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Leadership Development Lab 362

29 April 2021

## **Policy Memo**

### **Question:**

Recently, marijuana has become increasingly acceptable in US society, as many states either have or are constructing laws legalizing it for medical and recreational uses. Due to a common preconception that marijuana is completely safe when the existing literature refutes this, it is imperative that drug prevention programs in schools are effective in spreading the correct information as well as encouraging students to abstain from marijuana use. The research question associated with this project is: What are the short and long-term effects of marijuana on the body and the mind? Additionally, how effective are school drug prevention programs?

### **Executive Summary**

- Although it is true that marijuana is not chemically addictive, it is possible to form a dependency on it and it is proven to have some short and long term negative effects. It can cause several respiratory issues (Owen et. al 2013) and can negatively impact mental health in the long term (Arria et. al 2015). Despite these consequences, many adolescents use marijuana despite its harmful impacts, turning towards marijuana as a coping mechanism for anxiety (Buckner et. al. 2007). The fact that so many students are comfortable smoking marijuana is evidence that their drug prevention programs have been either ineffective or lacking. In schools where there are no drug prevention

programs, there needs to be one instated and in places where the programs are ineffective, they will need improvement. The main issues that research has found with existing programs are that they need to focus more on communication, refusal, and decision making skills (Stephens et. al 2009) and (Buckner et. al. 2007).

## **Background**

- Up until recently, marijuana has been illegal in most states in addition to being illegal on the federal level. Therefore, most drug prevention programs glossed over it as simply a gateway drug and focused on the legality of it as well as pushing abstinence from marijuana without explaining why. However, given the new legislation making marijuana legal in many states, the focus of prevention programs must shift now to either the safe consumption of marijuana or presenting clear and accurate information so that students can make informed decisions.

## **Key Stakeholders**

- *Parents/Guardians*
  - Those who oversee young people hold stakes in the health of those adolescents, and are invested in their decisions. They want the best for the young people they know and discourage them from trying drugs which they do not know could hurt them in the long term.
- *Businesses*
  - As marijuana becomes a legal commodity, many more companies will arise to grow and distribute it. They will in turn rely on and advocate for the safe consumption of their product so that marijuana does not become illegal again.

## **Appraisal of Past Solutions/Opposing Views**

- Due to marijuana's recent relevancy, there is not much research or literature available exploring its long term effects on the body and the brain. Therefore, many people take this to mean that it is not harmful at all. However, this is refuted through studies concluding that marijuana use is associated with lesser physical and mental health over time (Arria et. al 2015) as well as cognitive changes in the short term (US National Institute on Drug Abuse 2020).
- Previously, outdated drug prevention curriculums were general and focused on simply giving information (Stephens et. al 2009). Stephens found that they were more effective when specific drugs were addressed and essential skills for handling situations where drugs are present were taught. Along with similar findings, Buckner advised that these programs be aimed towards youth with social anxiety (Buckner et. al. 2007).

## **Project Plan**

My project aims to draw upon the previous literature regarding the effects of marijuana on the brain and body as well as regarding how to conduct a drug prevention curriculum as I create my own marijuana use prevention program for a high school. As mentioned in the Background section, many states have legalized marijuana during the last election, including New Jersey where this project will be conducted. I am partnering with my old high school where I know the drug prevention program could use some work, and I will assess the success there before expanding the program to other schools. This project will update all of the parts of the existing drug education program at the school and expand upon the marijuana lessons to include the essential information found in my research.

## **Conclusion**

Although the decriminalization and further legalization of marijuana could be beneficial in the context of the criminal justice system, it could still lead to people thinking that marijuana is safe despite being a drug. Therefore, there is a dire need for effective school drug prevention programs that will ensure that children and teenagers have access to accurate information presented in engaging ways.

## References

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