

Mandated Supporters in Education

Build Healing Relationships with Students and Families



Concerns about substance use among young people prompt many educators to report to child protective services.¹ But **mandatory reporting rarely catalyzes interventions that address root causes and often exposes children to unnecessary trauma. We can—and must—do better** to prevent and reduce child maltreatment. This brief explores the mandated support framework, and the powerful role that building relationships plays in student success.

When educators observe student challenges—including evidence of illicit substance use or exposure to adults' illicit substance use—they are often trained to report out of concern for children's safety. In fact, educators today make 1 in 5 reports to Child Protective Services (CPS) agencies annually. However, their reports are rarely verified and may be unnecessary up to 90 percent of the time, with about 10 percent of educators' referrals to CPS ultimately leading to confirmed victims of maltreatment.² In fact, mandatory reporting rarely achieves child safety or protection and, "has not been associated with a reduced incidence of severe injury and abuse of children."³ Instead, CPS depends on mandatory reporting to identify families to investigate, follow and possibly separate.⁴

JMACforFamilies coined the term "mandated support" to name a policy and programmatic approach that challenges what states require and prioritizes family support over family separation; eliminates unnecessary reporting; and focuses on prevention instead of lagging interventions.

Mandated support in education challenges schools and educators to rethink how to provide support for children and families, as well as the role educators can play in more effectively preventing and addressing child maltreatment. Family engagement is a key tenet of mandated support and foundational to school programs that promote healthy behaviors and more equitable student outcomes.⁵ Building stronger relation-



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ships with caregivers and families increases trust and reduces reporting.⁶ For family engagement to be effective, schools and educators must place high value on engaging with families and move away from assumptions that undesirable outcomes or behaviors mean that families or caregivers are deliberately harmful or in crisis. Listed below are examples of promising practices and approaches educators can use to strengthen family engagement. The following solutions emerged in dialogue with students, families and educators⁷ during focus groups conducted by the Healthy Schools Campaign for “[Advancing School-Based Substance Use Prevention and Early Intervention Measures: A Community-Informed Vision to Strengthen Equity and Access](#),” as well as over 1,100 educators’ survey responses, summarized in “[Nobody Wins: Educators’ Perspectives on Mandatory Reporting](#).”⁸

Focus on schools as a safe place, especially for serious challenges.

Fact-based information empowers young people and families to make informed decisions; but fear-based messaging and scare tactics are too often the default when students hear about substance abuse.⁹ Like mandatory reporting, these tactics are largely ineffective at deterring youth substance use or abuse; they undermine student trust and can even achieve the opposite of intended results, including increased substance use.¹⁰

“Teachers, in an attempt to do something, often do the wrong thing. They call Child Protective Services. They call the Department of Children & Family Services on the parents and make the situation worse.”

—Middle School Student

Healthy relationships with adults are among the best ways to protect young people from harm and the effects of illicit substance use and exposure.¹¹ To prevent youth substance use, schools should engage students. Indeed, youth want to contribute their diverse perspectives in all areas of substance use prevention and early intervention, including visioning, developing, implementing, evaluating and adjusting services to achieve equitable access and outcomes.¹²

- Develop ways to identify and respond to students’ questions and concerns about substance use.



At least 9 in 10 times, educators and schools need different tools to address observed challenges.

- Ensure youth can ask questions without disciplinary consequences such as immediate suspension or expulsion.
- Build connections and support spaces to foster a school climate and culture conducive to positive youth development and community engagement efforts.

Collaborate with families through effective communication and education to strengthen impact.

“We have the kids a majority of the time, and we hear stuff that maybe you all [parents] might not hear as well. If we got together and discussed what we all know, then we’d probably help our kids a lot better.”

—Middle School Teacher

Family-centered approaches show “top-shelf effectiveness” for supporting students who struggle with substance use.¹³ Like students, parents typically reject involving law enforcement or focusing on legal ramifications for substance use. Parents are searching for effective tools and information sources to address these issues. Parents’ lack of knowledge about the current landscape of substances can be a barrier to discussing substance use with their children.

- Help parents access accurate information about substance use to have better conversations with their children. Caregivers often need information about the current landscape of substances to effectively discuss substance use with their children.
- Share culturally and linguistically appropriate educational resources to assist parents in becoming nonjudgmental sources of information and support.
- Pair parental education with resources on how to talk to a young person in a nonpunitive manner and where to go for prevention, early intervention, treatment and recovery support.

Empowering Parent Engagement and Leadership: The Healthy Schools Campaign's Parents United for Healthy Schools Initiative

Effective youth substance use prevention can happen through meaningful family engagement that does not necessarily address substance use directly. For the past 20 years, **Parents United for Healthy Schools**, the **Healthy Schools Campaign's parent-led initiative**, has brought together parents, caregivers, educators and community leaders to raise a strong and united voice for health and wellness in Chicago Public Schools. This parent engagement model provides a framework to combat health disparities and speak up for school wellness from a social justice perspective in four stages:

- **Peer-to-Peer Parent Engagement.** Parents often begin by attending cooking classes and gardening workshops to learn about health issues, then broaden their perspectives to address public health and issues facing their families, schools and communities. While the dialogue includes issues of personal health and wellness, it emphasizes the social and political structures that have created health disparities and barriers to health.
- **Parent Knowledge and Skills.** At the heart of HSC's program is a parent leadership institute to provide knowledge and skills necessary to become champions for change.
- **Parent Advocacy.** Parents have organized rallies, collected thousands of petitions and spoken at Chicago Board of Education meetings to successfully change school health policies.
- **Parent Leadership.** Parents United participants have gone on to run for local school councils (elected bodies that govern local schools in Chicago) and integrate health and wellness into the overall goals and operations of the school.

HSC's program is sustained by an empowerment cycle: Experienced parent leaders recruit new participants and help conduct the leadership institute sessions. Through Parents United, thousands of Chicago parents have achieved **positive, sustainable change** in school health policy:

- **Recess.** Successfully advocating to bring back recess to CPS schools after more than a 20-year absence.
- **Breakfast.** Championing the Breakfast in the Classroom program at individual schools and at the district level.
- **School food quality.** Winning significant improvements in school menus at the district level.
- **Universal School Meals.** Championing CPS' move to make school meals free for all students.
- **Physical Education.** Collecting 7,000 signatures in support of daily PE which helped lead to the Chicago Board of Education adopting a new PE policy.
- **District wellness policy.** Successfully advocating for the district to adopt a strong wellness policy, as well as a snack and beverage policy.
- **School wellness.** Supporting schools' efforts to implement health- and wellness-related policies and practices

Parents United members **champion school wellness policies** and **build mutually empowering relationships between families and schools**. Parents United participants actively partner with educators and school staff to support kids and encourage other caregivers to become involved. Though they have directly focused on other health and wellness issues, their efforts are also effective youth substance use prevention.



Engage families beyond crises.

“Parents are only engaged when there is a crisis.”

—Parent

Some parents did not have a positive school experience when they were children, and this affects their school interactions and ability to trust educators today. Moreover, school systems are not always set up to include families; and when they are, the options for engagement may be narrow and not reflective of how parents and caregivers see themselves becoming active participants.

- Consult parents, including making them the first call for any areas of concern. Ask openly about the best ways to engage parents in the school with attention to how their time may be limited due to the competing demands of being a caregiver.¹⁴
- Offer optional voluntary home visits at opportune times for families to build strong educator-caregiver relationships, establish consistent communication around family needs, and set shared goals for a child’s well-being and academic success. Some home visiting projects have been shown to cut maltreatment in half.¹⁵ The most effective programs focus on family strengths, assume that parents and caregivers are equal partners with educators, and connect families to aid for specific challenges.¹⁶

Use culturally and linguistically responsive, whole-family approaches.

All family engagement opportunities should be culturally and linguistically responsive to the maximum extent possible. Mandated supporters respect diverse family structures, cultures, languages and experiences without bias or perpetuation of negative stigmas. Schools should provide culturally and linguistically sensitive referrals to resources on substance use for parents in need of these services.

- Try family counseling if there is discord in the parent/youth relationship. When disagreements between young people and parents cannot be resolved, youth need a safe place to go and trusted people with whom they can talk.
- Offer a two-generational approach to services. Dyadic approaches can help schools consider biological, social and environmental factors while developing helpful, nonjudgmental approaches to supporting students and their families.

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Endnotes

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