NYC High School Tests New Harm Reduction Drug Education Approach

Could doing away with “Just Say No” tactics cut back on the number of young people struggling with addiction and hepatitis C?

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A high school in New York City is testing a new approach to drug education that prioritizes harm reduction over abstinence-only approaches. Could doing away with “Just Say No” tactics cut back on the number of young people struggling with addiction and hepatitis C virus (HCV)? A recent report by The Fix investigates.

According to the website, The Safety First curriculum, developed by the nonprofit advocacy group the Drug Policy Alliance, was introduced at Manhattan’s Bard High School Early College this spring. The course was designed to discourage substance use, though it also acknowledged that some kids would nevertheless end up trying drugs. Students are taught how to be safe and avoid getting sick or injured in the even that they do choose to use drugs and alcohol.

For example, the harm reduction education course teaches kids how to recognize the signs of a drug overdose and how to help if they think someone is overdosing. The course also empowers kids to make tough decisions in high-risk situations.

Safety First is an abrupt departure from the total abstinence promoted by programs like D.A.R.E, and other antidrug coalitions. Its first class graduated in April, and researchers will evaluate its efficacy and revise the course, if needed, before releasing the final version of its curriculum next fall.

Advocates for drug policy reform argue that this approach is better suited for today’s young people, who often find themselves on the front line of America’s opioid and addiction crises. But only time will tell whether the course is widely implemented.

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