

Keeping them connected



Preface

This national study of how Australian Catholic secondary schools can best respond to incidents of illicit drug use by students addresses a difficult and complex issue.

Jesuit Social Services is vitally interested in this area because for almost thirty years we have been working with young people whose lives have been damaged by their substance misuse. For many, their difficulties were first identified when they were still in secondary school. Often the consequent community responses left them less connected and more vulnerable. In keeping with Commonwealth Government frameworks and guidelines in this area, Catholic schools which are responsible for the education of more than one in five Australian school students, uniformly seek to keep their learning environments 'drug free'.

Knowing that the use of illicit substances by young people is not uncommon, no school principal these days remains unaware of how such activity can impact on the behaviour, performance and interaction of a student within the school context.

Occasionally, in every school around the country, students are detected as having been in possession of, or having used, illicit substances in school hours, or in a school related activity. Very few schools can claim not to have been affected by such an occurrence. How the school administration responds to such isolated incidents can be a critical issue - for the student concerned, for the general student body and for the school community.

While recent surveys indicate that there is a significant group of young people who have used illicit substances, often such use is situational or experimental, and does not represent compulsive or seriously problematic behaviour. Nevertheless, serious addictive behaviour by young Australians usually has its foundations in early teenage years. Therefore, it is important for educational authorities to be able to distinguish and identify such behaviour from an isolated incident that does not call for an intervention leading to formalised drug treatment.

In earlier years, a 'zero tolerance' approach was often seen to be the best response, in that it sent a clear message to all students and to the wider community that schools must remain a 'drug free zone'. Students detected in possession of, or using, illicit substances in a school context were transferred to other schools or expelled.

This response was seen to be successful in some respects in that it was thought to have protected the school community and to have given the identified student an opportunity for 'a fresh start'.

In more recent years, many school principals have undertaken a serious reassessment of this approach. On consideration, the approach was seen to be effective in protecting the school's reputation as being 'tough on drugs', but questionable with respect to the school's duty of care for the student concerned. The message often received by other students in the school was: "don't allow your continuing drug behaviour to be detected by school authorities, and if you or another student has problems in relation to illicit drug use, don't approach school authorities for assistance".

As a consequence, many Australian Catholic schools have done considerable soul searching in assessing the appropriateness of this response. They identified that too often that response simply shifted the problem. In many cases the student transferred was not a student who could be assessed as having serious problems in this area, but as someone who was merely engaged in experimentation.

There is a growing awareness that a more fitting focus for Catholic secondary schools should be: *How best to respond to the interests of the student concerned, while respecting the duty of care to other students.*

In almost every Catholic secondary school that I visited as part of this investigation, I saw in the Reception area or later in the Principal's office, a Mission Statement that spoke of Christian values of inclusiveness, forgiveness, healing and justice. A closer consideration of these values in recent years has led many schools to change their practice in responding to incidents of illicit drug use by students.

The findings of this investigation provide some important guidelines for Catholic schools wishing to further develop their practice in this complex and sensitive area. Any suggestion that a simplistic, single dimension response could ever be appropriate would be foolish. There is a wide range of Catholic schools operating in vastly different localities and contexts: from very large metropolitan centres such as Sydney and Melbourne, through to extremely isolated schools in the Northern Territory including Port Keats and Bathurst Island. However, there are key principles that can be applied in each school seeking to establish good practice in response to students' use of illicit substances.

Foundational Christian principles need to be central to upgrading our policies and improving our practices in this area.

This policy dimension could become an important distinguishing characteristic of Catholic independent schools and Catholic Systemic Schools in their task of shaping the lives of young Australians through their ministry of education.

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