

Schools report sharp rise in drug incidents

Written by [Rebecca Jones](#) on Nov 8th, 2010. *Education News Colorado*

Drug violations shot up dramatically in Colorado schools during the 2009-10 school year, reversing a decade of steady declines, newly released statistics show.

Drug-related suspensions were up 31 percent over the 2008-09 school year, from 3,202 to 4,205. Drug-related expulsions were up 40 percent, to 749 from 534 the previous year. And drug violations referred to law enforcement – typically those instances in which students were caught possessing, selling or distributing illegal drugs on campus – were up 15 percent, from 1,898 to 2,182. Incidents in which students are found to be under the influence of drugs, but not actually in possession of them, need not be reported to police.

Altogether, the number of drug incidents reported by school districts rose 34 percent from 2008-09 to 2009-10. Districts report incidents and the resulting penalties to state authorities. Because one incident may result in more than one penalty, such as both expulsion and a referral to police, the number of incidents does not equal the number of sanctions.

The figures don't reveal which drugs were involved but some educators and law enforcement officials are blaming the surge on the proliferation of medical marijuana dispensaries in the past 18 months and the growing registry of Coloradans who may legally smoke pot.

They believe those two factors are combining to make marijuana more easily accessible than ever, and to convince youngsters that its use is socially acceptable.

"I'm sure it's the legalization of medical marijuana," said Beverly Kingston, director of the Adams County Youth Initiative, a countywide collaboration that conducts a yearly survey of 25,000 Adams County youth on their experiences with and beliefs about drugs, among other things.

"They think this is an OK thing," she said, [citing research from the Boulder-based Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence](#) that concludes teenage use of marijuana is related to the perceived approval or disapproval of use, and that as marijuana use becomes more open and pervasive, the perception of disapproval drops.

Some less willing to link increase, marijuana

Others aren't willing to make that connection without additional study.

"There's definitely an increase, and it's concerning, but we need more years of comparison, as well as a concrete collection asking kids where they got the marijuana," said Michele DeBerry, who oversees discipline and attendance issues in the **Boulder Valley School District**, where drug-related incidents were up 23 percent in the 2009-10 school year over the previous year.

She noted that drug-related incidents were split evenly between schools in the city of Boulder – which is home to a concentration of medical marijuana dispensaries – and those farther east, where dispensaries are less prevalent.

Aurora Public Schools officials are equally cautious about pinning any blame on dispensaries.

"I don't want to speculate," said Barbara Cooper, chief equity and engagement officer for the district. "I don't think there's a single reason for the increase."

She said district officials are trying to identify the locations where the kids are picking it up, and are looking for trends, but haven't identified anything specific yet. In Aurora, drug-related incidents were up 43 percent in 2009-10.

And Mason Tvert, executive director of **SAFER** or Safer Alternatives For Enjoyable Recreation, a Denver-based organization that promotes legalization and regulation of marijuana sales, is adamant that the alarming '09-10 statistics ought not be linked to legal medical marijuana.

"It was universally available to high school students prior to the legalization of medical marijuana," he said. "The notion that it is somehow more available now is crazy."

Estimated 100,000-plus have legal pot cards

Colorado voters first approved medical marijuana sales in 2000 but strict enforcement of federal drug laws – which the federal government insisted overrode state laws – kept the industry negligible.

That changed in February 2009, when [U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder announced](#) the Drug Enforcement Agency would end raids on state-approved dispensaries. Since then, the number of legal dispensaries in the state has grown exponentially.

At one point, state officials estimated there were more than 1,100, though [a recent tightening of regulations](#) is expected to reduce their numbers. The number of Coloradans carrying medical marijuana cards has swelled from 4,720 in late 2008 to an estimated 115,000, said Mark Salley, communications director for the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment.

[State records](#) show that at least 26 of those users are under age 18. The figures are estimates because the state is months behind in processing applications for the cards.

Meanwhile, school officials are grappling with the scenario of what to do with teachers or students who possess medical marijuana cards and come to school stoned – or even ask the school nurse to administer pot to them during the school day.

“It poses some interesting challenges,” said Mike Gass, executive director of student services for **Eagle County schools**.

Eagle officials recently had an adult – possibly a parent volunteer – come onto campus and inadvertently leave behind a jacket that contained medical marijuana in the pocket. No one has yet come back to claim the jacket.

Gass said he’s also seen an increase in baked goods on campus that are laced with marijuana. The possible ramifications boggle his mind.

Concern about drug-testing of student athletes

“We’re one of the high schools that has random drug testing for all CHSAA-sanctioned activities,” he said. “The potential exists where a kid could, without knowing it, get a brownie in the cafeteria with marijuana in it, then get tested and become ineligible for sports.”

Gass says he has no idea what he would do if a student athlete applied for and received a medical marijuana card. He doesn’t think anyone else knows what to do either, though his inclination is to prohibit medical marijuana users from playing sports.

“The biggest challenge I see right now is that kids are taking medical marijuana from their parents, and they’re either using it or reselling it,” he said. “It’s really becoming more of a social norm, which is a challenge not just in our area, but throughout the country.”

Eagle County schools reported 37 drug incidents last year, up from 21 such incidents in the 2008-09 school year.

In the nearby **Roaring Fork district**, which encompasses Basalt, Carbondale and Glenwood Springs, school board members were stunned by the increase in drug activity last year – drug incidents went from 11 to 61.

In response, they beefed up the district’s drug and alcohol policy to make sure it addressed medical marijuana, inserting wording to specify that even legal drugs would not be tolerated on campus.

“The kids seemed to get the feeling that because (a medical marijuana dispensary) was downtown, next to the shoe store, there was nothing wrong with it,” said Roaring Fork Superintendent Judy Halpenstall.

When students have medical marijuana cards

She said that two high school students in her district possess medical marijuana cards and officials warned them not to bring marijuana onto school property or come to school if they’d been smoking.

“It’s their right to have the cards but it’s not right for them to come to school under the influence of marijuana,” she said. “That totally confused them and they said that didn’t make any sense. I might have said the same thing at that age.”

In **Douglas County**, school officials have also updated district policy, especially in regards to maintaining a drug-free workplace for faculty and staff.

Drug-related incidents in the district were up 23 percent last year, from 161 to 198. That’s a 52 percent increase over the 2007-08 school year.

“We’re following the law strictly,” said Mark Knapp, security area manager for the school district. “We’ve had both minor students and adult students with medical marijuana cards who’ve been caught with it on campus, and we reported them to law enforcement. We want

to let people know that even if you have a card, you can't have marijuana on campus. It's a drug-free environment."

Referrals for substance abuse also rise

Dr. Christian Thurstone, a board-certified child/adolescent and addictions psychiatrist, isn't surprised to hear local school districts are dealing with more drug-related incidents.

He's an attending physician with the [Adolescent Substance Abuse Treatment, Education, and Prevention Program of Behavioral Health for Denver Health Medical Center](#), and he's seen an equally large increase in the number of referrals to that program for substance abuse treatment. He says 95 percent of the referrals are for marijuana abuse.

"Colorado is No. 1 in the country for prevalence of past-month marijuana use among teens," he said. "So we're already in a bad spot and getting worse."

Thurstone is less concerned about minors themselves having medical marijuana cards than he is about them knowing adults who have them.

"They get the marijuana from an older sibling or a parent with a medical marijuana card, then they come to school with it and use it or sell or distribute it in some way," he said.

"Secondly, teens are changing their attitudes about pot use. It's no longer seen as a drug or something they can get addicted to. It's a medicine," he said. "A decrease in perceived harmfulness tends to foretell an increase in actual use by about a year or two."

School officials say that other factors may also be influencing the sharp rise in drug-related incidents, including the persistent economic downturn and an increased emphasis on staff training on drug recognition and how to identify students who are under the influence. But they admit they're baffled by this sudden uptick.

District seek ways to deal with drug incidents

In the **Poudre Valley School District**, where drug incidents were up 48 percent last year, district officials recently concluded four days of meetings to analyze the situation and get to the root of the problem.

“Most of it is marijuana,” said Manny Ortega, assistant superintendent of secondary schools for the district. “When we interview students, we find most of them got it from a friend whose parent or sibling has access to it. There are a lot of connections.”

He said the leading hypothesis is that most of the increase is linked to medical marijuana but that there are other contributing factors as well, including the district’s recent move of ninth-graders up to the high schools.

That meant two classes – ninth- and tenth-graders – moved at once, making the transition to high school especially difficult.

“We have to do a better job of educating our students to the consequences of what they do,” he said. “As for things outside the school setting, medical marijuana, we have no way to control that. It’s not something we can focus on as a school to resolve.”

In the **Adams 12 Five Star district**, officials are also watching the rising numbers with concern.

“In the coming weeks we’re going to put together a focus group throughout our intervention services to gather staff and law enforcement to look at what might be some of the root causes for these increases,” said Joe Ferdani, spokesman for the district, where drug-related incidents were up 24 percent last year over the previous year.

“We have some suggestion that for some of the offenders, medical marijuana might be having an impact but it’s just anecdotal. We don’t have anything definite with respect to that. But we certainly recognize it’s an increasing issue.”

Perception – “Everybody is doing it”

The [2009 Adams County Youth Initiative’s survey of county middle and high school students](#) revealed that 22 percent of high schoolers and 6 percent of middle schoolers acknowledged smoking marijuana within the past month, up from 19 percent and 5 percent, respectively, the year before.

More troubling to Kingston than that finding, however, was the finding that 79 percent of high schoolers believed that “the typical” Adams County teen had smoked marijuana within the past month.

That question wasn't asked the year before, so there's no way to track whether the perception of widespread drug use has increased.

"It's interesting in terms of kids' perceptions of what other kids are doing," Kingston said. "You're so susceptible to peer pressure at that age, and they really do think everybody is doing it. And everybody's *not* doing it."

Kingston says she is convinced medical marijuana is driving up drug usage in the county – even though Adams County has very few dispensaries.

"One of our people in District 12 said they're taking drugs away from kids like they've never see before," she said. "If it's called 'medical marijuana,' the perception is that this could help me."

Thurstone predicts it's only a matter of time before medical marijuana card-carrying students show up at the school nurse's office asking for a toke during lunch.

"Schools are going to need a policy on how to handle that," he said. "Given that 2 percent of the entire state already has a medical marijuana license, you're going to want a policy."

Drug incidents reported by selected school districts

Data reflects total drug offenses reported by school districts to the Colorado Department of Education.

District	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	Change from '08-09 to '09-10	Change from '07-08 to '09-10
Jefferson County	541	466	562	21%	4%
Denver	341	344	385	12%	13%
Douglas County	130	161	198	23%	52%
Cherry Creek	262	342	418	22%	60%
Adams 12	347	381	473	24%	36%
Aurora	220	193	277	44%	26%
Colorado Springs	25	41	67	63%	168%
Boulder	91	108	133	23%	46%

District	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	Change from '08-09 to '09-10	Change from '07-08 to '09-10
St. Vrain	67	91	147	62%	119%
Poudre	219	273	405	48%	85%
Mesa County	385	367	456	24%	18%
Pueblo City	244	151	179	19%	- 27%
Littleton	93	79	80	1%	- 14%
Thompson	391	455	466	2%	19%
Brighton	71	104	123	18%	73%
Westminster	131	76	124	63%	- 5%
Pueblo County	60	76	75	- 1%	25%
Adams 14	79	50	61	22%	- 23%
Mapleton	46	43	80	86%	74%
Englewood	5	10	13	30%	160%
Sheridan	10	8	15	88%	50%
Statewide	3,809	3,779	5,048	34%	33%

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