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## Schools Step Up Efforts to Fight Opioid Abuse

Measures include enlisting pharmacists, counseling and prevention programs

By  
**JEANNE WHALEN**

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Many U.S. schools are ramping up campaigns to prevent opioid abuse among students as evidence mounts of a growing problem.

Some are inviting pharmacists to schools to convey the dangers of prescription pills. Others are offering emergency counseling via text message. In some regions, schools are teaching a substance-abuse-prevention program developed at Cornell University to students as young as fourth grade.



Gilbert Botvin, developer of the Botvin LifeSkills program, which teaches children the proper way to use prescription drugs, joins Lunch Break.

The widening crisis of addiction to heroin, prescription painkillers and other opioids “has been very scary, very serious,” says Michael Lubelfeld, superintendent of an elementary- and middle-school district in Deerfield, Ill. “We want to do everything as a community to start addressing it at age 10, 11, 12, so when they are 23 they aren’t going to be addicted.”

The rate of U.S. children hospitalized for prescription-opioid overdoses [more than doubled](#) over a 16-year period ending in 2012, according to a study in JAMA Pediatrics last month.

Particularly at risk were 1- to 4-year-olds, who most likely swallowed their parents' medications, and older teens who abused the drugs or attempted suicide, the researchers said.

Hospitalizations for heroin overdoses among teens 15 to 19 nearly tripled over the same period, from 0.96 to 2.51 per 100,000 teens, the study showed.

The roots of the crisis lie in widespread prescribing of painkillers that created a generation of opioid addicts among adults and children, public health experts say.

Because opioid addiction often begins with misuse of prescription painkillers, [CVS Health](#) Corp. last year started sending pharmacists to schools to warn about the dangers. The pharmacists gave nearly 3,000 presentations in 40 states in the 2015-16 school year.

Kayla Mays, a CVS pharmacist who has given presentations in Atlanta-area schools, says she rattles off a list of generic and brand-name prescription painkillers—Lortab, Norco, OxyContin, fentanyl and others—and asks kids to raise their hands if they have heard of them. “There is a lot of giggling around names like Percocet or OxyContin,” she says, “because those drugs are mentioned in a lot of pop songs.”

But the mood turns serious when Ms. Mays plays a video describing the downward spiral of four teens who got hooked on prescription medication, she says. Drug overdoses killed one of the students and paralyzed another; two others made it into rehab. “The video really demonstrates this can happen to anybody—good kids, athletes, anybody,” Ms. Mays says.

CVS this summer paid \$3.5 million to settle federal allegations that 50 of its pharmacies in Massachusetts and New Hampshire filled forged prescriptions for painkillers and other controlled substances. The company says it has “implemented enhanced policies” to help its pharmacists “determine whether a controlled substance prescription was issued for a legitimate medical purpose.”

In the suburbs north of Chicago and east of Los Angeles, some schools are trying a new texting tool that connects kids to a counselor within minutes. Kids send their questions anonymously—

the system hides their phone numbers—and can use the service to seek help for themselves or a friend, says Andy Duran, executive director of Linking Efforts Against Drugs, or LEAD, a nonprofit in Lake Forest, Ill., that developed the tool, called Text a Tip.

Licensed therapists are on-call round the clock to respond. “We have had kids text at a party and say, ‘There are kids using around me and I don’t know what to do.’ So we respond and say, ‘Can you distract yourself, can you leave, can you call a friend or adult to pick you up?’” says Dana Slowinski, who oversees the therapist team. “Because what we find is, in the moment kids are not thinking through their options.”

More than 100 school districts in Illinois and California are using Text a Tip. To cover the program’s costs, LEAD charges each district about \$7,500 a year for the service, plus a per-student fee of about 49 cents.

The Jordan Michael Filler Foundation, established by the family of a young man who died of a heroin overdose in 2014, helped finance the cost of the texting service for eight schools in Highland Park and Deerfield, Ill. The foundation also helped fund a substance-abuse-prevention program, called Botvin LifeSkills Training, in the schools.

Botvin LifeSkills was developed by Gilbert Botvin, a professor emeritus at Weill Cornell Medical College in New York. Conducted in as many as 15 sessions over several weeks, the program teaches kids the traits they need to resist pressure to abuse substances, including self-esteem and strong problem-solving and decision-making skills.

One study in middle-school children in Iowa and Pennsylvania found that use of the Botvin program “significantly reduced” the chances of students taking prescription opioids for nonmedical purposes by grade 12, compared with a control group that didn’t receive the training, according to results published in 2014 in the journal *Preventive Medicine*.

Julie Filler, the mother of the young man who died, said it took a while to convince some of the schools to accept the help. “The communities don’t want to talk about it because they want people to buy houses here,” she says of drug addiction.