



# What does it take to Prevent Youth Substance Abuse?

**MetroWest Youth Substance  
Abuse Prevention Initiative  
FINAL REPORT**



Prepared by Education Development Center, Inc.  
for the MetroWest Community Health Care Foundation

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**METROWEST  
COMMUNITY  
HEALTH CARE  
FOUNDATION**

**ONE** example of the power of prevention in MetroWest.



..... **O**ne Friday night in early October 2007, 25 ninth-graders gathered in one student's barn for a party. Though a parent was at home, things got quickly out of hand when a couple of gallon jugs of vodka were sneaked into the party. Students began binge drinking . . . police were called . . . students scattered into the woods to avoid authorities . . . one student needed medical attention for alcohol poisoning. When parents got word of the incident, fingers were pointed at the host parent, as well as at other parents and the students themselves. Law enforcement professionals would tell you that this incident is fairly typical on weekends in suburban towns.

But what wasn't typical was the response that followed. The town's youth officer, working closely with the town's MetroWest Youth Substance Abuse Initiative's project coordinator, quickly assembled all parents of the involved teens and the teens themselves. They skillfully diffused the anger and blaming among the parents and diverted the energy to brainstorming ways to prevent these incidents from occurring again in the town. The parent group developed a list of House Party rules and presented them to the students. The teens agreed to abide by them, after they realized that their parents were unified in implementing and supporting the new rules. The parents went on to take a leadership role with other parents in the community, and several joined the town's substance abuse coalition's prevention efforts.

In short, the incident was turned into a lesson that certainly prevented future harm to other teens.

This is one example of the power of prevention in the MetroWest region of Massachusetts.



**T**een alcohol and drug use has long been a problem of great concern to parents, teachers, students, and community leaders.

The MetroWest Community Health Care Foundation examined regional health indicators in 2004 and found that rates of alcohol and marijuana use among high school youth were growing and that the region had a higher rate of adult binge drinking than the rest of the state. This led the Foundation to develop a special initiative on youth substance abuse prevention and intervention.

Since then, while teen substance use has increased nationwide, many MetroWest communities, funded as part of the Foundation's Youth Substance Abuse Prevention Initiative, saw modest but encouraging decreases in use. The data indicate that these communities have taken action and worked effectively to reduce youth substance use in their region. Here is their story.

## **THE INITIATIVE** A New Approach Based on Research

While there have been many approaches to addressing teen substance use over the years, a solid body of research now guides communities on effective strategies to reduce and prevent alcohol and drug use among middle and high school students. Yet many towns, like those in Boston's MetroWest region, were not drawing on this research in their prevention strategies.

By launching its Youth Substance Abuse Prevention Initiative, the Foundation sought a research-based approach to reduce youth substance abuse locally, and turned to Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC), and Brandeis University to help establish and evaluate the Initiative.



“ Many local communities were not using evidence-based substance abuse prevention strategies that had been known to be effective. And that concerned me. ”

—Martin Cohen, President



### THE INITIATIVE COMPRISED THREE KEY COMPONENTS:

- **Funding for local communities**—\$200,000, per community over three years to improve youth substance abuse prevention, intervention, and access to treatment
- **A technical assistance center**, operated by EDC, to guide communities to use effective research-based prevention and intervention strategies, and to establish a learning community to enhance sharing between funded towns
- **An evaluation** conducted by Brandeis University on both the progress of the communities and the impact of the technical assistance on that progress

### THE 11 COMMUNITIES HAD SIMILAR GOALS:

- Prevent alcohol and other drug use among middle and high school students
- Establish effective strategies to identify teens at risk of alcohol and drug abuse
- Improve access to substance abuse treatment for those in need

Each town used grant funds to hire a person dedicated to lead its efforts. In most cases, this project coordinator worked solely on the Initiative.

## EDC's guiding philosophy to communities:

use multiple strategies in multiple settings.

In 2005, the Foundation awarded grants to six local communities:

Framingham  
Hopkinton  
Needham  
Wayland  
Milford/Bellingham

In 2007, five additional communities were funded:

Ashland  
Holliston  
Hopedale  
Medfield  
Natick

## COMMUNITY STRATEGIES FORM A “PATCHWORK QUILT”

Teen alcohol and drug use doesn't occur in a vacuum. Prevention science holds that youth substance use is a community problem that demands a community-wide solution.

For effective solutions to take hold, all sectors need to be involved—teens themselves, their parents, and leaders from the schools, police, clergy, businesses, and town government, to name a few. A community-wide solution requires not just one strategy but many, working in concert with each other.



Guided by EDC's technical assistance, the funded MetroWest communities developed differentiated strategies that targeted various aspects of the problem. They revised and clarified policies. They got teens involved in creating alternative activities to drinking. They replaced lackluster school prevention curriculum in favor of programs with proven track records. They made it easier to refer individuals to treatment. They gave parents tips and strategies to strengthen their prevention skills. And they made sure that these strategies involved different sectors of the community: schools, families, police, recreation departments, faith communities, and local businesses.

Taken together, the best ideas of the Initiative, guided by research and adapted to fit the needs of each community, resemble a patchwork quilt of many different shapes and colors. Yet, common elements (using data to guide efforts; engaging the community; developing an effective coalition; using evidence-based curricula; changing the environment; effectively identifying, screening, and referring youth; and measuring success) are woven through the fabric of this quilt. These elements—strategies used by many of the towns—were key to the Initiative's success. Each is described in more detail on the following pages.

## Use Data to Guide Efforts

When their efforts began, many communities lacked local data about their town's youth substance use which was needed to guide their planning efforts. They drew on anecdotal information and strong opinions about alcohol and drug use among teens, but without actual data this information often fueled disagreements and denial about the problem and how to address it. Local data are essential, not only to inform people about the true nature of the problem, but also to guide the development of local solutions.

This lack of data led the Foundation to fund the Adolescent Health Survey (AHS), a 10-year biennial effort across the 25-town region to collect data about the health risks of middle and high school students, including alcohol, drug, and tobacco use.

The first AHS (2006) provided a baseline measure for towns on youth substance use that included lifetime and 30-day use of alcohol, tobacco, and drugs; driving after drinking; and binge drinking. Most funded communities also surveyed parents to learn about their attitudes, actions, and needs regarding the prevention of teen substance use. Using these local data, communities hosted public forums, developed publications, and worked with local media to share the information with parents and community leaders so that everyone understood the nature of the problem in their town.

With an accurate picture of the issues, the communities began to plan prevention curriculum, revise school policies, mobilize their coalitions, and get teens and others involved in community solutions. For instance, in one town, whose data showed high levels of teen anxiety and stress, the school district created a program to address stress, depression, and substance use.

## Engage the Community

A major challenge in each town was finding community support to make prevention a priority. Lack of support was expressed in different ways in these communities—not enough commitment from community leaders, turf battles between schools and police on how to handle enforcement issues, and burned-out coalitions with limited community impact, yet little desire to change their strategy.

Since the effects of this problem ripple throughout a community, engaging three essential groups—teens, parents, and community leaders—was imperative. A variety of methods were used in each town to get the community's attention and involvement.<sup>1</sup>



## Teens

Teens themselves need to be part of any effective solution, since they are closest to the problem. Research suggests that involving teens in developing meaningful solutions increases their commitment to the issue; the strategies employed are therefore more likely to be effective.



Many communities put youth at the center of the solutions. For example, Hopkinton experienced tremendous population growth over the past decade and had no real youth organizations and activities for its burgeoning teen population. As part of its grant, Hopkinton developed the “be FREE” youth coalition with a core group of high school students, who planned and led activities that offered a positive alternative to drinking on weekends. These events, which include ice skating parties, community service activities, and music events, such as acoustic coffee houses and “battle of the bands,” have drawn more than 200 teens. Hopkinton’s hallmark youth engagement strategy is seen as a model for communities throughout the region.

## Parents

A major factor fueling youth substance use is parental denial. Some parents do not view teen drinking and drug use as a problem, and more are hesitant to talk openly about it in their community. Many parents are so busy that it can be a constant challenge to get their attention on this issue.

Yet, despite these barriers, all communities found creative ways to encourage public discussions through town hall meetings, community forums, and other presentations. “Parent coffees”—small, home-based gatherings similar to Tupperware parties but with the focus on addressing youth alcohol and drug use—reached a broad group of parents. In Medfield and Needham, more than 500 parents attended these small group events in each community and praised them as an effective way for parents to learn more information and skills and to network with each other.

Parents also got involved by participating in or learning about their town surveys on parents’ attitudes and behaviors around youth substance use. The results of the surveys, shared widely, illustrated the significant gap between teen alcohol and drug use and

parents' perceptions of the problem. Parents consistently said they were aware of the teen substance abuse, but most said that it was "not my child." A regional social marketing campaign specifically geared for parents addressed this "disconnect" and provided information about the problem and how to handle it.

Through these channels and local media coverage, teen substance use data were shared along with information about adolescent brain development, treatment initiatives, and other related topics. One town, Holliston, also developed a parent network via Facebook for parents to connect and share information about how to help their teens.

### *Community Leaders*

Making changes in policy, particularly with law enforcement and in schools, has been shown to reduce teen substance use.<sup>2</sup> Yet this can be extremely challenging to do without the commitment of key town leaders. The local data helped enormously to mobilize community support and alert community leaders about the need to address this issue.

In Medfield, the project coordinator's first task was to visit community agencies in town to raise awareness about the problem, share local data and information about substance abuse prevention and treatment, and invite broader community participation in working on solutions. This resulted in greater awareness and support for the project across multiple sectors in the community.

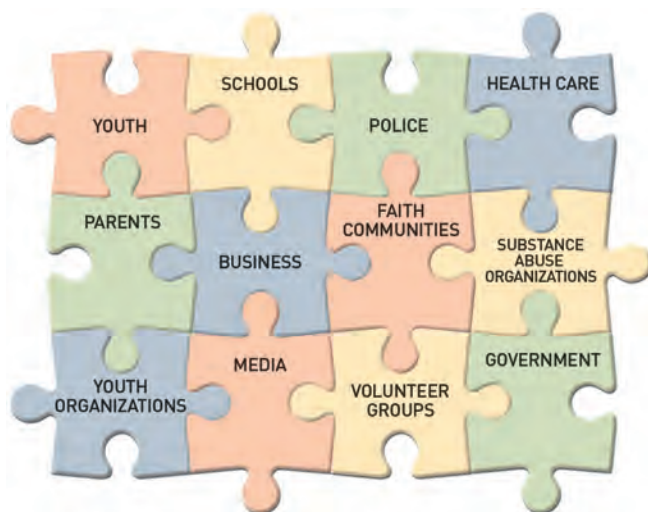
### **Develop an Effective Coalition**

A coalition is a structure that brings together all the different stakeholders to address the problem. Like a puzzle, a coalition pulls together the different pieces.

Project coordinators in each town had to determine who needed to be involved in the Initiative—which community members could be influential or helpful. They reached out not just to community leaders, but also to teachers, coaches, the police, and clergy—all of whom interacted with teens in some way. By working together on this issue, the strategies and messages the group developed about teen alcohol and drug use could be reinforced in different settings.



For many communities, developing a broad-based coalition was an essential step in moving substance use prevention “into the light,” expanding the narrow view of those who saw it solely as a school problem. Some towns began the Initiative with inherited coalitions that did not have broad representation, an effective structure, or solid leadership, while others started from scratch. In both situations, EDC guided communities on effective coalition-building to either develop or revitalize their coalitions. These groups then became the base from which the communities planned and carried out their “patchwork quilt” of multi-faceted strategies.



Wayland started the Initiative with a long-standing coalition, almost solely made up of school personnel. The project coordinator broadened membership to include clergy, business, parents, and more youth to create a more effective sub-committee structure. Together, the group re-assessed the issues and developed new strategies. By broadening its membership, the group became a much stronger community-wide coalition; it later won a major five-year federal Drug Free Communities grant to continue its efforts beyond the MetroWest Community Health Care Foundation funding.

### Select Evidence-Based Curricula

Like other communities, many MetroWest middle and high schools used a health curriculum that includes alcohol and drug prevention. Yet, in some schools the curriculum was not evidence-based, or was not used as intended, or did not address the particular substance use needs in that town.

Each community assessed the impact and effectiveness of its initial curriculum and then either improved it or found one with research behind it. Several communities used their town data to determine the type of curriculum needed to address specific teen substance issues. For instance, Medfield wanted a curriculum that targeted binge drinking, since its rates were higher than the national average. The community turned to EDC for recommendations of research-based curricula, and selected one that best fit its needs. Milford and Bellingham did the same.

Some school systems were using “homegrown” curriculum they had developed or pieced together themselves, which lacked any evidence of effectiveness. One such community,

Needham, was reluctant to give up its curriculum, due, in part, to limited funds. But once Needham received the grant and had adequate funding, the community was motivated to improve its school-based prevention efforts by updating the curriculum. With EDC's assistance, Needham found a model broadly focused on wellness that included substance use and that fit the community's commitment to a social and emotional learning framework.

## Change the Environment

Each community used a public health approach—moving beyond the narrower focus of changing individual teen behavior to also changing the community norms and policies that allow alcohol and drug use among teens to take root. The communities recognized that changes in the environment do influence changes in behavior.<sup>3</sup> These environmental strategies include social marketing campaigns, local policies, and law enforcement, each of which is described in more detail in this report.

### *Social Marketing Campaign*

Project coordinators and community leaders in all the towns agreed that parents' lax attitudes and behaviors around teen substance use were a major barrier to effective prevention. They were especially concerned about parents who actually supplied alcohol to teens and those who just looked the other way. Parents' attitudes are fundamental to creating a culture where underage drinking is seen as inevitable.

The project coordinators saw an opportunity to address this issue collectively through a regional social marketing campaign aimed at parents of teens. The campaign was based on research about what motivates parents to act. The goal was to empower parents to take specific, research-based action to prevent their teens from drinking.

The campaign offered practical steps that parents could take to convey their values and expectations around substance use and the consequences of violating family rules. It also encouraged parents to connect with other parents in order to create and enforce a clear, collective expectation that teens will not drink or use drugs.



### *Local Policies*

A few communities worked to improve town-level policies that address teen substance use. Some, like Needham, discovered a lack of community awareness about existing policies and inconsistent policy enforcement. Needham formed a Policy Task Force to examine school and community policies related to youth alcohol and drug use. Members included officials from the town, courts, treatment agencies, school, police, and fire, as well as youth. The result: School alcohol and drug policies were reviewed, updated, clarified and communicated much more effectively to students and their parents.

### *Law Enforcement*

A common problem for communities is an inconsistent law enforcement response to youth alcohol and drug use. To support an essential partnership with police, EDC convened periodic regional meetings with police chiefs, school resource officers, and project coordinators throughout the region.



These meetings encouraged people to share resources and strategies on many issues, including improved communication with school districts, the use of and referral to diversion and treatment programs, the impact of the new state marijuana law, and the need to communicate about specific teen substance offenses between towns. Both police leaders and project coordinators credit these meetings with forging partnerships between communities and for improving collaboration between law enforcement and prevention efforts within each town.

### **Effectively Identify, Screen, and Refer Youth**

During the five-year Initiative, many teens throughout the region needed help with alcohol and/or drug issues. Project coordinators learned about this need in many ways—from highly publicized serious crimes and weekend parties to confidential referrals from teachers and parents. While providing treatment was beyond the scope of this project, each community worked to ensure that there was a clear and effective system for identifying youth who may need an initial screening and subsequent referral to a treatment program.

Seven school districts created a clearer, more effective process for teachers and parents to identify and refer students who concerned them. School staff also received training on the signs and symptoms of substance abuse so they could more readily identify students at risk and know what to do. They used evidenced-based screening tools, such as CRAFFT<sup>4</sup>, and developed stronger relationships with local treatment providers whom they could refer students to if necessary.

### Measure Success

With access to new local survey data every two years, these towns can now measure trends and assess the effectiveness of their strategies. Each town is also able to use the data to refine and revise its strategies in order to more effectively target its needs.

These encouraging data indicate that the Initiative's substance abuse prevention strategies benefitted the communities.



The regional data between 2006 and 2008 show a slight reduction in key indicators, including small but consistent decreases in several alcohol-related behaviors among teens in the region:

- **Current alcohol use** dropped from 42 percent to 39 percent
- **Binge drinking** dropped from 25 percent to 23 percent
- The proportion of **students who had their first drink before age 13** dropped from 16 percent to 14 percent
- Incidents of **driving after drinking** dropped from 17 percent to 15 percent

## PRELIMINARY EVALUATION RESULTS

Brandeis University's preliminary evaluation results show four main findings.

- **Strategies for addressing youth substance abuse were readily available and shared within each community.**

All the towns were successful in raising the visibility of youth substance abuse and publicizing their efforts to address it. There was overall improvement in perceptions that community agencies work well together on this issue, that the right individuals and agencies were involved, and that people know how to find services for youth with substance abuse treatment needs.

- **The regional learning community was beneficial; innovative strategies spread across the funded communities.**

Many new prevention and intervention activities, informed by the goals of the Initiative, were initiated throughout the funded communities. These included Parent Coffees, online parent surveys, and town forums to present and discuss the youth and parent survey data. The new activities spread across all funded communities and were fostered by regular meetings of the project coordinators and by tailored technical assistance to communities seeking to adopt a new activity.

- **Multiple strategies reinforced one another in most communities.**

All the communities carried out multiple strategies in multiple settings. In the communities that proved most successful in sustaining their efforts (including securing additional funding), the strategy areas interacted with and reinforced one another. For example, activities to increase police involvement in the referral process led to increased coordination between police and the schools, and increased engagement of both in the community coalition. Meetings with teachers to discuss a new evidence-based curriculum led to revamping a school's screening, identification, and referral process. Cross-fertilization of strategy areas can generate new relationships among stakeholders, which in turn can help sustain new prevention efforts.

- **Technical assistance had a positive impact on the communities.**

Project coordinators found the technical assistance they received to be extremely useful, playing a major role in the evolution of a town's efforts, supporting a community's use of evidence-based practices, and encouraging the community to plan and carry out activities beyond those it had initially proposed. In general, technical assistance activities had a greater influence on each community's sequence of project activities than those activities that did not involve technical assistance.



“ The Initiative led to clearer information and greater awareness about teen substance abuse, and improved community efforts to address it— from prevention to identification and referral to treatment. ”

—Peter Kreiner, Research Scientist and Lead Project Evaluator, Brandeis University

## LESSONS LEARNED AND KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

The following lessons learned may be helpful to communities, technical assistance providers, and funders who support prevention efforts.

- **Community readiness and planning are essential to success.**

Funded towns learned the value of a clear assessment and planning process prior to actively engaging in strategies—to discover the needs, assets, and interests of the community and to connect with decision-makers. This process should include reviewing local data, assessing both the community’s readiness and its assets, listening to a broad set of stakeholders, and understanding the community’s history of substance abuse prevention efforts. In the MetroWest Initiative, it was clear that some communities were more ready than others to embrace change in their prevention approach. Understanding this level of readiness helped the project coordinator fine-tune the plan. Identifying what “small wins” might be feasible, and starting where there was the greatest receptivity in the town—whether in the schools, with parents, through the police department, or with town leaders—fostered early success.

- **Focus on sustainability from the beginning.**

Sustaining new strategies and activities beyond the funding period often requires developing new ways for people and organizations to interact—and, in turn, supporting the development of these new activities and structures is essential to sustainability. These may include greater communications outreach, community skill-building to continue promising activities, and an emphasis on relationship-building. For example, periodically interviewing a diverse set of community leaders to understand their perceptions of project strategies and activities can assist in developing relationships that will, over time, help to support the project’s sustainability.

“ **The MetroWest grant was pivotal for Needham, allowing us to put a prevention infrastructure together that made us competitive to win a significant five-year federal grant to strengthen our efforts.** ”

—Carol Read, Needham project coordinator

- **Share “ownership” of the issue.**

Communities make more progress when teen substance abuse prevention is seen as a community priority and when responsibility for solutions is shared. In communities where prevention is left solely to the schools to address through prevention curriculum, little progress is made. The schools, however, because of their access to youth and parents, are key players in successful prevention efforts. Other natural allies are law enforcement, teens, and parents. Through shared ownership, a community can develop a thoughtful, comprehensive approach—a “patchwork quilt”—to address youth substance use.

- **Link to other related youth problems.**

The impact of the economic downturn affected the Initiative. It was tough to prioritize youth substance abuse at a time when school and town governments were cutting essential service staff. Linking substance use to other youth risk factors, such as depression and bullying, or tying it to academic achievement—a highly valued goal in the MetroWest communities—stimulated broader community engagement, particularly in these tough economic times.

- **Technical assistance matters.**

Communities reported that they benefitted a great deal from many of the technical assistance activities, including quick access to research and evidence-based models, hands-on assistance in local planning, neutral facilitation to resolve thorny community issues, resource-sharing between communities, and targeted training on specific skills needed to do the job well.

- **Provide longer-term funding.**

There was overwhelming agreement among the communities that three years of funding wasn’t enough time for the Initiative to meet its goals. By the end of the grant, many towns finally had a great deal of momentum and buy-in from leaders who were not engaged at the outset. But these relationships can take a lot of time to build; when the funding ended, some of the strategies had not been established long enough to garner continued support.

**Core knowledge and skills needed by project personnel:**

- Leadership skills
- The ability to inspire and manage groups
- Project management skills
- A working knowledge of substance abuse prevention and community organizing

“ You need a skilled leader with the ability to juggle multiple balls in the air. ”

—Bob Moro, Ashland project coordinator

# MetroWest Youth Substance Abuse Initiative

## KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

- **More than 1,500 parents attended Parent Coffees to learn how they can address and prevent youth substance abuse**
- **All communities showed reduction in at least one measure of youth substance use from the initial Adolescent Health Survey (AHS) in 2006 to the 2008 AHS Survey**
- **All communities now use local AHS data to plan their prevention efforts**
- **All funded communities work actively with their local police departments on prevention and enforcement efforts**
- **Seven communities are now using evidence-based prevention curricula in schools**
- **Seven communities improved the way that they identify and refer teens needing substance abuse treatment**
- **Six communities created new or restructured community coalitions dedicated to reducing and preventing youth substance use**
- **Four communities revised school and/or community policies to more effectively address youth substance abuse**
- **Four communities received major additional funding to continue their efforts after their MetroWest grant ended**

### EndNotes

1. Committee on Developing a Strategy to Reduce and Prevent Underage Drinking. (2004). *Reducing Underage Drinking: A Collective Responsibility*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.
2. Evans-Whipp et al. (2004). A review of school drug policies and their impact on youth substance use, *Health Promotion International*, 19(2), 227–234; and Dent, C., Grube, J., & Biglan, A. (2005). Community level alcohol availability and enforcement of possession laws as predictors of youth drinking. *Preventive Medicine*, 40(3), 355–362.
3. Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America National Community Anti-Drug Coalition Institute. (2008). *The Coalition Impact: Environmental Prevention Strategies*. Available at [www.cadca.org/.../Beyond\\_the\\_Basics\\_EnvironmentalStrategies.pdf](http://www.cadca.org/.../Beyond_the_Basics_EnvironmentalStrategies.pdf).
4. The CRAFFT is a behavioral health screening tool for use with children under the age of 21. For more information, see the Center for Adolescent Substance Abuse Research at Children’s Hospital Boston, [www.ceasar-boston.org/clinicians/crafft.php](http://www.ceasar-boston.org/clinicians/crafft.php).

Visit the MetroWest Community Health Care Foundation web site [www.mchcf.org](http://www.mchcf.org) to view helpful resources, including parent surveys, community outreach materials, social marketing campaign and project video.

**Click here** to view our brief project video:  
[www.mchcf.org](http://www.mchcf.org)

#### ***Acknowledgments***

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