

66% of underage pupils binge-drink in Western Cape

Mayco member for community services and health Zahid Badroodien said a provincial survey on substance use, risk behaviour and mental health among Grade 8 to 10 learners conducted in 2011 also found that the most frequently reported substance used was alcohol, with 66% of learners reporting use out of a group of 20 227 sampled.

He said about 22,3% of learners reported binge drinking in the two weeks prior to the study and 10% reported being drunk on a weekly basis. There are now calls for a more recent survey which could show even higher percentages.

Yesterday provincial education department spokesperson Bronagh Hammond said it has received 50 expulsion recommendations for alcohol and drug abuse from January till June this year, of which 13 pupils were expelled. Prof. Charles Parry, director of the Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drug Research Unit at the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC) said alcohol use has been linked to absenteeism, failing grades, dropping out of school, risky sexual behaviour (including teen pregnancy) and being injured.

Parry said alcohol use, particular 'binge drinking' is also harmful in terms of adolescent brain development - the brain develops until the early 20s and alcohol affects brain development. Parry said the last comprehensive school survey in the Western Cape was conducted in 2011. "It is time we had another high school survey looking at adolescent risk behaviour," he said. He said getting the 2017 Western Cape Alcohol Harm Reduction White paper approved by the provincial parliament would be a good start to reduce alcohol consumption in schools.

"Other things to consider that would have an impact on youth accessing and binge drinking - increase excise taxes, prosecute people selling to underage persons and closing outlets for a week or two who are caught doing so would be a good start, more comprehensively limiting youth exposure to alcohol marketing and raising the drinking age to 19," Parry said.

Hammond said they were fully aware of the challenges around drug and alcohol use and abuse by pupils and were working closely with partners in the Western Cape government and civil society in dealing with substance abuse among young people. She said while most drug and alcohol use took place at home or within the community, "the sad reality is that some learners do come to school in possession of or under the influence of illegal drugs. It is therefore not uncommon for the WCED to call on the police or City Law Enforcement to conduct random search-and-seizure operations at schools as a security measure," Hammond said.

Police spokesperson Noloyiso Rwexana said as part of partnership policing, police conduct awareness talks in various schools in the province to warn pupils about dangers of alcohol and drugs and consequences.

The Southern Africa Alcohol Policy Alliance spokesperson Aadielah Maker Diedericks said the government should adopt the National Liquor Amendment Bill of 2017. "It makes provision for a radius of no alcohol trading of 500m around schools."

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