

## PROJECT ALERT BEST PRACTICES: CASE STUDY FINDINGS

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**A** case study on the “real world” adoption and implementation of Project ALERT was undertaken at the request of the BEST Foundation For A Drug-Free Tomorrow.

This study collected information on a variety of issues, including:

- Why did schools select Project ALERT?
- How effectively have schools been implementing Project ALERT?
- What were the perceived benefits and challenges of using Project ALERT?

For this case study, we visited 14 middle schools across the United States. During each site visit, we met with Project ALERT teachers, school principals, and school- and district-level staff involved with decisions regarding substance use prevention programs and curricula. We also attended a Project ALERT lesson taught during our visit to each school.

We begin our discussion by highlighting how schools approach their school-wide prevention efforts.

Many of the schools we visited implemented comprehensive school-based prevention programs that included the following components: policies prohibiting use, multiple substance use prevention education topics, teacher training, cessation programs,

regular needs assessments, and parent or community involvement. The substance use prevention education materials used in the schools addressed self-esteem, decision-making, goal-setting, assertiveness, character building, safety, effective communication, and other critical skills and issues. Overall prevention programming in these school systems began in pre-K and continued through 12th grade. Many schools focused on character education and decision-making throughout a student’s education, paying particular attention to substance use prevention efforts during the middle school years.

As part of their prevention program, some schools incorporated a type of mentoring program, usually during their advisory periods, in which school faculty served as student advisors. In one such program, teachers met with a group of students once a week for 20 minutes to talk about various topics. They watched videos, held discussions, read plays, or conducted other activities that met the program’s objectives. In another school, staff met with interested students on a regular basis, but not as part of a class.

### What resources guided the selection of substance use prevention curricula?

The process by which schools selected curricula varied in many ways, including how decision-makers found out about a given curriculum, whether they

used needs assessment data or other resources to inform their choice, whether they had to adhere to local or state standards, and who was involved in the selection process. Many decision-makers cited a number of resources that were critical to their selection processes, including the Department of Education's *Principles of Effectiveness*, Drug Strategies' *Making the Grade*, various websites, or their colleagues. Few schools, however, used needs assessment data to guide their decisions.

### Why did schools select Project ALERT?

Many schools selected Project ALERT because it addresses decision-making and skill development. A few decision-makers also stated that Project ALERT appealed to them because it is research-based. Other reasons for selecting Project ALERT included its relatively low cost, ease of implementation, availability of training, and good fit within school schedules.

### What were the key components of effective implementation?

Many factors contribute to effective implementation of substance use prevention curricula. Although we specifically studied Project ALERT, these factors are relevant to other substance use prevention efforts as well.

During our visits, we observed that Safe and Drug Free Schools (SFDS) Coordinators were instrumental in supporting the implementation of their schools' substance use prevention efforts. Schools with greater district involvement were more likely to have substance use prevention efforts that were better planned and coordinated.


Our site visits also revealed a variety of ways in which Project ALERT was implemented to meet each school's particular needs. Below we describe key components of successful substance use prevention, different strategies by which Project ALERT was taught, and some of the curriculum's perceived benefits and challenges.

**Informed, dynamic teachers.** As with most curricula, Project ALERT was better received when the lessons were presented by dynamic, engaging, and excited teachers who managed their classrooms well. Not all the teachers we observed were naturally gifted, and some seemed to lack enthusiasm for teaching substance use prevention. Teachers who were more knowledgeable about substance use prevention in general, including prevalence of use in their community, media influences, and social norms, appeared better equipped to address students' questions. These teachers also appeared to be more passionate about preventing substance use, which may have helped highlight their prevention messages for students.

**Effective teaching strategies.** The effective implementation of Project ALERT relied greatly on the classroom environment. One principal described classroom management as "the place where it all begins. If you can establish positive relationships and establish your rules, then you can prevent a lot of [negative] things from happening." Teachers who used effective strategies and behavior modification approaches experienced fewer discipline problems, more student participation, and greater dialogue about substance use prevention issues. Many effective teachers moved around the classroom; sometimes to monitor group activities or to maintain students' attention during lecture-style activities. Effective teachers were able to manage large group discussions by encouraging thoughtful participation among all students, providing positive feedback, and addressing discipline issues before they became disruptive.

**Project ALERT's booster lessons.** Schools frequently faced challenges with incorporating the three booster lessons into their schedules. Many respondents suggested that incorporating booster lessons required the buy-in and involvement of additional staff at a higher grade. Most of the teachers who provided the core lessons were unaware whether boosters were provided in the next grade, but some knew that teachers in the next grade were not providing the lessons.

**Evaluation of substance use prevention programs and Project ALERT.** Few schools conducted evaluations of their substance use prevention efforts.


 We did find, however, that a couple of districts took part in national or regional studies, allowing them to monitor their students' substance use. In one district, data suggesting that inhalant use was high in a particular school resulted in the SFDS Coordinator specifically choosing to implement Project ALERT in that school because of its inhalant lesson.

**Community and parental involvement.** Overall, community and parental involvement was limited in the schools we visited. Although many school- and district-level staff recognized the importance of community involvement, few made efforts to include organizations and families, although some had tried without success. Among those community groups that were involved, many participated in Red Ribbon Week or other annual events. For example, some community businesses provided discounts to students who wear red ribbons into their businesses during Red Ribbon Week. Some community health organizations, such as health departments, presented information to students in classes or assemblies, while other schools utilized former students who had dealt with substance use problems to talk with groups of students.

### What types of implementation approaches were used?

Schools used a variety of approaches in implementing Project ALERT, identifying the strategies most appropriate for their schedules, student population, and community interests. Following are observations we made about some of these approaches.

**Team teaching.** In one of the schools we visited, we observed a team teaching approach in which a team of educators provided Project ALERT to their 6th grade science students. The team included the 6th grade science teacher, a School Resource Officer (SRO), a school counselor, and a school nurse; sometimes the principal also participated. This approach was developed out of a desire to continue including the SRO in prevention education as the school began phasing out DARE. They told us that they chose to use this strategy because it provided a consistent no-use message from a number of significant adults. It also gave students an opportunity to interact with a variety

of people in hopes that they might form a meaningful connection with at least one of them.

**Homeroom classes.** We found that a few schools used a homeroom or advisory class to ensure that each student received Project ALERT in a given grade. Teachers told us, though, that they thought both students and teachers could benefit from having the same teacher and peers throughout the year to address some of the difficult issues related to substance use.

**Prevention Specialist.** A few of the schools we visited relied on district-supervised prevention specialists from within the district. These districts provided ongoing training, curricula, materials for implementation and assessment, and guidance in the development of their schools' overall prevention programs. The prevention specialists stated that one advantage to this approach is the district's continual guidance and support. In addition, this approach allowed the traditional subject teachers to focus on the curricula with which they were most familiar, thereby reducing their burden. We found that using a prevention specialist ensured greater adherence to the curriculum because of the prevention specialists' background and understanding of the importance of fidelity, as well as the ongoing district support and supervision.

**Peer teaching.** In one school, a group of 8th grade students who had been trained in Project ALERT lessons and activities provided those activities to 6th graders. These activities supplemented the full Project ALERT lessons administered by a regular classroom teacher. We found that a key factor in the success of the program was the thorough training of the 8th grade peer teachers, and the evident enthusiasm of the school counselor, school staff, and peer teachers.

### What were the perceived benefits of using Project ALERT?

Schools cited many reasons for using Project ALERT. Many people stated that Project ALERT's approach inspired their confidence in its success. For example, we heard a couple of teachers say with appreciation that ALERT does not tell students "don't do drugs."

Instead, the curriculum helps students identify their own beliefs and acquire refusal skills. They also appreciated the curriculum's social norms and decision-making focus.

Teachers also mentioned that the curriculum's enjoyable and interactive activities made it appealing to teachers as well as students. One teacher said, "when you see the students involved, you know that some of the lessons are really good." Students paid close attention to the videos, the Pictionary-like "drawing" game, and the role plays.

Many respondents reported that they liked Project ALERT because it has an easy-to-follow, "comfortable" format, with materials that are updated regularly.

Many school- and district-level staff cited their interest in Project ALERT as one of the curricula that the U.S. Department of Education recommends. Staff also recognized that Project ALERT is cost-effective and easy to administer with fidelity. Some also said that Project ALERT's 11 lessons fit more easily into their current school schedules than other substance use prevention curricula.

### What were the perceived challenges of using Project ALERT?

The most frequently reported challenges pertained to scheduling the lessons. Many teachers had a hard time completing the lessons within the timeframe specified, in part because their class periods were too short. Some teachers in schools with block scheduling taught Project ALERT on those days so they could capitalize on longer class periods. Another teacher, who saw her students every day of the week but for a shorter time period than the lessons require, split each lesson into two days. For other teachers, keeping the discussions focused and providing a rapid transition from one activity to another helped keep the class on schedule.

Teachers faced several difficulties fitting Project ALERT's three booster lessons into their schools' schedules. Often administrators and staff felt that

accommodating the core lessons in one grade was challenging enough without having to find room for three more lessons the following year. A couple of schools offered the booster lessons as part of a core class, such as science, to ensure that all students received booster lessons in the following year.

Teachers and decision-makers reported very few curriculum-specific challenges. One teacher told us that she skipped the inhalant lesson for fear of providing information that might entice the students to experiment with toxic substances. Another teacher said the comparisons made between tobacco and marijuana use were confusing because tobacco is legally sold to adults in this country, while marijuana is illegal.

Decision-makers at the district level expressed concerns about finding the right teachers to provide Project ALERT lessons. Decision-makers recognized that many teachers were regularly asked to do more than they could realistically accomplish and, for them, the implementation of Project ALERT was just one more thing they had to incorporate into their already-full schedules.

### Conclusion

As researchers in the field of substance use prevention, we were honored to have the opportunity to learn about substance use prevention issues and practices from school and district staff. We were told about the many challenges schools face with funding, scheduling, academic needs, and (most importantly) students' health and safety.

Despite these challenges, schools are choosing research-based substance use prevention curricula, implementing them to meet their schools' needs, and teaching effective skills to their students. The passion that school and district staff members manifest for their students' well-being contributes greatly to successful substance use prevention efforts.

## BEST AND PROMISING PRACTICES OBSERVED DURING THIS STUDY

1. Schools implemented multi-faceted prevention programs that addressed curricula, policies, needs assessments, and community and parental involvement with regard to substance use prevention.
2. Teachers and districts made well informed decisions about the prevention curriculum they used - with an emphasis on those curricula that are research-based.
3. Substance use prevention efforts were generally led by caring teachers interested in promoting the well being of their students.
4. Dynamic classroom teachers used effective classroom management skills.
5. Teachers showed respect for and created rapport with their students.
6. Classroom teachers used innovative teaching methods.
7. Some schools used a team teaching approach, bringing together leaders in the school and community members to provide substance use prevention lessons.
8. Other schools used prevention specialists, reducing classroom teacher burden.
9. Teachers generally delivered prevention lessons with relatively high fidelity.
10. Schools scheduled substance use prevention lessons so that they were offered during classes with smaller numbers of students, while still reaching the targeted population.
11. Some schools collected and used needs assessment data to guide their prevention efforts.

## ONGOING CHALLENGES

1. Districts lacked sufficient resources to expand their prevention efforts.
2. Parents and communities did not provide adequate support for prevention efforts.
3. Some schools selected curricula that were not research-based, continuing to use such programs as DARE.
4. Teachers did not effectively use interactive teaching methods.
5. Teachers used scare tactics as a part of their substance use prevention message.
6. Teachers adapted lessons in a way that would probably reduce their effectiveness.
7. Schools typically did not implement the Project ALERT booster lessons.
8. Districts did not provide needed guidance and support to the schools and teachers.
9. Competing priorities displaced substance use prevention.



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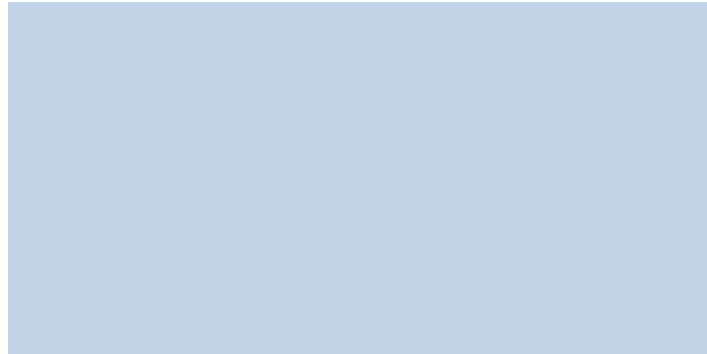
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## 2002 Prevalence of Use Statistics

The news is good. In fact, it is very rewarding for prevention educators! Overall drug and alcohol use declined in year 2002. Teen smoking declined sharply, more than offsetting the large increases of the early 1990s.

When students overestimate the number of their peers who are involved in drug use, they are less likely to perceive social support for refusing offers to use drugs. **Actually, most youth don't use drugs.**

As a Project ALERT teacher, you strive to make this point with your students in Core Lesson 4, Activity 3 – The Prevalence of Use Activity. To make your point with credibility, you need to be aware of current statistics.

The 2002 National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), *Monitoring the Future Study*, reports the following national usage patterns for eighth graders:

- **10.7%** **smoked cigarettes in the last month**
- **8.3%** **used marijuana in the last month**
- **19.6%** **used alcohol in the last month**

Yes, the numbers are still high. But nationally, most young people don't use drugs!

These statistics can be downloaded from the Project ALERT web site – [www.projectalert.com](http://www.projectalert.com) – and the complete *Monitoring the Future Study* can be found at <http://monitoringthefuture.org>