

**Colorado Consortium on Prescription Drug Abuse (CCPDAP)  
Treatment Workgroup**

**Recommendation to Expand School-Based Substance Treatment in Colorado**

The CCPDAP Treatment Workgroup has been charged with identifying gaps and barriers that limit the ability of the existing substance treatment system to effectively address the opioid epidemic and to develop recommendations for overcoming these barriers. During the past year, the workgroup has worked closely with the Attorney General's Substance Abuse and Response Task Force (SATF) to develop specific plans for translating workgroup recommendations into action and policy change.

The workgroup has identified that one of the most critical gaps is the paucity of adolescent substance treatment throughout the state. The workgroup recommends significant expansion of school-based substance treatment to address this gap. This recommendation is closely aligned with several national and federal initiatives including the President's New Freedom Commission (NFC) on Mental Health Care Reform<sup>1-3</sup>. The NFC identified expansion of school-based substance and mental health treatment as the most effective way of increasing access and availability of high quality behavioral healthcare for youth and families, especially for those marginalized by existing health disparities<sup>2,3</sup>. The workgroup recognizes that meaningful progress towards achieving this goal in Colorado will likely require legislative action and policy leadership.

Brief Research-Based Background, Rationale and Support for the Recommendation

State and national survey data consistently report that only approximately 10% of adolescents who could benefit from substance treatment receive it. Treatment options are extremely limited for the estimated 10-15% of high school students who currently meet diagnostic criteria for a substance use disorder (SUD), but who are not (yet) involved with the juvenile justice system –the largest third party payer for adolescent substance treatment services<sup>4,5</sup>.

The current opioid epidemic further underscores the need for school-based substance treatment. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration Services (SAMHSA) reports that nearly 80% of young adult heroin users say that they started abusing prescription opioid pain medications as adolescents before transitioning to injection heroin use<sup>4</sup>. Unfortunately, research shows that very few adolescents receive treatment for prescription opioid abuse<sup>6</sup>. In addition, it is concerning that regular and daily marijuana use among high school students remains at 30-year peak levels<sup>4,5</sup>. An estimated 10-15% of high school students in Colorado and the U.S. currently use marijuana at levels (i.e. amount and frequency) associated with significant reductions in adult IQ and persistent neurocognitive deficits that may not be fully reversible. There is unequivocal scientific evidence that regular cannabis use during adolescence interferes with brain development and at least quadruples the risk of psychosis<sup>7,8</sup>.

The current climate of healthcare reform makes this a particularly opportune time to expand school-based substance treatment and/or integrated substance/mental health treatment interventions (e.g. *Encompass*) in parallel with expansion of school-based health clinics to increase treatment access and availability for Colorado's youth and families<sup>9,10</sup>.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of the CCPDAP Treatment Workgroup,



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