

Schooling in an Addicted Society

The mixed signals we give to young people about drug use stem from the old Saturday-night-and-Sunday-morning split in our national character.

Addiction: The state of being given up or having yielded to a habit or practice or to something that is habit-forming, as narcotics, to such an extent that its cessation causes severe trauma.

—*The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, 1971*

No one, it seems, is in favor of recreational drug use in the U.S. When was the last time a minister, a school superintendent, or a politician in your area said a kind word about pot, cocaine, or liquor? Mothers are MADD, students are SADD, and everyone will be GLAD to rid America of the scourge of drugs, right? Maybe.

The social consensus concerning drug use and what constitutes drug abuse may not be as broad or as deep as it appears at first glance. For example, despite considerable data that link tobacco use with a variety of ugly ways to die, millions of public and private dollars are spent encouraging farmers to grow it and people to smoke it, chew it, or simply put it in their mouths. Nonsmokers are forced to breathe the noxious by-products of burning tobacco in their workplaces and as they travel for business or pleasure. Parents and teachers who smoke and drink routinely instruct children not to.

The medical evidence about harmful drugs does not support the clear distinction made by the law between licit and illicit drugs. Alcohol and tobacco, completely legal, are dangerous addictive drugs that cost millions

of people their lives or livelihoods, year in and year out. In spite of this, however, making the case against tobacco and alcohol is difficult; they are legal and profitable, and there are plenty of highly visible role models to encourage their use. For example, I have seen posters of baseball teams with beer company trademarks on them prominently displayed on the walls of elementary school corridors. Liquor companies cannily portray drinking as an "adult" activity—the very status teenagers are struggling to achieve. All of this is perfectly legal, though hardly in the public interest.

But what about illegal drugs? The slogan of the Reagan administration is "Just say no!" However, while the Reagan administration is urging children to "say no" to drugs, it is busy saying no to funds for drug treatment, prevention programs, and law enforcement. According to Abbie Hoffman (1987), in fiscal 1988, President Reagan recommended not one cent be spent on drug rehabilitation and treatment.

With regard to constitutional questions, the pit bull tenacity with which the First Amendment right of businesses to advertise their destructive wares is guarded becomes a pit bull attack on the right to privacy of American citizens who are being told to urinate into beakers as a condition of employment, despite evidence that the margin of error in such testing programs may be as high as 25 percent.

All of this only scratches the surface of our national schizophrenia about

drugs and drug use. There's more. Our farmers are hooked on herbicides and pesticides that poison our food and contaminate our water. Our industries are hooked on fossil fuels that foul the air and nuclear energy that produces wastes so toxic they will endanger countless generations. As consumers, we are hooked on an unhealthy diet consisting primarily of fat, sugar, and salt. And as a people, we are, in our political discourse, hooked on fantasy and illusion instead of thoughtful reflection about who we are, what we wish to become, and how we might get there.

Just as with drugs, our various social addictions have their pushers, and they aren't shadowy foreigners. They attend Rotary meetings, sit on school boards, and help formulate social policy about drugs at every level of government. They are "good citizens."

Educators can contribute to solving the problems posed by our society's addictions by supporting the calm and reasoned assessment of the issues and by seeing to it that schools, in their policies and practices, exemplify for our young a healthful and affirmative vision of society. □

Reference

Hoffman, Abbie. "Reefer Madness." *The Nation* (November 21, 1987): 581.

Alex Molnar is Professor, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, P.O. Box 413, Milwaukee, WI 53201, and Consultant for Contemporary Issues for *Educational Leadership*.

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