Evaluating a Novel Drug Education and Diversion Program: Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

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**Rationale**

- There is an increase in adolescents using substances at school, in part due to the advent of discrete devices that allow for easy concealment.
- Punishment (e.g., detention, suspension) is often the first line response by schools for addressing substance use.
- Punishment for substance use is an ineffective deterrent and may increase harm through multiple pathways, including: 1) stigma, 2) reactivity, 3) increased supervised time, 4) academic disengagement, and 5) failure to address underlying reasons for use.
- Punishment magnifies inequities, with students of color 4x more likely to punished for substance use infractions without differences in reported rates of use at school.
- There is a lack of evidence-based best-practice guidelines for effective and equitable alternatives to punishment.

**Goal**

- To conduct a statewide survey of school stakeholders to:
  - Understand school staff experiences with various strategies to address substance use
  - Compare the effectiveness of diversion programs with other approaches
  - Identify barriers and facilitators to implementing substance use diversion programs

**Needs Assessment**

- 156 stakeholders from MA K-12 schools completed a web survey in March 2020
- Examples of survey topics included:
  - School/district characteristics
  - Frequency and type of school substance use infractions
  - Perceptions of current school response to substance use infractions
  - Equity of response to substance use infractions
  - Barriers and facilitators to offering diversion programs

**Pilot Efficacy Data**

- **Methods**
  - Participants were 21 13-19-year-old adolescents
  - 7 high school students with daily or near daily substance use
  - 8 high school students with weekly but not daily substance use
  - 4 high school students with monthly substance use
  - 2 middle school students with any substance use
  - Data came from baseline (pre-curriculum) and 1-week post-curriculum follow-up:
    - Knowledge of drug effects and brain development (scale: 0-100 correct)
    - Perceived Harm (10 National Survey on Drug Use and Health; scale: 1 (no risk) to 4 (great risk))
  - Readiness to Quit or Reduce Substance Use
  - 2018 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Brief Interventions: scale: 1 (not at all ready) to 10 (very ready)

- **Results**
  - Knowledge increased 22% after completing iDECIDE (63.4% to 77.4%).
  - Perceived Harm of Substance Use increased for both having 5+ drinks once or twice a week (baseline: M = 4.67; end of program: M = 4.93) and smoking marijuana once or twice a week (baseline: M = 4.67; end of program: M = 4.93).
  - Mean readiness to quit increased from 4.67 at baseline to 4.93 following the curriculum.

**Summary and Next Steps**

- There is a clear need for alternatives to punishment for school-based substance use infractions that seek to educate adolescents from a mental health promotion and youth empowerment framework.
- Preliminary data support the efficacy of iDECIDE in increasing knowledge of drug effects, perceptions of harm, and motivations to quit – constructs known to mitigate risk for substance use progression.
- Multiple state-funded data collection activities are underway to further evaluate the utility, acceptability, and scalability of iDECIDE (PI: Schuster), including:
  - A randomized lab-based efficacy trial among adolescents with recent substance use at school
  - A pragmatic clinical effectiveness study with a stepped wedge design in 95 schools in MA
  - School stakeholder qualitative interviews pre- and post-iDECIDE implementation to evaluate barriers and facilitators to sustainability

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