

Drug-Free School Policy 101

Why should my school have a written policy?

Schools have become the primary setting for drug prevention efforts. However, education and prevention programs alone are not enough. Explicit standards and norms for behavior are also an important component of any school-based prevention effort. While these standards can be established in a number of ways, the most important means is the adoption of a comprehensive and effective school drug policy. Adopting a clear school drug policy and communicating this policy to students and staff on a regular basis is an important component in preventing drug abuse. Additionally, districts receiving federal grants may be subject to the Drug-Free Workplace Act, which requires a written policy on substance abuse for staff.

What will a policy do for your school?

A comprehensive school policy will complement the education process, promote discipline and school safety, frame the scope of the issues involved, and clearly describe relevant goals, elements and resources. It is in the school's best interest to take the time to craft a clear and cohesive policy document.

What should be included in your policy?

Rationale and Philosophy: Define the reasons for creating and implementing a school drug policy. Include the district's mission statement, with an explanation of how drug policy relates to the school's mission and the health and safety of students and employees.

General Statement of School Policy on Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drugs (ATOD): This sets the parameters for the school's policy and generally identifies the basics – who, what, where, when, how – pertinent to the policy.

Audience: It is necessary to address ATOD issues for both students and adults (i.e. employees, volunteers) either in separate documents or combined into a single policy, as both groups are school based.

School Health Education: The most successful prevention efforts include ATOD prevention as a component of a Coordinated School Health Education (CSHE) program.

Prevention Education: A comprehensive policy document briefly describes how the district addresses each research-validated ATOD prevention principle.

Intervention/After-care & Re-Entry: Intervention is often triggered by a policy infraction. And, indeed, identification of individuals involved in or affected by ATOD abuse should lead to intervention. Mechanisms of intervention processes can include in school and outside of school ATOD assessment, referral, parent meetings, and support groups.

Resources/Employee Assistance: Both students and employees need to know how to deal with ATOD-related problems, questions and concerns. To provide the most information to the most people, compile, publish and post a list of in-school and community-based resources.

Disciplinary Measures/Codes of Conduct: School drug policy must be augmented by defined, written codes of conduct. It is imperative that the code be formalized, put in writing and widely disseminated. Just as with the school drug policy, advance notice and clear parameters can go a long way toward setting the tone for behavior. Written discipline codes can help assure fair and consistent management.

Accountability: Clarify roles and responsibilities in writing and make sure that all staff members understand how their participation enhances the success of the school's policy. Check with the school attorney about the use of an annual sign-off sheet to indicate that district employees and students have read and will comply with the policy.

Staff Development: A comprehensive policy should acknowledge the district's support and commitment to ongoing staff development. This may include a general statement that promotes the need for training and the district's intent to sponsor training opportunities and information dissemination on an ongoing basis.

What about legal issues?

Because of the visibility of ATOD issues and the legal, financial and ethical concerns involved in policies, it is in the school's best interest to take the time to craft a clear and cohesive policy document. It is also important to receive advice from the appropriate legal counsel before adopting or modifying a policy.

Schools with a clearly stated, written position on drug-related issues are less likely to be involved in protracted hearings, legal wrangling and other time-consuming, expensive situations. In the event of legal action, written procedures provide a paper trail. This points to the need for wide distribution of policy, along with appropriate training for implementation and annual reviews for students, parents and staff.

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