

Pot Policy Sparks Student Debate

An initial email sent to parents said students under the influence of marijuana at school would be sent by ambulance to the hospital.

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By Maya McFadden, New Haven Independent

NEW HAVEN, CT — Should showing up stoned to school mean you should be sent by ambulance to the hospital? A Dixwell Avenue charter school said yes. Some Amistad school students aren't so sure.

That question about how a high school should best respond to under-the-influence students is at the center of Amistad's new marijuana use policy.

As described in an initial Oct. 13 email to parents, the policy calls for students under the influence of marijuana at school to be sent by ambulance to the hospital.

As clarified in a Thursday follow up email to parents, Amistad will send stoned students to the hospital by ambulance only if a school nurse first determines that they are in need of "urgent medical attention."

On Thursday, the Independent visited the 580 Dixwell Ave. charter school to talk with students as they left classes for the day about their thoughts on the drug-hospital policy.

Some agreed with the school's justification that this is a precautionary measure worth taking in order to prioritize student safety.

Others found the policy overly punitive for a substance that has now been legalized for adults and that some of their peers use to cope with traumatic events in their lives, or just to relax and enjoy themselves.

“Smoking is not a big issue,” one Amistad High School freshman named Nahfisaah told the Independent as she spoke out against the school’s pot-hospital policy. “Kids do it on a daily basis and, when they want to, some even do it around their parents.”

Another freshman named Gracey disagreed, saying the policy is a good idea because “you never know the effects it can have on your body.”

Two other Amistad students named Michael and Na’Karr stressed that the stresses of their and their peers’ lives often lead to smoking marijuana.

“You don’t know what they got going on at home,” Michael said.

“Why punish them for finding their peace?” Na’karr said.

An Amistad “communications consultant” named Jon Cetel, meanwhile, told the Independent that this policy was sent out by email on Oct. 13 and then on Oct. 20 as a precautionary measure. He said that no students have yet been sent from Amistad to the hospital by ambulance because of this policy.

The Amistad pot policy debate comes a year after the state legislature legalized adult-use marijuana in Connecticut, months after the Board of Alders has approved new zoning regulations for where legal adult-use cannabis businesses can open up around town, and as state regulators continue to work through cannabis business license applications. It also comes as the New Haven Public Schools (NHPS) district has sent middle school students to the hospital several times this year after different groups of students got sick from eating pot-filled edibles.

Amistad Policy: "The Student Will Leave With The Paramedics"

Amistad High School Principal Simon Obas first notified students’ families of the marijuana use policy in an Oct. 13 email.

“Marijuana use is an unfortunate reality for many students across the country,” Obas’s initial email read. “Even though our larger society has relaxed the laws somewhat regarding Marijuana, Amistad High School does not allow usage in our

building, and we are firm with this expectation. Clearly put, students cannot be in our building under the influence of any kind.”

He wrote that “having any student in the school building under the influence jeopardizes their own safety, as well as other members in the community.

“If it is brought to our attention that any student is under the influence, we will call the ambulance and the student will leave with the paramedics. The purpose here is to ensure safety and not punitive consequences. Please have a conversation with your child around the dangers of drug use. We want to make sure Amistad High School is a safe environment for every member.

On Thursday, Obas sent a follow-up email to parents to clarify the purpose of the policy.

“Even though many states are beginning to legalize adult-use marijuana, the reality is marijuana remains an illegal substance for minors and schools have a responsibility to partner with families to reach children about the dangers of drug use,” Obas wrote on Thursday.

“At Amistad, our number one priority is the health and well being of our scholars so they can thrive academically, emotionally, and socially. Unfortunately, the use of substances, including marijuana, can negatively impact our community and is something we take very seriously. Our policies around marijuana follow state guidance and are made in the interest of the health and safety of our community.”

Obas provided further details about how the school will respond if a student is under the influence. He made clear that an ambulance won’t be called for right away if a student is found to be stoned at school. Instead, a school nurse will evaluate a student first and then call for an ambulance only if they think the student needs “urgent medical attention.”

To quote directly from Obas’s Thursday email:

- *Scholars suspected to be under the influence of a substance will be immediately seen by the school nurse. If the nurse determines that the scholar is in need of urgent medical attention, the school will call emergency medical services.*
- *In alignment with CT guidance and our Family Handbook, the presence and use of controlled substances, including marijuana, are prohibited on school grounds.*

- *Any situation involving the use of marijuana, or other controlled and prohibited substances, will be addressed respectfully and with involvement of families.*
- *School leadership is responsible for addressing these situations, however the school will thoughtfully engage local authority when necessary in alignment with CT legal guidance.*

"Kids Are Going To Be Kids"

During dismissal time on Wednesday and Thursday afternoons, students shared their thoughts with the Independent about the school's marijuana policy.

Several students described the policy as "unfair" and "extra."

Some students said unless it is a medical emergency, an ambulance shouldn't be called for students under the influence.

Instead, some students said, those students in question should have their guardians contacted immediately to discuss the student's drug use.

While walking to a neighboring store after school, ninth-graders Nahfisaah and Heaven said they think the policy is "extra."

"It's unfair because if kids want to smoke, they should be able to do it in an area where you can't smell it, like the outside field," said Nahfisaah.

Nahfisaah argued students under the influence of marijuana should receive punitive consequences for their actions only if they are not performing well academically or behaviorally.

"If it's causing a problem, they could give them a warning for their first time, then a detention or something if it happens two times, and for the third time they could get the police or something involved," she said.

Nahfisaah said during the school day administrators have set bathroom occupancy limits to three at a time and stand outside the bathroom to keep students from smoking in the bathroom.

Heaven, 13, said an ambulance should be called only for serious medical emergencies, like a student passing out.

“If it’s not a problem with the kids’ parents and family, then the school can’t really say anything,” Heaven argued.

A fellow first-year named Gracey disagreed. She argued that the policy is necessary, that safety should be the school’s most important priority. A number of students interviewed said students should not be punished for marijuana use off school property, even if that marijuana use causes them to be under the influence at school.

“Calling an ambulance is too much,” junior Taj said. “If someone smokes everyday, are they going to do it everyday?”

Her friends Yami and Asia agreed and said the most the school can do is try to help the students find a staff member they are comfortable with to talk about why they are using marijuana. “Some people use it as an escape,” Asia said. “Regardless of what the school does, they going to do it weather its behind their back or in their face.” “Calling an ambulance waste their time and our time,” Yami said. “Kids are going to be kids.”

Another student interviewed, a senior, said he smokes marijuana almost daily and that’s because it helps him and his friends cope with “hard shit at home.” He said his marijuana use helps him to focus during school, as well as his friends, many of whom have straight A’s and are smart, he said.

“If smoking is my way of therapy, why are you punishing me for coping just so I can come to school and get an education?” another student said. “That can lead to depression if you take it away.”

"Why Are You Punishing Me For Coping?"

While taking a quick walk to the store before getting to after-school extracurriculars Na’karr, Michael, and Kailey emphasized the “therapeutic” role using marijuana has for some of their peers.

“At the end of the day, marijuana has become legal, and a lot of teens are smoking it,” Na’karr said. “If they call an ambulance for every kid they catch high, do you know how many kids will miss school and lose out on getting an education?”

Michael and Na’karr also agreed that punishing students for marijuana use can cause them to act up in school or become depressed after having no way to cope

with their difficult home lives. They said students are dealing with pressures like poverty and constant deaths of family and friends due to gun violence.

Na'karr agreed that students should not deal drugs on school property.

As for punishing students who are stoned, Kailey said, "I say let them be because they're not harming anybody."

While walking to the bus stop Wednesday, Jada, 15, said even with the school's policy, she feels her peers won't stop consuming marijuana in and outside of school.

"No kid should be coming to school high," argued Jada, who is a junior. "A lot of kids do it because it's normalized so they [schools] can only do so much."

Jada said although she feels a student under the influence of marijuana poses no real danger to her, it can raise safety concerns for a student under the influence who is "smoking without even being fully developed."

"Later on in life it will hit you, and it won't be good," she added.

Another 15-year-old old who declined to share her name for this article said she knows of classmates who have been caught smoking this school year. "They don't really take it serious," the student said.

The sophomore described some of her peers as "rebels" who "won't stop no matter what."

Last year, the student said, she knew of classmates who ate marijuana-infused edibles and "threw up all day until they were sent home."

NHPS: Suspension, Then Expulsion

The Independent asked New Haven Public Schools (NHPS) spokesperson Justin Harmon about the public school district's pot policy. He directed this reporter to the NHPS student and family handbook, which details progressive consequences for drug use, possession, and sales on school property.

That policy reads in part:

"The possession, use, and sale of controlled substances is a violation of the State Statutes and the use of illicit drugs and unlawful possession and use of alcohol is wrong and harmful. Students found in possession and/or use of a controlled drug or

alcoholic beverage in school or on school property are subject to suspension and/or expulsion and arrest. Whenever a student is expelled for the sale or distribution of drugs or alcohol, the student will be referred for counseling and rehabilitation.

1. First Offense

A. The parent and the police are notified that the student is in possession of narcotics/alcohol. A Case Incident Report is filled out by the appropriate administrator.

B. A list of appropriate licensed agencies that can assess and treat drug and/or alcohol abuse will be given to the parent and student. This list will include:

i. Name of Agency ii. Contact person iii. Telephone number

C. The parent and the student informed that if alleged substance is tested and proved to be a controlled substance, student will be suspended for ten (10) days and referred to the police for further investigation.

2. Second Offense — Same steps are taken as above, but instead of suspension, the student will be recommended for expulsion.

A. Parent and police are notified of sale. A Case Incident Report is filled out by the appropriate administrator.

B. The parent and the student will be informed that, if the alleged substance is tested and proved to be a controlled substance, the student will be suspended for ten (10) days, arrested by the police, and considered for expulsion.

The directive does not apply to special education students who will be treated in accordance with the due process procedures of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).”

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