

SDDFS NOTES on Underage Drinking

VOLUME 7, ISSUE 3

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Special Points of Interest:

- Alcohol and the Brain Research
- Underage Drinking and Media Literacy
- SDFS Resource Center items on Underage Drinking

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Underage Drinking : Introduction



According to research conducted at the University of California, the use of alcohol among middle school youth is three times more likely to occur when they start drinking at the elementary school age (Journal of Adolescent Health, June 2002). Such findings highlight the need for alcohol prevention education, along with appropriate intervention strategies, as early as pre-adolescence. The research also tells us that alcohol use is increased substantially when adolescents begin drinking at 15 years old as compared to those who do not drink until they reach their 21st birthday (NIAAA). Underage drinking has become a concern for everyone. Not only does it pose an enormous threat to the health and well-being of our young people, but it also has profound economic underpinnings, as research reveals that the

cost and related consequences of alcohol use by youth is estimated around \$53 billion annually.

This issue of SDFS Notes takes a closer look at underage drinking from many vantage points – physical and social effects, and academic implications. It summarizes current research and anecdotal literature from leading experts in the study of brain development, mental health and physical disorders associated with adolescent alcohol consumption. Also featured in this issue are discussions on the benefits of character educa-

tion, how media influences attitudes toward substance abuse, particularly alcohol, as well as the effects of social norms. To illuminate the statewide focus on this subject, a snapshot of FYSAS data on underage drinking is also presented in this issue. Finally, a thumbnail summary of three proven programs and intervention strategies are offered for your consideration.

Underage drinking is a serious matter which requires a community-wide commitment in order to decrease its prevalence. In fact, the Governor's Office of Drug Control, in concert with a work-group comprised of representatives from state agencies, associations, and organizations, collaborated to produce a White

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Paper which is aligned with Governor Jeb Bush's priority to radically reduce the number of adolescents who drink.

The White Paper, entitled *Changing Alcohol Norms (CAN): Florida's Initiative to Lower Youth Drinking*, released April 8, 2004 can be accessed on the SDFS website. Furthermore, First Lady, Columba Bush has actively advocated the Governor's agenda on underage drinking and has demonstrated public support for this cause. Educators like yourself are positioned to engage your colleagues and other agents in your community to bring about a reduction in the number of young people who dangerously compromise their future by drinking alcohol. You are encouraged to read the next few pages on underage drinking to find out how this issue of Notes may be a useful resource to you.



Internet Sites on Alcohol Use Among Adolescents

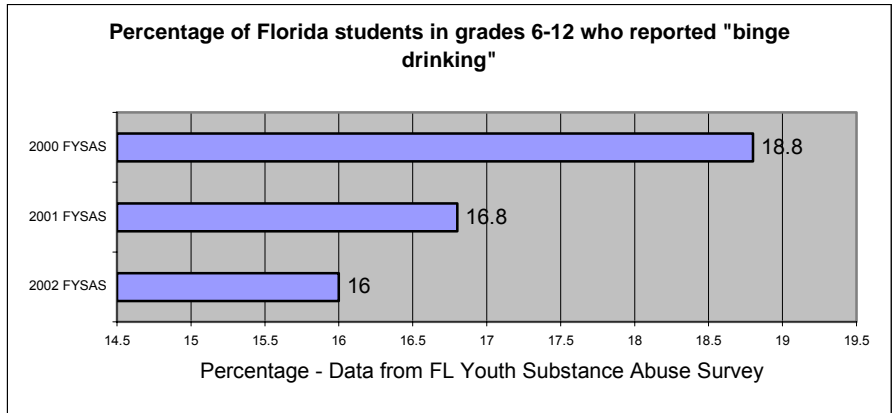
- >OSDFS The Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools<http://www.ed.gov/offices/>
- >Leadership to Keep Children Alcohol Free<http://www.alcoholfreechildren.org/>
- >National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism<http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/>
- >SAMHSA Model Programs<http://modelprograms.samhsa.gov/>
- >Nat'l Clearinghouse for Alcohol & Drug Information<http://www.ncadi.samhsa.gov/>
- >USEd Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention <http://www.edc.org/hec/>
- >Florida Alcohol and Drug Abuse Association<http://www.fadaa.org/>
- >NIAAA Alcohol Alert Underage Drinking (2003) <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/aa59.htm>
- >Al-Anon/Alateen<http://www.al-anon.alateen.org/>
- >NIAAA Teacher Curricula Materials<http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/Science/main.htm>



Did You Know?



- Alcohol can cause loss of coordination, slowed reflexes, distorted vision, memory lapses, and blackouts.
- Thirty-three percent of 9th graders report having ridden in a car driven by someone who had been drinking alcohol.
- Forty percent of children who start drinking before age 15 will become alcoholics at some point in their lives.
- If the onset of drinking is delayed by 5 years a child's risk of serious alcohol problems is cut in half.
- Among 8th grade girls who drink heavily, 37 percent report attempting suicide, compared to 11 percent who do not drink.
- Boys are more likely than girls to begin drinking before age 13.



Reducing Underage Drinking with Character Education



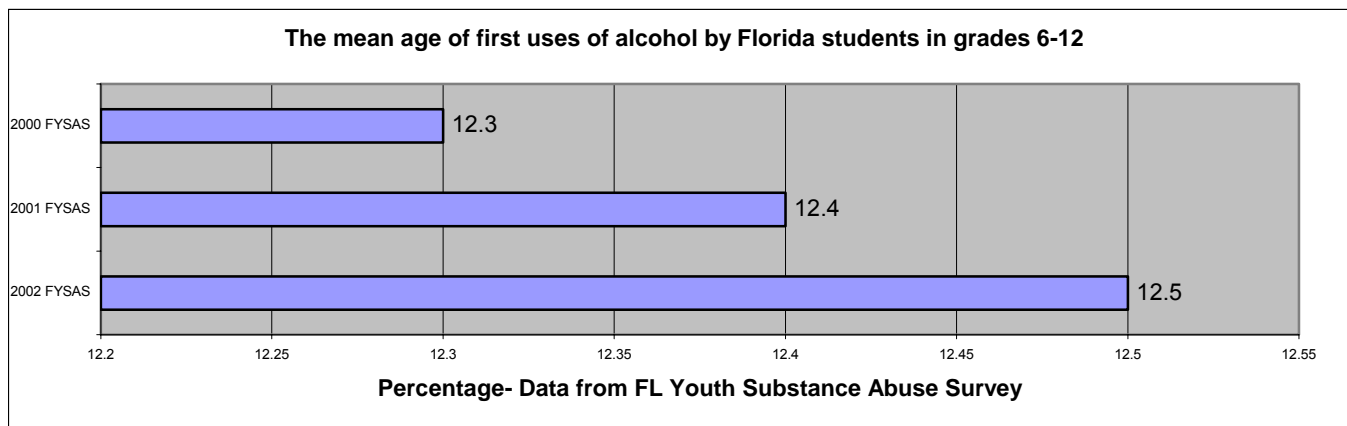
At any grade level, school curriculum is typically filled with more than a few methods for enriching students' knowledge as well as their social and personal development. Creative instructional techniques also make learning interesting and meaningful. Likewise, when teaching students about the effects of underage drinking, creative teachers often use a variety of proven and effective approaches. Character education is an instructional focus that is designed to encourage good decision-making and responsible behavior. When character education is embedded in the curriculum it can lead to students developing values and beliefs essential for resisting alcohol use. More importantly, students who become resistant to peer pressure are more likely to develop positive self-esteem.

Proponents of character education say it is “an umbrella term used to describe many aspects of teaching and learning for personal development.” Some facets under this umbrella are moral reasoning/cognitive development, social and emotional learning, violence prevention, conflict resolution/peer mediation, and ethic/moral philosophy (Character Partnership 1999, 3). A number of proven programs in prevention education also encourage these types of behaviors. Therefore it may be a good idea to complement effective prevention programs with character education instruction.

As indicated, character education incorporates many aspects of prevention education. As an example, educators expect students to use good judgment based upon learned principles of positive social and moral behavior. Oftentimes within the context of the school setting these principles or core values are reinforced through instruction and active classroom engagement. Thomas Lickona, author of *Educating for Character*, and leading expert in character education, says that character education should be a “high priority” [because with it] “schools are better places – certainly more conducive to teaching and learning – when they are civil and caring communities they promulgate, teach, celebrate, and enforce the values on which good character is based.” (Forward in *A Character Education Program: One School District's Experience* – Henry Huffman, 1994). Proponents also believe moral and social problems such as widespread drug and alcohol abuse produces even more compelling arguments in favor of character education.

Character education is not without criticism. Some critics ask “whose values will be presented during instruction?” In some instances, opponents say that character education is merely a means of indoctrinating students to accept certain views or beliefs. In nearly every instance these opinions are unfounded. On the other hand, the most significant value of character education and its relationship to reducing underage drinking is in the teaching of civic virtues that positively impact a school environment and the community. Students who are introduced to character education may display more responsible behavior and be exposed to fewer risk factors that may encourage underage drinking. In fact, “many schools with successful character education programs have observed fewer disciplinary referrals for misbehavior, improved school attendance, fewer student drop-outs, and higher performance on standardized achievement tests (Wynne and Ryan, 1997).

A number of educational resources available from the SDFS Resource Center are designed to help students develop and exhibit good character traits. Check out the SDFS Resource Center section in this issue of Notes for what is available.

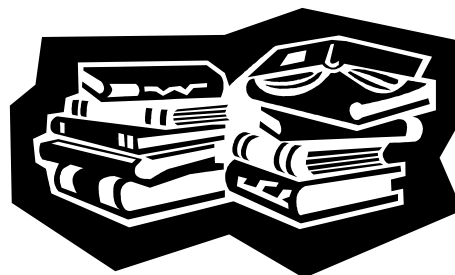


Underage Drinking Resources in the SDFS Resource Center

Our resource center has plenty of useful instructional materials on underage drinking. Here are just a few. For more resources, contact the Resource Librarian at elton_p@firn.edu.

- ▽ ***Teen Drinking Prevention Program Series*** – Center for Substance Abuse Prevention - 1995

- Law enforcement action guide
- Community action guide
- Communicator's guide
- Community risk assessment
- Guide to program materials



- ▽ ***Brain scans: alcohol and the teenage brain, Human relations Media***, 2001 - video
- ▽ ***Teens and alcohol***, Greenhaven Press, 2002
- ▽ ***An integrated approach to character education***, T. Rusnak, Crown Press, 1998
- ▽ ***Educating hearts and minds***, DeRoche, et al. Crown Press, 1998
- ▽ ***Eleven principles of effective character education***, Lickona and Lewis, 1997
- ▽ ***Lesson plans for character education: Elementary ed.***, The Master Teacher, Inc., 1998
- ▽ ***Media tool kit for anti-drug action***, Office of National Drug Control Policy, 2000
- ▽ ***Mass media and drug prevention: classic and contemporary theories and research***, Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002
- ▽ ***The Truth about teen alcohol use 101 : a social norms approach***, Discover Films, 2002 - video
- ▽ Perkins, H. Wesley, ed., ***The Social norms approach to preventing school and college age substance abuse: a handbook for educators, counselors, and clinicians***, Josey-Bass, 2000

The Impact of Social Norms on Underage Drinking

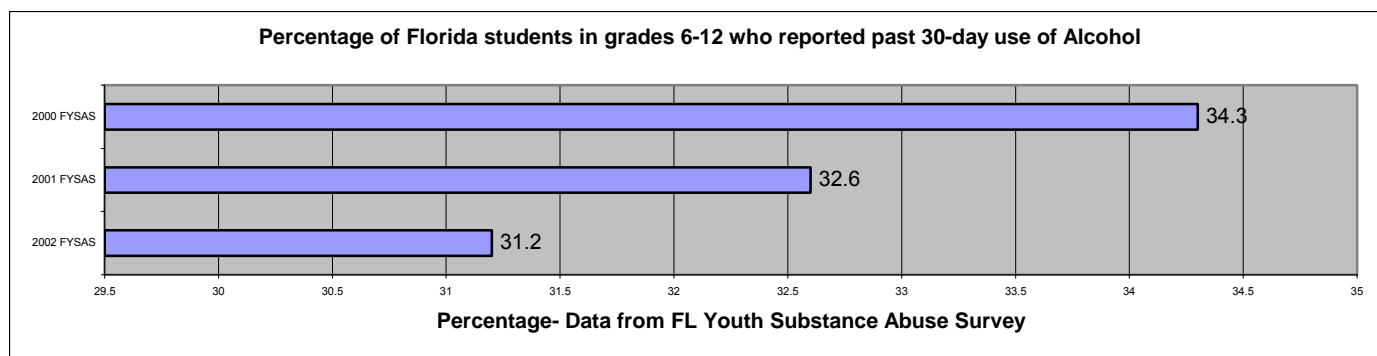
What is social norming and what makes it important to the reduction of underage drinking? Generally speaking, the social norms approach is an evidence-based, data-driven process that focuses on the strengths and positive aspects of the community and the idea that most students make healthy, safe and positive choices. Social norms are also acknowledged as standards of behavior taught either consciously or unconsciously by our parents, peers, school policies, law enforcement policies, religious institutions, cultural traditions, the mass media, advertising, and marketing practices. These standards can especially impact young people who are seeking guidance about what is considered right or wrong. It is through the social norms approach that alcohol use and other adolescent-related self-destructive activities have been successfully addressed. For the most part, the social norms approach has been utilized in higher education settings but researchers are beginning to recognize how the application of social norms strategies could positively impact adolescent and elementary students' use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs.

Where did the concept social norms begin? Dr. Alan Berkowitz and Dr. H. Wesley Perkins co-founded the social norms theory and approach in the mid-1980s. The professors incorporated the theory of social norming into a model for reducing high risk drinking on college campuses. While at Hobart and William Smith College, they co-published research findings that showed most students on their campus overestimated their peers' use of alcohol, and thus the correlation with drinking behavior. They concluded from their findings that by correcting the misperceptions of the existing social norms, possibly high-risk drinking and its related negative outcomes could be reduced. In years following their research, an approach to health promotion and positive behaviors was initiated and was coined social norming.

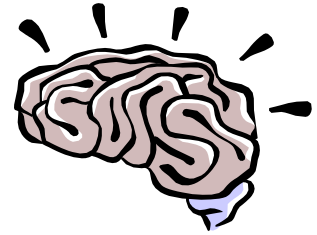
Professor Michael Haines was actually the first to implement the social norms model in 1989 at Northern Illinois University. He stated that "The theory holds that if students perceive something to be the norm, they tend to alter their behavior to fit that norm, even if it isn't reality. So if students think that heavy drinking is normal, they'll drink more. If they think responsible drinking is normal, they'll drink more responsibly". The results were extremely promising. Later, in the 1990s other universities followed by utilizing the model as well.

It is essential for adolescents to be exposed early-on to norms that encourage responsible behavior with regard to alcohol consumption. Therefore as teachers, it is advisable to promote and use positive social norms strategies in the classrooms so that students develop healthy attitudes about abstaining from alcohol use. The research tells us that there are several ways in which positive social norms are disseminated among adolescents. They include the use of media in all forms, curricular innovations and classroom enrichments. All have been said to reduce high risk drinking and its negative consequences, both long term and short term.

Instituting the practice of promoting positive social norms in the school and the community is a practical approach to reducing alcohol use among teens.



Alcohol and The Brain



Learning is a biological phenomenon that begins with the brain. Healthy brains enable us to learn, reason, and make decisions. Healthy brains also help us to become mature, responsible adults. Interestingly, information from the American Medical Association (AMA) and other recent studies confirm our greatest and most disturbing fears – excessive alcohol use results in extremely harmful consequences and possibly irreversible damage to the adolescent brain.

Adolescence is a very important period for brain development. Numerous studies have reached similar conclusions about how the brain is affected by alcohol consumption. Dr. Susan Tapert, who has done extensive research on the affects of alcohol on the teenage brain, said that “certain brain developments, such as the refinement of neural connections, are completed by about age 16.” She also stated that “Developments in the frontal lobes (parts of the brain that are important to judgment, planning and problem-solving) continue until about age 16.” It is during this crucial developmental period that drinking alcohol may have its most damaging and possibly permanent effects. Teenagers who drink heavily expose themselves to toxic effects of alcohol, and have more difficulty recalling new information compared with teens who choose not to drink, (Feb. 2000 Journal, Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research). In addition, an AMA study reported that adolescent drinkers scored worse than non-users on vocabulary, spatial, and memory tests, and were more likely to perform poorly in school, fall behind and develop social problems, depression, suicidal thoughts and violence.

The science relating to brain functions is also very interesting. Researchers believe the brain operates on no less than 60 different chemicals, and more chemicals will likely be discovered in the future. Scientists refer to these chemicals as neurotransmitters that are influenced by our thoughts and actions, as well as the things we ingest – food, or illegal substances that may be considered harmful, i.e. alcohol. When alcohol is consumed by adolescents, chemicals (neurotransmitters - amino acids, monoamines, and peptides) are altered to induce various affects on brain functions. Amino acids are viewed as the most prevalent excitatory neurotransmitter in the brain. This is the area of the brain that deals with emotions and thinking. Monoamines include epinephrine, dopamine, and serotonin, all of which are very important to brain development and functions. Alcohol alters the levels of serotonin in the brain, and the lack of serotonin, for example, may result in low self-esteem and depression.

Other characteristics of the brain are altered because of underage drinking. For instance, the hippocampus area of the brain is where behavior related to memory takes place. When a teen drinks alcohol he or she actually develops a smaller hippocampus than those who do not drink. This can cause serious challenges to teaching and learning. In addition, the area of the brain that goes through the biggest change due to alcohol consumption is the prefrontal area which is essential to developing the adult personality and behavior.

When adolescents drink, poor brain development interferes with the potential for academic success. In order for young people to do well in school and in life they must understand the negative consequences of drinking alcohol. Through prevention education we can help adolescents understand that healthy brains go hand in hand with healthy bodies.

Persuasive Advertising — the Media and Underage Drinking



Have you ever watched a commercial on TV, read a magazine ad, or listened to a radio sales pitch and then went out to buy something you really didn't need or want? It happens to everyone. It is difficult to avoid the temptation to shop for products or services in a culture that is full of creative marketing and advertising gimmicks. Once we become adults we discover from hindsight that advertising and other media driven sales pitches can occasionally be misleading. For most adults, hindsight knowledge usually causes us to make better choices. On the other hand, most adolescents do not have the benefit of hindsight wisdom; yet young people are exposed to new information everyday, delivered by TV, the internet, radio, newspapers, or magazines. Media messages about consuming alcohol can often be confusing and mind-boggling, especially to young people. Many movies and television shows communicate to adolescents the social benefits of drinking without presenting the negative consequences that often go along with it.

Discussions about whether advertising beer, wine, and other alcoholic beverages on TV continue with some experts believing that "Children exposed to alcohol advertising over a period of years can gain a false impression about drinking (its always good!), which becomes part of their value system and influences later drinking behavior" (Mosher 2000). Alcohol industry proponents deny this claim, saying that no single study can be used to justify restricting advertising through all types of media.

Many studies have shown that the unmonitored television habits of young children makes them especially vulnerable to alcohol ads that they find entertaining, e.g. animation, animal characters. One study, for example, indicated that 7th to 10th grade students who saw more alcohol commercials were more likely to report drinking alcohol beverages.

On average, brewers spend over \$600 million a year on TV and radio ads, and approximately \$90 million on printed ads. Likewise, liquor companies spend about \$90 million on printed ads. Promoting alcohol use through the media is pervasive, and has become a challenge to those who seek to reduce underage drinking.

Some say that when alcohol is advertised on TV it:

- Affects the manner, style, and meaning of drinking in society;
- Defines beer drinking as a positive and normative behavior;
- Promotes an exaggerated view of how many people drink and how much; and
- Provides drinking lessons for kids that ought to be learning about alcohol from their parents and less self-interested parties (Hacker, Counselor, Jan.-Feb. 1999).

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Media



There are more than a few recommendations for making alcohol advertising less pervasive, and there are numerous suggestions for deterring youth from illegally using alcoholic beverages. Often strategies include a mixture of public policy, education, family or parental involvement, and community action. A few are listed below.

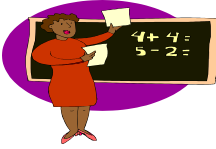
James Mosher of the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation challenged the alcoholic beverages industry to:

- Stop over-exposing young people to advertising;
- Implement and expand minimal Federal Trade Commission (FTC) recommendations for voluntary advertising reform;
- Take down billboards in inner city communities and stop the predatory marketing in ethnic/racial communities;
- Draw the line on products that are obviously designed for young teenagers, such as alco-pops and zipper shots;
- Distillers – stop marketing low alcohol coolers as if they were beers; and
- Turn unwanted revenues resulting from youth consumption into funds used to advance public health information and law enforcement to defray the costs associated with youth drinking. (Prevention File, summer 2003)

Public health experts also suggest:

- Restricting alcohol ads during prime time television hours;
- Encouraging cooperation between alcohol prevention leaders and the alcohol industry advertising officials;
- Using public service messages to counter any ads that promote alcoholic beverages; and
- Educate young people to be media literate so as to understand how alcohol ads may be persuasive.

(Mediascope, Issues in Brief, Mar. 2000).



Proven Alcohol Programs

If your school district has targeted the reduction of underage drinking as an important goal, you will want to take a closer look at the following proven alcohol prevention programs. While many prevention programs include underage drinking as part of the curriculum, the following programs specifically address this problem.

PROJECT NORTHLAND is an alcohol prevention program with components that help to delay the age of first use of alcohol, while it also helps to reduce alcohol consumption by those already drinking illegally. Components of this program are: 1) Parent involvement, 2) Behavioral Curricula; Peer-led small-group activities, 3) Community mobilization, and 4) Strategies to reduce alcohol access. Project Northland is designed for 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students.

Another alcohol prevention curriculum for elementary students that is endorsed by **SAMHSA** is **PROTECTING YOU/PROTECTING ME**. This is a five-year classroom-based alcohol curriculum that focuses on young children. This model program is proven to change children's knowledge and understanding about their brains and personal development.

Finally, the third highlighted proven programs is **Start Taking Alcohol Risks Seriously (STARS) for Families**. This program focuses on middle grade students and has documented that youth who complete the program decrease their alcohol use by 27 percent. The overall goal is to help students commit to postponing alcohol use until adulthood. It has also been proven to (1) increase student motivation (2) help students avoid alcohol use while increasing their protective factors and resistance skills, and 3) increase parent-child communication about alcohol use prevention.



Did You Know?



- It is against the law in all 50 states and the District of Columbia for people under 21 to buy or publicly possess alcohol.
- Nearly one of every five teenagers has experienced "black out" spells where they could not remember what happened the previous evening because of heavy binge drinking.
- Binge drinking during high school especially among males, is strongly predictive of binge drinking in college.
- Alcohol poisoning – a severe and potentially fatal physical reaction to an alcohol overdose is the most serious consequence of binge drinking.
- In 2001, 26 percent of 16-20 year old passenger vehicle drivers fatally injured in crashes had high blood alcohol concentrations (BAC)(0.08 percent or more).
- Sixth, seventh, and eighth graders are nine times more likely to smoke and five times more likely to drink if they had two or more friends who smoke and drank according to a National Institutes of Health study.

Read More about Adolescents and Underage Drinking

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Journal of Adolescent Health, June 2002.

The members of the SDDFS staff, as well as the staff of the Safe Schools Office at the Department of Education, stand ready to provide support through training and technical assistance to schools and school districts. Please encourage educators to take advantage of our services. For additional information on these resources or to find out how to access these resources, please contact Patricia Elton at (850) 414-0236 (SunCom 994-0236) or by email at elton_p@firn.edu.

Florida Safe, Disciplined and Drug-Free Schools Project

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The Department of Education, through the Bureau of School Safety and School Support, funds the Florida Institute of Education's (FIE's) Safe, Disciplined and Drug-Free Schools Project. FIE is an institute of the University of North Florida. The Safe, Disciplined and Drug-Free Schools Project offers technical assistance and support in the development and implementation of drug use and violence prevention strategies. For more information, contact the FIE/SDFS Project.

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