

Colorado educators concerned about pot in public schools

A summit by the Colorado School Safety Resource Center in Thornton featured a panel on marijuana legalization and its effect in schools

By Elizabeth Hernandez
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THORNTON — School officials and educators packed a conference room on Wednesday, taking detailed notes and heaving collective sighs as they learned about what authorities are calling the No. 1 issue Colorado schools face: marijuana.

"We got sold that marijuana legalization was going to positively impact our schools," said Christine Harms, director of the Colorado School Safety Resource Center. "And there is the school infrastructure aspect, but we're not seeing tremendous changes with marijuana prevention programs, and our students are paying the price."

More than 350 school officials, first-responders and school mental health professionals gathered in Thornton on Wednesday for the resource center's Safe Schools Summit.

The conference, which runs through Thursday, offers training sessions and panels on issues like school shooting responses and human trafficking. The center said that a panel on marijuana legalization is back by popular demand.

"It's the No. 1 problem in schools right now," said Lynn Riemer, president of ACT on Drugs, a nonprofit drug awareness and education organization.

Assistant Attorney General Michael Song gave the marijuana presentation, telling teachers and school faculty about the shifting attitudes young people have toward marijuana and the ways in which authorities can address this new frontier.

Jeff Whitmore, director of transportation for Bayfield School District in southwestern Colorado, shook his head in disbelief after the more than hour-long presentation that covered edibles, cannabis paraphernalia and the laws behind busting students for possessing the drug on school campuses.

"At first, I thought it was similar to alcohol and that the kids would do it anyway and all that," Whitmore said. "But it's like they're disguising alcohol as Kool-Aid and marketing it to kids. These edibles are cookies and gummy bears, and they're filled with high amounts of THC."

During the presentation, teachers took notes about the packaging of various marijuana edibles in the hopes of spotting the substances more easily. They also shared frustrations of complacent parents smoking with their children.

"There's a shift in culture," Whitmore said. "Kids see their parents smoking it and see it marketed everywhere, and they think it's normal and OK for them to do."

While data on marijuana-related incidents in Colorado public schools remains contested and scarce, many educators said they are seeing the problem escalate.

"This is not a concern simply because it's new," Harms said. "This really is an issue, and we need to educate our parents about it so they can be vigilant."