

# A guide to working with schools

## *Drug agencies can help schools become part of the solution*

MANY CONFLICTING demands have now been made of schools – the national curriculum, attainment tests, local financial management; probably now is as hectic a time as it can be for teachers. So it is that from being high on the agenda a couple of years ago, most schools have put 'drugs' on the back burner – until one of those incidents occurs that can rock the school's complacency and send teachers rushing to the local drug agency for help.

A solvent-related death is the obvious incident that could make drugs a priority, but increased police activity is another. The spectacle of one third of a sixth form being given informal cautions for cannabis use can stir even rural and complacent schools into a desperate need for action.

Some drug workers would ignore the school's call for help as an inappropriate waste of their time. However, ignoring it probably means that others, notably the police, will direct the school's response. Without alternative guidance a school will tend to accept everything the police tell them to do. The result could be that the school responds in unconstructive ways.

### **Take the lead**

Police may, for example, insist on total confidentiality, stipulating that even the school's own staff be kept in the dark about what's happening. In one incident, senior year tutors heard about large scale police investigations in their school from someone they met in a pub.

This kind of approach can mean staff feel confused and are left feeling bitter that they had not been consulted. Zealous police sub-divisions can see closed school environments as an opportunity to sweep huge numbers of young people into the criminal justice system prematurely or in ways some might consider damaging.

Substance misuse agencies have a role to play in preventing these kinds of hazards, working with local schools to support the development of constructive responses to drug-related incidents – responses that

minimise young people's exposure to the capriciousness of the justice and welfare systems. One way of doing this is for drug agencies to offer schools a clear policy programme for action, using the flow chart outlined in the diagram opposite as a guide.

Throughout this process communication and co-working, including liaison with the

---

***"There is no reason for drug agencies to be any more complacent than schools"***

---

police and the local education authority (LEA), are key principles to follow – but it is also important that the agency sees itself as playing the lead role rather than leaving it up to the LEA. Schools are now becoming increasingly independent; it may be possible to work out school-level 'micro' policies that are far more favourable to young people and less stigmatising than some corporate LEA ones.

The procedure suggested in the diagram may look extensive but should take no more

by

**Robin Burgess**

*The author is Executive Director of the Council on Addiction in Northamptonshire.*

---

Requests for help from schools reacting to a drug-related incident can be an opportunity for drug agencies to establish constructive procedures that avoid stigmatising pupils but make help available to those who need it. Involving all parties from the LEA to the pupils and parents is essential. Several layers of intervention are needed to avoid labelling pupils as drug users yet provide appropriate interventions for those pupils at serious risk of drug problems.

---

than the equivalent of six sessions or three days to set up. In-depth client-worker relationships between agency staff and pupils are best left until this process has reached the point where all staff – management to cleaners – share a common knowledge and understanding of a working ethos and methodology around drugs.

Communication with pupils concerning the overall policy and with the increasingly important school governors will be needed to ensure that everyone is clear about the process being followed.

Contact with the school's local education authority is desirable to see that any outline area guidelines are incorporated into the more specific plans for the school. Likewise, if they are significant contributors, education welfare may need to be closely involved in drawing up an acceptable policy. Without this kind of 'statutory consent', local initiatives are greatly devalued.

### **Avoid labelling**

Until a proper pastoral system has been worked out, no teacher-training on 'counselling' should be attempted *en masse*. Many teachers are unable to act as counselors because of lack of skill, time, motivation, or because of role conflicts, so provision of semi-independent 'advice' to young people within the school must be part of the strategy.

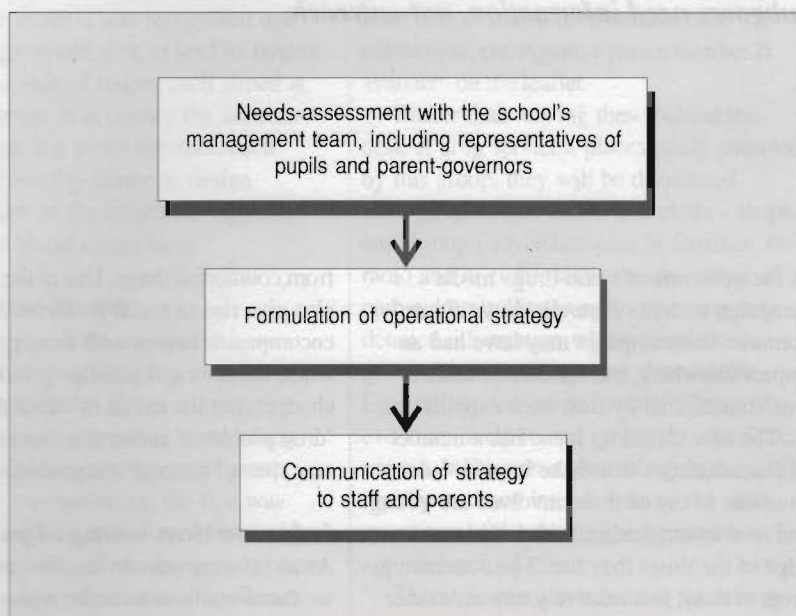
The need to minimise the extent to which young people are seen as, or see themselves as, drug users means it is probably best for generic youth counselling agencies to take on the initial counselling role, making it clear that immediate consultancy and/or referral will be available from the drug agency in serious cases. Local financial management of schools may provide an opportunity for groups of schools to purchase agency time on a sessional basis, with the agency offering counselling or running groups.

To avoid 'labelling' suspected drug users among pupils, or confirming their drug user

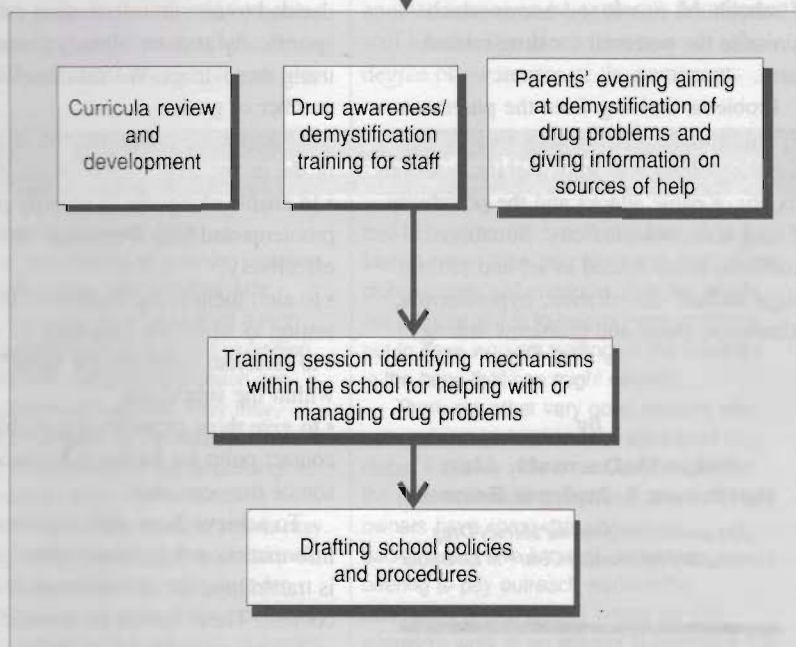


## PLANNING

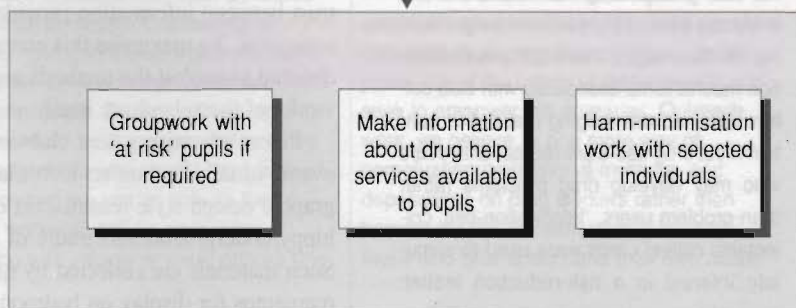
### Steps to working with schools



## TRAINING AND AWARENESS RAISING



## ACTION



identity, drug agencies should only attempt groupwork with 'at risk' young people when there is clear evidence of serious experimentation with drugs. In the school context, even generic 'lifestyle' groupwork on a range of issues – crime, AIDS, etc – with selected groups of disadvantaged young people poses real risks of stigmatising those young people.

### Harm minimisation

Outside of negotiations about policy, direct drug worker-pupil contact should be within the counselling/outreach relationship rather than a directly educational one with classes. However, there is a role for harm-minimisation work with, for instance, sixth formers as a whole, as part of a day that addresses all kinds of broader health issues from the same viewpoint.

Key curricula work with younger pupils should remain solely the responsibility of the academic staff, and the review and development of curricula should be done less by the drug agency and more by the local education authority, though it would be useful for the agency to retain an advisory capacity here.

THE KIND OF process recommended here should be enough to update schools about what's been happening since the mid '80s and to ensure that school welfare systems don't pillory young people for experimental drug use. By giving young people the right kind of access to services, it should also ensure that those who need help get the help they require. It's easy to dismiss schools as a reactionary force in helping young people with drug issues, but there is no reason for drug agencies to be any more complacent than schools themselves. ■

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

■ **CONTACT THE AUTHOR** at the Council on Addiction, Spring House, Spring Gardens, Northampton NN1 1LX, phone 0604 233227.

■ **WATCH DRUGLINK** for the announcement of ISDD's forthcoming *Drug issues for schools* by Colin Chapman.

■ **TACADE** is a national source of advice on educational and pastoral work in schools – contact them at 1 Hulme Place, The Crescent, Manchester M5 4QA, phone 061 745 8925.

■ **ISDD's INFORMATION SERVICE** is available on 071-430 1993.