Meeting Youth Where They Are

Substance Use Disorder Treatment in Schools

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KEYWORDS

• Substance use disorder • Adolescent • School mental health

KEY POINTS

- School is an ideal setting for mental health interventions including treatment for substance use disorders.
- Substance use assessment—alone or paired with brief intervention—is associated with decreased substance use in high school students.
- More intensive intervention is required to effect sustained behavior change.
- Cognitive–behavioral therapies are effective and can be easily adapted for implementation in schools.
- Several models for school-based intervention have been studied, but additional research is needed.

SCHOOL AS AN IDEAL SETTING FOR MENTAL HEALTH INTERVENTION

Youth in the United States spend, on average, more than a thousand hours in school each year. Meeting these students where they are—in schools—offers an opportunity to bridge a significant gap in mental health treatment needs. Implementing evidenced-based substance abuse treatment schools has the potential to reach youth at earlier stages of substance severity, reduce the risk of progression to more chronic addiction with considerable cost savings to society.[1]

A significant number of high school–aged youth are in need of services for problematic substance use. The 2011 national Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey[2] reports that of youth in grades 9 to 12, 21.9% reported binge drinking, 23.1% smoked marijuana, and 25.6% sold, offered, or were given illegal drugs on school property in the past month. The range of illness in these youth is wide. Based on 2011 National Survey on Drug Use and Health data, 14.4% of youth aged 12 to 18 years met *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM)-V criteria

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Abbreviations	
CRAFFT	Car, Relax, Alone, Forget, Friends, Trouble
DSM	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders
SBIRT	Screening, brief, intervention, and referral to treatment
SUD	Substance use disorder

for substance use disorders (SUD), with about one third endorsing mild SUD (2-3 symptoms), about one third endorsing moderate SUD (4-5 symptoms) and about one third endorsing severe SUD (6-11 symptoms).[1,3] Unfortunately, only about one-third of the 14% to 20% of school-aged youth with a behavioral health disorder receive treatment, and SUD are among the least likely to be treated.[4] Schools provide an important venue to increase access to care, especially for families who are least likely to access care in traditional clinic settings.[5] In fact, 70% to 80% of those youth who are able to access services receive treatment in schools.[6] Currently, however, treatment services are most often funded by juvenile justice and social services and provided in community-based programs.[7]

In addition to increasing access to care, addressing mental health and substance use in schools can have a positive impact across a variety of emotional, behavioral, and educational outcomes in children and adolescents.[8] Substance use is associated with poor academic performance, greater rates of discipline referrals, and higher rates of dropout. Despite the high rate of drop out, more than 90% of the youth with SUD are still in school.[1]

SCHOOLS OFFER AN OPPORTUNITY TO ADDRESS SIGNIFICANT UNMET NEED FOR TREATMENT

Commonly reported barriers to receiving care included cost of treatment, perception that substance use is not a problem, not knowing where to access treatment, and lack of transportation.[9] Providing SUD treatment services in schools can overcome these barriers by meeting youth where they are.[6,10,11] Schools are a unique setting for increasing the availability of adolescent substance treatment and access to care, especially for minority and disadvantaged youth.[12,13] Youth who have access to school-based health centers are 10 times more likely to make a mental health or substance use visit and participate in screening for other high-risk behaviors compared with youth receiving services in community-based treatment settings.[14]

Despite the urgent need for services and call to provide services in schools, few published studies address school-based substance abuse treatment. In a review of the literature published to date, 16 studies of substance use treatment interventions delivered in schools were identified from 7 groups across the United States and 1 group in Great Britain. These reports include results from 5 randomized, controlled trials of brief interventions. The remaining reports are feasibility studies and analyses of the mechanisms of change in 5 nonexperimental implementation of school-based substance abuse treatment including one 8-week intervention. Findings from these published studies will be reviewed here. A significant gap in the literature remains in the absence of randomized studies of robust, integrated treatment for SUDs in schools.

SCREENING FOR SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS IN SCHOOLS

Treatment for SUDs necessarily begins with identifying youth in need of services. Use of a validated screening tool significantly improves identification of youth with problematic substance use[15] and is recommended. Multiple screening instruments for