

## Substance Use and School Improvement

The previous *California Student Survey* (CSS) revealed promising declines between 2001 and 2003 in the use of alcohol and other drugs (AOD) by adolescents. For 2005, this declining trend leveled off and 7<sup>th</sup> graders even reported several increases, although very small ones. This Brief summarizes results related to AOD use at school in the context of school improvement efforts. Analyzing data from the *California Healthy Kids Survey* (CHKS), Hanson et al. (2005) revealed that school progress in improving scores on the state's annual achievement test was inversely related to the proportion of students who reported (a) ever being intoxicated, (b) currently using alcohol or marijuana at school, (c) ever being intoxicated on school property, or (d) being offered drugs at school. The current results confirm 2003 data showing that substantial numbers of high school students report these behaviors, thus providing further evidence of the barrier to learning and school improvement posed by substance use among students.

### Use of AOD on School Property

Using alcohol or other drugs at school, especially on several occasions, reveals risk-taking, disengagement from academics and serious substance involvement. Table 5.1 provides the results for three measures of substance use on school property among 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> graders.

**Current Alcohol and Marijuana Use.** Use of alcohol and marijuana in the past 30 days on school property was relatively stable and similar, at 8% and 7%, respectively, for 9<sup>th</sup> graders, and at 9% and 7% for 11<sup>th</sup> graders. The proportion of current users who used at school was higher for marijuana than for alcohol. For both substances, this proportion declined between 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grades, likely reflecting high dropout rates among AOD users at school.

**Ever Drunk or "High."** Attending school at least once while drunk on alcohol or high on another drug, which declined among 11<sup>th</sup> graders in 2003, was relatively level at 13% for 9<sup>th</sup> and 23% for 11<sup>th</sup>. About half of these students in both grades reported three or more occasions!

Table 5.1. AOD Use on School Property

	2003		2005	
	9th (%)	11th (%)	9th (%)	11th (%)
Alcohol (past 30 days)	7	8	8	9
Marijuana (past 30 days)	6	7	7	7
Drunk/high (lifetime)	12	23	13	23
3 to 6 times	3	5	3	5
7 or more times	3	7	3	7

### Availability of AOD on School Property

Availability of AOD at school increases the likelihood of use on site, which likely affects the learning environment. Twenty-nine percent of 9<sup>th</sup> and 38% of 11<sup>th</sup> graders had been offered drugs at school (given or for sale) in the past 12 months (up from 2003). Over half of these students in 9<sup>th</sup>, and over two-thirds in 11<sup>th</sup>, reported more than one such occurrence. Yet, only slightly more than one-tenth selected school as a place where most students get alcohol.

Table 5.2. Availability of Alcohol and Drugs at School

	2003		2005	
	9th (%)	11th (%)	9th (%)	11th (%)
Offered etc. drug at school	24	36	29	38
Two or more times	14	25	17	26
Believe students get alcohol at school	13	10	15	13

\*Past 12 months

### School Problems Related to Use

Table 5.3 shows that school performance and attendance are related to substance use. Four categories of heavy users — High-Risk Users of drugs (HRU), binge drinkers, and students who used alcohol or marijuana at school (see Brief #4) — are compared with Abstainers (no AOD use in the past six months) and Conventional Drug Users (used, but did not meet criteria for HRU).

**Academic Performance.** The percentage who received grades of mostly A/Bs or better was twice as high among 9<sup>th</sup> grade Abstainers compared to the four categories of heavy users (50% vs. 22-26%) — and about 1.7 times as high among 11<sup>th</sup> grade Abstainers (48% vs. 26-30%). Conventional drug users were in the mid-range.

**School Attendance.** Differences were even larger for attendance. Only 20-24% of heavy users in 9<sup>th</sup> grade and

14-17% in 11<sup>th</sup> did NOT skip school or cut classes in the past 12 months, compared to 76% and 62% of Abstainers.

Table 5.3. Received Grades of Mostly A/Bs and Did Not Skip School or Cut Classes, past 12 months

	Grades A/B or better		No Skip School/Classes	
	9 <sup>th</sup> (%)	11 <sup>th</sup> (%)	9 <sup>th</sup> (%)	11 <sup>th</sup> (%)
Abstainers*	50	48	76	62
Conventional drug users	37	32	48	32
High risk drug users*	22	26	24	17
Binge drinkers**	23	29	21	19
Used marijuana at school**	26	26	14	16
Used alcohol at school**	26	30	20	14

\*Past 6 months. \*\*Past 30 days

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**Trouble at School or with School Work.** Only around 2-4% of 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> graders reported that their alcohol or drug use had gotten them into trouble at school or affected their school work. These percentages may be underestimates, given that many problem users of all ages fail to

connect AOD use to problems they experience. As shown in 2003-04 CSS Brief #1, students reporting current AOD use at school reported use-related school problems two-to-three times more frequently than other current users.

### School Violence

Table 5.4 shows that reports by 11<sup>th</sup> graders of violence at school in the past 12 months increased with level of substance use. High-Risk Drug Users (HRU) were over 6.5 times more likely than Abstainers to report carrying a weapon or vandalizing school, and 3.5 times more likely to have engaged in a fight, with Conventional Drug Users in the mid-range. To a lesser extent, the same progression is evident in measures of harassment at school and feeling unsafe or very unsafe at school.

Table 5.4. School Violence, Past 12 Months, Grade 11

	Drug Use Category*		
	HRU	CON	ABS
Damaged school property	54	21	8
Taken a weapon to school	40	14	6
Had physical fight at school	53	30	15
Been harassed	49	38	28
Feel school unsafe/very	16	10	9

\*High-Risk Use, Conventional Use, and Abstinence in past six months

### School Support to Reduce Use

Students were asked the likelihood that their school would provide help for stopping or reducing AOD use. Only 17% of 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> graders thought it *very likely* that the school would provide help. Only a little over one-third felt it was *likely/very likely* (35% and 36%), moderately lower than in 2003. In contrast, *not likely* was selected by 41% of 9<sup>th</sup> graders and 46% of 11<sup>th</sup>.

Table 5.5. Likelihood Students Will Find Help at School for Stopping or Reducing AOD Use

	Grade	
	9th (%)	11th (%)
Very likely	17	17
Likely	17	18
Not Likely	41	46
Don't know	26	19

### Conclusion

These findings have important implications for the efforts in California to improve academic achievement. A significant minority of high school students reported use-related behaviors and experiences found to be barriers to raising test scores by Hanson and colleagues. Consistent with this, heavy AOD use indicators on the 2005 CSS were negatively associated with good academic grades and school attendance and positively associated with violence and, to a lesser extent, victimization at school. These CSS correlations do not prove that AOD use causes poor grades and violence, but they do indicate that these problems co-occur within the same population and must be addressed simultaneously among many youth. Heavy AOD users may also adversely affect the learning environment of other students through their higher levels of school violence and contributing to availability of drugs on campus, although the school is *not* the main place where drugs are obtained. In schools with high rates of heavy use, substance abuse prevention and intervention need to be a significant component of comprehensive attempts to improve student achievement. To this end, greater effort must be given to create an open, supportive school environment that will encourage students who have problems with AOD use to seek, and benefit from, assistance.

### References

Hanson, T.L., Austin, G.A., and Bayha, J.L. (2005). *Ensuring That No Child Is Left Behind: How are Student Health Risks and Resilience related to Academic Progress of Schools?* San Francisco: WestEd. See also California Healthy Kids Survey Fact sheet 3). Download at [www.wested.org/hks](http://www.wested.org/hks).

### About the CSS

The state-mandated 11<sup>th</sup> biennial California Student Survey was conducted in the fall-winter of the 2005-06 school year by WestEd under conditions of strict confidentiality and anonymity among 10,638 students in grades 7, 9 and 11 in 113 randomly-selected schools. Participation was voluntary and required parental approval. The survey is sponsored by the Office of the Attorney General, with the California Dept. of Education and Dept. of Alcohol and Drug Programs. Full results are online at [www.Safestate.org/CSS](http://www.Safestate.org/CSS).