

# School drug incidents raise questions on Colo. pot policy

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Hundreds of Colorado's middle-school students got caught with drugs at school last year, setting a decade-high record while raising questions about the impact of the state's legal marijuana industry.

School districts don't specifically report which kinds of drugs kids get caught with — the data lumps together prescription drugs, heroin, cocaine and marijuana. But school-based experts say they believe the 24% increase in middle school drug reports is directly related to the legal marijuana industry, and now lawmakers are asking school districts to do a better job tracking which drugs they're finding.

The jump in drug violations came as overall suspensions, expulsions and other referrals to police decreased between the year of legalization and the previous academic year, 2012-13, according to a Rocky Mountain PBS I-News analysis of data from the state Department of Education. While medical marijuana has been legal in Colorado since 2000, recreational sales began Jan. 1, 2014.

"According to our data, middle schools are where most people begin to experiment," said John Simmons, the Denver Public Schools' executive director of student services. "It's much easier to stop someone from using in the first place than it is to stop it once it's started."

Denver Public Schools saw a 7% increase in drug incidents, from 452 in 2012-13 to 482 in the 2013-14 year. Simmons says that marijuana accounts for almost every drug incident.

"I would say that at any given time, any day of the week, there are probably about 10% of kids in the high school that are under the influence of something," said school resource officer Susan Condrey of the Aurora Police Department.

The 951 middle-school drug violations across Colorado was the highest tally in a decade. School officials acknowledge marijuana has long been a problem, legal or not, but say the greater availability and societal acceptance appears to be prompting more kids to try it.

"We have seen parents come in and say, 'Oh that's mine, they just took it out of my room,' and that sort of thing," said school resource officer Judy Lutkin of the Aurora Police Department. "Parents have it in their houses more often, and the kids just can take it from home."

Last April, several elementary school students in northern Colorado made national headlines after they were suspended for bringing marijuana and marijuana candy to school. Authorities said they stole it from their grandparents, who had purchased it legally.

Legalization supporters point out that kids aren't coming in and buying from stores, and packages that leave the stores do not market to children.

"We have gone above and beyond to make sure that we are not marketing to children," said Meg Sanders, owner of MiNDFUL, a cannabis company that operates in several cities in Colorado. "We feel it's our responsibility as a responsible business to card not just once but twice for any recreational customer, and medical patients have to show several documents before they can purchase marijuana."

Marijuana is second only to alcohol in teen substance abuse, according to the Healthy Kids Colorado Survey, an annual survey from the Colorado Department of Public Health and the Environment.

"Alcohol is by far and away the most used substance by middle schoolers, then it goes down for marijuana and tobacco is just below that," said Dr. Christian Thurstone, attending physician for the Denver Health Adolescent Substance Abuse Treatment program. "Prescription drug use is number four, and it's increasing, so that's been an alarming increase, as well, that we need to pay attention to.

"Middle schoolers are most vulnerable to being confused about marijuana," Thurstone said. "They think, 'Well, it's legal so it must not be a problem.' "

The I-News analysis shows spikes in two years when legal marijuana became more widely available — the proliferation of medical marijuana dispensaries with a change in law in 2010 and the advent of recreational pot in 2013. But the state's data doesn't break out marijuana incidents, and reporting is widely inconsistent from school district to school district, even from schools within a district.

The Department of Education wants to address the lack of marijuana specifics in its drug reporting, said State Rep. Polly Lawrence, R-Littleton. She said she was asked to sponsor a bill that would require schools to be more transparent with their drug reporting, particularly about marijuana.

"We are still continuing with stakeholder meetings, but I am hoping to have a bill drafted and ready to go (this month)," said Lawrence. "If we don't start now, we are not going to have a baseline to compare to in the future."

Tax revenue generated through legal sales is expected to help in school preventive programs.

"The fact is that we had a significant number using marijuana then and now (before and after legalization)," Simmons said of public schools in Denver. "We are hopeful that these changes will provide more resources."

The Colorado Legislature set aside \$2.5 million in grants for schools from marijuana tax revenue. As of November, the Department of Education had awarded \$975,000 to 11 districts to hire more health professionals to help address student behavior regarding marijuana, sometimes as an alternative to traditional punishment such as expulsion or suspension.

However, alternative or non-punitive methods currently dealing with drug incidents by districts or individual schools also are not tracked by state data. Until the Legislature crafts a law requiring more specificity in drug reporting, the state is in some ways flying blind.

"There is no manpower to audit the data; we can't go back to the districts to check what they say," said Annette Severson, a data analyst at the Colorado Department of Education. "We just have to trust that what they report to us is accurate and then they have to sign off and say that it is accurate."