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Letter of Intent

Return to Learn: An At-Risk Drug Intervention Suspension Program

CAAP Final Project Requirement

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### Return to Learn: An At Risk Drug Intervention Suspension Program

#### Problem Statement

Statistics indicate that illicit drug use among youth is on the rise nation wide. The Canadian Addictions Survey (CAS) reported a 15.9 % rate of past year use of any six illicit drugs (i.e. cocaine, speed, ecstasy, heroin, hallucinogens, and cannabis) and a 19.9-42.2 % rate of reported harm from drug use among Alberta's youth aged 15-17 (Adlaf, Begin,& Sawka, 2005). The Alberta Youth Experience Survey (TAYES) reported that Edmonton has the highest percentage (31.1%) of youth having used or tried cannabis (The Alberta Drug and Alcohol Abuse Commission [AADAC], 2002) and the biggest user group of methamphetamine or crystal meth is youth (The Council on Drug Abuse, 2005, ¶ 1). Health Canada (2001) reports that approximately 10% of the general high school populations surveyed nationwide, were current users of stimulants, inhalants, cocaine, methamphetamines, and ecstasy. Adolescence is filled with experimentation and change bringing to the surface many emotions. When unable to cope, youth often embrace the upward mood swing that drugs can offer. For example, Marsden et al. (2005) surveyed mid-adolescent students to identify correlates of alcohol use. They identified psychological factors, such as specific reasons for drinking; "the most commonly endorsed mood alteration function was drinking to relax [...] followed by drinking in order to forget about a problem" (Marsden et al., 2005, p. 437). There has been an increase in both the percentage of students reporting current use of more than one substance and the tolerance of use, with fewer students expressing moral disapproval or perceiving a risk of harm in experimentation with drugs (Health Canada, 2001).

Currently, the Edmonton Public School Board (EPSB) adheres to a use-reduction policy, which is an abstinence-based zero-tolerance approach involving punitive penalties for illicit drug use in attempt to deter students from engaging in such practice (Beyers, Evans-Whipp, Mathers, Toumbourou & Catalano, 2005). One Edmonton high school's drug policy states that a recommendation for expulsion from the school or district will immediately occur as a result of being involved in the possession of or sale of any illegal substance (W.P. Wagner, 2005). More commonly, punishment for possession or being under the influence of an illicit drug is a five day out of school suspension. The rate of drug use and associated suspensions necessitates an alterative drug policy that is a more effective means of prevention and support for drug abusers. Australia's Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) "stresses the importance of the retention of students in schools, highlighting the fact that detachment from school is a risk factor for further involvement in drug use" (Evans-Whipp et al., 2004, p.232).

#### Project Rationale

Experimentation with drugs at the high school level is not uncommon. However, reported rates are alarming, considering the conservative nature of these reports due to limited sampling and self-reported bias. Skiba, Monroe, and Wodarski (2004) suggest that "surveys tend to under represent school drop outs and subgroups (...) fail to reach small isolated areas, and are prone to regional differences" (p. 345). Cannabis use alone among Alberta's youth jumps from a rate of 20.5% in grade nine to 41% in grade 10 and 58% by grade 12 (AADAC, 2002). Currently, Edmonton high schools are becoming increasingly concerned with the influx of students reporting the use and abuse of drugs,

primarily cannabis, ecstasy, and crystal meth, which are inexpensive, readily available drugs.

The transition to high school is difficult: A decline in academic achievement and an increase in anxiety due to meeting expectations and peer acceptance often occurs. “Young adolescents must adjust to older students, a wider array of teachers throughout the day, and increased social and academic pressures”, which many are ill prepared for (Lampert, 2005, p. 61). As a result, negative behaviours such as lack of focus, violence, absenteeism, secrecy, and defiance may develop that are also correlated with drug use (DeWit, 1995). These behaviours lead to problems at school often resulting in problems at home and perpetuates the students need to escape, leading to more drug use. The World Health Organization (WHO) recognizes youth substance use and the resulting physical and social harms (i.e., accidents, disrupted family and peer relationships, educational problems, and overdose) as significant global issues in society (Evans-Whipp, 2004).

The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) identifies familial factors associated with greater potential for drug abuse that include ineffective parenting, a chaotic home environment, and a caregiver who abuses substances. Furthermore, factors outside the family (i.e. academic performance and relationships with teachers and peers) also compound the risk (NIDA, 2003). So, the suspension for students found under the influence or in the possession of drugs, is not a step toward resolving the drug issues in school. Rather, it perpetuates the problem as it creates increased student pressures by placing them further behind in their academics and increasing the distance between them and their teachers, peers, and parents.

Student records (2006) at one south side Edmonton high school revealed that approximately 30% of the students that had been withdrawn or expelled within a 4-month period had been involved with drugs. Edmonton Public Schools has adopted a new mandate, which is a dedication to increasing retention rates. Edmonton Public Schools legacy statement outlines dedication to raising academic achievement levels and high school completion rates, and promoting the physical and mental well being of every student. Additionally, the goal statement is “to achieve at least a high school completion rate of 70% (for students completing in three years) and 80% (for students completing in five years) within the board’s term” (Edmonton Public Schools, 2006, p. 5). Evans-Whipp et al. (2004) suggest that the suspension and expulsion of students at high risk of drug abuse is unlikely to prevent further drug involvement and has the potential to decrease participation in school and increase school failure. Thus, designing an alternative to the current standard consequence (suspension) for drug use, in an attempt to better support students and retain their enrollment aligns with the Board’s vision.

### Supporting Literature

Today’s youth continue to use illicit drugs despite the development of many prevention programs, which center on developing positive self-esteem and decision-making skills. These programs have been unsuccessful because they choose to ignore the students and their stubborn reactions to propaganda (Moilanen, 2004). However, the social influence model uses resistance and broader social skill training in the social environment to promote change and has produced many positive effects. Social influence is a central component of models of substance use because “association with drug using peers is often found to be one of the strongest predictors (risk factors) of adolescent drug use” (Donaldson, 1995, p. 801). Therefore, this model works well with at-risk groups

when used to build resistance and the ability to rebound from adversity. Unfortunately, most schools are not using the best-known prevention science, which necessitates the need for a program to support not punish drug-users at the high school level (Beyers et al., 2005).

School drug policies are important as they may hinder substance use by limiting the opportunity and availability of use or altering student beliefs. At the high school level, a harm minimization approach supports academic and social competence and although youth are encouraged to abstain from drug use, the notion that some youth will use drugs is accepted (Beyers, Evans-Whipp, Mathers, Toumbourou, & Catalano, 2005). Marsden et al. (2005) illustrate the importance of discussing personal, family, peer, and school conduct factors with students in an attempt to reduce harm. They highlight the importance of ensuring that program content is both relevant to the identified behaviours and the target audience and the benefits of including parents. For example, encouraging parents to consider how their own behaviour and attitudes towards drugs might influence their children. The NIDA suggests that schools should focus on the following skill development: “study habits and academic support; communication; peer relationships; self-efficacy and assertiveness; drug resistance skills; reinforcement of anti-drug attitudes; and strengthening of personal commitments against drug abuse” (2003, p. 3). Additionally, they should target key transition points (i.e. high school), combine both family and school-based programs, and include teacher training to promote relationship building and achievement (NIDA, 2003). Strengthening relationships and promoting academic success fosters a sense of hope among a typically hopeless demographic.

Hope is a very powerful construct to incorporate in counselling, especially with

drug-using youth as this demographic can be hope deprived. As this group transitions from adolescence to adulthood, hope is often lost in the chaos and uncertainty of a future that is difficult to conceptualize. Bruce and Cockreham (2004) suggest that “adolescents who sense meaning and purpose in their lives, who are at peace with themselves, and who have a healthy perspective about living in a confusing, rapidly changing, and frightening world are quite unusual” (p. 9). This lack of hope has the potential to increase due to the depressing effects of the drugs (i.e., cannabis, ecstasy, and crystal meth) that high school students often seek in an attempt to escape this pressure. It is often difficult for high school students to set goals yet research indicates that personally based goals are more attractive to high hope individuals and this high hope will in turn facilitate positive and active emotions about goals (Snyder, Lehman, Kluck, & Monsson, 2006).

### Project Procedures

Return to Learn is an At-Risk Drug Intervention Suspension (ARDIS) program that will be designed for future implementation at the high school level in an attempt to better address the needs of both the students caught under the influence of drugs and the school. ARDIS will aim to: meet the academic and emotional needs of drug-using students, potentially bridge the gap between students, parents, and the school, and facilitate continued learning. To ensure that the program effectively meets the needs of Alberta’s youth and incorporates current research, a literature review will be conducted on the following topics: the nature of substance use among youth, the prevalence of drug use among Alberta’s youth, current school drug policies among Edmonton Public’s high schools, harm minimization policies and their effectiveness, effective counselling for drug using high school students. Relevant electronic databases and search engines will be

accessed to obtain recent primary source articles using keywords: prevention, youth, high school, policy, treatment, addiction, drug, abuse, use, misuse, substance, illicit, risk, assessment, Alberta, harm minimization, cannabis, marijuana, crystal meth, hope, adolescents, suspension, harm reduction, and program development.

The development of the ARDIS program will require three main procedures. First, a relevant literature review will be completed as described above. Second, this author will draw upon her experiences as a counsellor at one Edmonton high school and an anonymous case example will be used to demonstrate ideas. Third, a synthesis of the literature will inform the development of the ARDIS program, which will attempt to reduce harm among the drug-using students of one Edmonton high school. The final project will include the development of the ARDIS program but implementation is beyond the scope of this project.

#### Potential Implications

There are several potential implications of this project, primarily the development of an effective program that offers the support required by students found in possession of or under the influence of an illicit substance. Adopting a harm minimization policy should lead to a decrease in both the frequency of drug use among students and the number of drug-using students. With a more effective action plan in place, students will have the opportunity to access the required emotional and academic supports to facilitate their retention in school. A program that supports students will likely strengthen relationships and promote the necessary camaraderie between the student and both the school and home. It is anticipated that increased support will bring increased attendance, course completion, academic achievement, positive behaviours, and high school



graduates, which aligns well with EPSB's three-year plan (EPSB, 2006). Vast amounts of research suggests that extended periods of substance use tends to lead to heavier, multiple drug use that continues well into adulthood creating long term effects on society further necessitating the need for such a program (Skiba et al., 2004).

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