

The Impact of Youth Substance Use in Schools and How To Provide Support

NATIONAL
COUNCIL
for Mental
Wellbeing

An Interview with Student Outreach Specialists

GETTING CANDID YOUTH AMBASSADOR ISADORA PAUL CONDUCTED THIS INTERVIEW.

I have personally seen the impact of substance use in the Arlington, Texas, community -- especially on our youth -- and I want to help fight for our youth's health and lives. For this interview, I spoke with Lashana Tolman, L.C.S.W., and Marcie Thomas, L.C.P.A., two members of the student outreach staff at James Bowie High School in Arlington. Tolman and Thomas shared their insights on the impact of substance use on students, how school administration can make a difference and opportunities to support prevention efforts. Here is our conversation, edited for clarity.



Lashana Tolman, L.C.S.W.

Student Outreach Services
Drug and Alcohol Specialist
James Bowie High School, Texas



Marcie Thomas, L.C.P.A.

Student Outreach Support
Licensed Professional Counselor Assistant
James Bowie High School, Texas



WHAT IS YOUR ROLE IN SUBSTANCE USE PREVENTION?

Lashana Tolman (LT): When students return from alternative schools¹, they are referred to me to aid them with issues with substance use to offer resources for long-term rehabilitation.

Marcie Thomas (MT): Students who are struggling with substance use are referred to me.² 

 Resource from the National Council for Mental Wellbeing


¹ Alternative schools are designed to educate students struggling within the traditional school setting for reasons including behavioral issues or learning disabilities.


² Check out the [Getting Candid Message Guide](#) and Youth Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment (YSBIRT) resources for tools on effective conversations and early intervention.



HOW HAVE YOU SEEN SUBSTANCE USE IMPACT THE LIVES OF YOUTH AT JAMES BOWIE HIGH SCHOOL?


LT: Substance use in our students starts as early as second grade, so by the time they get to high school, substance use has been present for most of their lives. Cannabis has become a new sort of coping mechanism. These unhealthy coping mechanisms make substance use even more prevalent in our communities. Cannabis is now more addictive than it used to be, and substance use among youth has become a social epidemic. When kids in our district are caught using or having drugs, they are sent to alternative schools. When their time there is over, they are introduced back into the same environment where drugs are easily accessible, making long-term rehabilitation that much harder.

In addition, opioids can be laced with fentanyl, or youth may sell substances without being aware of the components and chemicals. The chemicals present in these drugs, such as THC in cannabis, affect memory and judgment, and also mental state. Over time, the body deems these substances as a need, making tolerance increase. This greatly impacts our students academically, and it makes it difficult for students to reap the benefits of their education.³ 

MT: Rehabilitation efforts are very slim, and the transition from alternative to regular school makes substance use even more mainstream in our school. Last semester, 174 kids in our district were sent to an alternative school due to substance use/substance dealing: 59 in the first six weeks of school, which is already more than last year's total cases. We had three overdoses last semester alone.⁴ 



WHAT EFFORTS HAVE THE ADMINISTRATION AND ADULTS AT THE SCHOOL TAKEN TO INTEGRATE SUBSTANCE USE PREVENTION HERE AT BOWIE?

LT: Our district took the initiative to establish a district-wide drug and alcohol committee to battle substance use and provide rehabilitation in our community. Administration is contacted with initial findings of observing a kid with substances, and the protocol is to temporarily send the student to an alternative school. While at an alternative school, the Drug and Alcohol Specialist works with them for six weeks. When they return from the alternative school, they are referred to professionals such as us to aid them. We aid them in instituting healthy coping mechanisms, teaching proper life skills and shifting their perspective and mindset for dealing with peer pressure. We are only here as short-term aid, so it's up to the community and surrounding adults to provide the tools and resolve to prevent substance use from continuing in our community.⁵ 




³ Take a look at the [Cannabis Resource Center](#) for more information about health risks of cannabis, cannabis products and state policies.

⁴ View the [Three Things You Should Know About Marijuana](#) resource for youth and [What You Need to Know About Youth and Fentanyl](#) for more information about fentanyl and how to prevent overdoses.

⁵ View these resources on [building trust and rapport with youth](#), [implementation tools](#) and [peer pressure](#).



WHAT CAN YOUTH DO TO INCREASE SUBSTANCE PREVENTION EFFORTS IN THEIR SURROUNDING COMMUNITIES?

MT: It's important that youth first recognize the mental health aspect of substance use in our community, as there are many reasons why people choose to partake in substance use. Things such as trauma, familial situations and depression are major contributors to substance use. Our youth need to understand the importance of healthy coping mechanisms. Being aware of the substance use going around them, such as the fentanyl overdoses in our Texas community, and spreading that information to friends helps aid in preventing others from partaking. These substances are easily accessible, so being aware of the risks and issues present and knowing how to say no to peer pressure aid heavily in the fight against youth substance use.⁶ 



WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE ADULTS AND ADMINISTRATION CAN DO TO INCREASE SUBSTANCE USE PREVENTION EFFORTS IN SCHOOLS AND THE COMMUNITY?

MT: Administration and adults need to realize that substance use isn't a short-term issue, but rather one that requires long-term intervention and aid. Mental health and community go hand in hand, and offering effective outlets for youth to process their circumstances and issues is extremely helpful. Making sure youth are 100% aware of the risks of partaking in these harmful substances, and how these substances can affect their psyche and processing, is equally important.

It all starts with conversation.

LT: Most of the time when adults and administration are met with a student struggling with substance use, the initial response is consequence and not sympathy. The environment surrounding youth plays a big role in substance use, and it's important to actively seek and aid kids who are struggling with substance use with sympathy and intervention, not immediate consequence.

Information in these cases is key, especially sharing information regarding substance use and mental health resources.⁷ 

⁶ Share this [youth-focused webpage](#), including substance fact sheets and videos from social media influencers who choose not to use with youth to equip them with knowledge and tools to avoid substance use.

⁷ View the [Risk and Protective Factors worksheet](#) and [Six Recommendations to Create Safer Spaces for Young People](#).



IF SOMEONE IN THE YOUTH COMMUNITY IS READING THIS ARTICLE AND MAY BE STRUGGLING WITH SUBSTANCE USE, OR SOMEONE THEY KNOW IS STRUGGLING WITH SUBSTANCE USE, WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE THEM TO GET HELP OR START THE CONVERSATION AROUND SUBSTANCE USE?

LT: It's important to first acknowledge that there is a root cause of someone's substance use, and that the substance use came from something deeper within a person. There is usually a cause for these instances, whether it be a coping mechanism for life events or peer pressure. Acknowledging that there is an issue occurring and seeking long-term help is a must. It's also important to meet these circumstances with sympathy and understanding, rather than consequence.

MT: At the end of the day, wanting help and to truly change has to come from inside a person. Substance use disorder isn't just a one-case thing, but rather is a thing that communities face together. Being aware of the substance use and acknowledging it is the first step to helping oneself. After the person is made aware and cognizant, they should seek initial aid from an adult with knowledge on substance use and continue to seek long-term aid.

View our resources for tools to support your conversations with you about substance use.

- » [Communications Pathway](#)
- » [Motivational Interviewing Tips for Engaging with Youth](#)



About the Author

Hello, my name is **Isadora Paul**, and I am from Arlington, Texas. I decided to do this interview in connection with the Getting Candid project to give youth and providers a resource to gain a deeper perspective on substance use. I have personally seen the impact of substance use in the Arlington community, especially on our youth, and I want to help fight for our youth's health and lives. I am an incoming freshman at the University of Texas in Arlington, majoring in philanthropy. I hope to establish a career in non-profits and continue work such as this in the future.

This project is supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of a financial assistance award totaling \$1,500,000 with 100% funded by CDC/HHS. The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by CDC/HHS or the U.S. Government.