

Youth Recommendations for Preventing and Responding to Youth Substance Use

Prevention, Education & Healthy Alternatives

Provide honest, ongoing education about substance use and its risks. Students recommended continuing to educate young people about vaping and other drugs, creating clubs, sharing information online, and encouraging students to speak with their peers. They also pointed to videos created by Alexandria students as a useful way to share credible reasons not to vape. Education should clearly explain how substance use can harm physical and mental health, interfere with attendance and learning, affect young people's future goals, and lead to lasting addiction.

> ***"Offer honest information about the risks of drugs."***
>
> *~ Jasmin & Vanessa, 2025*



Sources: Jasmin and Vanessa, *Youth Substance Use*, 2025; Omar and Emerson, *Substance Use*, 2025; and Alazar Aweke, *Drug-Free Schools*, 2025.

Strengthen vaping prevention and respond consistently when vape detectors are activated. One student recommended communicating more clearly about the consequences of vaping during school and giving security staff clear responsibility to respond when bathroom vape detectors go off. The report emphasized that schools must take the lead in preventing vaping during the school day, while parents and community partners can reinforce prevention outside school. The report identified the Substance Abuse Prevention Coalition of Alexandria and the Virginia Cannabis Control Authority as organizations that could support education, policy, and community prevention efforts.

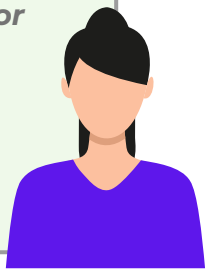
> ***"We have to enact new prevention measures because the ones already in place aren't enough."***
>
> *~ Christian Orrell, 2025*



Source: Christian Orrell, *What Will It Take to Help Students Prosper, Preventing Students from Using Vapes or Carts During School?*, 2025.

Offer positive alternatives to substance use through sports, recreation, clubs, mentoring, and peer support. Students recommended structured after-school programs that give young people something positive to do, teach life skills and healthier ways to cope, and connect them with peers and role models. They emphasized helping struggling students put their energy into school and activities that support their success, make it across the graduation stage, and create a better life for themselves.

> ***"Whether its a sport, or a club, or talking to peers that go through the same things..."***
>
> *~ Arielle Chavarry-Santana, 2026*

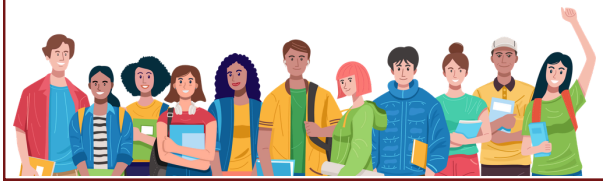


Sources: Student author not listed, *Youth Drug & Substance Abuse*, 2026; Arielle Chavarry-Santana, *Drug Addiction and Gang Affiliation*, 2026; and *Youth Substance Use*, 2025.

Address the pressures and challenges that can lead young people to use substances. One student report identified peer pressure, school stress, mental-health challenges, home environments, easy access to drugs, and boredom as major contributing factors. Students recommended responding with counseling, empathy, positive role models, peer support, life skills, and healthier ways to cope. One student also cautioned that strict rules and consequences alone may push substance use outside school rather than help students stop.

> ***"depression amongst youth, using them as a coping mechanism"***
>
> *~ Christian Orrell, 2025*

Sources: *Youth Drug & Substance Abuse*, 2026; *Youth Substance Use*, 2025; and *Drug Addiction and Gang Affiliation*, 2026.



Youth Recommendations for Preventing and Responding to Youth Substance Use

Early Intervention, Treatment & Supportive Relationships

Make trained substance-use counselors consistently available at every ACHS campus. One student recommended guaranteed referral pathways to DCHS for minors who need additional help. The report card emphasized that access to DCHS rehabilitation for minors can be inconsistent and that too few students currently have access to on-site substance-use counseling (*Youth Drug & Substance Abuse,* 2026).

> ***"Ensure trained substance abuse counselors are consistently on-site at every ACHS campus..."***
>
> *~ Youth Drug & Substance Abuse, 2026; student author not listed*

> ***"My solution is ACPS Should Implement After School Rehabilitation Programs at Every High School."***

Create after-school counseling and rehabilitation programs in partnership with ACPS and DCHS. Students recommended school-based and after-school programs that allow young people to receive help while continuing their education. One student proposed structured programs providing counseling, mentoring, and life-skills support for students at risk of substance use, funded and operated through a partnership between ACPS and DCHS (*Youth Drug & Substance Abuse*, 2026; and *Youth Substance Use*, 2025).

Create supportive spaces where students can talk honestly about substance use and ask for help. Students recommended an environment where young people can speak about drug-related problems, receive honest information with empathy, see positive role models, and learn healthier coping mechanisms and lifestyle choices. They also suggested connecting struggling students with peers who have experienced similar challenges (*Youth Substance Use*, 2025; and Arielle Chavarry-Santana, *Drug Addiction and Gang Affiliation*, 2026).

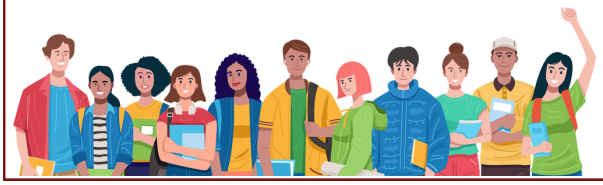
> ***"an environment for students to speak about their drug problems"***
>
> *~ Jasmin & Vanessa, 2025*



Strengthen peer and intergenerational mentoring for students affected by substance use or gang involvement. One student recommended improving an existing ACHS youth program and involving seniors in advising and encouraging younger students. Students also proposed mentorship within structured after-school programs, clubs, and opportunities to talk with peers who have faced similar challenges (Chavarry-Santana, *Drug Addiction and Gang Affiliation*, 2026; *Youth Drug and Substance Abuse*, 2026; and Omar and Emerson, *Substance Use*, 2025).

> ***"encourage seniors to give their younger peers advice"***
>
> *~ Arielle Chavarry-Santana, 2026*





Youth Recommendations for Preventing and Responding to Youth Substance Use

Safety, Accountability & Shared Responsibility

Train all ACHS staff to administer Narcan. Students recommended changing Narcan training from voluntary to mandatory for all staff so both campuses are fully prepared to respond to an overdose. They proposed incorporating the approximately 30-minute course into existing professional-development sessions and ensuring staff know how to access and confidently administer the Narcan already available at ACHS.

> ***"ensuring each teacher is trained and ready to save a life."***
>
> *~ Wesley O'Connell, Millie Barrientos & Randy Alverz, 2025*



Sources: Wesley O'Connell, Millie Barrientos, and Randy Alverz, *Teacher Narcan Training & Accessibility*, 2025.

Apply drug and vaping rules consistently, while also helping students change their behavior. Students supported clear school policies and consequences, and one report card specifically noted that the existing code of conduct was not being enforced consistently. At the same time, students cautioned that punishment alone may push substance use outside school without helping young people stop. They recommended pairing clear expectations with counseling, early intervention, youth programs, positive role models, and opportunities that help students cope differently, remain focused on school, and reach graduation.



> ***"Strict policies... Counseling... Community involvement... Creating a positive school environment."***
>
> *~ Alazar Aweke, 2025*

Sources: Student author not listed, *Youth Drug and Substance Abuse*, (2026; Chavarry-Santana, *Drug Addiction and Gang Affiliation*, 2026; Aweke, *Drug-Free Schools*, 2025; and Omar and Emerson, *Substance Use*, 2025.

Work together across schools, families, health services, and the community. Students identified ACPS administrators and the School Board, DCHS, parents, educators, health professionals, law enforcement, community organizations, and youth-program staff as people who could help prevent substance use and connect students with support. They also named the Teen Wellness Center, Neighborhood Health, the Alexandria Health Department, the Substance Abuse Prevention Coalition of Alexandria, and the Virginia Cannabis Control Authority as useful partners or resources for education, screening, counseling, referrals, community outreach, and Narcan access or training.

> ***"They work together to prevent drug use and support student safety and success."***
>
> *~ Aweke, 2025*

Sources: *Youth Drug and Substance Abuse*, 2026; O'Connell, Barrientos, and Alverz, *Teacher Narcan Training & Accessibility*, 2025; Orrell, *What Will It Take to Help Students Prosper by Preventing Students from Using Vapes or Carts During School?*, 2025; Jasmin and Vanessa, *Youth Substance Use*, 2025; Aweke, *Drug-Free Schools*, 2025; and Chavarry-Santana, *Drug Addiction and Gang Affiliation*, 2026.