

Opioids: A Multi-Pronged Problem for Schools

The use and misuse of opioids is one of the great cultural challenges of our time. And like most issues, schools are put in a difficult position because of the complexity of your environment. While most organizations can focus on their employee population, schools have the challenge of two distinct audiences: staff and students. Addressing the challenges of these two groups can seem overwhelming due to the difference in the way they obtain opioids, but the control you have in addressing the issue.

Here are some thoughts to help you get started:

Staff. Responding to usage amongst staff is more controllable than for students. As a district you can address access to opioids by putting programs into place for staff. Your health, employee assistance and worker's compensation programs have direct ways that you can help. Recently my colleague Cindy Van Asten covered this issue in depth, and I encourage you to [read her article on the subject](#).

Students. As school leaders, you have additional concerns regarding the opioid issue involving students. While you don't control student access or usage of opioids, it is important to understand the culture surrounding them and resources you may have at your disposal. Here are a few things to consider when it comes to student usage:

- *Motivation:* For most students opioids aren't really different than other intoxicants. Root causes include social anxiety, peer pressure and stress relief. There are also a large number of students who become addicted after being prescribed an opioid after an injury.
- *Sources:* Opioids differ greatly from other drugs/intoxicants in the way that students get them. In most cases, they are not obtained not "on the street" but rather from an existing supply in the student's home, or the homes of friends/relatives. Unfortunately, if this source is exhausted, students with serious addictions are susceptible to stronger drugs such as heroin.
- *Resources:* Because of the recent public attention to this serious issue, there has been an increase in the resources to help tackle the problem. Both federal and state governments have made stopping the opioid crisis a priority. On the federal level, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has [a website with resources available here](#), and the State of Wisconsin Department of Justice (DOJ) has [an education-focused resource site available here](#).
- *State Law:* Last summer, [Wisconsin Act 29](#) was enacted into law. Known as the "Opioid Antagonist Administration in Schools and Institutions of Higher Education" law, the statute exempts a school bus driver, employee, or volunteer from civil liability for his or her acts or omissions in the administration of an opioid antagonist to a pupil or other person who appears to be undergoing an opioid-related drug overdose. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) has set up a webpage to help districts identify resources to help them implement this law. [That site is available here](#).

Takeaway: The misuse of opioids is an important issue for your staff and students. As you develop an approach to minimize the effect on your populations, we encourage you to take a big picture approach and leverage external partners, such as government entities, local health care systems and your insurance partners to make sure your staff and students can continue to focus on education.

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