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**Subject:**

DRUGS: GUIDANCE FOR SCHOOLS

**Circular No:**

2004/9

**Date of Issue:**

10 May 2004

**Target Audience:**

- Principals and Boards of Governors of all grant-aided Schools;
- Principals of Institutions of Further Education;
- Education and Library Boards;
- Council for Catholic Maintained Schools;
- Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education
- Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment; and
- Youth Council for Northern Ireland

**Summary of Contents:**

Guidance for schools on the nature and extent of drugs misuse in Northern Ireland and their role in addressing the problem.

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**Governor Awareness:**

Essential

**Status of Contents:**

Advice

**Related Documents:**

Drugs: Guidance for Schools  
in Northern Ireland

**Superseded Documents:**

Circular 1996/16:  
'Misuse of Drugs: Guidance  
for Schools'

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Not applicable

**DE Website:**

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## SUMMARY AND APPLICATION

1. This Circular, in conjunction with guidance material from the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), is being issued to all schools in Northern Ireland and updates previous guidance on the teaching of drugs education and the handling of drug-related incidents on school premises. Each school is being provided with 2 copies, one for the Principal and one for the designated teacher for drugs.
2. Because misuse of drugs is not confined to illegal drugs, the advice contained in the Circular and the CCEA guidance material should also be applied to the misuse of alcohol, tobacco, volatile substances, over-the-counter and prescribed medication, and performance enhancing drugs in sport. Evidence indicates that the use of solvents remains a significant feature of drug misuse in the Province and the level of drinking and smoking among school children continues to be a major cause for concern.
3. The guidance from CCEA gives schools up-to-date information on the nature and extent of drug misuse in Northern Ireland and their role in addressing the problem; it also advises schools on how to develop a drugs education policy to support personal, social and health education in the curriculum and other health-related policies; and, from the basis of their policy, how to plan and implement a drugs education programme consistent with their health education programme. **It should be noted that it is a statutory requirement for every grant-aided school to have in place a drugs education policy, and to publicise this in their prospectus**

### Audience

4. The main audience intended for the guidance material is grant-aided primary, post-primary and special schools. However, principals and governing bodies of institutions of further education and principals of independent schools should consider with their staff its implications for, and application to, their own circumstances and how the guidance in the document can best be implemented in their own institutions. Youth leaders may also find much of the information and advice in the guidance of interest in preparing their own programmes.

### Summary of Schools' Roles and Responsibilities: what must a school do?

5. Schools have a duty in law to:
  - teach drugs education, as part of the Health Education cross-curricular theme;
  - have a drugs education policy, and publicise it in their prospectus;
  - inform the Police where they believe or suspect a pupil to be in possession of a "controlled drug" - if in any doubt about the nature of the substance, the Police should be informed (see page 30 of the CCEA guidance).

6. In addition to the statutory requirements, the Department of Education has identified a number of issues which schools need to address in order to fulfil their responsibilities to their pupils and their parents. The recommended areas for action, together with the roles and responsibilities of individuals within schools, are described in full in Section 2 of the CCEA guidance (see pages 28-30).

## **CANCELLATION OF PREVIOUS CIRCULAR**

7. Circular 1996/16, "Misuse of Drugs: Guidance for Schools", is hereby cancelled.

## **INTRODUCTION**

8. Drug misuse is a major threat to individuals, families and the wider community, in Northern Ireland as in the rest of the United Kingdom and further afield, and no school can afford to ignore the threat that the increasing drugs culture poses to the health and well-being of the children and young people in its charge. The Department of Education, in common with all other Government Departments, is firmly committed to tackling the increasing problem of the availability and use of illegal drugs. Schools have a key role to play in ensuring that young people understand the risks involved and have the confidence, knowledge and skills to avoid them. The other parts of the education sector - the Youth Service, further education colleges, the universities and training colleges - also have a major contribution to make in discouraging drug misuse, encouraging positive attitudes and self-esteem, and promoting healthy lifestyles. The education sector alone cannot, of course, solve the problem of drug misuse in society, but the implementation of an effective programme of drug education in all schools and colleges is an essential step in tackling it.

10. As part of its ongoing response, the Government appointed a Drug and Alcohol Strategy Co-ordinator to oversee the joint implementation of the Northern Ireland Drug Strategy and the Strategy for Reducing Alcohol Related Harm. The Education and Prevention Working Group, set up in 2001 as part of the Joint Implementation Model, commissioned CCEA to carry out a review of the 'Misuse of Drugs' guidance issued to schools by the Department in 1996. The Council's revised guidance was prepared in consultation with primary and post-primary teachers, the Education and Library Boards and the Health Promotion Agency, all of whom were represented on the Advisory Working Group.

11. In addition to the provision of this guidance, a number of other steps will continue to be taken to enhance and strengthen drugs education in schools:

- a. the Education and Training Inspectorate will continue to monitor the effectiveness of drugs education programmes in schools;
- b. the Education and Library Boards will, through their Curriculum Advisory and Support Services and the Schools and Youth Drug Education Project, assign a high priority to in-service training of teachers, youth workers and governors to enable them to deliver drug education programmes effectively and to deal with drug related issues as they arise;

c. in the Higher Education sector, the universities and teacher training colleges, as well as reviewing and improving the drugs awareness and counselling services they provide to their students, will continue to provide drug education as a compulsory element of all initial teacher training courses.

## **DRUG MISUSE AND YOUNG PEOPLE: THE NEED FOR ACTION**

12. There is a public perception that drug misuse is mainly an issue in disadvantaged inner city areas but evidence from seizures and Police involvement, and indeed the recent experiences of many schools, indicates that this perception is misplaced. The misuse of drugs and other potentially harmful substances is just as much an issue for young people in rural areas and affluent communities and educationally successful young people are just as likely to put themselves at risk as low attainers.

13. It is also wrong to think of drugs education as an issue for young people in the post-primary sector only. Primary school pupils may have some knowledge of drug misuse in their local communities. Although there is little official information about substance misuse among primary pupils, it is recognized that quite a few young people start their drug use at primary school age, with a cigarette, a drink of alcohol or a sniff of a volatile substance, and are therefore already at risk.

14. Drug misuse has implications, not only for the individuals involved, but for their families and the wider community. It can result in under-achievement at school and can be associated with truancy and behavioural problems. A criminal conviction for activities related to drugs can inhibit or prejudice career options, and drug misuse can place families and friends under severe stress. For communities, drug-related activities and crime in support of drugs habits (including vandalism and violent behaviour, theft, burglary and fraud) are an increasing threat.

## **DRUGS EDUCATION: THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS**

15. The role of schools in relation to drugs issues is twofold: prevention and protection. The responsibility for **prevention** is exercised through drugs education programmes. Health Education is a compulsory cross-curricular theme for all pupils aged 4-16. Taught in the context of other compulsory subjects, one of the theme's main objectives is that pupils should develop their knowledge and understanding of the use, misuse, risks and effects of drugs and other potentially harmful substances; and they should develop a critical awareness of the relevant personal, social and economic implications. Drugs education will continue to be a part of the revised curriculum and should engage the young people as part of a developed Personal Social and Health Education programme or a Personal Development programme. The guidance from CCEA enclosed with this Circular provides advice on how these statutory duties can be put into effect (see pages 16-22).

16. For the **protection** of young people, school authorities need to be aware of the drugs scene within the school community and to put in place a drugs education policy, which will set out how the school will fulfil all its responsibilities in relation to drugs. Schools may

consider it appropriate to work in partnership with representatives of the local community during the development of their drugs education policy.

17. Schools themselves should strive to be health promoting environments, both for pupils and for teaching staff and other employees. As learning environments, they should adopt the 'Health Promoting School' ethos and the misuse of drugs policy and programmes should link with other school-based strategies, such as making schools smoke free environments in line with the Department's circular 2004/01. As workplaces, they should also have in place a policy relating to staff use of drugs and alcohol. A resource pack to assist schools with the issue of the use/misuse of drugs and other substances by staff is available from the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland (HSENI) (see pages 13 and 27).

### **What is a Drug?**

18. The CCEA guidance (page 2) provides a definition of a drug. This definition covers a wide range of substances, not all of which are illegal, but many of which can be equally harmful in their effects. Some, for example cigarettes and alcohol, have restricted sale. While clear distinction must be maintained between illegal drugs and others, all these substances are likely to raise common issues for schools, and will often require similar teaching approaches, for example in relation to equipping pupils to withstand peer pressure.

19. The legislation relating to drugs refers to "controlled drugs". These are defined and classified in the legislation, but it is not expected that all staff in schools should be familiar with what is or is not a "controlled drug", or be able instantly to recognise them. What is important is that all staff should be able to recognise the point at which a young person becomes a danger, either to himself or herself or to others, and that there are appropriate measures in place to deal with that situation. A summary of the relevant legislation applicable to Northern Ireland is included at Appendix 8 of the CCEA guidance.

### **Procedures for Handling Suspected Incidents of Drug Misuse**

**20. Each school should appoint a designated teacher with responsibility for drugs and should have agreed, identified procedures in place for handling cases of suspected drug misuse on the premises.** Advice on the establishment of such procedures in schools is included in Section 2 of the CCEA guidance (see pages 27-40). This advice is based on the fundamental principle that schools act **in loco parentis** - that their primary concern must be the well-being and safety of all the pupils in their charge. **It is the duty of all schools to report any incident involving drugs to the Designated Officer in the relevant employing authority.**

21. Every member of staff of the school, both teaching and non-teaching, should be completely familiar with their school's procedures, and know whom to contact and what to do when a young person is suspected either of being in possession of drugs or being under the influence of drugs, including alcohol. Care should be taken to ensure that the procedures are brought to the attention of new members of staff as part of their induction

training. Schools should ensure the provision of training for all staff to support the full implementation of the school's drugs policy.

22. In every case, however, where action needs to be taken to protect the young person or young people involved, the need to avoid unnecessary physical risk to the member(s) of staff concerned must also be taken into account: although every effort should be made to ensure the safety of the young people in their charge, staff should also have a proper regard to their own safety.

### **The Designated Teacher**

23. It is strongly recommended that **each school should designate a senior member of staff as having overarching responsibility for drugs**. The duties of the designated teacher are outlined on page 29 of the guidance. In view of the responsibilities involved, it is recommended that the designated teacher should be a member of the school's senior management team.

24. Governors, too, need to be involved in the development of the school's drugs education policy and procedures. Boards of Governors are advised, therefore, to designate one of their members as having specific responsibility for drugs (see page 29 of the CCEA guidance).

### **Signs of Drug Misuse**

25. The guidance addresses how schools should act where signs and symptoms of misuse are noted. There are a number of warning signs which may indicate to teachers or non-teaching staff that a pupil is misusing drugs, and staff need to be alert to these. Some of the main warning signs are summarised in Appendix 10.

### **Outside Speakers**

26. CCEA's guidance on developing a drugs education programme refers to the possibilities of involving outside speakers (see pages 24-25), and many schools find that visiting speakers, such as a local health promotion officer or a Police Officer, can fulfil a valuable expert role. Such a visit is not, of course, in any sense an acceptable substitute for an effective drugs education programme, but rather a potential resource which can be deployed within such a programme. Where outside speakers are involved, their contribution **must** be properly planned as part of an overall teaching programme. External agencies should not be used without considering the appropriateness and relevance to the overall drugs education programme in line with the school's stance and ethos on drugs and related issues.

### **Involvement of Parents**

27. CCEA's guidance refers to the importance of schools' seeking and securing the support and encouragement of parents in their efforts on drugs education, and suggests ways in which this can be achieved (see page 23). Many parents are very concerned about

drugs in their community, and will be anxious to know, not only that the issue is being addressed by the school, but the manner in which it will be addressed and the type of information which will be given to their child. They may also have a fear that teaching may encourage experimentation. **Schools should ensure that parents are aware of their drugs education policy, and should consider how best they can allay any fears and give parents the opportunity to find out more about how the school is tackling these issues.** In particular, schools will want to stress the case for drugs education for all young people, within the wider context of health education, and that all teaching will be carefully matched to the age and maturity of the pupils concerned.

28. The provision of information to parents by schools can also contribute to the education of the wider community on the facts about drug misuse, helping parents to recognise the signs of drug misuse and to know where to turn for specialist help and advice.

### **Pastoral Care and Support for Pupils at Risk**

29. Where a pupil has been identified by the school as having experimented with illegal drugs, or as being at risk of doing so, he or she should be offered appropriate counselling and support within the school's general arrangements for the pastoral care of its pupils, and his or her parents should be informed.

30. Schools should be aware of the range of specialised agencies, support and counselling services available in their areas which may be in a position to support a pupil at risk. The CCEA guidance contains, at Appendix 11, a list of useful contacts which can offer advice and support. In addition, the Education Welfare Service, local health and social services, and the local Police all have a role to play in supporting schools' efforts. Appendix 9 details the telephone numbers of the Community and Schools Involvement Officers (CSIO) of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI).

31. Schools should consider displaying details of local telephone helplines for young people who may want to seek confidential advice and support on drug problems (see Appendix 11).

### **Confidentiality**

32. Schools should consider carefully the response of members of staff approached by a pupil for individual advice on drug misuse. Where a pupil discloses to a teacher or other member of staff that he or she is taking drugs, the staff member should make it clear to the pupil that **he or she can offer no guarantee of confidentiality** given the seriousness of drug misuse. He or she might point to sources of confidential information and advice (see preceding paragraphs) and to treatment and rehabilitation services to help those who are misusing illegal drugs to stop. Schools will also wish to take careful account of the legal position, set out on page 30 of the guidance, and of child protection guidelines and other policies within the school.

## Dealing with the Media

33. Schools will need to give consideration to the handling of enquiries from the media following a drug-related incident. It is recommended that only the Principal or a designated nominee should deal with media enquiries. It is essential that the privacy of the pupil and his/her family is respected. The CCEA guidance provides further advice on handling the media response to any incident involving drugs (see page 38).

## Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs

34. Drugs education is just as necessary for pupils with special educational needs. Children with learning difficulties may need more help than others in understanding what sorts of behaviour are and are not acceptable and desirable, and in developing the confidence and skills to resist drugs. For these young people, it will be particularly important that schools take into account their individual needs and abilities in interpreting the advice given.

35. For those pupils who have emotional and behavioural difficulties, alcohol or substance misuse may be among a number of symptoms. The Northern Ireland Code of Practice for the identification and assessment of pupils with special educational needs refers to the need for the Education and Library Board to take account of any clear, recorded evidence of such misuse in considering whether the pupil may need statutory assessment.

## Discipline

36. Article 3 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 as amended by Article 19 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 requires school principals and Boards of Governors to ensure that policies and procedures designed to promote good behaviour and discipline are pursued at the school, and to consult pupils and their parents before deciding on measures to encourage good behaviour.

37. It is recommended that **all school policies on behaviour and discipline should include a clear statement of the school's attitude to illegal drugs and of the disciplinary measures which will be applied in drug-related incidents.** All schools should make it clear that they are committed to tackling drug misuse among young people, and that any instances of possession, use or supply of illegal drugs on school premises will be regarded with the utmost seriousness.

38. It would not be appropriate to prescribe centrally specific sanctions which should be applied to drug-related incidents. Principals must retain responsibility for deciding how to respond to particular incidents, taking account of factors such as the age of the pupil concerned, whether the incident involved one pupil or a group of pupils, whether there has been evidence of particular peer group pressure and whether this is a first offence. Schools need to make a co-ordinated and measured response to any drug-related incident and detailed advice is given on page 34 of the guidance.

39. It is recommended that schools should develop a repertoire of responses, incorporating both counselling and sanctions, such as suspension or, in extreme cases, expulsion, which reflects the different kinds of drug-related offences.

40. Where a pupil is permanently excluded from school for a drug-related offence and a place cannot quickly be found for him/her in another mainstream school, the Education and Library Board may have to make arrangements, at least in the short term, for the pupil to be educated otherwise than at school. In such circumstances there will be a continuing need to provide appropriate drugs education and counselling.

### **Teaching Resources**

41. There is a large number of resources available to help teachers plan their teaching programmes about drugs. The CCEA guidance provides advice on how to choose appropriate materials and an audit tool for evaluating resources is provided at Appendix 5b. A list of resources is also included at Appendix 12. Whatever resources a school chooses to use, the importance of matching the message to be given to the age, maturity, and level of ability of the pupils cannot be over-emphasised.

### **Health and Safety of Pupils: Premises Issues**

42. In cases where it is known or suspected that school premises or grounds are used out of hours for drug or solvent misuse, the Police should be notified and the Principal should ensure that arrangements are in place to check the premises and grounds for signs of such misuse. It may be necessary to make arrangements with the local council's Environmental Services Department for the safe and secure disposal of dangerous matter. There may be cases where further measures are appropriate and which, in any case, enhance the security of the premises.

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