

STUDENT SUBSTANCE ABUSE: ALTERNATIVES TO ZERO TOLERANCE

(Adopted by Convention Delegates May 2003)

Reviewed by Board of Managers July 2012

- WHEREAS, Drug use among middle and high school students in California and nationwide continues to be prevalent; and
- WHEREAS, Suspension or expulsion of students that use alcohol and drugs, without behavioral intervention, mentoring or rehabilitative referral, is ineffective and unsuccessful in curtailing substance abuse among students; and
- WHEREAS, A disproportionate number of minority students are affected by Zero Tolerance policies; and
- WHEREAS, It is counterproductive to punish students without attempting to alter their behavior; and
- WHEREAS, School connectedness (the perceived caring from teachers and high expectations for student performance) was found to make a critical difference in whether or not students turned to alcohol and drugs; now therefore be it
- RESOLVED,** That the California State PTA urge its units, councils and districts to encourage the use of programs that include prevention, treatment, education and support as an alternative to mandatory suspension in response to student substance abuse in schools; and be it further
- RESOLVED,** That the California State PTA urge its units, councils and districts to encourage local school districts to adopt programs and plans that promote school connectedness and address behavioral changes; and be it further
- RESOLVED,** That the California State PTA urge its units, councils and districts to support in-school suspension, after school interventions, positive behavior mentoring, student assistance and other programs that offer counseling and education as preventive disciplinary response to first time drug abuse offenders and students who voluntarily seek help to deal with drug abuse, and be it further
- RESOLVED,** That the California State PTA urge its units, councils and districts to encourage local school districts to adopt policies of preventative disciplinary response and urge school districts to report, where required by law, any violation of drug laws.

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BACKGROUND SUMMARY

Research shows that the “War on Drugs” campaign and harsh Zero Tolerance policies have been unsuccessful in deterring student substance use and abuse. According to the Eighth Biennial California Survey 1999-2000 Report to Attorney General Bill Lockyer sponsored by the California Departments of Justice, Education, Alcohol and Drug Programs, and Health Services, and a 2001 Columbia University National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse report, *Malignant Neglect: Substance Abuse and America’s Schools*, alcohol and substance use among middle and high school students continues to be a commonly occurring practice.

Research shows that the common disciplinary approaches of suspension, expulsion or involuntary transfer to a continuation school for alcohol and drug-related offenses are ineffective. They are contrary to research findings that show school connectedness as a successful method of promoting student success in making healthy lifestyle choices. Additionally, these measures are counter to federal and state legislative mandates that support schools offering alternative approaches and interventions to assist students who abuse drugs.

Findings from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, a comprehensive federally funded study of the health-related behaviors of adolescents in grades 7-12, revealed that school connectedness significantly correlates with lower health risk behavior. The nature of school discipline is one of the basic factors contributing to school connectedness. The study concludes that: “The overall level of school connectedness is lower in schools that temporarily expel students for relatively minor infractions...compared to schools with more lenient discipline policies. Zero tolerance policies, which mandate harsh punishment (usually expulsion) for the first occurrence of an infraction, seek to make schools safer. Yet, students in schools with harsh discipline policies report feeling less safe at school than do students in schools with more moderate policies.”

Federal and state laws support alternative responses as ways to address youth substance abuse:

- The United States Department of Education identifies the fundamental qualities of a safe and responsible school as one in which “prevention and intervention programs are sustained, coordinated and comprehensive.”
- The newest authorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, recommends that schools prevent drug use through learning support activities, student services and interventions. It encourages youth anti-drug programs and activities that reduce the need for suspension or expulsion and that assist students who have been suspended or expelled to reenter the regular education setting. It also encourages programs that connect students with adults in whom they can confide.
- The California Department of Education’s Healthy Kids Program advocates intervention and cessation programs as part of the effort to keep our youth drug-free.

For many years the California State PTA has advocated for comprehensive school community drug abuse prevention programs and has encouraged the availability of good counseling and other support services in response to youth substance abuse and underage drinking. It is time to advocate for compassionate responses to student substance abuse by promoting the many extracurricular, after-school and prevention programs that increase the connectedness of troubled and at-risk students to their schools and, thereby, strengthen their chances for success.