

**LGBTQ Center OC Elevate Youth  
Elevate Youth II- Key Informant  
Interviews Results N=10  
Dates: 8/1 - 9/4/2024**

The Elevate Program aims to provide Orange County youth and students with the opportunity to gain a greater knowledge about their community, develop strong leadership skills, and gain experience in restorative justice and substance prevention advocacy. The staff assessed expulsion and suspension policies as they relate to substance use and possession within specific communities in Orange County. Key Informant Interviews were conducted to gain perspectives and opinions from high school students. Ten (10) high school students participated in the Elevate II- Key Informant Interviews. The Interviews took place via Zoom on 8/1 - 9/4/2024 and were conducted by Cezar Hernandez and assisted by Jules Landin.

### **Key Informant Interview Results**

When the participants were asked **“Do you think drug use on middle/high school campuses is a problem?”**, the following was shared. Some participants view it as a significant issue, noting increased accessibility and its growing prevalence, especially with substances like vaping products. Others recognize drug use as a problem but suggest it is a symptom of broader social issues and varies by location. A few individuals express uncertainty about the extent of the problem due to limited knowledge. Overall, there is a general agreement that drug use is a concern, but its impact can differ depending on the specific school or community context.

When the participants were asked **“What are some of the risk factors that cause people in your age group to abuse substances? Are you aware of any minority groups in your community that are more affected by substance abuse?”**, the following was shared. Participants identified several risk factors for substance abuse among their age group, including peer pressure, family problems, and mental health struggles. Many emphasized that youth in foster care or from low-income backgrounds, particularly Latinx/Hispanic and Black/African American communities, may be more vulnerable due to less supervision and support. Issues such as disillusionment with the future, high stress from school, and lack of a strong social support network were also noted as contributing factors. While some participants mentioned specific minority groups being more affected, others indicated a general lack of awareness or direct experience with these issues. Overall, peer pressure and family-related problems were commonly cited as significant drivers of substance abuse among teens.

When the participants were asked **“Are you aware of your school’s current policies for middle/high school students found with drugs? If so, what are the policies or consequences? Do you agree with these policies or consequences?”**, the following was shared. Responses about school policies for students found with drugs indicate varied opinions and levels of awareness. Many participants are aware that common consequences include suspension, parental notification, and in severe cases, expulsion. Some believe these measures are appropriate, arguing that they help maintain school discipline. However, several others criticize the policies for being overly punitive and not supportive enough, suggesting that they focus too much on punishment rather than rehabilitation. They advocate for a more supportive approach that includes mental health resources and counseling.

A few participants mentioned that the policies are not clearly communicated or consistently enforced, leading to mixed opinions on their effectiveness and fairness. Overall, while there is recognition of the need for consequences, there is also a strong call for integrating support and rehabilitation into the school's response to substance use.

When the participants were asked **“What would you like to see happen when students are found with illegal drugs at middle or high schools? How can your school support students who are caught with illegal drugs? Probe: How would administrators (e.g., principal, vice principals) handle this? Probe: How should administrators handle this?”**, the following was shared. Participants suggested several approaches for handling students found with illegal drugs at middle and high schools, with a focus on both punitive measures and supportive interventions. Many advocated for a combination of disciplinary actions, such as confiscation of drugs, suspension, and parental involvement, alongside increased support. They emphasized the need for schools to provide counseling and mental health resources, with some suggesting dedicated support staff or programs to address substance abuse more effectively. Some participants criticized current policies for being too punitive and not offering sufficient help, recommending a shift towards rehabilitation and support rather than just punishment. They highlighted the importance of confidentiality, understanding students' backgrounds, and creating safe spaces for discussion and support. Overall, while there is support for enforcing rules, there is a strong call for integrating more supportive measures to help students overcome substance use issues.

When the participants were asked **“What strategies do you think would be useful in preventing or eliminating drug use among youth?”**, the following was shared. Participants suggested a variety of strategies for preventing or reducing drug use among youth, emphasizing both preventive education and supportive measures. They recommended promoting alternative coping mechanisms, such as drawing or writing, to help students manage their emotions without resorting to substances. Enhancing drug prevention education through real-life stories and awareness programs was seen as crucial, as was increasing access to counseling and mental health support within schools. Participants also highlighted the importance of engaging parents by informing them about substance use realities, as family dynamics often play a significant role. Additionally, they suggested improving school policies and supervision, such as more frequent bathroom checks, while cautioning against overly punitive measures. Overall, a combination of education, support systems, and proactive engagement with students and families was viewed as essential for effective prevention.

When the participants were asked **“What do you think the impact of drugs has been (positive or negative) as it relates to folks in your community?”**, the following was shared. The impact of drugs on various communities has been predominantly negative, according to participants. Many emphasized the harmful long-term effects on health and well-being, noting that drug use often exacerbates issues such as homelessness and contributes to social stigma. In some communities, such as those historically targeted or overpoliced, drugs have reinforced negative stereotypes and led to heightened awareness of their dangers.

In marginalized groups, like the queer and neurodivergent communities, there is a notable stigma and reluctance to address drug use openly. Participants also observed that while some positive developments include the emergence of programs aimed at preventing youth substance use, the increased availability of drugs, particularly vapes, complicates efforts to combat drug abuse. Overall, the pervasive negative impact includes increased isolation, mental health struggles, and a tarnished community reputation.

When the participants were asked **“Do you think that there are marginalized student groups that are at a greater risk for being pushed out of school because of substance use/abuse? Which groups in particular (LGBTQ youth, BIPOC youth, Latinx/e youth)?”**, the following was shared. Participants indicated that marginalized student groups, particularly those from lower-income backgrounds and students of color, are at a greater risk of being pushed out of school due to substance use or abuse. They noted that BIPOC youth, including Black, Latinx, and LGBTQ+ students, face systemic biases and harsher disciplinary actions, which can lead to higher rates of suspension or expulsion. This disproportionate impact is exacerbated by socio-economic factors and racial stereotypes. Many participants emphasized that students from marginalized backgrounds often encounter additional challenges such as lower income, fewer opportunities, and heightened scrutiny, which increase their vulnerability to substance-related issues and punitive school policies.

When the participants were asked **“Are you aware of the internal or external school services that currently exist at your school to support students who have been affected by drug use or abuse? Do you think they’re effective? Are there specific services that should exist if they do not already?”**, the following was shared. Participants generally reported limited awareness and effectiveness of existing school services for supporting students affected by drug use or abuse. While some mentioned that counselors and general awareness programs, like Drug Free Week, are in place, they often feel these resources are insufficient or inadequately funded. Many expressed that current services, such as counseling or mediator options, are either underfunded, ineffective, or lack a focus on substance abuse specifically. There is a strong call for more targeted and well-supported programs that not only provide immediate support but also offer long-term solutions, such as counseling with mental health professionals, coping skills development, and comprehensive substance abuse programs. Participants emphasized the need for programs that are genuinely supportive and well-resourced, rather than punitive, to truly address and help students struggling with substance abuse.

When the participants were asked **“Does your school offer post treatment support for drug use or abuse?”**, the following was shared. Participants generally reported that their schools do not offer post-treatment support for drug use or abuse. Most expressed uncertainty or confirmed that such support is either lacking or nonexistent. Responses suggest that after initial disciplinary actions like suspension or expulsion, there is little to no follow-up assistance provided to help students recover or reintegrate. The prevailing sentiment is that schools primarily focus on punitive measures rather than offering ongoing support or counseling to address the underlying issues related to substance use.

Overall, the Key Informants provided valuable and useful information that the project staff will use to determine methods, materials, and messages to facilitate working with youth in Orange County.