

*“Is it alright to teach Project ALERT in sixth grade instead of seventh? Or over the course of eight weeks instead of eleven?”* Some historical perspective helps answer these questions.

## Historical Perspective

Project ALERT was written and validated at a time when most school districts followed a junior high school configuration with seventh grade marking the transition from elementary school. Evidence suggests the transition from elementary school is a time of particular vulnerability for students who face the challenge of forming new and broader social groups and are beginning to make more decisions on their own. “They desperately want the approval of their peers, to be perceived as ‘cool,’ and they will do dangerous and just plain dumb things to gain that status” said RAND’s Phyllis Ellickson and this guided the development team’s approach to drug use initiation.

When Project ALERT began national dissemination in the early 1990’s, it was one of a few drug prevention programs available to schools. There were fewer competing priorities with respect to the academic schedule. And the intense focus on achievement outcome assessment and assessment preparation was not yet prevalent. Forty-five or fifty-minute classroom periods were the norm and devoting 11 classroom sessions to drug prevention over an 11 week period was feasible.

## Times Change

Times change. The middle school (grades 6-8) configuration now succeeds the junior high (grades 7-9) configuration. And the transition from elementary occurs in sixth grade.

Competing priorities, including the proliferation of other health and social issue curricula and achievement testing and the emphasis on core competencies, makes time in the academic schedule highly prized. Often, it is a challenge, or even impossible, to teach Project ALERT’s core lessons once each week over an eleven week period.

## Curriculum Fidelity and Modification

What does “teaching with fidelity” mean? Basically, it means including all the lessons and all the activities within the lessons. Why are we making such a big deal about this? Because Project ALERT has been rigorously evaluated *as it is written*. It was demonstrated to be effective in preventing drug use in seventh grade students. So, when teachers ask if they can teach Project ALERT in the sixth grade, we say we have no evidence to support its effectiveness with this population since the program was only tested with 7th and 8th grade students.” However, we *can* say that the curriculum was developed for the adolescent population, so implementing earlier than sixth grade will probably be off the mark. And we can say that focusing on the transition year from elementary school when social groups expand is consistent with ALERT’s social influence underpinnings.

Project ALERT was evaluated with lessons taught once a week over an eleven-week period during the core year followed by three weekly lessons implemented during the booster year. We have no evidence on implementation schedules other than the way it was evaluated. However, given today’s real teaching world, we can offer general guidelines for adaptations based on the logic used to develop the original implementation schedule.

### Alternate Core Year Schedules

Project ALERT Lessons 1 thru 3 work to motivate non use. In Lesson 4 students learn to identify pressures to use. Lesson 5 marks the beginning of the resistance skill-building process supported by lessons 6, 7 and 9, which offer multiple opportunities to learn and practice. Lesson 11 help identifies the benefits of resistance while Lessons 8 and 10 are special issue lessons dealing with inhalants and smoking cessation.

Every one of the following schedules recognizes the **absolute** need to leave time for students practice on their own and integrate key skills after each of the skill building lessons: 5,6,7, and 9. The schedules also assume that where possible, lessons will not be taught back-to-back following Lesson 5.

- Eight-week core lesson schedule

Week	Lessons
1	1, 2
2	3, 4
3	5
4	6
5	7
6	8
7	9
8	10, 11

- Seven-week core lesson schedule

Week	Lessons
1	1, 2
2	3, 4
3	5
4	6
5	7, 8
6	9
7	10, 11

- Four-week core lesson schedule

Week	Lessons
1	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
2	6
3	7, 8
4	9, 10, 11

### Booster Lessons

Since there are only three booster lessons designed to be taught the following year and each lesson reinforces key skills from core lessons, it is best to teach one lesson per week over three weeks.

### Modification Guidelines

Within the framework of teaching every lesson and every activity, there is room for some modification. Basically, there are two questions to ask about the proposed change:

- 1) Does it take significantly more time? and 2) Does it decrease student involvement?

If the answers to both questions are “no”, then the modification is probably acceptable. When a modification takes more time, then the likelihood that another activity will be short- changed or eliminated increases, thereby decreasing curriculum fidelity and potentially drug prevention effectiveness. If student involvement is decreased, learning effectiveness is also decreased.