

Identifying the Cannabis Prevention and Education Needs of Minnesota Schools

Background

Legislation mandates that Minnesota school districts and charter schools implement a comprehensive cannabis and substance use education program for middle and high school students by the 2026-2027 school year. In this study, we assessed: (1) experiences of middle and high school staff regarding cannabis use and related problems among students and (2) staff needs for addressing cannabis use and related problems at their schools.

In December 2024-January 2025, school support staff (e.g., nurses, counselors, psychologists, social workers) in Minnesota were invited to complete an online survey. Recruitment emails were sent to school support staff from their professional associations. 296 respondents completed the survey.

Results

Substance Use Issues Among Students

As seen in Table 1, most (68%) school support staff have dealt with cannabis use in the last year and about one-third (34%) have dealt with cannabis use several times per month in the last year. More than half (60%) of school support staff at 9th-12th grade schools dealt with cannabis use several times per month compared to 12% of school support staff at 5th-8th grade schools.

Table 1. How often staff has dealt with substance use issues among students in the last year (n=290)

	Never	A few times	Once per month	Several times per month
Cannabis use	32%	23%	11%	34%
Vaping nicotine/tobacco use	22%	22%	11%	46%
Alcohol use	41%	36%	11%	12%
Opioid/Fentanyl use	76%	20%	3%	0%

Approximately one-half of school support staff (51%) report they dealt with students experiencing health problems related to cannabis use at least a few times in the last year. Among school support staff who dealt with students experiencing health problems related to cannabis use in the last year (n=148), the most common health problems were: Increased anxiety after using cannabis (72%), cannabis use disorder (55%), increased paranoia after using cannabis (52%), throwing up after using cannabis (39%), and cannabis overdose (24%)

Awareness of Legal Requirements

Few school support staff (8%) reported knowing about the forthcoming legal requirements for schools to provide cannabis education.

Current Activities and Needs Related to Cannabis

When asked what their school is currently doing (or likely in the future) now that cannabis is legal for adult use in Minnesota, the most common responses were:

- Nothing (38%)
- Linking students and/or families with services/resources (37%)
- Providing direct education to students (32%)
- Creating educational materials for youth (27%)
- Creating/Modifying school policies (26%)

When asked to indicate the three most difficult aspects of their responsibilities regarding cannabis legalization, the most common responses were:

- Lack of training on how to address cannabis use among our students (52%)
- Lack of staff/staff time (41%)
- Insufficient protocols for how to respond when a student is having a severe reaction to cannabis (30%)
- Lack of guidance from school district (30%)
- Understanding their role vs. school administrators (28%)
- Lack of funding (28%)

When asked to indicate the three most critical types of training that would be helpful for their work regarding cannabis legalization, the most common responses were how to:

- Implement a school-based education program that would meet the state mandate (49%)
- Develop a school-based education program that would meet the state mandate (45%)
- How to assess whether a student is using cannabis (41%)
- Develop a protocol for responding to situations when a student is having a severe reaction to cannabis (39%)
- Communicate with parents/caregivers about risks of cannabis for you (38%)

When asked what tools would help school support staff address student cannabis use, the most common responses were:

- Effective intervention programs for students identified with a cannabis use disorder (64%)
- Protocols for how to respond when a student is caught/identified using cannabis (62%)
- Assessments to identify cannabis use disorder among students (56%)
- Protocols for assessing and handling a student who is having a severe reaction due to cannabis (53%)
- Standardized messages to send to parents/caregivers whose children identified as cannabis users (50%)
- Protocols for how to notify parents/caretakers when a student is caught using cannabis (49%)

Conclusion

Minnesota school staff regularly deal with cannabis use and cannabis-related health problems among students. Staff encounter a number of challenges related to cannabis legalization and they have identified training and tools to help them support students and prevent and address student cannabis use.

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