

B-CASA Wellness Summit 2022 Report on

The Changing Landscape – Addressing the Challenges of Teen Substance Use

(Nov. 30, 2022) Roughly 80 people from across the community -- from PSB teachers, staff, and students to health care professionals -- gathered for the recent Wellness Summit sponsored by B-CASA (Brookline Coalition Advocating Substance Awareness). The goal of the event was to generate ideas to prevent/delay substance experimentation and use among youth, focusing on protective factors and evidence-based steps to reduce use, destigmatize treatment, and promote well-being.

Elizabeth, a speaker in substance use recovery from *Minding Your Mind*, gave a compelling talk about her own journey of addiction and recovery, reminding those present that addiction can have many faces. She was in the top of her class in high school and a good student at Wellesley College with a supportive family, yet her internal pressures to succeed made her seek out ways to calm racing thoughts and feel a sense of control, efforts that escalated into a compulsion for drugs and alcohol. With a great deal of help, she is now in recovery and a licensed social worker.

BHS Peer Leaders offered an engaging [presentation](#) that offered data and affirmed substance issues among students, offering insightful perspectives on the prevailing culture.

The heart of the meeting was the opportunity for people representing mixed demographics to engage in tabletop discussions around specific topics. Key strategies were then shared with the whole group:

1) **Consent and Party Culture**

- Students need to better understand what consent means and what constitutes crossing the line. We need to define that, having more conversations about touching, using more examples and scenarios in school, building this info into school curriculum.
- Kids need to have conversations with friends before going to a party for setting up “buddies” and how to get home, then stick to the plan.
- Encourage parents to trust their kids but know where they will be and what they are doing, being willing to pick up at any time without immediate questions, even if it means bending the rules. Kids need that safety net without fear of getting in trouble.
- Make reporting easier and address the problem of silence around assault, especially with power differentials – older/cooler kids make it hard to say no, and substance use adds to that. It also complicates the challenge of reporting and credibility, with students fearful of stigma and consequences. Could there be an amnesty policy re: mandated reporting so kids feel free to talk?
- PSB need a stronger policy regarding sexual harassment/assault.

2) **Driving Under the Influence**

- Focus on better education, though fear is not the most effective tool.
- Help parents realize binge drinking and high driving are prevalent in Brookline, and provide tools for constructive conversations.
- Partner with local colleges to bring in young people to talk to HS students about issues.
- Target more education toward passengers, with messages not to ride with drivers under the influence.

- Create a peer network for designated drivers or texting chain for students to drive others.
- Encourage students to call parents if in need of a ride, and parents to be receptive.
- Signage around town about not driving under influence.
- Create more after school activities/clubs to fill the gap for those not in sports or theater.

3) **Reducing Age of First Use**

- Change perception that everyone does it – in reality substance use is NOT the norm and not the only way to have a good time.
- Parental attitude is key – need to set clear boundaries/guardrails. B-PEN can increase parent outreach re: substance awareness and resources, talking to their students.
- Reduce academic pressures, especially imposed by parents.
- Education initiatives through community organizations – faith-based, sports, etc. -- to eliminate stigma

4) **Prevention and Reduction**

- Parents lead by example.
- Equip parents/caregivers with tools for meaningful conversations with their students.
- Engage Peer Leaders to educate younger students.
- Set up a network of safe and trusted adults that students know they can approach with issues.

5) **Role of Athletics in Prevention**

- Coaches set positive tone and the culture of their teams, which should extend to the careful selection of captains toward responsible leadership (vs. popularity). Dispel any misconceptions about their team and articulate clear expectations and boundaries. Make sure these expectations are reinforced at home by parents. Also voice values about being responsible and holding each other accountable.
- Reinforce that athletics can build self-confidence and be a powerful protective factor.
- Reinforce that a strong coach builds community year round -- students bond around the common joy of sports and being part of a team.
- Coaches and captains be mindful when 9th graders come into the team and try to fit in with older players.
- Add a special team event beyond Chemical Health Night for coaches and captains to talk about substance use (maybe include special speaker, share local cautionary tales, reinforce MIAA rules, etc.).

6) **Mental Health Issues as Risk Factors**

- Check in with students early and often, be more proactive toward possible issues like depression and anxiety, which can hit suddenly and hard. Understand the signs, which can look different from person to person.
- Create a safe space in athletics to be open about MH concerns.
- Create a more formal presentation for all students to clarify mandated reporting, protocols, what resources are available, etc. (Consider expert presentation with Peer Leaders as supplemental.) Debunk myths about confidentiality, like the fear of impact on college admissions.
- As students absorb info, continue conversations and allow them to feed into protocols/policy process.

7) Vaping

- With vaping normalized and very prevalent, often a form of social pressure to make connections, make sure students understand health consequences, starting with middle school.
- Also, consider vaping as a potential mental health issue, asking what else might be going on and what other strategies could be helpful to address.
- Construct a clear policy at school and home by having open discussions among adults and students together. (Provide more info to parents/caregivers, addressing *before* use begins.)
- Media campaign.

8) Parents Role in Prevention

- Create opportunities to think about usage differently than their own experience, and help them prepare for conversations with students on prevention.
- Publicize our great town resources as well as [state](#) and national resources, like [SAMHSA](#) brochures and [treatment programs](#).
- Think of the whole adult community as “equal and reciprocal” in prevention efforts, reaching out to deans, coaches, teachers, other parents, social workers, etc.
- Help parents identify moments of vulnerability (break-ups, losing games, bad test scores, etc.) that could prompt usage.
- Meet with teachers to understand their student’s behavior at school.