

December 10, 2014

Dear Parents:

Thank you to all who attended the FCD (Freedom from Chemical Dependency) parent meeting last week that was sponsored by Valley Partnership for Drug Prevention (VPDP). It was by far the best attended meeting in the seven years that FCD has been involved with AHS. During that meeting, and at other times during the last week, parents and other interested individuals have asked about the survey and information contained therein. I'm cautious about making the entire report available to the community as our sample size is small and making sweeping generalizations about the data could be counterproductive. Further, the full executive report is almost 100 pages long. I have attempted to condense some of the information below, and even this letter is longer than I would have liked, but summarizing this report has proven to be a challenge. Indeed, the amount of data generated by the survey and presented to the school can seem overwhelming. Many issues are raised by the findings and it is natural for a reader to feel unsure of how to best "use" the data. What do the results mean? How does our school compare? Are the findings "good" or "bad"? Now what do we do? The answers to these questions can be found throughout the rest of this abstract.

In this first part of this summary, I have tried to present a balanced portrait of student behaviors and attitudes at Aspen with regard to alcohol and other drug use. The findings suggest that the vast majority of Aspen students hold positive attitudes, engage in responsible decision making, and strive towards healthy behaviors. There is, however, a clear trend of increasing alcohol use as students progress through the school (from 8th grade through 12th grade).

There is sometimes a tendency to focus on "negative" results – i.e., students getting drunk, using before school events, riding in cars with intoxicated drivers, etc. – to the exclusion of those students making healthy decisions and behaving responsibly. While students engaged in risky, irresponsible behavior pose a threat to themselves and the school community, there are far more students at Aspen making healthy decisions. These students can be a powerful force for maintaining and strengthening the health of the school.

One of the most striking findings is the extent to which students misperceive the behaviors and attitudes of their schoolmates. And, if students are doing so, one must wonder whether the adults in the community are likewise overestimating use, and underestimating healthy attitudes and behaviors. Such mistaken normative beliefs can be a significant factor in increasing use and promoting the idea that a "culture of use" exists at a school, (i.e., "everybody is doing it!"). FCD and VPDP believe that normative belief interventions to correct false impressions and support non-using students would have a positive impact on reducing alcohol use and/or abuse at Aspen. Aspen High has much to be proud of in the school climate it has created. The data suggests that students themselves represent one of the most significant assets available for maintaining and strengthening the health of the school community.

By necessity, this summary focuses on those findings we believe are most relevant to, and representative of, the Aspen community. As a start, we encourage you to become familiar with the data contained in this summary, and to ask us any questions you might have concerning the results. Take

your time. Call on us to clarify, explain, and/or elaborate. Use VPDP as a resource. This summary is not meant to represent the “end” of a process. Rather, it is designed to be a “beginning,” a foundation for illuminating, invigorating, and guiding the community’s ideas around prevention programming. Based on the behaviors and attitudes revealed by this survey, we believe that Aspen High will see increasingly positive results from implementing additional prevention strategies, informing parents of risks, strategies, and behaviors, and continuing our school’s commitment to prevention.

Key Findings/Alcohol

- **Alcohol use by Aspen 8th graders is below U.S. norms for lifetime, past-12-months, and past-30-days measures.**
- **Alcohol use by Aspen 10th graders exceeds U.S. norms for lifetime and past-12-months measures, and is on par with U.S. norms for past-30-days use.**
- **Alcohol use by Aspen 12th graders exceeds U.S. norms for lifetime, past-12-months, and past-30-days measures.**

While the majority of all students (64%) disagree that “the social atmosphere at this school encourages alcohol use,” 36% of students do agree with the statement. Similarly, the majority of students (74%) disagree that “students at this school feel pressured to drink alcohol,” leaving 26% who do agree with this statement.

As students get older, they are more likely to report encouragement within the school climate to drink alcohol. *For example, 7% of 8th graders agree that the social atmosphere at Aspen encourages alcohol use. By 12th grade, this figure rises to 47%.*

There appears to be considerable respect for individual choices regarding alcohol use at Aspen. The majority of students believe that “it is easy to make friends without drinking alcohol” (83%), that “students will let you make your own decisions about drinking” (97% of 12th graders), and that those who choose not to drink are respected for their choice. They also disagree that “students at this school who abstain from alcohol do not fit in.” Eight-sever percent (87%) of all students feel “valued as a person” at AHS and 90% feel that “teachers and school staff care about me as a student.” These positive elements suggest that the school climate would respond well to efforts to encourage and support non-use.

Other survey data regarding alcohol use among AHS students reveals that:

- 29 Aspen students could be considered “higher-risk drinkers,” having reported consuming 5 or more drinks of alcohol on 2 or more days within the past 30 days
- 79% of “higher-risk drinkers” typically have 5 or more drinks when they drink.
- 70% of “higher-risk drinkers” were or felt drunk on 3 or more occasions within the past 30 days.
- 24% of “higher-risk drinkers” drove after drinking on 1 or more occasions within the past 12 months.
- 35% of “higher-risk drinkers” report having been a passenger on 1 or more occasions within the past 12 months in a vehicle driven by someone who had been drinking.

- 79% of “higher-risk drinkers” took care of someone who drank too much on 1 or more occasions within the past 12 months.
- Levels of lifetime alcohol use by Aspen students rise from 10% in 8th grade to **84% in 12th grade**.
- Of those students who have had at least 1 whole drink of alcohol in their lives (54% of the student body), 89% (227 students) drank alcohol within the past 12 months.

However, fifty-four percent (54%) of Aspen students disagree with the statement “students assume that everyone at this school drinks alcohol.” Forty-seven percent (47%) of all students believe that “most students at this school don’t drink or are light drinkers.” Sixty-nine percent (69%) of students believe that their schoolmates do not “think heavy or binge drinking is okay.” While these are healthy beliefs, it should be noted that assumptions about the behaviors and attitudes of their schoolmates become less healthy as students get older. For example:

- 22% of 8th graders, versus 64% of 12th graders, agree that students assume that “everyone at this school drinks alcohol.”
- 86% of 8th graders, versus 38% of 12th graders, believe that most Aspen students “don’t drink or are light drinkers.”

In reality, 79% of Aspen students either do not drink at all, or typically drink once a month or less. Thus, for 62% of 12th graders to disagree with the statement that their schoolmates are light drinkers or do not drink is a *gross overestimation* of use.

These findings illustrate the differences in beliefs about the “culture of use” at Aspen between students in younger and older grades. Students tend to adopt less healthy normative beliefs with increasing grade level. For example, 3% of 8th graders believe that “students at this school think heavy or binge drinking is okay.” By 12th grade, 51% of students agree with the statement, thus ascribing an unhealthy attitude to their schoolmates. The reality is quite different, though. Eighty-seven percent (87%) of all Aspen students do not think “it is cool to get drunk” (Q27). Fifty-one percent (51%) also believe “drinking [by teenagers] is never a good thing to do,” or that “drinking is all right but a person should not get drunk” (Q23). This is a good example of the extent to which adolescents underestimate the healthy attitudes held by their peers and overestimate the use of their classmates.

Compounding the damage caused by mistaken normative beliefs is something known as anticipatory socialization. It’s really a form of daydreaming in which young people imagine (anticipate) acting out “normative” roles and behaviors that lie ahead. For example, most kids fantasize about what it will be like when they get their driver’s license. Older teens may visualize going to college, having their own apartment, or being in a committed relationship. These future-oriented “psychological videos” are based in large part on normative beliefs (i.e., “all teens get a driver’s license;” “all of my friends are going to college”), and play an important role in maturation so long as the anticipated behavior is healthy and pro-social. Anticipatory socialization can be harmful when the projected behavior is risky, unhealthy, or based on mistaken beliefs. For example, if 12-year-olds think that “all high school

students drink,” they will imagine themselves drinking well before they become teenagers.

Key Findings/Marijuana

- **67% of Aspen students report that they “have never used marijuana at all.”**
- **Marijuana use by Aspen 8th graders is below U.S. norms for lifetime, past-12-months, and past-30-days measures.**
- **Marijuana use by Aspen 10th graders is on par with U.S. norms for lifetime, past-12-months, and past-30-days measures.**
- **Marijuana use by Aspen 12th graders exceeds U.S. norms for lifetime, past-12-months, and past-30-days measures.**
- **Past-12-months substance use by Aspen 12th graders is below or on par with U.S. norms for all available measures, with the exception of higher use of marijuana.**

The data shows that marijuana use increases with age. Yet, students overestimate levels of marijuana use by their classmates. For example, students were asked how often they typically use marijuana, and then, “How often do you think students in your grade typically use marijuana?” Thirty percent (30%) of 10th graders report using marijuana 1-2 times per year or more as typical for themselves. Yet, 96% of 10th graders believe their classmates typically use marijuana 1-2 times per year or more. These types of overestimations can be a factor in increasing levels of use as students get older. If students believe that “everyone” is using, research shows that they will be more likely to use. The findings show that use of alcohol, marijuana, and tobacco by Aspen 9th and 10th graders is generally lower than, or on par with, Colorado public school 9th and 10th graders. Furthermore, Aspen students report first use of alcohol and marijuana at older ages than do students in the YRBSS sample (see below). However, *Aspen 11th-12th graders’ use of alcohol, and 12th graders’ use of marijuana, are above Colorado averages.*

MTF/YRBSS

Given the unique demographics of the school community, it is difficult to identify norms that would provide meaningful comparisons for analyzing Aspen data. Nonetheless, included in the report are data from the highly respected “Monitoring the Future Study” (conducted annually by the University of Michigan with tens of thousands of students in America, www.monitoringthefuture.org) and selected comparative data from the Colorado Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS). MTF survey data is considered the gold standard for measuring teen substance abuse in America.

The following table compares lifetime marijuana use by Aspen 8th, 10th and 12th grade students with U.S. norms (MTF). While marijuana use by Aspen 8th graders is considerably lower than U.S. norms, use by Aspen students increases dramatically between 11th and 12th grade to levels that greatly exceed the U.S. norm.

Marijuana Use Lifetime Prevalence						
	MTF 8 th	Aspen 8 th	MTF 10 th	Aspen 10 th	MTF 12 th	Aspen 12 th
Total	16.5	2.3	35.8	35.2	45.5	63.9
Male	16.5	4.3	37.1	35.3	49.2	55.6
Female	13.6	0.0	30.6	35.8	40.5	70.2

Survey Reliability and Validity

Some students have stated that the survey data from the FCD survey is not reliable or valid. Tom Heald, the Director of Curriculum and Assessment for Aspen School District, stated that:

The FCD staff did assure me that they had been able to identify an internal consistency of .95 using Cronbach’s alpha, which is commonly used as an estimate of the reliability of a psychometric test (or survey) for a sample of examinees. A confidence interval is an indication of a measurement’s precision. It is also an indicator of how stable the estimate is, which is the measure of how close the measurement will be to the original estimate if you repeat your survey or experiment.

The consultants identified 23 students who appear to have been untruthful and/or frivolous in filling out the survey. These students misreported grade/age, reported very extreme substance use, contradicted themselves, and/or left more than 60% of the survey blank. These responses were consistent with students taking a hostile or flippant stance towards the survey. Given the size of the Aspen sample, this number of students taking such a stance is not uncommon. After hand reading those surveys, the consultants considered whether to discard the responses of these students. Retaining the data could elevate or decrease use statistics, depending on whether students falsely over- or under-reported use. Eliminating the data poses similar issues, calling into question the truthfulness of these students’ answers. Nonetheless, after careful review, the consultants determined that the 23 surveys mentioned above would decrease the reliability and validity of the data.

Conclusion

As a community, Aspen has set substance abuse prevention as a priority. Survey results show a strong need for a continuing and intensified program. Aspen High School has a strong foundation of non-using students. We believe that these students support the school efforts to maintain a healthy community, with the majority of students finding the school policies and enforcement “about right.” Aspen should take pride in its commitment to prevention, and rest assured that ongoing efforts will continue to maintain and strengthen the health of the individual student and the school community. Please contact Valley Partnership for Drug Prevention for additional information about our community prevention efforts (970-925-5188) and as always, please call Kim Martin at Aspen High School (970-925-3760 x1134) if you have concerns about the health and safety of any student in our community.