"In the summer between my junior and senior years of high school, my alcohol and marijuana use went from a weekend occurrence to an almost anytime event. Although my use was causing a lot of conflict between my parents and me, I thought I was simply having a really good time for myself, spending my summer job earnings on marijuana and alcohol. My parents were very concerned about the amount of ‘partying’ I was doing. I just saw it as a summer of fun, planning to buckle down and focus on academics and college applications once school started. As the fall began, I tried to keep my partying to just the weekends, but soon enough, I started extending those weekends, going out to drink on Thursday and Sunday nights as well. Although the majority of kids at my school were not out in the bars, I thought that you had to go out and drink to be part of the ‘in’ crowd. I started to underperform academically and was faced with the reality that once very realistic college choices for me were now a far reach or had slipped away all together. This transition from summer drinking to the school year was the first of many attempts in my life to ration or control my drinking because my use was interfering with my relationships and my future. It was not until 11 years later after suffering much loss that I was able to start recovering from alcoholism." - An FCD Prevention Specialist

All students, those who use substances and those who do not, enter the school year with hopes and expectations about grades,
sports, social relationships, and the future. The beginning of the academic year is an important time for school communities to reinforce the healthy expectations that can support all students in reaching their goals.

As the fall begins, schools can once again draw attention to the health risks of alcohol and other drug use. At this time, schools may also want to remind students of their discipline policies and additional consequences of school-year use which may be absent from summertime behavior and activities. In every message schools send to students about alcohol and other drug use, there is the potential for that message to support the health of students and to correct false perceptions that use is expected or acceptable within the community.

Normally, alcohol and other drug use at school, during school-sponsored events, and even at off-campus non-school-sponsored activities is scrutinized much more closely during the school year than during summer vacation. Many schools begin routinely warning students about the risks of using alcohol and other drugs during the first week of school and continue this conversation throughout the year. Such communication is usually found to be most helpful during periods of the school year when students are more likely to drink alcohol or use other drugs, such as homecoming, seasonal breaks, prom, and graduation.

The start of a new school year is also a vital time for adults to reflect on their own attitudes and actions related to students' use of alcohol and other drugs.

Research consistently shows that young people all over the world use and abuse alcohol more than any other substance, legal or illegal. While new drugs move in and out of youth culture, alcohol is the substance students are likely to use first and most, if students chose to use any substance at all. Among high school students in the United States, for example, for every one student who has ever used cocaine or ecstasy in his or her lifetime, eleven students have used alcohol. Alcohol is also the drug most likely to be involved in unintentional injuries to young people, such as motor vehicle accidents, drownings, and fatal falls. These injuries are known to be the leading cause of death for persons aged 12-24. This makes it necessary for the adults in students' lives, even while keeping up with new drug trends, to clearly and consistently support students in their healthy choice to delay use of alcohol.

Fortunately, research also shows that young people care what adults have to say to them about alcohol and other drugs. The Partnership at Drugfree.org, a nonprofit organization that helps parents prevent substance abuse by their children, has found that kids who learn a lot about the risks of drugs from their parents are up to 50% less likely to use. FCD's own surveys have illustrated time and time again that parents' opinions about alcohol and other drug use are one of the most important factors in a child's decisions about whether he or she will choose to use. Parents' opinions have been found to be more important than students' own opinions about use in many cases, and parental opinions have consistently been found, among FCD surveys, to be of greater influence than the opinions of friends and/or peers.

For schools, current prevention research provides clear data about the most effective strategies for encouraging students to refrain
from alcohol and other drug use. We know from this research that messages which reinforce healthy behavior are most effective when they are integrated into the norms and expectations of membership in a healthy school community. These messages make it possible for students and adults alike to remember truths that are critical to the prevention of substance abuse among young people, such as the reality that the majority of students are not abusing alcohol or other substances, and the further reality that parents, school faculty and other adults can effectively support healthy students by providing appropriate policies and supports to them throughout the academic year.

So as school starts this fall, schools communities should ask themselves, "Are we doing all we can to keep our students healthy when we limit our conversations to 'warning' students about the consequences of breaking school rules? Or is there something more we can do?"

The Social Norms Approach Supports the Healthy Majority

Drug use is less prevalent in schools where non-use is recognized as an acceptable and common choice, and student misperceptions regarding the actual amount of substance use are corrected. The social norms model is based on the fact that young people consistently and dramatically overestimate alcohol and other drug use by their peers and elders. At the same time, students underestimate healthy behaviors practiced by their peers (e.g., abstention, limiting consumption). This is disturbing because research shows that normative beliefs (student perceptions as to the prevalence and acceptability of alcohol and other drug use amongst one's peer group and close friends) are a strong predictor of the level of actual alcohol and other drug use in a school community. In other words, the more use students think there is, the more likely they will be to anticipate using themselves, therefore increasing the risk of engaging in a host of other unhealthy behaviors.

The social norms approach to prevention, as applied to students, has two primary components: The first is data collection. Students are surveyed to uncover actual behaviors and attitudes concerning alcohol and other drug use, as well as perceptions of their peers' behaviors and attitudes. The second component of the social norms model addresses misperceptions by utilizing data identifying healthy norms as the basis for positive feedback and interventions. Such healthy feedback reinforces positive behaviors and dispels the myth that "everybody" is engaging in unhealthy activities. The interventions, developed with and by members of the school community, including students, are designed to reflect the singular characteristics of the school and the target audience as revealed by the data collected.

Over the past decade, FCD has conducted over 100 social norms-based FCD Student Attitudes and Behavior Surveys within school communities. From this work, we have discovered that in nearly every school, the vast majority of students hold positive beliefs, engage in responsible decision making, and exhibit healthy behaviors. And yet, members of many school communities continue to believe that far more kids are drinking alcohol or using other drugs than this and other compelling research shows. Certainly, every school community can be influenced by media messages and
the occasional discipline incident that highlights abusive use and promotes false perceptions. As a result, students and adults assume that student use is much higher than it really is. Because of this false perception and the fear it evokes, it is very easy for the community to affirm exaggerated levels of use. Remember, the more use kids "think" there is, the more use there is likely to be, all as a result of false perceptions.

The few students who actually get caught up in the substance abuse discipline system in school take up an enormous amount of time and energy. Their behavior also has an effect on the reputation of the school. The community rarely talks about or makes public the number of students who make healthy decisions or don't get caught in the discipline system, but when incidents occur, they are usually well-discussed. It is easy for a school community to make incorrect assumptions based on the behavior of three or four students. As a result, schools may think they have a "big problem." Communities can become prone to designing policies, procedures, and programs based on the unhealthy behavior of a small minority instead of the healthy behavior and attitudes that so many of their students display. Then, of course, policies and messages for students come from a place of fear, false assumptions, and the implied message that the adults in a school expect students to use alcohol or other drugs. Even though our intentions are noble, we can actually do more harm than good by promoting false perceptions and reinforcing unhealthy expectations. It is essential to remember the prevention messages sound research has revealed - that the majority of students are not abusing alcohol or other substances, and that adults can effectively support healthy students by providing appropriate policies and supports.

All programs, policies and procedures for the prevention of student alcohol or other drug use should be designed from a perspective of the students who make up the healthy majority. That means we don't have to be threatening as we engage students in these conversations. Frank - yes; intimidating - no.

For those students who rarely or never engage in substance use, policies that focus on reinforcing healthy behavior strengthen their resolve while and marginalizing those students who have been drinking or using other drugs. In fact, it is not uncommon for students to tell FCD how much their drinking actually drops or stops completely once they are back at school. Just last week, an FCD prevention specialist was engaged with a group of students in a discussion about how difficult it can be to change drinking patterns at the beginning of the school year. Some students were relieved to be back at school because the structure and schedule of the school calendar means they can't continue to drink the way they did in the summer, especially if they want to keep up with academics, athletics, and other activities - which they do! Other students discovered they are having a bit of trouble dropping a "habit" they cultivated over the summer, making school community support all the more essential.

The Start of the School Year: Tips for Talking with Students About the Risks of Alcohol and Other Drug Use
Start the discussion by acknowledging and validating the students who choose healthy behaviors and do not drink alcohol or use other drugs to establish a positive, affirming tone.

Hold these discussions in small groups, such as advisories or athletic team meetings - not during an all-school assembly. Remind the advisors or coaches leading such discussions to be careful not to make assumptions about individual student use.

Emphasize how valuable each individual student is to the community and remind them of the many healthy behaviors in which they are engaged. This is not about "good" or "bad" students. It is about the health and well-being of each child and the community as a whole.

Instead of telling students what the substance abuse policy is, give them a short, multiple-choice quiz designed to generate conversation and judge how accurate their own perceptions of the policy might be. Find out if students are aware of consequences of use and fully understand the risks they and their friends face should they make the choice to use alcohol or other drugs.

Even though the majority of students either do not drink, or drink infrequently, some students do drink in a manner that is of concern. It is important to address the signs and symptoms of higher-risk substance use. Every year, kids tell FCD that they are concerned about friends' use of alcohol and other drugs. It is important to help students identify what higher-risk behavior looks like, and to let students know that expressing concern is acceptable.

Be clear with students that all use equals risk. Whether use is on campus or off campus, during the summer or during the school year, substances pose substantial health risks to the young persons who use them. Framing discussions from a health perspective helps students make wise choices for themselves about substances within the school community and outside of it.

For schools that have completed an FCD Student Attitudes and Behavior Survey, this is a perfect opportunity to address the relatively small number of kids that fit the "higher-risk" definition. Survey results can clearly show that kids who drink the most also experience more health, social and academic consequences than do their peers.

If your school has not conducted a survey, FCD can supply a student-friendly list of warning signs that help students know when they should be concerned about a friends' use (or their own use) of alcohol or other drugs.

Confirm on the school calendar six to eight appropriate times throughout the school year to discuss this issue. Be creative - don't repeat the same session twice and utilize interactive delivery methods.

Make sure prevention education is based on well-designed scientific research. Keep the focus on healthy norms, the
expectation of healthy choices, and a commitment to non-use, instead of further emphasizing the minority of students already drinking alcohol or using other drugs.

- In at least one or two of the scheduled discussions, use peer leaders instead of, or in combination with, adult leaders.

- Don't forget to review with your school community's students, families, faculty and staff the systems that are in place for helping a student. It is always a good idea to go over the latest research-based strategies with students on assisting friends in trouble.

- Remember that the vast majority of teenagers do not use and/or will never use the illicit substances that often become highly sensationalized in the media and popular culture. Alcohol, tobacco and marijuana remain the most widely used drugs among teenagers today.

- Exert the pervasive and meaningful influence adults have on the developing perceptions, attitudes and opinions of young people. Despite the obvious importance of friends and other peers to teens, your example and guidance as a respected adult is a critical part of keeping healthy kids healthy.

Substance use should be addressed on a regular basis, not just at the beginning of the school year or after a disciplinary infraction. Though it may be easy for schools to spend time dealing with a handful of students who get caught in the discipline system, it is far more effective and rewarding to support and encourage those students who are already making healthy choices.

About the Authors:

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FCD’s mission is to help parents, teachers and school communities protect young people from substance abuse by reducing the risk factors that contribute to unhealthy behaviors: identifying and intervening on unhealthy behaviors; and strengthening the protective factors that contribute to health and well-being.