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### The Culture of Drug Use During the School Day in an Urban School System

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## The Culture of Drug Use During the School Day in an Urban School System

*The city this study took place in has been given a pseudonym. Additionally, the names of the participants, high schools, colleges, and other cities and towns mentioned in this paper have been changed in order to ensure confidentiality and protect the privacy of the participants.*

### **Introduction**

There has been a shift among high school student drug users from not only using on the weekends, but also using regularly before and during the school day. Finn, Marable, and Willert, investigated drug use in schools in their study “Substance Use in Schools” (2003). According to past research, between six and twenty-five percent of US students have been under the influence of alcohol and marijuana during the school day in school at some point during their high school career. Finn et al. found that the use of drugs during school has increased since 1995, and that even though schools have made efforts to decrease drug use, these efforts are proving to be unsuccessful. Finn et al. suggest that in order for students to stop using drugs in school, teachers must understand this growing epidemic, and try to monitor students more closely. According to Finn et al., the use of drugs in school is increasing at a time when policies such as zero tolerance should be preventing school based drug use. How does this all play out in the Metville public schools? What is the prevalence of drug use by students before and during the school day in an urban, low-income school district?

It is usually assumed that drug and alcohol use by high school students peaks in the late evening and on weekends. I am interested in investigating substance use by students before and during the school day. Gottfredson also wanted to examine the

timing of drug use, but specifically related to drug-related crimes compared the timing of different types of crimes. In his 2005 study titled “The timing of property crime, violent crime, and substance use among juveniles,” Gottfredson found that although crimes against people usually happen during after-school hours, drug crimes were not elevated during after-school hours. Therefore, it is assumed that juveniles are using drugs during school hours as well. I want to explore what the culture of drug and alcohol use and enforcement is at specific schools in the Metville area, and how prevalent substance use is by students during and before the school day. Gottfredson also found that high rates of delinquency occurred before school, which led me to wonder if students used drugs before school hours.

I believe that using drugs and alcohol during school would impede a student’s ability to focus, learn, and be attentive in class. As a result, would these students be less likely to pass their classes? Would this eventually lead to these students to not graduate from high school? Mensch and Kandel (1988) conducted a study that examined the relationship between dropping out of high school and drug involvement. They found that students involved in smoking cigarettes or using illegal drugs are more likely to drop out of high school than students who did not engage in this type of behavior. Interestingly, Mensch and Kandel also found that the earlier a student is exposed to drugs, the greater the chances are for that student to drop out. This made me wonder if schools provided specific counseling for students who were thought to have substance use problems, or if they began drug education programs at an earlier grade.

I am curious to find out what policies, if any, schools have regarding drug use by students, especially if this type of behavior is prevalent in schools and can lead to

negative consequences, such as dropping out. I wonder if more schools use the zero-tolerance approach, or if they use other means of measuring student drug use. If there is a zero tolerance policy in place and a student decides to use drugs or alcohol during the day, will this student use more because the consequences are the same regardless of how amount of drugs they use? This is exactly what Caulkins (2003) examined at in his study of Zero Tolerance Policies. Results from this study show that when zero-tolerance policies are in place, it is associated with users consuming more, because the punishment is the same no matter what. Therefore, zero tolerance policies do not always decrease drug consumption. Do the Metville schools that have zero tolerance policies have high incidences of drug and alcohol cases during schools hours because of the type of policy that is in place?

Even if schools have drug and alcohol policies in place, I wonder if students are aware of these policies, and how students view these policies. Arthur, Beyers, Catalano, Evans-Whipp, Lafazia, Llyod, and Toumbourou (2004) examined drug policies and their impact on youth substance abuse. Looking at different policies in Western countries, Beyers et al. attempted to see if these policies were enforced at schools. However, little evidence was found about student drug use, which makes me think that schools do not want researchers conducting this type of study within their schools. The authors explain that more research, particularly around the impact of policies on student behavior, is crucial to making conclusions. I hope that my study can further the efforts to examine the impact of specific policies on student substance use.

Drug policies in schools not only affect students, but also teachers within the school, and parents of students. Bond, Catalano, Evans-Whipp, and Toumbourou

examined this in their 2007 study titled, “School, parent and student perspectives of school drug policies.” Bond et al. explain that drug policies set the norms, values, and also expectations for student behavior, and there is very little research done on this topic. Schools also have come to terms that as an institution, they have a crucial influence on preventing drug and tobacco use, and therefore implement different programs and policies in an effort to accomplish this goal. Bond et al. found that both parents and students were aware of policies within their schools, but because students still choose not to follow these policies, it is essential that more research is done to figure out which policies actually decrease levels of student drug use.

If teachers are aware of drug policies, does this mean that they always follow through with them? Van Hout and Connor (2008) investigated this topic in Irish secondary schools. The goal of their study was to see how teachers view student substance use within their schools. Van Hout and Connor found that most teachers implied they could use more information and training regarding drugs and drug use in order to recognize signs of substance use. They felt substance use affected their classrooms and the academic achievement of their students. Some teachers even indicated that because of the lack of training, they cannot tell the difference between a tired student and one who is under the influence. How do teachers in Metville react to students who are under the influence in their classrooms? Is there specific drug-related training for these teachers?

Although there has been past research done on various topics regarding drug use in schools, Finn et al. explain that there is still an incomplete scientific knowledge regarding this subject. I am hoping that my study can provide further insight as to what

the culture of drug use by students during the school day is like in the high schools in Metville. I also want to explore prevention efforts, and policy enforcement by school staff, and how aware, or unaware, school staff members are of substance use by students during the school day in Metville. The following paper will use data from Metville to illustrate these points.

### **Research Question**

What is the culture of drug use, prevention, and enforcement during the school day among a group of students in an urban school system, and awareness of this by school staff?

### **Methods**

For the past year I have interned at the Institute for Community Research (ICR). I am assisting with a study titled “MDMA and STD/HIV Risk Among Hidden Networks of Ecstasy-Using Young Adults” funded by NIDA (the National Institute on Drug Abuse). There were 115 participants, ranging from ages 18 to 25 total in this study. The participants take part in two in-depth interviews. The first interview, Interview Part A, discusses the participant’s background including family life, social life, history of drug use, history of sexual behavior, current drug use, current sexual behavior, and educational experiences. The second interview, Interview Part B, focuses on certain events that included sex with or without protection and with or without MDMA.

Through my work at the ICR and while reading over the transcripts from the interviews, I noticed a pattern of participants’ drug use before and during the school day. I created a matrix of this information which included the participant’s ID number (used to

ensure confidentiality in the study), sex, age, ethnicity, city, school, drugs used in school, reasons for drug use, whether or not they thought the teachers were aware of study drug use, and consequences of their use. In total, 25 participants discussed drug use before or during high school in their in-depth interviews.

I wanted to expand on this topic by talking to different people involved in the school system in Metville. I decided that the qualitative methods of interviews would be the most appropriate for my study because I wanted to gather information in great detail and have participants expand on information as necessary. Therefore, I conducted in-depth interviews with three different groups of participants. Each interview was roughly an hour long, and I asked open-ended questions in a semi-structured way (see appendix for list of interview questions), meaning that if a participant discussed something new or different, I would ask them to elaborate on the subject even if I did not initially plan on asking questions about that specific topic.

The first group of participants I interviewed were school personnel. I was connected with these participants through the ICR. There were four school personnel interviewed in my study, two female and two male. Among the school personnel were two guidance counselors, an intervention specialist, and the former director of health education services for Metville. The second group of participants that I interviewed were non-users. These were college students who attended Metville Public Schools and did not use drugs before or during the school day while they were in high school. I interviewed three non-users: one 24-year-old male, and two 19-year-old females. The last group of participants I interviewed were users. These participants were in the initial MDMA ICR study that I called back for a follow up interviews that focused specially on

their drug use in high school. I interviewed two users: one 28-year-old male, and one 21-year-old female.

### **Data & Analysis**

Some high school students in Metville do use drugs before and during the school day, but perceptions of incidents vary within three groups: users, non-users, and school personnel. Additionally, whether or not a student uses drugs greatly affects their high school experience because school personnel tend to stigmatize users, putting them in an out-group, while forming relationships and providing extra help to non-users. Lastly, limited consequences of being under the influence of drugs in class, along with a great prevalence of drugs in popular culture (i.e., music lyrics, TV shows, life styles of famous music artists) form a drug enabling mainstream culture in this urban high school system.

### **Non-users**

The three non-users, Catie, Jake, and Beth, are all students at Constance College, a private college with an enrollment of approximately 2,200 students. Catie and Beth graduated high school in 2007 while Jake graduated in 2003. Catie, a 19-year-old African American female, attended Pierce High School for a year and then was accepted into ABC, an inter-district magnet school that she attended for the rest of her high school career. She views her high school experience as a blessing because ABC offered her many more academic opportunities than Pierce would have. Because of Catie's experience of attending a neighborhood public school and then a magnet school, she was able to offer a unique view on drug culture within two very different schools.

Beth is a 19-year-old white female who immigrated to Metville from Bosnia with her family when she was in elementary school. She also attended Pierce high school, but for her entire high school career. Beth emphasized the huge dropout rate at Pierce, but also explained that if students wanted to do well at Pierce they could. However, if they did not put in any effort, they would most likely fall through the cracks. In her eyes, students who were motivated were able to establish close relationships with teachers, which further helped them succeed. Beth views her high school experience as being both positive and negative, and highlights the fact that despite Pierce's bad reputation, a student can still "do good," which is exactly what she managed to do.

Jake, a 24-year-old African-American male, is part of the Individualized Degree Program at State, which allows adults to get their college degree. Jake was accepted into Project Concern, a lottery-based program that transfers Metville students out of the Metville school system into better school systems in the suburbs, after he finished 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. From 4<sup>th</sup> grade on Jake attended Westown High School, a public school in Westown, CT, a town right next to Metville, but demographically very different. However, Jake had family and friends who attended high school in Metville, and connected his experiences to Westown to those of friends and family in Metville and found that the culture of drug and alcohol use in schools was almost the exactly the same in both places.

These three students who attended Metville Public high schools at some point in their academic career are classified as non-user students because they were aware of drug and alcohol use during school in their respective schools, but did not use during the school day. For all of these participants, drug and alcohol use was evident in their

school. Jake explained, “I know that people smoked weed at school. That was like common knowledge!” Whether it was because the school brought in dogs once in a while to conduct drug searches, they heard about it through word of mouth, or they saw it first hand, these non-users knew drugs were there, but completely separated themselves from the group of students who used.

Not only was the drug use between these two groups of students drastically different, but also the non-users explained that because of the classes they were in, their quality of education was much better than those students who were only in basic and remedial classes. Beth explained that because of the small class size of her AP classes, sometimes as few as 6 students, she received a lot of individualized attention from her teachers. Jake also viewed extreme differences between the AP classes he was in, and the basic, or as he referred to them, “academic” classes he was in, “I enjoyed school and I enjoyed a lot of my classes...but I wasn’t in honors for every class and I can definitely see in an academic class that it was like babysitting. The honors and the AP classes are definitely a totally different atmosphere.”

Jake, Catie, and Beth all actively tried to distance themselves from drugs, and the students who they classified as users, during their high school career. Catie made this evident in her interview by stating “I tried to stay away from anything like that [drug] activity that I saw.” Both Jake and Beth mentioned that within their close circle of friends, no one used drugs or alcohol during the school day, but they were all aware of its prevalence in their schools.

In terms of which drugs were used in school when these students attended high school, all non-users stated that marijuana and alcohol were the most common drugs used

by students in their schools. Catie explained that she saw students showing each other weed (marijuana) behind lockers, and Jake knew other students were under the influence of weed because their eyes were always blood-shot.

Reasons for peer substance use differed with each non-user participant. According to Jake, use was a result of non-school related stress, and drugs allowed these users “to relax and feel better.” When asked about what sorts of stress these people were going through, Jake explained that it was mostly family-related issues. Jake believed that out of all of his non-user friends, only one of his friends had a “normal family relationship.” He went on to explain that the students who used probably had bigger problems than he could imagine and therefore turned to drugs as a coping mechanism. Catie on the other hand, believed students used substances in school because they identified drug use as a sign of coolness. Users believed that they were cool, and using drugs was the cool thing to do. Beth explained substance use as a result of lack of education about the harmful effects of drugs. Because students see their family and friends use drugs and do not see the negative effects right away, they assume they too will have positive experiences with it.

It is interesting to note that although Catie, Jake, and Beth gave different reasons for why they thought students used substances during the school day, they did not place blame on the users. Instead, they viewed student drug use as an integral part of popular culture. Beth said, “it’s like the culture, it promotes it in a way, ‘cause they’re surrounded.” According to Catie the students who used substances “were embedded in that culture, it seemed right and it didn’t seem like they were doing anything wrong... I feel like a part of it is they grew up in a neighborhood where it’s popular and you’re

going to get embedded in that culture... that's what happened to most of the kids that I know." Jake, too, agreed that these users were pushed into a drug culture that they could not avoid. Additionally, all three non-users believed that users are first exposed to drugs through subtle peer pressure and family use at home. These three non-users were able to resist this drug culture because of their choice of friends, academic motivation to succeed, and support of their families.

Opinions of teacher awareness of drug use were similar across non-user participants. Jake and Beth believed that teachers were definitely aware that students were under the influence in their classrooms. According to Beth, teachers never drew attention to the fact that students were high in their classes: "No one ever said anything, no one ever pointed anything out." Catie on the other hand, compared teacher awareness of student substance use at ABC and Pierce. At Pierce there was more of an awareness because the teachers knew what to expect so "they kept a stronger look out."

Every non-user identified the policy for students regarding drug and alcohol use during school as a Zero-Tolerance Policy, and that the staff members in their schools were aware of the policies. Beth and Jake believed that although this policy was in place, it was extremely difficult for school personnel to enforce it. Beth recounted a story of when she was meeting with a teacher after school and another teacher ran into the classroom crying. This teacher had just witnessed a student using drugs right before her eyes in her classroom. "She didn't know what to do, like she was just crying like traumatized by it, like she didn't know what to do with it. And like we didn't tell the principal. I think [teachers] just don't know what to do with it." Jake expressed similar views, but explained that the difficulty of enforcing a zero tolerance policy arose from the

fact that it is hard to catch a student in the act of using a drug, and then it becomes an “iffy foundation to base an assumption on.” He elaborated that although the drug behavior can be evident, “you can’t suspend someone ‘cause their eyes are red or ‘cause they are acting goofy.” Although these non-users believed students took the zero-tolerance policy seriously, they believed students used substances because they thought that they would never get caught and that the policy never crossed the minds of students who would use during the school day.

According to these non-users it is the responsibility of the school to educate students on the effects of drugs, and attempt to reduce the incidence of drug and alcohol use, both in and out of school. Beth emphasized education, “I think kids need to know what these things do to them... the majority of them don’t know. And these are students who are not taking advanced biology classes so you don’t learn these things so I think education and making health class mandatory freshman year.” On the other hand, Jake believed that if the school simply enforced the rule of students not leaving school during the day, drug use would decrease: “if [the users] can’t get outta the classroom, they can’t go light up.” Catie believes that although schools are increasing the strictness of policies, drugs are in the neighborhoods and therefore translate to use in the schools. However, despite her pessimism about Metville neighborhoods, Catie was also the only non-user to have an optimistic outlook on the future of Metville schools.

Views on the future of substance use in Metville public schools differed among the non-users. Beth and Jake both believe that drug use in schools will remain the same in the future. According to Beth “some kids are always going to be troublemakers,” and therefore continue to use drugs before and during school. Jake holds similar beliefs as

Beth, “it’s always been with us, and pretty much always will be.” However Jake had also noticed an increase in the abuse of prescription drugs because it is hard to determine whether students really need the drug for medical reasons, or they are bringing it to school to get high. Catie holds an optimistic view of drug use decreasing in the future, “I see youth opening their eyes and realizing like I just need to go to school and not for drugs and all of this other mess that’s being promoted, I really see it decreasing.” Catie is the only participant in this study who sees drug use in schools decreasing in the future.

Non-users view themselves as a completely different group from the users. They view themselves as removed, and not even a part of, the mainstream, drug-enabling culture of Metville high schools. As the next section will explain, the users view themselves as part of the high school culture as a whole, whereas the non-users seem to think of themselves as outsiders looking in at a world of peer drug use and abuse.

## **Users**

Two participants from the original MDMA study, who used drugs during the school day, were classified as users in this study. Lisa, a twenty-year-old Hispanic female, attended both Price Tech and Pierce High School. Adam, a twenty-eight year old African-American male attended East Metville High School. Both Adam and Lisa smoked marijuana before and during the school day. Adam also occasionally drank alcohol before and during school. Both Adam and Lisa started smoking marijuana before school with their cousins, and would usually miss first period because they spent this time smoking outside of school.

Lisa used to smoke right in front of the school, “right in the corner of the school... it’s right there open.” Before Lisa attended Pierce she did not smoke before the school

day. However, as she explains, “when I got to Pierce it’s a whole other story. I was just smoking like crazy.” Lisa would meet her cousins before school and stand in a circle and pass around a “dutch.” Lisa identified herself as being a pothead in high school, and stated that she would usually smoke ten blunts a day. Because of her smoking routine, she explained that she would usually unintentionally miss her first period class.

Adam on the other hand, used to smoke further away from school grounds, “There’s a path behind the school. Then we’d actually go and get crazy and sit, some people probably whose house was behind the school, they’d sit in their backyard on the lawn chairs and whatnot.” Adam and his friends would meet up before school and go smoke marijuana, and sometimes leave school during lunch period to smoke. Adam explained that he and his friends smoked weed “everyday we could.”

Neither Adam nor Lisa got in trouble for being under the influence in class. Adam explained that getting in trouble never even crossed his mind, “We pretty much didn’t think about it.” The one time that teacher noticed Adam and his friends sneaking back into school “[the teacher] didn’t do nothing about that.” According to Adam, he never got in trouble for being high in school. The only situation where he felt there would have been consequences was if he had been found in possession of weed. Similar to Adam, Lisa explained that even though teachers told her she smelled like pot and knew that she was high in class, “they didn’t care... If you was that concerned you would do something about it.”

In terms of school security guards, Adam and Lisa both mentioned having close relationships with the security guards who worked in their high schools. Adam explained that he “knew a lot of [security guards] outside of school and they would see us at the

parks and whatever and they, um, a lot of the security guards at Park and Rec work as security guards or security guards turned Park and Rec workers.” Adam went on to explain that the security guards definitely knew he was high during school, but did not do anything about it.

Lisa was also friendly with the security guards at Pierce. One incident that stood out to Lisa was when everyone at Pierce was notified that the police were coming to arrest a student for possession of drugs. The student was in possession of crack, and handed the crack to the security guard to hold while the police searched him. Lisa explained that even though the security guard could have lost his job for holding drugs for this student, he did it anyway. When asked what the main purpose of having security guards is at her school if they did not try to eliminate drug related behavior, Lisa responded that their job was to prevent violence and fights.

Both Adam and Lisa believed that the majority of students at their high school smoked marijuana during the school day. As Lisa stated, “Everybody in the school smoked. They didn’t have no policy... Everybody smoked.” Another similarity between Adam and Lisa is that both of them mentioned that the students in their high school who did not use during high school were the people who now use drugs the most out of anyone they know. It is interesting to note the differences in perceived student use between users and school personnel, as explored in the next section.

### **School Personnel**

Four adults who either currently work in the Metville Public Schools or who recently had jobs in the HPS were grouped in the school personnel sample of this study. Ms. Smith, an African-American female, has worked at City High School for 3 years as

an intervention specialist. Her primary role is to assist families and kids with various issues that impede academic success. Most of these problems arise from lack of resources. For example, Ms. Smith helps with issues like students not attending school due to lack of clean clothes at home, students not having food to eat, and student drug and alcohol related problems. Sarah, a white female, has worked as a school counselor at Standard Magnet High School for the last five years. Her work focuses on academic counseling as well as social and emotional counseling as needed. Chris, a white male, is currently in his first year as a bilingual guidance counselor at public high school. He helps students address academic, career, personal and social issues. Kevin, an African-American male, was the coordinator for health education and health services for the Metville Public School system until the end of last year. He has also worked as a math teacher, biology teacher, and certified nursing instructor in Metville schools.

According to these four school faculty members and similar to the other two groups of participants, marijuana is the most prevalent drug used by high school students. In terms of drug use during school hours, opinions varied within this group. Ms. Smith explained her school went from having around 1500 students to roughly 315 students because City High School is now separated into different academies. If a student does not have enough credits to pass their sophomore year, they are not allowed to advance to the academy where Ms. Smith works. “We got rid of all of the kids that didn’t have enough credits to go on from junior year. Now we have most high-achievers. So, drug use isn’t as common. Those other kids... some of them are on the streets, some went to the culinary school, some went to alt. ed, and some maybe took adult ed classes.” Because of the changes in her school, Ms. Smith has observed a drastic decrease in all

delinquent behavior, particularly drug use and fights. However, she was also able to reflect on the past when drug use in school was a bigger issue.

Sarah's responses to my questions made drug use seem like a non-issue at her school. She explained that magnet schools tend to attract higher-achieving students, and because of this and the community values and policies of magnet schools, she suspects less drug and alcohol use by her students during the school day. Similar to Sarah, Chris did not believe that drug and alcohol use by students during the school day was a big problem at his school. Both Sarah and Chris mentioned that a student is more likely to be suspected of drug use or examined closely if he or she has a history of drug-related problems, or a reputation of being a user. Kevin's had a completely different approach to the drug and alcohol problems within schools; he explained that substance use in schools was a direct mirror image of what was happening within the adult population in Metville. Instead of trying to eliminate drugs and alcohol from the Metville community, Kevin finds it necessary to educate students about the effects of drugs because he feels drugs are here to stay. Therefore, education is much more important than attempting to eradicate all drug use since the goal of eradication will never be accomplished.

Sarah's view of minimal student drug use before or during the school day may be true because it is possible that magnet schools have a less dominant drug culture. However, Sarah may also just be naïve to the fact that students in her school are using. Either way, Sarah's explanation of how the school culture promotes honesty, trust, and community, and the likelihood that other students will report drug related behavior before staff members find out, support the idea that magnet schools have lower drug use than other schools in Metville.

Most of the school personnel would agree that using drugs in school negatively affects student learning. Each of them mentioned that the fact students are using during the days means that students are missing class time, and therefore obviously missing out on learning. Additionally, not being able to focus and being distracted in class were mentioned as side effects from being under the influence during class.

Two main reasons for using drugs during school were given among the four participants. Kevin and Chris explained that students use drugs as a coping mechanism to deal with emotional problems. Chris mentioned that using drugs in school offers students an immediate enjoyable sensation during class time that they might otherwise find boring and tough. According to Kevin, students use drugs during the school day because of “stress, and fun, but I would say more for stress.” Sarah and Ms. Smith believed that students were influenced by their peers to use drugs. Sarah believes that when older kids use drugs younger children tend to imitate their behavior. Ms. Smith thought students used because of “peer pressure... kids are trying to fit in and for social acceptance.”

In terms of what schools could do to prevent student drug and alcohol use during the school day, each participant offered similar educational solutions with varied details. Kevin emphasized having open discussions about the consequences of drug use, and that drug education should start at home, and then immediately when the child gets to school at a very young age. Similar to Kevin, Ms. Smith believes that drug and alcohol education should start at home especially because drug use at home can explain why “so many kids have no ambition, because they were raised with parents who are that way.” Sarah stressed the importance of creating a community within the school “where people

can't disappear and where people feel safe and where people respect the space... if schools... teachers and staff can create a place where students feel safe and respect the space, then I think those things do get eliminated.”

Chris had some trouble figuring out what the best solution was for schools to try to decrease student substance use. He believes that communication is key, “I mean we should be working as a team all of the time, and sometimes we are, but sometimes we're not and we need to work on that. But between administration, counseling, teachers, everybody in the school needs to communicate all of the time about those issues and each play their own part. So those things are very important and if you do those then I suspect it is going to reduce the incidence.” These four school staff members do not foresee the incidence of drug and alcohol use by students during the school day increasing the future, but all believe it will stay the same. However, they also believe that with more education, students will be more aware of the consequences of drug use, which could potentially help reduce use.

A common theme among all of the school personnel was classifying students into two categories, those who use and those who do not use. However, the users were simply the users. Nothing else was explained about them or their lives, and only drug-related characteristics were discussed. However, Kevin, Ms. Smith, Chris, and Sarah identified the non-users as high achieving students, and went on to explain other traits about this group of students. The school personnel tend to stigmatize users based on their single behavior of drug use, while they have substantive relationships with the non-users.

Ms. Smith, Kevin, Chris and Sarah all stated that their school has a zero-tolerance policy regarding student drug and alcohol use. However, it is important to note

the discrepancy between what the administration of Metville Public Schools believes, and what the staff members, such as guidance counselors, who actually work in the schools, have observed. When asked if schools offer drug awareness training for teachers and school staff during orientation or at any other time during the school year, Kevin responded, “Yes, as far as I know it’s being offered every year at this current time. Every teacher that comes into the system has to go through drug and alcohol awareness training.” However, Ms. Smith, Chris, and Sarah had not gone through this type of training. Ms. Smith was the only school staff member to mention it in her interview, saying that it was an option for teachers to attend during professional days once a year, but many teachers opt to attend different programs.

Another example of this is that Kevin claimed that there is a police officer assigned to every Metville high school that helps reinforce the zero tolerance policy. However, only one other school personnel said that there was a police office assigned to that school. Clearly there is a huge disconnect between what the administration wants to happen, and thinks is happening within the schools, and what is actually happening.

## **Conclusion**

Perceptions of how many students were using drugs during the school day differed greatly between the three groups. Non-users separated the populations of high school students at their own school into two categories: those in AP classes who did not use drugs, and those in basic classes who were disinterested in succeeding and therefore used drugs. Users believed that everyone at their high school was smoking marijuana during the school day. Lisa even equated marijuana use to tobacco use by students, “Everybody was just smoking, like, smoking is nothing now, smoking weed is like

smoking a cigarette now these days.” On the other hand, school personnel believed that some students used, but drug use during the school day was not particularly a huge problem at their schools.

Another difference between groups was perceptions of the students who did not use in high school. The users explained that the students who did not use drugs in high school are now the people who have the most drug-related problems, and are those who are living on the streets. School personnel and non-user participants believed that students who did not use drugs in high school were high-achieving, and succeeded in resisting peer pressure and most likely graduated high school and went to college. It is interesting to note the extreme discrepancy between how users, and non-users and school personnel viewed the future of non-user students. However, obviously users’ perceptions of the future of non-users did not prove to apply to all non-users because the non-users from this study were motivated college students. These non-users remained non-users after high school, and went on to attend a competitive private college.

A similarity between the three groups was the influence of popular culture that currently promotes drug and alcohol use. As one non-user explained, “it’s like the culture, it promotes it in a way, ‘cause they’re surrounded.” School personnel participants explained how their students see musical artists as role models and therefore mimic their behavior. Ms. Smith explained, “These kids don’t have as many positive role models as they should. They really do believe in the fairy-tale that BET/MTV presents to them.” According to Ms. Smith, students act on what they hear in rap songs. She explained that over the summer, a rap song came out that was called “blame it on the alcohol.” This song mentioned Grey Goose, a very expensive brand of vodka. After this

song aired on the radio for a few days, she noticed students going out and buying Grey Goose vodka. Sarah explained “these rappers are their role models so the kids really take what the song says to heart.” Music lyrics have a direct influence on student use. Lisa explained that “Because Lil Wayne... be like rollin’ and... I’m rollin’... people do that, like, TV and songs is bad just because that’s what kids end up doing.”

All of the participants agreed that drug use is prevalent in Metville, and reinforced in the media and culture of the students. Kevin explained student use drugs because of “the glorification of it... the people that a lot of students look up to like their families and communities and the entertainers. We’ve seen a huge change in the face of entertainment. At one point... there was not too many Black or Latino or Asian entertainers, and now it’s pretty prevalent, and they’re using... like when you’re in an urban area, take for example P Diddy. He’s selling vodka, and prior to that, people who sold vodka did not look like that [referring to P Diddy’s race]. Now it’s cool to have Ciroc, and Grey Goose because it’s in the songs, it’s everywhere.” Clearly the influence that popular culture has on high school students is huge.

It is interesting to note that although school personnel and non-users thought health class could be more effective in helping reduce the incidents of drug use by students, the users believed that health class was ineffective. Lisa and Adam both explained that health class made them scared and nervous to experiment with drugs, particularly ecstasy. Lisa explained, “That’s why I think I didn’t [use other drugs]. I started learning a lot more about stuff... until this day I got all my notes on that class. However, Lisa and Adam were both heavy marijuana users. Lisa and Adam both also expressed that health class sent them mixed messages about certain drugs. For example,

Adam explained that for a final project in health class he demonstrated how to roll a cigarette for the entire class. However, he was really showing how to roll a joint of marijuana. According to Adam, the teacher laughed along and said that his presentation was entertaining and engaging. Adam received an A for this project.

Therefore, there is a common perception between users that marijuana is not a dangerous drug. Lisa and Adam did not use other drugs in high school because health class was effective in deterring them from using drugs. However, the school personnel would argue that marijuana is indeed a dangerous drug, and health class should attempt to reduce marijuana use. School personnel tend to classify all drugs as bad, while users view marijuana as a soft drug without any harmful effects.

There is a gap between groups of what it means to use drugs during the school day and how many students use drugs before and during the school day, which produces tensions and different norms and values within each group. This negatively affects users, who feel excluded and isolated from school staff, while non-users form bonds with school personnel. A certain number of students in Metville high schools are definitely using drugs before and during the school day, but the prevalence of drug use is relative to each group because each of the three groups had different perceptions about student drug and alcohol use in school.

## **Discussion**

It is evident from this study that different norms and values exist within users, non-users, and school personnel. The perceptions of marijuana use differ greatly between users and school personnel. While the school personnel categorize all illegal drug use as unhealthy choices, users do not see marijuana as dangerous, and view it as a “soft” drug

with no harmful effects. Furthermore, school personnel assume that users are making poor decisions when they decide to smoke marijuana before and during school. While the users are engaging in illegal behavior, it is important to note that some of them are making informed decisions about their use. Lisa stated, “What do I look like buying weed off of a kid? I would rather put it in my cousin’s pocket... Especially somebody that I probably didn’t even like... I’m not putting money in your pocket.” By purchasing weed from her cousin, Lisa was helping to support her family financially, and also not buying weed from someone whom she did not know or trust. She later explained that she always buys drugs from the same person because she only uses drugs if she knows where they came from and who was handling them.

Drug use at home was also a factor that school personnel and non-users believed influenced drug use. School personnel discussed parent involvement, and how positive parent involvement can deter a student from making poor decisions, such as using illegal drugs. Many of the school personnel believed that students were first exposed to drugs at home. Because users saw their parents, cousins, and siblings using drugs without any immediate negative consequences, they assumed that they, too, would be fine if they used drugs. Ms. Smith explained that users “might watch family members smoke” and therefore think that using drugs was not risky. Non-users gave similar explanations for family use at home affecting student use. When asked how students are first exposed to drugs, Beth answered, “Families. Like if they have some kind of connection either through like family or their friends.”

However, both Lisa and Adam insisted that their mothers were very against their drug use. Lisa explained that she had a very close relationship with her mother. When

asked if her mother knew about her drug use in high school, Lisa responded “I didn’t hide it from her. Like once I started smoking a lot she just knew... She just like remember that junk you used to talk about how you’re not going to smoke, that stinks, that’s for bums and look at you now.” Contrary to what non-user and school personnel believed about user families, Lisa’s mother was strongly against her daughter using drugs. Adam also discussed the fact that his mother did not support his drug use in high school. It is interesting to note that popular belief among non-users and school personnel is that parents of users smoke, too, but this data shows otherwise. However, both Adam and Lisa had other family members, such as cousins and siblings who smoked with them. Perhaps sibling and cousin use is more influential than parent use when it comes to family members who use drugs.

Non-users and school personnel would argue that users take drugs because they are not educated about their negative effects. However, the user culture is influenced by information from multiple sources. Users decide which drugs are dangerous and which are not. Popular culture, sibling and cousin use, and lack of negative effects make it seem okay for the users to engage in drug use before and during school. Users are making informed decisions about their drug use, but not incorporating the same factors as the non-users when choosing to use drugs.

It is important to realize the difference in perceptions of incidence of drug use between all three groups. Users believe, as Lisa said, “Everybody in the school smoked. They didn’t have no policy,” while Catie stated that drug use in school was “against the policy” and went on to explain that only a certain percent of students at her high school smoked during the school day. School personnel, on the other hand, did not see many

kids in their school smoking during the day at all, and rarely saw drug use as a problem during the day within their schools. Where does the truth lie? If three different groups view student use so differently, it is crucial to figure out what is actually happening. Potentially, this could be researched in future studies if Metville schools opened their doors and allowed researchers to come in and study the incidence of drug use by students during the school day.

Furthermore, enforcement of rules could potentially change student drug use before and during the school day. Jake explained, “No one was ever standing by the doors or the exits that leads to the easiest way out, were always open! Always open, ya know? So just little things... like having a teacher around or someone like saying ya know, hey where are you going? Do you have a hall pass? Or something like that. You know, if you prevent them from getting outta classes... you know, or out of where they’re supposed to be, they cant go light up or whatever.” If the school spent a little extra time making sure students could not leave campus during classes, it would make it harder for students to go off school grounds and use drugs while they should be in classes.

Another important distinction to make is the reality of who is helping to enable students to use drugs during the high school day. Lisa and Adam explained their close relationships with security guards. Lisa told the story of how one security guard in particular held crack for another student until the police finished a drug search. Adam stated, “a lot of security guards knew [that he would leave school to smoke marijuana].” Another time, Adam explained that a teacher had a suspicion that he was in possession of weed. He said, “I passed the weed off to this girl in my class,” and this girl held the weed until the end of the day so in case Adam was searched he would not get in trouble.

Cooperative friends and security guards enable users to possess drugs during the school day. By holding drugs for others, these groups protect one another from being caught, and trust each other to not tell authorities that they are in possession of drugs. When security guards hired to police students collude in their blatant disregard for school policy, this facilitates continued drug use.

The data from this study definitely confirms the need for further research. First of all, how can certain high school students resist pressures from siblings, cousins, popular culture, and other students, to use drugs, while other students find drugs acceptable and easily become part of the mainstream drug enabling culture? As noted before, non-user parents did not support user drug use. However, Jake, one of the non-users, claimed “my own mother smoked weed you know. She tried her best to hide it or whatever, but you can only hide something for so long. You know, and that was my first exposure to it. It just was nothing ever I was ever interested in.” How can Jake’s resilience be explained when his own mother used drugs, while Lisa and Adam’s mothers were against drug use, but they were the ones who ended up using during school?

In her interview, Ms. Smith explained, “The have-nots are more vulnerable to do the non-productive things in our society. Those kids really don’t have much. They might be sucked into drugs because they try to escape the world that they live in. They might wake up and there is a urine smell in their house, or the banister is always loose, or they don’t have a bed and have to sleep on the couch, they might not have food, or their house is over-crowded. Nothing matters to them, to they smoke to go into a world of their own, which is not reality.” Although this may be true for some users, the non-users share many characteristics, such as family background, socioeconomic status, home city, etc.,

with the users. Further research should be done to help explain why students with similar backgrounds choose to use or not use drugs.

Most importantly, all three groups need to work together to address student drug use. One way to start making a change is to have open conversation among these three groups to see what is actually happening in the schools. The users believe non-users from high school are now heavy users, so what would happen if Lisa or Adam sat down with Jake, Catie, or Beth? Additionally, school personnel needs to increase interactions with users to understand what drug use means to them. If users expressed to school personnel that they believed “everyone” in their high school was using, how would the school personnel respond? How would a non-user respond? Metville schools need to pay attention to this issue because it is clear that Metville high school students do use drugs before and during the school day, even though perceptions of incidence vary within users, non-users, and school personnel. The act of using drugs greatly affects a Metville student’s high school experience because school personnel stigmatize users, while non-users feel more connected to their high school academic experience. Additionally, the limited consequences of being under the influence in class and the prevalence of drugs in popular culture create a drug-enabling atmosphere in Metville high schools.

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## **Appendix**

### Interview questions: School Personnel

1. What is your job title?
2. How long have you worked here?
3. What is your primary role with students?
4. In your own opinion, what is the culture of drug and alcohol use at this school or how prevalent do you think it is? What drugs do you think students use most?
5. In your opinion, why would students use drugs or alcohol before or during school?
6. How does the use of drugs and/or alcohol during school affect student learning?
7. In your opinion, how aware are teachers of students who are under the influence in classrooms?
8. Does your school offer drug and alcohol awareness training for teachers and school staff during orientation or at any other time during the school year?
9. Does this school have a policy for students regarding drug and/or alcohol use during school?
10. What is the policy?
11. Are the staff members here aware of this policy?
12. Do you think the staff members at this school follow through with that policy? Why or why not?
13. Is it difficult for you to enforce this policy?
14. What is the level of student awareness of this policy?
15. How do you think students view this policy? Do they take it seriously?
16. What are the consequences of being found under the influence in class?

17. Why, if students are aware of consequences, do you think they still use during school?
18. Does the school offer counseling for students who think they need extra support in terms of their substance or alcohol use?
19. Do you think students are peer pressured into drinking or using drugs during school?
20. What other factors do you think influence their decision to use?
21. How do you think students are first exposed to drugs?
22. Does your school perform drug searches? If yes, are these searches ever random?
23. Are police ever involved in cases where students are found in possession of drugs?
24. Are parents notified if a student is caught with drugs, or found to be under the influence in class?
25. What do you think schools could do to prevent drug or alcohol use during school?
26. Do you see this problem changing in the future? Increasing? Decreasing?
27. Is there anything I have not asked that you wish to comment on, or do you have any questions for me?

Thank you for your time!

Interview questions: Non-users

1. What is year did you graduate high school?
2. Tell me about your high school experience.
3. In your own opinion, what is the culture of drug and alcohol use at this school or how prevalent do you think it is? What drugs do you think students use most?
4. In your opinion, why would students use drugs or alcohol before or during school?
5. How do you think the use of drugs and/or alcohol during school affect student learning?
6. In your opinion, how aware are teachers of other students who are under the influence in classrooms?
7. Did your school have a policy for students regarding drug and/or alcohol use during school?
8. What is the policy?
9. Do you think the staff members were aware of this policy?
10. Did you think the staff at your school followed through with that policy? Why or why not?
11. Do you think it was difficult for them to enforce this policy?
12. What was the level of student awareness of this policy?
13. How did you think students viewed this policy? Did they take it seriously?
14. What were the consequences of being found under the influence in class?
15. Why, do you think if students are aware of consequences, do you think they still use during school?

16. Did your school offer counseling for students who think they need extra support in terms of their substance or alcohol use?
17. Did you think students were peer pressured into drinking or using drugs during school?
18. What other factors did you think influenced their decision to use?
19. How do you think students are first exposed to drugs?
20. Did your school ever perform drug searches? If yes, were these searches random?
21. Were police ever involved in cases when students were found in possession of drugs?
22. Do you know if parents were notified if a student was caught with drugs, or found to be under the influence in class?
23. What do you think schools could do to prevent drug or alcohol use during school?
24. Do you see this problem changing in the future? Increasing? Decreasing?
25. Is there anything I have not asked that you wish to comment on, or do you have any questions for me?

Thank you for your time!

Interview questions: Users

1. In your first interview, you talked about drug/alcohol use (*will alter question depending on participant*) at high school. Can you elaborate more about your drug use during the high school day?
2. How often did you use during school?
3. Did you ever get in trouble? What were the consequences?
4. Were you worried about getting caught?
5. Did your school have a policy regarding drug and alcohol use?
6. What was the policy?
7. Were you aware of the policy?
8. Do you think school staff members knew about the policy?
9. What would happen if a teacher thought you were high in their class?
10. Did your friends use during the day also?
11. Did you use together?
12. Where did you use?
13. Would you ever leave school, use, and then return to school?
14. Where did you get the alcohol/drugs?
15. Do you think it affected your learning?
16. Were the police ever involved?
17. How would you describe the culture of drug/alcohol use during the school day at your high school?
18. Do you think the same things are going on now?

19. Did you have any kind of drug education? Did it change any of your thinking about drugs/alcohol?

20. Do you want to ask me any questions, or is there anything else you want to say that you didn't mention before?

Thank you for your time!