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Drugs in school

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U.S. Department of Justice
National Institute of Justice

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School Safety

School Safety is published by the National School Safety Center to communicate the latest trends and exemplary programs of school safety and delinquency prevention. Publication dates are September (Fall issue), January (Winter issue) and May (Spring issue) to coincide with the academic calendar.

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Prepared under Grant No. 85-MU-CX-0003 from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice, U.S. Department of Education or Pepperdine University.

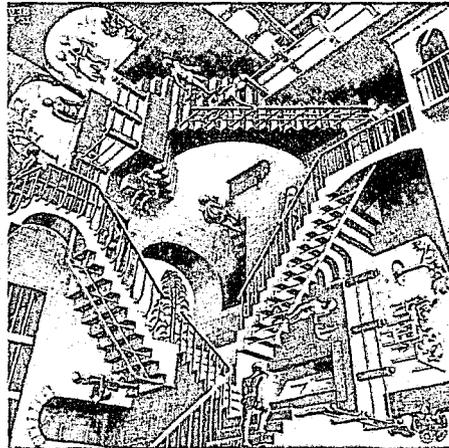
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ACQUISITIONS

"Just say no."

By Nancy Reagan

"It is my hope that more and more people . . . will get involved in prevention and education projects so we can rid our schools of drugs and alcohol and make them safe once again for learning."

Nancy Reagan is First Lady of the United States. She is actively involved in many national and local drug awareness programs, including hosting the "Chemical People," a PBS program aimed at helping communities organize against drug and alcohol abuse.

The use of drugs by young people is one of our country's greatest problems. Drugs are ruining the minds and bodies of our children, and unless we continue to search for ways of combatting the problem, we risk losing part of an entire generation.

We are making progress. The 1985 findings of the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) High School Senior Survey show that one in 20 seniors use marijuana on a daily basis and the same number use alcohol daily. While these numbers are still unacceptably high, they show a decline in overall use since the peak years of the late '70s. The daily use of marijuana by high school seniors is now less than half of what it was then and the daily use of alcohol has steadily declined. While these numbers are encouraging, we still have a long way to go.

The numbers – as well as the thousands of letters I receive from all over the country – indicate that drug abuse has reached into all sectors of society. It knows no social nor economic boundaries. It is our most democratic problem. Rich and poor, educated and uneducated, black and white, urban and rural youth are all affected.

No child is safe from the threat of drug abuse. Drugs are available virtually everywhere – on city streets and in suburban neighborhoods – and it is particularly frightening to know that they have invaded even our schools. Many schools today do not provide the secure, protective environment they

once did where children were able to learn in an atmosphere of calm and discipline.

Increased drug use among school-aged children has brought a degree of disorder and violent behavior into some of our classrooms and, as a result, is impeding the learning process. We must get drugs out of our schools.

There is no doubt parents must play a major role in protecting their children from the threat of drug abuse by becoming more involved with their youngsters' lives, but they can't do it alone. They need the support of the community and the schools. We owe it to our children to provide them a drug-free environment where learning can flourish and the ideals of excellence and pride in achievement will prevail.

I believe education is the key. Children, parents, educators themselves and the public at large need to become more knowledgeable about the problem of drug abuse. The greater knowledge we have, the better our chances for dealing with the problem.

There are many ways schools can help fight drug abuse. The establishment of drug education programs ought to be a major priority for schools that don't have them in place already. Many schools around the country have drug prevention classes beginning as early as the third and fourth grades. I believe that as children learn to read and write, they should be taught the dangers of drugs.

I once visited an elementary school in

South Carolina and sat in on a fourth grade class. That particular prevention program featured classroom activities aimed at deterring drug abuse and other forms of self-destructive behavior by strengthening the students' personal values, their sense of self-esteem and decision-making and problem-solving skills.

Helping to build character in children early on is an important step in making them strong enough to resist the temptation of drugs. It is often not enough to teach children that drugs are bad – they also have to learn *how* to say “no” to them.

Another way schools can reinforce the anti-drug message is by inviting speakers knowledgeable about the problem to address school assemblies. A local police officer could describe experiences with drug users and the personal tragedies that result from drug use. A health professional could discuss the physical and psychological harm drugs cause. A young former drug user could deliver a powerful message about the realities of drug use and the pain and suffering it causes. There are also many personalities from the sports and entertainment fields who travel the country speaking to young people about the dangers of drugs.

I'm very encouraged by a growing movement within our schools led by students themselves. Kids are standing up against peer pressure, the major cause that lures teenagers to try drugs. I'm talking about positive peer groups made up of students who make a point of *not* using drugs. These groups can be very supportive and really have an impact. Kids can do a lot to make it known among their friends that drugs are dumb.

A wonderful example of kids helping kids is the formation of the “Just Say No” clubs. The first clubs originated in Oakland, California, and the movement is now spreading throughout the United States. Members of the clubs generally range from the elementary grades to the late teens. These are kids that have the courage and determination to say “no” to drugs, often in the face of strong peer pressure to use drugs and be considered one of the crowd. They know drugs can ruin lives and want to help

their brothers and sisters, friends and neighbors lead drug-free lives.

“Just Say No” clubs are formed in many ways – through the help of a teacher, school administrator, PTA member, high school student, parent, law enforcement personnel, or other people in the community who are interested in helping and spending time with young people. Sometimes communities work with an existing youth organization, such as the Scouts or 4-H, to make a “Just Say No” club one of its regular activities.

Parents also are helping tremendously in the fight against drug abuse. Parent groups are banding together and having a powerful impact on the drug crisis. They are working within their communities and schools and are taking the call to action to their state legislatures. In the past five years, the number of

tions fun, upbeat, safe and chemical-free.

Operation Graduation is saving lives throughout the country by reducing the number of alcohol-related traffic accidents around graduation time. Each graduation celebration is different, tailored to the interests of the community, the availability of resources and the activity choices of sponsors and graduates. But they all have a common goal – to offer alternatives to drugs and alcohol and to save lives.

And equally encouraging, the effects of prom night programs now are being felt throughout the year. Young people are realizing they can have fun without alcohol or other drugs.

It is my hope that more and more people in communities all across the country will get involved in prevention and education projects so we can rid



Mrs. Reagan participates in a drug education class at an elementary school in Atlanta, Georgia. (Photo by Mary Anne Fackelman, The White House)

parent groups has grown from 1,000 to over 9,000 across the country. I think parents are showing the professionals that something can be done on a scale larger than previously thought.

One example of parents working on both the local and national level to fight youth drug abuse is a program called Operation Prom/Graduation which involves community groups, national associations and schools. It is a national effort of the National Federation of Parents for Drug-Free Youth, the National Association of Broadcasters and the National Federation of High School Associations, aimed at making high school graduations and prom celebra-

our schools of drugs and alcohol and make them safe once again for our children.

There remains great danger today and in the future unless we can turn the image of the drug user around in the eyes of all young people to reflect the truth. Drugs destroy minds, bodies, relationships and families and lead the user into a world of isolation and deception. Drugs are not glamorous. They are deadly. It is not a problem that will be solved easily or quickly. It's going to take a lot of hard work and dedicated people to get this problem under control. But I am convinced we *can* solve it. □