

# Schools reach beyond 'Just Say No' on opioid dangers

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In this photo made on Monday, Jan. 23, 2017, the Norwin School District Superintendent of Schools, William H. Kerr talks about materials being considered in use in the development of a curriculum for educating students in the district about opioid drug addiction at his office in North Huntingdon, Pa. Schools across the country are teaching children as young as grade school about opioids as the nation's deadly drug crisis rages on. (AP Photo/Keith Srakocic)

Schools are going beyond "Just Say No" as they teach students as young

as kindergartners about the dangers of opioids in the hope that they don't later become part of the growing crisis.

Some states have begun requiring instruction about prescription drugs and heroin, and districts are updating their anti-drug teachings to move toward interactive and engaging science-based lessons they hope will save lives.

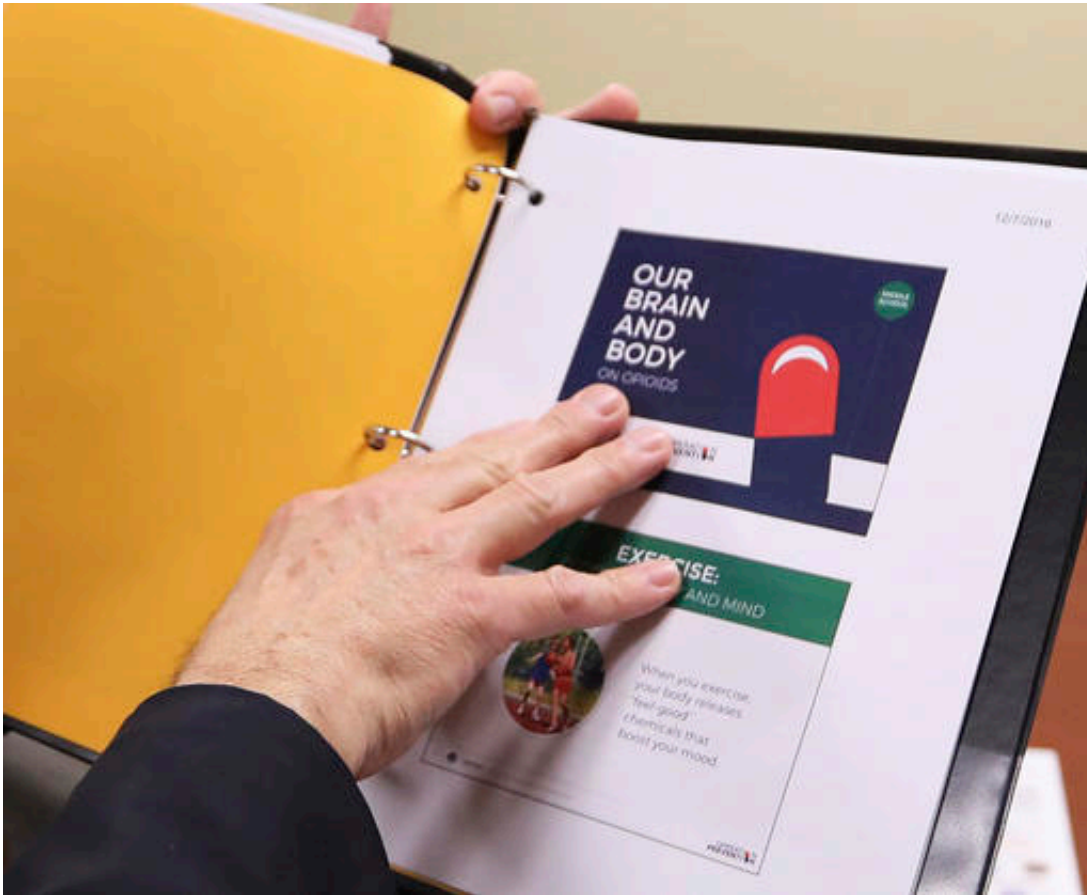
States including Ohio and New York have passed laws requiring that schools include opioid abuse prevention in health education, and Republican New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie pledged to do the same this month.

"The message will be simple and direct and start in kindergarten," Christie said, "the medicine in Mom and Dad's medicine cabinet is not safe for you to use just because a doctor gave it to them."

Savannah Wilson, a 17-year-old junior at State College Area High School in Pennsylvania, said a lesson including the science of opioid addiction and a video with stories from young addicts stuck with her when she got an oxycodone prescription following a recent surgery.

"I'm not sure if I would have had any issues, but it was definitely good to know, don't take more than you absolutely need to," Wilson said.

"They're really strong drugs. They prescribed me way more than I needed. I had a lot left over. It's kind of scary how easy they make it for you."



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Wilson said that she has gotten anti-drug lessons throughout school but that "before, it was kind of 'Just don't do it.'"

"Up until this year I didn't really get a full understanding of how easily it is to get addicted to some of these drugs and how open they are to people," she said.

The growing crisis has pushed her teacher, Melanie Lynch, to spend time focusing on opioids and not just drugs in general. One of her lessons was teaching students that they are consumers and that it's OK to discuss prescriptions with doctors.

"When you can get a teenager to acknowledge that that can happen to me—because nothing can happen to me, I'm invincible—that's a lesson that's a keeper," Lynch said. "It's not a scare tactic. They've internalized it."



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The number of students abusing opioid prescription drugs is declining, according to a survey of 45,473 students by the National Institutes of Health. It found that misuse of opioid prescription drugs among 12th-graders dropped from 9.5 percent in 2004 to 4.8 percent in 2016.

But with the epidemic killing family members and recent graduates, teachers and administrators are looking for ways to teach about the issue.

While teachers like Lynch dedicate their time to coming up with creative methods, Kevin Lorson, director of the physical education licensure program at Ohio's Wright State University, said many others are desperate for help.

"I feel like schools are crying out for the help more than me telling them it's important," said Lorson, who is helping to create the grade-appropriate curriculum for Ohio schools. "Everybody is affected in some way, shape or form, whether it be a current student, former student, parents; everyone is impacted in some way."





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Schools are bringing in people recovering from addiction to tell their stories, teaching about the science behind drug addiction, and working to get students and parents talking to each other and recognizing signs of

abuse.

In the Norwin School District, near Pittsburgh, Superintendent William Kerr is having his middle school teachers start using Operation Prevention , a curriculum created by the Drug Enforcement Administration and Discovery Education.

It includes digital lesson plans aligned to federal science and health education standards, a social media video challenge, and tools for parents.

"We want to make sure that parents know the signs, that students understand the negative aspects, how to understand refusal skills," Kerr said. "We do believe that the earlier the conversations start between parents and children the better, and so we will also be exploring at the elementary level."



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The best approach is to address underlying factors that encourage use, including easy accessibility, said Linda Richter, director of policy research and analysis for the National Center on Addiction and



## Substance Abuse .

She advises schools against developing their own program and suggests they invest in proven prevention programs that have been rigorously evaluated and connect them with overall lesson planning in schools.

"It's important for kids (and adults) to understand how drugs affect the brain and body," Richter said in an email, "but to really make a dent in the problem, parents, schools, and communities have to be involved in overall prevention and in identifying and helping kids who show signs of risk get the help they need."

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