risk factors can help schools address multiple barriers to student learning.
- Substance abuse and suicidality can be addressed with common strategies including identifying students at-risk for or suffering from suicidality, substance abuse, or depression; ensuring they receive help; and enhancing overarching protective factors, such as school connectedness.¹⁴
- The Legislature already directs the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS), the Texas Juvenile Justice Department (TJJD), the Texas Education Agency (TEA), and the Texas Military Department to coordinate and report on juvenile delinquency prevention and dropout prevention and intervention services.¹⁵ Including HHSC and substance abuse prevention into this existing coordination and reporting requirement set forth in Article IX budget rider 17.05 would make it easier for policymakers to evaluate the outcomes of substance abuse prevention programming and for state agencies and community-based providers to identify opportunities to collaborate and coordinate with each other.

School-based Efforts are Particularly Important

Effectively addressing youth substance use can improve students' academic success.

- Substance use can exacerbate academic problems that students may already be experiencing, and it can cause academic problems to emerge. Ongoing substance use among youth is highly correlated with school dropout rates, chronic absenteeism, behavior issues, and impaired learning.¹⁶
- In the 2016-17 school year, more than 23,000 disciplinary actions removed students from their classroom either through suspension, expulsion, or placements in disciplinary and juvenile justice alternative education programs for substance use or possession at school. (This figure excluded disciplinary actions for alcohol and tobacco use or possession.)¹⁷
- Besides missing instructional time, research shows that exclusionary discipline increases a student's chance of dropping out of school or later becoming involved in the juvenile or criminal justice system.
- Comparing the data of exclusionary discipline actions taken for substance use and the arrests of youth at school for substance use, even factoring 17- and 18-year olds who are not processed through the juvenile justice system, it is clear many students who have or use drugs at school are not arrested.

School-based substance abuse prevention saves money.

- The cost of implementing evidence-based substance abuse programs in schools are repaid through cost-savings in the education, health, and criminal justice systems.
- In 2008, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration determined that if effective school-based substance abuse prevention programs were implemented nationwide, for every \$1 invested in substance abuse prevention, society would save \$18 in health, education, criminal justice, and other costs.¹⁸

Substance abuse prevention programs funded through HHSC only reach three percent of students in Texas.

- Of the 5.3 million students attending Texas district and charter schools,¹⁹ only 150,000 are projected to be served during each year of the 2018-2019 biennium with funds appropriated to the Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC).²⁰
- SAMHSA requires states to use at least 20 percent of federal Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment Block Grant (SAPT) funds for prevention strategies. HHSC uses a portion of these prevention funds to contract with community-based youth prevention providers who deliver age-appropriate, evidence-based curricula to students in elementary through high schools that target risk and protective factors associated with substance use. Only 500 districts or charter schools in Texas are

ⁱ In the 2016-17 school year, there were just over 8,000 exclusionary discipline actions for alcohol and tobacco use or possession at school.

accessing this HHSC-funded prevention programming,²¹ meaning just over half of the 1,200 districts or charters in the state are not leveraging this youth prevention resource.²²

- The heavy reliance on federal funding (76 percent)²³ for these effective substance abuse prevention programs means the overwhelming majority of students in Texas do not benefit from the broad range of positive outcomes the programs offer.

There are other school-based strategies shown to prevent or delay youth substance use, although school districts often lack the funding or guidance needed to implement them.

- **Prioritizing healthy, positive school climates for all individuals in the school.** Many schools are adopting positive behavior intervention and support (PBIS) models that emphasize strategies to support social and behavioral improvement, such as character education, social skill instruction, bullying prevention, behavior support, and building consultation teams. Research has shown that for every dollar spent on PBIS, there are \$13 in benefits to society.²⁴
- **Investing in evidence-based social-emotional learning and life and coping skill programs.** Programs that help youth process their emotions, lower their levels of aggression, and develop problem-solving skills have been shown to reduce incidents of bullying and delinquency and raise students' levels of academic success.²⁵
- **Expanding availability of school counselors and mental health personnel.** Embedding a mental health provider within schools has great potential to improve student access to services when they need them, especially for Black and Hispanic youth, who are less likely to initiate and receive mental health treatment. Mental health providers, such as school social workers or psychologists, can be employed directly by the district or through a school partnership with a community provider to help address the mental health needs of students through prevention, early intervention, treatment, and referral services.

Effectively Addressing Youth Substance Use Has the Potential to Keep Youth Out of the Juvenile Justice System

Youth entering the justice system have unmet substance use treatment needs and other unmet needs that prevention services can address.

- The trauma and other experiences that put youth at risk of substance use can also put youth at risk of engaging in behavior that leads to involvement with the juvenile justice system. Effective substance youth prevention services address trauma and other risk factors and promote public safety.

- In 2016, 30 percent of Texas youth entering the juvenile justice system had an identified or suspected need for substance use treatment. The substance use treatment need for another 31 percent of youth referred to probation was identified as unknown.²⁶
- Youth who go into the deeper, more expensive end of the juvenile justice system — state lock-ups — have even greater treatment needs. In 2016, 91 percent of youth committed to the state-secure facilities were identified as needing alcohol or other drug treatment, with 42 percent identified as having a high treatment need.

Arrests for possession of illegal substances lead to a significant number of youth entering the juvenile justice system.

- Nearly 15 percent (7,682) of all referrals to juvenile probation in 2016 were for drug offenses.
- Schools are particularly active in referring youth to the justice system for substance use. In 2016, 60 percent of referrals to juvenile probation for drug offenses originated at school, accounting for 9 percent of all referrals to juvenile probation.²⁷
- According to DPS arrest dataⁱⁱ, the vast majority of drug-related arrests of 10- to 16-year-olds are for drug possession — 92 percent when excluding alcohol offenses.ⁱⁱⁱ 78 percent of possession arrests are for marijuana.²⁸
- Six percent of youth arrested for possession offenses are arrested for opiate possession — opium, cocaine, morphine, codeine, etc.²⁹

Recommendations

1. Support funding to sustain and expand evidence-based substance abuse prevention programs, practices, and policies to ensure access for every Texas student, county, and community.
2. Establish and fund a state center, connected to institutes of higher education and educational service centers, that is focused on supporting the behavioral health of students. The center would provide schools with a trusted place to turn to when looking for information, training, and technical assistance on implementing both campus-wide and youth-targeted practices that support a healthy, positive school climate for all individuals in the school, including positive behavior interventions and supports, trauma-informed practices, and programs that help youth process their emotions, cope with stress in healthy

ⁱⁱ Texas DPS 2016 Crime in Texas Arrest Data. Our data on juvenile probation referrals breaks down drug offenses by misdemeanor and felony, not by different substances. The DPS arrest data tracks arrests by substance, however, it does not include referrals to probation if they were not made by law enforcement and it includes all classes of offenses, including Class C misdemeanors which are not processed in the juvenile justice system.

ⁱⁱⁱ Alcohol charges for youth are generally Class C misdemeanors, which are not processed through the juvenile justice system. If alcohol is included as substance use in the analysis of arrest data, it would be 14% of arrests of youth ages 10 to 16, making arrests for drug possession 80% of drug offense arrests of juveniles.

ways, and make healthy decisions. The center could be modeled on the state’s school safety center, which provides training and technical assistance to districts on safety matters.

3. Support funding to districts to expand the number of school counselors and other mental health personnel in schools.
4. Encourage schools to develop disciplinary models that keep students in the classroom and learning after a first offense of substance use or possession at school.
5. Improve coordination of school-based prevention programs that target common risk and protective factors. Include HHSC and substance abuse prevention programs in legislative direction to state agencies to coordinate dropout and delinquency youth prevention and intervention services (Art. IX Sec. 17.05).
6. Expand the use of Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) in schools and other settings to identify substance misuse in youth and assess the need for intervention/treatment.
7. Identify and address legislative or administrative barriers that prevent substance abuse providers from offering substance use disorder outpatient treatment and recovery services on school campuses.
8. Provide more treatment options to youth outside of the juvenile justice system to reduce the number of youth unnecessarily arrested and processed through juvenile court.
9. When youth are justice-involved, ensure treatment options are available in the community so that youth are not held in costly lockups for treatment when they are not a safety risk to the community.
10. Provide more resources for aftercare for youth who have been released from juvenile justice facilities to help promote recovery and long-term success.

1 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Surgeon General (2016) Facing Addiction in America: The Surgeon General’s Report on Alcohol, Drugs, and Health.

2 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2016)

3 American Academy of Pediatrics (2010). Children, Adolescents, Substance Abuse, and the Media.

4 Ellickson PL, Tucker JS, Klein DJ. (2003) “Ten-year prospective study of public health problems associated with early drinking.” *Pediatrics*.;111:949–955

5 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2018). High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey, Texas 2017 Results

6 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2018). High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey, Texas 2017 Results

7 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2012) Preventing Suicide: A Toolkit for High Schools.

8 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2018). High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey, Texas 2017 Results.

9 Makhija, N., and L. Sher. (2007). “Preventing suicide in adolescents with alcohol use disorders.” *International Journal of Adolescent Medicine and Health*. 19(1): 53-59.

10 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2012) Preventing Suicide: A Toolkit for High Schools.

11 Miller, T. and Hendrie, D. (2008) Substance Abuse Prevention Dollars and Cents: A Cost-Benefit Analysis. Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

12 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

-
- 13 Trust for America's Health. (2017). Pain in the Nation: The Drug, Alcohol and Suicide Crises and the Need for a National Resilience Strategy. <http://healthyamericans.org/assets/files/TFAH-2017-PainNationRpt-FINAL.pdf>
 - 14 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2012) Preventing Suicide: A Toolkit for High Schools.
 - 15 The 2018-2019 General Appropriations Act, Article IX, Section 17.05
 - 16 Trust for America's Health. (2015) Reducing Teen Substance Misuse: what really works. <http://tfah.org/assets/files/TFAH-2015-TeenSubstAbuse-FnlRv.pdf>.
 - 17 Texas Education agency PEIMS discipline data from tea.texas.gov.
 - 18 Miller, T. and Hendrie, D. (2008)
 - 19 Texas Education Agency. Pocket Edition – 2016-2017. <https://tea.texas.gov/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=51539619750>
 - 20 S.B. 1 General Appropriations Act, Texas Health and Human Services Performance Measure Target D.2.4. Substance Abuse Prev/Interv/Treat
 - 21 Texas Department of State Health Services. "Featured Prevention Resources." <https://www.dshs.texas.gov/sa/Prevention/default.shtm>. Accessed August 2, 2018.
 - 22 Texas Education Agency. Pocket Edition – 2016-2017. <https://tea.texas.gov/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=51539619750>
 - 23 Health and Human Services Commission. (March 22, 2018). Presentation to the Senate Health and Human Services Committee: Substance Use Disorder in TX.
 - 24 Washington State Institute for Public Policy. (2017) Other School Wide Positive Behavior Programs. <http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/BenefitCost/ProgramPdf/540/Other-school-wide-positive-behavior-programs>
 - 25 Stone DM et al. (2017). Preventing Suicide: A Technical Package of Policies, Programs, and Practices. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
 - 26 Open Records Request #30613 of all youth referred to juvenile probation in calendar year 2016.
 - 27 Ibid.
 - 28 Texas DPS 2016 Crime in Texas Arrest Data. www.dps.texas.gov/crimereports/
 - 29 Ibid.