

Integrating Drug Prevention With Academic Success

By Kris Bosworth, Ph.D.

A principal I recently interviewed commented that schools' job "is to do the best we can for kids in the six hours we have them." Unfortunately, each year "doing our best" seems to involve more and more discrete programs: affective education, violence prevention, substance abuse prevention . . . and in the middle of it all public pressure is increasing for standards-based education that holds schools accountable for producing measurable academic outcomes. Every child deserves the best possible chance at making it in life, despite whatever challenges he or she faces outside the school doors.

How can schools accomplish all this in less time than the average workday? A partial answer is what I have dubbed "protective schools." A protective school takes an environmental-level approach to promoting health and success in students, thus reducing the time that must be spent on specific prevention curricula, while maximizing the effect that these curricula have on students' lives.

What does a protective school look like?

- It builds on the school's and students' strengths, rather than focusing on "fixing" weaknesses.
- The critical intervention occurs in the policies, standards, and everyday student-adult and adult-adult interactions in the school, rather than only through specific lessons.
- Students and adults have many opportunities to experience success and be recognized for competence and pro-social actions.
- The environment encourages student bonding to the school and to positive role models within it.
- All students are expected consistently to succeed at the highest level they can.
- This applies to academics, conduct and self-discipline, and development of their talents.
- Students are encouraged to set goals for their future and work to achieve them.
- The school is a warm and friendly place that actively encourages families and community members to become involved, make contributions.
- The school is a caring and supportive place to work and learn - for adults and children alike.

- The school has a clear, collaboratively generated vision of what it wants to be and how to get there.
- The vision and protective culture are deeply embedded in the school. They remain in place to ease transitions such as staff turnover, curriculum adoptions, and changes imposed from outside.

Not surprisingly, such a school is a great place to work. It is also a great place to learn, and academic achievement can be expected to improve. Finally, although my personal focus is substance abuse prevention, the above factors are protective against violence, teen pregnancy, school failure, and a host of other problems as well.

I fully recognize that every school already does some of these things well, and thus, every school already exerts some protective influence on many students. Nevertheless, every improvement a school can make will pay powerful dividends in helping children avoid substance abuse and related social problems while overcoming barriers that prevent them from achieving their full academic potential.

How does a school go about enhancing its protective effect? I have identified ten components that a school will want to self-analyze. Protective Schools is not another program, but a blueprint for schools to use in both assessment and planning. Out of necessity, I have listed them in an order, but I view them all as interrelated and critical for success:

Forge a Vision of Success

A school-wide vision is a commonly held belief system that is positive in outlook and helps unite people to move in the same direction. When school leaders enlist the support of people who will be affected by a change, change occurs more rapidly and causes less emotional upheaval.

A principal can begin by examining and articulating his or her own personal vision for the school, as a means of initiating a community vision. To ensure widespread community support, however, all concerned parties need to be included in the process of examining their assumptions about and expectations for the school.

The process of formulating a collective vision requires careful planning if it is to include all voices without degenerating into a free-for-all. A process that worked for one principal was to begin discussion of the vision in small groups and gradually expand the stakeholders involved.

Build a Protective School Culture

School culture refers to the overall physical and psychological atmosphere in a school:

the behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs that have worked well in the past and are taught to new members of the community. Culture is the most pervasive influence in a school, and even seemingly small changes can have profound effects. Yet because culture is deeply embedded in beliefs and attitudes - many of which may never have been explicitly examined - it is easily overlooked or taken for granted.

All members of the school community contribute to building a positive culture. Student bonding is increased by giving students developmentally appropriate opportunities to contribute to the school, including input in establishing rules and expectations. All staff members serve as positive role models for students, especially teachers, who can reinforce the values of the school culture in their instruction. As the person who sets the tone for the building, the principal has tremendous potential for establishing policies that support a positive, protective culture.

Increase Leadership Commitment

The principal is most influential in shaping and maintaining the tone, culture, and vision of a school. Whatever the school administrators visibly, enthusiastically, and persistently support will become priorities for staff.

At the same time, however, in a protective school, a transactional style of shared leadership exists at many levels. Students have responsibility for making age appropriate choices about what and how they will learn. Teachers have leadership in determining how they will structure their classrooms, in terms of curriculum, discipline, and instructional techniques. Beyond the school level, superintendents take leadership in building trusting and supportive relationships with the schools in their district. School boards can show leadership in reevaluating restrictive policies that stifle creative efforts to better meet the needs of individual student bodies and communities.

Support a Strong Academic Program

An academic program that encourages all students to become excited about learning, explore their talents, and set positive career and life goals is the heart of a protective school. In addition to a strong academic curriculum, a protective school promotes celebration and display of the products and processes of learning. While basic skills are emphasized, prevention concepts are also woven into the academic content (for example, using discussion of literature to clarify group values) to encourage students to make positive life choices.

Bonding to school and having positive goals for the future are major protective factors against substance use (and other negative outcomes as well). Conversely, school failure by third grade is a strong predictor of adolescent substance use. Therefore, this is not a mere nod to “what schools are supposed to be about.” Giving children a good

foundation of basic skills, actively involving them in learning, and setting high expectations for all students to achieve is in itself substance abuse prevention.

Implement a Research-Based Prevention Program

The protective aspects of the school serve to reinforce and strengthen the information, behavioral skills, social skills, and resistance skills taught in a good prevention curriculum. Teaching general assertiveness skills does not necessarily help students to be assertive in specific situations related to alcohol, tobacco and other drugs unless the students have an opportunity to practice those skills in situations in which these drugs are used.

Moreover, the curriculum needs to be implemented as it was designed if it is to be effective. While some adaptations may be necessary based on the teacher's knowledge of his or her students and the classroom dynamics, lessons have been developed, tested and shown to be effective as they are written. Deviation from the content, procedures or the sequencing may seriously dilute the effect of the curriculum.

Provide a Continuum of Services

This component is based on the fact that students have different levels of risk, and need different “doses” of prevention accordingly. At least three different “strengths” of prevention should be in place in every school. The goal at each level should be to minimize the number of students who will progress to needing more intensive intervention. Universal prevention constitutes skills that are taught to all students. Selected intervention describes additional support and instruction given to students who are identified as being at high risk but who have not yet shown problems. Finally, indicated intervention are programs that prevent or slow the progression from experimentation with drugs to habitual use.

A common problem in many schools is that interventions are discoordinated and separate. Thus, students may need to be labeled as “problems” before they can receive specialized intervention. Moreover, the instructional strategies and messages delivered in specialized intervention may directly contradict those of the universal prevention program. In addition, each discipline may be “doing its own thing”: the school nurse addressing health, social studies teachers teaching social skills, administrators directing peer mediation, etc., without any thought about how these efforts could be integrated into a coordinated package to reduce duplication of efforts, improve service delivery, and eliminate contradictory messages.

Provide Ongoing Professional Development

Professional development should be a way of life that suffuses learning throughout

teachers' and educators' lives. Obviously teachers benefit from expanding their knowledge base, both about prevention and about the subjects they teach. Second, adopting a protective schools approach is bound to initiate a wave of organizational change. Information and support for all staff throughout the change process can make the experience more efficient and more positive.

Just as valuable, however, can be practice in new instructional skills, such as positive behavior management, role-playing, guided discussion, and other techniques that are critical components of effective prevention curricula. All too often, instructors have omitted these components of prevention curricula because they don't feel confident implementing them. Yet, when a prevention program is not implemented as designed, it will be less effective—and sometimes may even do more harm than good.

Strengthen Home-School-Community Relationships

Students' risk-taking behaviors, such as drug use, sexual activity, or delinquency, typically occur at home or in the community. Yet, though they may be relatively less visible at school, the fallout significantly interferes with a student's education. School-family-community collaboration unites schools and communities in promoting children's welfare.

When every person in an adolescent's life models, supports, and expects healthy behaviors, the chances that this young person will make healthy choices are greatly increased. Moreover, teens and preteens are quick to recognize when different people in their lives are communicating conflicting values and expectations. The more this occurs, the more likely they are to be influenced by their peers rather than the adults around them.

Finally, the students at highest risk often have parents who themselves had negative school experiences. Schools can communicate a welcoming environment for visitors and can serve as a supportive resource for parents in order to turn around this dynamic. Remember, one positive communication with parents will have more effect than ten negative ones. Actively look for opportunities to give parents good news about their child.

Leverage Funding and Resources

Secure funding ensures the continuity of core educational and prevention activities and services. Given that under-funding is a perpetual problem, school leaders are forced to actively lobby for funding, research alternative funding sources, reallocate existing resources, and seek inexpensive ways to begin making changes. Leveraging resources through recruitment of volunteers, solicitation of in-kind donations from businesses, and resource sharing are some creative ways you may be able to supplement traditional funding sources.

Also, get to know reporters and editors responsible for school coverage at your local newspapers, radio and television stations. Let them know about good things happening at your school, and lobby for positive coverage. Involving students in writing press releases or invitations to school events can pay off in learning as well as community support. We have heard way too much about what is wrong with education; let's start publicizing what is right, in order to build public support.

Use Data to Guide Decision Making

Data collection serves three main functions: needs assessment ensures that planned programs match the needs of the target audience; monitoring ensures that programs are being implemented successfully; and evaluation ensures that programs are addressing identified needs and identifies areas where they could be strengthened.

Often evaluation is seen as an extra chore that must be done to satisfy federal or state mandates, leading to a flurry of activity that is disruptive and never used in productive ways to identify successes and plan next steps. However, ongoing data collection can be structured in ways that are neither time-consuming nor disruptive. And it pays off. Well-planned assessment enables leaders to target scarce dollars where the greatest need is. Data collection also helps keep people focused on their objectives and progress toward them. Finally, when the school community gets timely feedback about what is not working, they can make timely adjustments.

The first step in adopting a protective school is to do an assessment of your school's strengths and weaknesses in each of the ten areas. Celebrate your areas of strength and examine what you are doing in these areas. Ask yourself how you might build on these strengths to make improvements in other areas. For example, one school with a strong parent booster club for athletics is exploring how to engage these parents in support of the academic program. The protective schools approach can be a basis for a strategic plan to keep a school on course for many years to come.

For more information about protective schools:

Log onto the website of the Smith Initiatives for Prevention and Education at www.drugstats.org. A complete copy of *Protective Schools: Linking Drug Abuse Prevention with Student Success*, the document on which this article is based, may be viewed and downloaded. Or contact the Smith Initiatives for Prevention and Education at: College of Education, The University of Arizona, P. O. Box 210069, Tucson, AZ 85721-0069, (520) 626-4964.

Reaching Success

Select and implement an effective prevention program or curriculum that:

- is based on sound scientific principles and strategies validated by research;
- presents relevant and developmentally appropriate information and skills at each grade level;
- uses highly interactive teaching strategies (such as role playing, brainstorming, small group work, service learning);
- resonates with the cultural values of the target audience, in terms of age, ethnicity, school situation, etc.;
- addresses the contexts in which members of the target audience are likely to encounter drugs (or conflicts or decisions about sexual activity);

- is taught by educators well trained in the curriculum and prevention concepts, so they can present the program faithfully but make adaptations where appropriate for the target audience;

- is based on behavioral or cognitive behavioral principles, such as modeling, behavioral and cognitive rehearsal, coaching and feedback, cueing, and goal setting and commitment making; and

- provides ample opportunity for practice and rehearsal of skills in realistic situations.

The effect of a prevention curriculum cannot be assessed entirely by traditional means of educational assessment. Gains in knowledge about drugs, which may show up on pencil and- paper tests, are not sufficient to change attitudes and behavior.