



## **Guidelines for developing a School Substance Use Policy**

### **Introduction**

The National Drugs Strategy 2001-2008 sets out a detailed programme of action to be implemented by Government Departments and Agencies to combat the very serious problem of drug misuse in our society. The strategy highlights the important contribution that schools can make in the area of education and prevention, and requires them to have substance use policies in place.

The central objective of a school's substance use policy is the welfare, care and protection of every young person in line with the Education Act, 1998 and the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000. The policy should address both education concerning alcohol, tobacco and drugs and the procedures for managing incidents relating to these substances.

The issues involved in the design of a school substance use policy are complex. The policy should represent an integrated community – based response. It should be developed through existing consultative structures within the school and should build on existing school policy, e.g. discipline, bullying, RSE. While the school substance use policy should cover alcohol, tobacco and drugs, different issues may need to be addressed under each of these headings.

### **Why a policy on Substance Use?**

The world in which we live presents young people with many challenges that affect their health and well-being. Exposure to alcohol, tobacco, and drugs is part of this reality. Schools need to reflect upon how they might provide for the needs of their student cohort and respond appropriately to what are sometimes sensitive and emotive issues.

The Education Act (1998) provides that schools should promote the social and personal development of students and provide health education for them.

The National Drugs Strategy, 'Building on Experience<sup>1</sup>', is now Government policy and it requires schools to have a substance use policy in place.

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<sup>1</sup> Available at [www.tourism-sport](http://www.tourism-sport)

The recent report from the National Advisory Committee on Drugs entitled 'Drug use prevention' (November 2001)<sup>2</sup> underlines the importance of schools developing substance use policies.

The 1999 European School Survey Project on Alcohol and other Drugs (ESPAD) Report<sup>3</sup> highlighted the seriousness of the problem among sixteen year olds in Ireland, as compared to the other 29 ESPAD countries surveyed. Alcohol was identified as being the dominant drug of misuse in Ireland whilst the use of tobacco and other drugs was above the ESPAD average.

## **What is a Substance Use Policy and how is it developed?**

A substance use policy sets out, in writing, the framework within which the whole school community manages issues relating to substance use. It should reflect the unique ethos of the school and should aim to develop a shared understanding of the term 'drugs'.

A partnership approach based on the 'whole school' model is recommended for the development of the policy. The policy applies to the entire school community, including teachers, students, parents/guardians and users of the school building. It is strongly recommended that schools within the same community collaborate on policy development.

The process of developing a substance use policy is best undertaken in a step-by-step approach as outlined in the seven steps below.

### **STEP 1: Establish a core committee to develop the policy**

Structures for developing a school substance use policy should ideally be based on existing school structures for planning and curriculum change and should involve the participation of management, principal, teachers, parents/guardians, students, and other relevant groups. It is recommended that a core committee representative of the whole school community be established to develop the policy.

The following questions may help to clarify the working of the committee:

- Who will convene/chair the committee?
- Who will record the work of the committee?
- What assistance will the committee need and where can it be sourced?
- How will the committee consult with the various groups in the whole school community?
- Is there a role for additional representation from a relevant community based agency (e.g. Gardai, local drugs task force, youth or community services)?

### **STEP 2: Study relevant resource documents and legislation**

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<sup>2</sup> Available at [www.nacd.ie](http://www.nacd.ie)

<sup>3</sup> Alcohol and other Drug Use among students in 30 European countries

In recent years, many resource materials relevant to education on substance use have been developed. These include:

- Walk Tall Programme----a Social, Personal and Health education programme for the prevention of Substance Misuse - Department of Education and Science.
- Social, Personal and Health Education ----Primary School Curriculum and Teacher Guidelines - Department of Education and Science/NCCA (1999).
- Child Protection Guidelines and Procedures for Primary Schools – Department of Education and Science (2001).
- Substance Misuse Prevention information booklet outlining a multi- strand approach for Boards of Management, Teachers, Parents and other Educators – Department of Education 1997.
- “On My Own Two Feet” – Educational Resource Materials for Social, Personal and Health Education - Department of Education and Science.
- Junior Cycle Post Primary Curriculum and Teacher Guidelines for Social, Personal and Health Education – Department of Education and Science / NCCA (2000).
- Directory of Alcohol, Drugs and related services in the Republic of Ireland – Health Promotion Unit, Department of Health and Children.
- Facts about Drug Abuse in Ireland, compiled by Dr Des Corrigan - Health Promotion Unit, Dept of Health and Children (revised edition available in September).

Additional educational resource information is also available on the internet at website address : [www.sphe.ie](http://www.sphe.ie).

For other substance information resource materials, schools can contact the local Health Promotion Department in their relevant Regional Health Board.

Legislation relevant to substance misuse should also be considered. Drug laws are complex. Schools are advised to be proactive in developing a good working relationship with local Gardaí, who will be able to give more details on the alcohol and drug laws, and with the Environmental Health Officers in relation to legislation on tobacco. The laws relating to drugs that are most relevant include the Misuse of Drugs Acts, 1977 and 1984. Offences under these acts include possession with intent to supply and possession for personal use. There are other laws relating to tobacco, alcohol, solvents and medicines, which must be taken into consideration in developing a policy.

### **STEP 3: Review the current situation in the school regarding substance use policy issues**

Among the aspects of the current situation that may usefully be considered are the following:

#### **a) Current provision regarding alcohol, tobacco, and drug education**

Information on what is already happening in the school in relation to substance use education may be helpful in highlighting provisions that should be incorporated into the school's substance use policy

- How is provision currently made in the school for alcohol, tobacco and drug education? Is it through specific programmes, existing school subjects, special projects, etc.....? Are all pupils in the school catered for?
- Does the school include SPHE on the curriculum?
- Does SPHE include a component on drug education?
- Do visiting speakers contribute to drug education in the context of a supportive school environment?
- What criteria are used for inviting visitors and who monitors their contribution?
- Is project work undertaken by students on the topic of substance use appropriate, supervised and monitored?
- Is the whole school environment supportive of a substance use policy?

**b) Existing school policies (e.g. school plan, the code of behaviour etc.),**

Policies that the school already has in place may contain provisions relevant to substance use.

- Does the school have a policy on smoking, or is the issue dealt with in the context of any other school policy?
- Does the school have a policy on alcohol, or is the issue dealt with in the context of any other school policy?
- Does the school have a policy on drugs, or is the issue dealt with in the context of any other school policy?
- Does the school have a policy on use/ storage of medicines?
- How are incidents relating to alcohol, tobacco and drug use currently addressed in the school's Code of Behaviour or within the School Plan?
- Does the school have a health and safety statement?

**c) Current understanding in relation to alcohol, tobacco and drug use**

It may be helpful to consider current understanding, awareness and attitudes among the school community in relation to substance use.

- What is our understanding of 'drugs'?
- For example:  
'A drug is any chemical which alters how the body works, or how the person behaves or feels '.
- Are we aware of the level and range of drug use in the immediate community and environs of the school? If not, can we gather this information with the assistance of the Gardai, Health Board or a statutory or voluntary group? Do we have links with these groups at present?
- What are staff views on current approaches concerning substance use?

The information gathered in Steps 2 and 3 will help the core committee to decide on what should go into the draft policy statement

## **STEP 4: Prepare a draft policy statement**

### **a) Policy Framework**

The School Development Planning Initiative provides the overall framework for policy development in schools. The following framework could be used in drawing up the draft policy statement:

- **Title of Policy**  
Name the issue or aspect of school life to which the policy relates. In this case, the title may be “Substance Use Policy”
- **Scope**  
To whom does the policy apply—students, teachers, parents, users of the school building. When does it apply- school time (including break times), to all school related activities?
- **Relationship to School’s Mission/Vision/Aims**  
Relate the policy to the philosophy and characteristic spirit (ethos) of the school [For further help, see page 7 below.]
- **Rationale**  
Why is this policy necessary? [See page 1 above - Why a policy on Substance Use]
- **Goals/Objectives**  
In precise terms, what is the policy intended to achieve?
- **Policy Content**  
State the content of the policy, indicating the school’s approach to this policy area. [For further help, see page 7 below regarding the division of the content into three sections.] The policy content comprises general guidelines. It should be followed by a detailed implementation programme.
- **Roles and Responsibilities**  
What are the responsibilities of the various parties in the school community in the development, implementation and evaluation of this policy?
- **Success Criteria**  
What indicators will be used to gauge the effectiveness of the policy?
- **Monitoring Procedures**  
Who will do what, when, to see how the policy is working?
- **Review Procedures**  
Who will do what, when, to evaluate the effectiveness of the policy and to ascertain what changes, if any, are necessary?

- **Timeframe**  
When will the completed policy be circulated, when will it come into force, when will it be subject to review?
- **Implementation Programme:**  
What detailed procedures are necessary to implement the provisions of this policy?  
  
Who will devise the procedures? When? How will details be circulated to all concerned? Who will carry out the procedures when they have been devised?

## **b) Prompts to assist in using the Policy Framework**

- **Relationship to School's Mission/Vision/Aims**
- Has an understanding of the characteristic spirit of the school (school ethos) been developed and agreed with the partners in the school community?

For example:

'Dedicated to the care of the whole school community.'

'Provides a safe and secure environment for learning'.

'Supports those who are experiencing difficulties.'

'Seeks to engage the partners in the education process.'

- How does/might the substance use policy reflect the school ethos?

- **Policy Content**

It may be helpful to divide the policy content into three sections:

- I. Education concerning substance use
- II. Management of alcohol, tobacco and drug-related incidents
- III. Provision for training and staff development

## **I. Education concerning substance use**

Education about alcohol, tobacco and drugs is most effective if provided in the broader context of a Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) programme, which is developmental and delivered in the context of a supportive whole school environment.

- In what ways will education concerning substance use be provided within the broad context of SPHE--through specific modules or programmes, existing school subjects, special projects....?
- What considerations will inform the selection of content and methodologies?
- What approach will be taken to co-ordination, teacher involvement, and time-allocation?
- Other considerations?

The use of an outside visitor/ speaker to enhance the work done in class should always be considered in the context of the full SPHE programme and should be undertaken in the presence of a/the teacher.

## **II. Management of alcohol, tobacco and drug-related incidents**

Incidents involving alcohol, tobacco and drug use might include

- Use or suspected use of alcohol, drugs, tobacco on the school premises or during a school-related activity
- Intoxication/unusual behaviour
- Disclosure about use
- Finding these substances and/or associated paraphernalia
- Possession and/or supply on the school premises or during a school-related activity
- Other

The school should respond to incidents involving alcohol, tobacco and drug use in a planned and considered way. In certain cases it may be necessary to seek legal advice. Due care will be important in deciding on the balance between a pastoral and a disciplinary response. An appropriate pastoral response to an incident involving alcohol, tobacco and drug use may include referral to a support agency. It should be stressed that the ultimate sanction of expulsion can have the effect of alienating a student from mainstream sources of help and may result in this student becoming more involved in the culture of drug misuse. Where a member of staff requires support, schools may consider facilitating links with an Employee Assistance Scheme.

The school policy should inform teachers about issues relating to confidentiality and appropriate reporting procedures. It should also clarify an agreed procedure for involving parents/guardians, liaising with Gardai and responding to media inquiries.

- In what situations and locations are young people most at risk in relation to substance misuse?
- How are incidents relating to (a) alcohol, (b) tobacco and (c) drug use addressed in the school's code of behaviour?
- What is the school's shared understanding of 'a drug related incident'?
- What is the reporting procedure for such incidents?
- How will parents be involved in incidents involving their own child?
- How will parents be involved in incidents relating to another child?
- What is the role of the Board of Management/Trustees?
- Are procedures in place for dealing with incidents requiring medical interventions e.g. are personnel suitably qualified in First Aid available? Have contacts been established with local medical personnel?
- When and how will Gardai be involved in 'drug related incidents'? It is essential that the school establish a rapport with the local Gardai, which will encourage a proactive rather than reactive approach.
- What support agencies are available at local level to which students involved in substance misuse might be referred?

- What advice is given to the school community in relation to responding to the media and who in the school is designated to respond to the media?
- Are there adequate mechanisms in place to enable the school to follow up on incidents that may take place?
- Other considerations?

### **III. Provision for Training and Staff Development**

An effective policy needs to be supported by an ongoing commitment from the Board of Management and School Trustees to training and staff development. At present, schools are assisted in this at post-primary level by the SPHE Support Service (Post-Primary) and at primary level, by the Primary Curriculum Support Programme and Walk Tall Support Office (for Local Drugs Task Force Area Primary Schools). Health Boards also provide a wide range of supports for schools including Health Education and Health Promotion, Smoking Cessation Support and Adolescent Counselling Services.

- Is there a shared understanding among the staff of the contribution that an SPHE programme can make to the prevention of substance misuse?
- Are all staff members aware of the contribution they can make to the prevention of substance misuse within their own subject area in post-primary schools and in their own class in primary schools (e.g. by developing a supportive class environment)?
- Are all staff members sufficiently aware of and sensitive to the signs and symptoms of substance misuse?
- Are all staff members sufficiently aware of laws relating to alcohol, tobacco and drug use and how they relate to themselves, to the school and the students?
- What further training needs do we have in relation to the implementation of the policy?
- Where can we access training?
- How will new staff, in particular, be briefed on the substance use policy of the school?
- How will parent education on SPHE and issues relating to substance misuse be promoted in the school community?
- Other considerations?

#### **STEP 5: Publicise, revise /amend and finalise the draft policy**

The draft policy should be circulated as widely as possible for the views of parents/guardians, teachers, students and management. Particular effort should be made to involve those parents and pupils who might not normally be reached. Revision of the draft policy should be informed by the feedback from this process.

#### **STEP 6: Ratify, circulate and implement the agreed policy**

When the finalised draft policy has been ratified by the Board of Management, it becomes the school's agreed Substance Use Policy. It should then be circulated to ensure everyone in the school community is aware of it. The whole staff team must be familiar with the policy and ready to put it into practice in accordance with the



Implementation Programme. It is important that everyone is aware of any changes implied in curriculum, school rules, sanctions and code of behaviour.

Parents/guardians should be informed of what is happening in the school with regard to substance use policy from the time of enrolment of the student. It is recommended that parents and students (aged over 18 years) be asked to sign a statement to the effect that they have read the policy and agree that they are bound by it.

### **STEP 7: Monitor, review and evaluate the policy**

The policy should be reviewed regularly. In practice, this process might be co-ordinated by the core committee in consultation with the wider school community. Ongoing review and evaluation should take cognisance of changing information, legislation, developments in the school-based programme and feedback from parents/guardians, teachers and students. The policy should be revised as necessary in the light of such review and evaluation and within the framework of school planning.