

Navigating the Fentanyl Crisis Among School-Aged Youth



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Introduction

"Navigating the Fentanyl Crisis Among School-Aged Youth" is a comprehensive course designed to equip educators with the knowledge and skills necessary to address the pressing issue of fentanyl use among school-aged youth. Educators play a crucial role in the well-being and development of students, and it is essential that they are informed and prepared to respond effectively to the challenges posed by the fentanyl crisis. Section 1 will lay the foundation by defining fentanyl and exploring its characteristics. This section will provide an in-depth overview of the prevalence and impact of fentanyl in the United States, highlighting its alarming rise and the specific risks it poses to school-aged youth. Understanding the nature of this crisis is crucial, as it directly affects the health and safety of students and the broader community. Section 2 will focus on practical strategies for responding to the crisis within educational settings. This section will highlight ways to recognize signs and symptoms of substance use among students, including specific red flags for fentanyl use and overdose risk. Through evidence-based approaches, educators will explore prevention, intervention, and harm reduction strategies that can be implemented to create safer and more supportive environments for students.

By the end of this course, participants will be equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively respond to the fentanyl crisis in their educational settings. Together, we will work toward creating safer and healthier environments for our students to thrive.

Section 1: The Fentanyl Crisis Defined

Section 1 will delve into the definition, characteristics, and scope of the fentanyl crisis. This section begins by examining the specific properties of fentanyl, a

synthetic opioid known for its potency and devastating effects. Following this, an overview of the fentanyl crisis in the United States is provided, offering insight into its prevalence, distribution, and impact on communities nationwide.

Understanding the gravity of this crisis is paramount for educators, as it directly impacts the health and well-being of school-aged youth and society as a whole. Through exploring the epidemiology of fentanyl use and overdose deaths among school-aged youth, along with demographic trends and affected populations, learners will gain a comprehensive understanding of the scope and impact of the crisis. Additionally, learners will analyze the various factors driving the crisis, including the influence of prescription opioids, illicit production and distribution of fentanyl in school communities, and the role of drug trafficking and online markets in facilitating access to fentanyl among youth. By comprehensively examining these aspects, educators will lay the groundwork for effective response strategies and intervention efforts within educational settings.

Definition and Characteristics of Fentanyl

What is Fentanyl?

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid drug, approved by the FDA for pain-relief, and estimated to be 100 times stronger than morphine and 50 times stronger than heroin (United States Drug Enforcement Administration [DEA], 2022). Fentanyl, first developed in 1959 and introduced as an intravenous anesthetic in the 1960s, is legally manufactured and distributed in the United States for medical use; however, it's also illegally made and sold on the streets (DEA). Over the past decade, there has been a significant increase in fatal overdoses linked to illegal fentanyl. This increase is mainly due to the production and distribution of fake pills that look like prescription drugs but contain deadly amounts of fentanyl. Young people may encounter illicitly manufactured fentanyl (IMF), which is frequently

mixed with other drugs to reduce production costs and increase addictiveness (National Council for Mental Wellbeing, 2022). IMF is commonly found in counterfeit pills that mimic legitimate medications like OxyContin, Xanax, and Adderall, as well as in liquid forms such as nasal sprays and eye drops. Fake prescription pills are easily accessible and can be bought on social media and other platforms. Additionally, a form known as "rainbow fentanyl," which is brightly colored and available in pill, powder, or block form, has been discovered in 26 states as of August 2022 (National Council for Mental Wellbeing).

Short-Term and Long-Term Effects of Fentanyl

Fentanyl is known by various street names like Apache, China Girl, and Tango & Cash (DEA, 2022). Like other opioids, fentanyl can make people feel relaxed, euphoric, and relieve pain, but it can also cause serious health risks such as slowed breathing, lowered blood pressure, nausea, fainting, and potentially fatal seizures. Similarly, misuse can cause agitation, an increase in heart rate and blood pressure, elevated body temperature, anxiety, paranoia, and in severe cases, convulsions, cardiovascular failure, stroke, or death from overdose (DEA, 2024).

Teenagers who misuse fentanyl face profound dangers, not only from the high risk of overdose but also from significant mental health challenges (Destinations for Teens Mental Health Treatment Center, 2023). The mental health of teens using fentanyl is also at risk as the drug can trigger or exacerbate conditions like anxiety, depression, and even lead to suicidal ideation. Furthermore, the addictive nature of fentanyl can quickly lead teens down a path toward addiction, a chronic condition that affects individuals throughout their lives.

What is a Fentanyl Overdose?

A fentanyl overdose occurs when an individual has ingested too much of the synthetic opioid fentanyl, either intentionally or accidentally (Seattle Public

Schools, 2024). Fentanyl's high potency makes it particularly dangerous, especially when mixed with other substances or when its strength is unknown. Symptoms of a fentanyl overdose can range from non-life-threatening effects like nausea, vomiting, and sleepiness to life-threatening effects such as slowed or irregular breathing, slowed heartbeat, unresponsiveness, and severe allergic reactions. Risk factors for a fentanyl overdose include the following:

- Mixing opioids with other substances
- Taking too many opioids
- Using opioids after a period of abstinence
- Having other health conditions
- Previous overdose experiences
- Using opioids obtained from non-pharmacy sources where the strength is uncertain.

Importantly, individuals who overdose on fentanyl typically do not experience sudden cessation of breathing, allowing for intervention before death occurs (Seattle Public Schools).

Understanding the Scope and Impact

Although fentanyl is legal for medical purposes, there has been a significant problem with the illegal distribution of fentanyl from legitimate sources. Theft, fraudulent prescriptions, and unauthorized distribution by various healthcare professionals, including doctors, nurses, and pharmacists, have contributed to fentanyl entering illegal markets (DEA). Over the past decade, there has been a sharp increase in fatal overdoses linked to the abuse of illicitly produced fentanyl. This trend is largely driven by the unauthorized manufacturing and distribution of

fentanyl and its variants, leading to widespread trafficking, distribution, and misuse of these potent substances (DEA).

Epidemiology of Fentanyl Use and Overdose Deaths

The crisis surrounding synthetic opioids, particularly fentanyl, has escalated dramatically, making it the leading cause of death for Americans aged eighteen to forty-five (Klobucista & Ferragamo, 2023). In 2021 alone, there were 80,411 deaths linked to these substances, a figure that vastly exceeds the number of U.S. military fatalities in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars post-9/11. Research from the Mayo Clinic and Yale University highlights a particularly alarming trend: deaths specifically from fentanyl nearly tripled from 2016 to 2021 (Klobucista & Ferragamo).

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the opioid epidemic by disrupting supply chains and forcing individuals to turn to less familiar drugs (Klobucista & Ferragamo, 2023). The social distancing measures implemented during the pandemic led to more isolated drug use, increasing the risk of fatal overdoses. The availability of illicit fentanyl has grown, often sold by drug cartels as counterfeit prescription opioids. In 2022 alone, the DEA reported seizing over fifty million fentanyl-laced fake pills—more than double the amount seized the previous year—with over half containing deadly doses of fentanyl. The extreme potency of fentanyl contributes to its heightened addictiveness and lethality; a mere two milligrams of the drug, comparable in quantity to ten to fifteen grains of table salt, can be fatal. This stark potency is a significant factor driving the ongoing crisis.

Demographics

In 2021, fentanyl emerged as the leading cause of drug overdose deaths across all regions and demographics in the U.S. (Klobucista & Ferragamo, 2023). However, the impact was more devastating to certain groups than to others. American

Indian and Alaska Native populations, Black individuals, younger adults, and men experienced disproportionately higher rates of fatal overdoses linked to fentanyl. Additionally, other specific demographic groups have been notably affected. Military veterans, individuals with disabilities, those who have experienced the loss of a spouse, renters, and the uninsured have all suffered disproportionately from the opioid crisis, with fentanyl playing a significant role in the increase in overdose deaths among these populations

A particularly alarming increase was observed among youth aged 10 to 19, where fatal fentanyl overdoses nearly doubled from 2019 to 2021 (Klobucista & Ferragamo, 2023). Further, in 2022, there was an average of 22 drug overdose deaths per week among adolescents aged 14 to 18 years old (UCLA Health, 2024). This surge has pushed the death rate to 5.2 per 100,000 for this age group, largely due to the presence of fentanyl in counterfeit prescription pills. American Indian and Alaska Native adolescents experienced overdose rates 1.82 times higher than their white counterparts between 2020 and 2022 (UCLA Health). Additionally, today's adolescents are more likely to use fentanyl in pill form, a shift from when the drug was primarily available as a powder.

The troubling rise in adolescent overdoses has continued to grow sharply, now equating to the loss of an entire high school classroom every week (UCLA Health, 2024). This makes drug overdoses the third leading cause of death in this demographic, trailing only behind firearm-related injuries and motor vehicle accidents. Interestingly, the spike in overdose deaths is not attributed to an increase in illicit drug use among teenagers, which has actually decreased over the past two decades—excluding cannabis, the rate of illicit drug use among 12th graders dropped from about 21% to 8% since 2002 (UCLA Health). Instead, the escalation in fatalities is due to the lethal nature of the drugs now available, particularly fentanyl. This potent synthetic opioid is often secretly added to counterfeit versions of commonly abused prescription medications like oxycodone

and benzodiazepines, significantly raising the risk of fatal overdoses among youth who might unknowingly consume them. This rise is also partly attributed to the accessibility of counterfeit pills sold through social media platforms, which has become a significant risk factor for this age group.

Young people may turn to prescription opioids for various reasons, such as curiosity, the influence of peers, or a desire to belong. One factor contributing to why teens and young adults may opt for prescription opioids is their accessibility compared to other drugs. Research indicates that 53% of individuals aged 12 or older who use prescription painkillers nonmedically get them from friends or relatives (Seattle Public Schools, 2024). Furthermore, the CDC has found that students who are prescribed opioids before finishing high school are 33% more likely to misuse these drugs after graduation (Seattle Public Schools). The risk of long-term opioid use also increases for those who take these medications following procedures like wisdom teeth extraction.

Factors Driving the Crisis

Identifying the primary factors behind the opioid crisis is challenging, but experts often cite several key contributors. The factors contributing to the rise in opioid use among youth include (DEA, 2022):

- **Increased availability of counterfeit pills:** With the proliferation of fake prescription drugs that often contain fentanyl, young people are more likely to encounter opioids. These counterfeit pills are designed to mimic legitimate medications like painkillers, anti-anxiety drugs, and stimulants.
- **Social media and technology:** Drug dealers use social media platforms to market and sell opioids through subtle advertisements using code words and emojis. Young people, frequent users of these platforms, can inadvertently or deliberately access these drugs.

- **Lack of awareness:** Many young individuals may not fully understand the risks associated with opioid use, especially when these drugs are disguised as common prescription medications.
- **Mental health issues and societal pressures:** Mental health struggles, stress, and peer pressure can lead some adolescents to experiment with drugs as a form of coping. Others may be influenced through social interactions.
- **Changes in drug use patterns:** While reports indicate that the overall use of illicit drugs among youth has declined, the dangerous trend of using potent synthetic opioids like fentanyl has surged, leading to an increase in overdose deaths despite a lack of increase in overall drug use.
- **Ease of access through informal networks:** Young people might obtain these drugs through peers, at parties, or other social settings, not realizing they might be laced with potent opioids.

As previously stated, young people are not using drugs at higher rates than before, but the drugs that they are using are more dangerous. Research shows that illicit drug use among youth has actually been stable or even declining over the years, but there has been a sharp increase in overdose deaths among adolescents aged 14-18. This rise is primarily due to fentanyl contaminating the market of counterfeit pills that mimic prescription drugs like benzodiazepines, ADHD medications, and opioids (National Institute of Drug Abuse [NIDA], 2022).

Section 1 Conclusion

Section 1 offers a comprehensive exploration of the definition, characteristics, and scope of the fentanyl crisis, crucial for understanding its impact on society, particularly school-aged youth. By understanding the properties of fentanyl, including its potency and dangerous effects, learners gain insight into the severity

of the crisis. Additionally, an overview of the crisis in the United States provides valuable context, highlighting its prevalence, distribution, and devastating consequences for communities nationwide.

Furthermore, the section provides a detailed analysis of the epidemiology of fentanyl use and overdose deaths among school-aged youth, along with demographic trends and affected populations. This examination reveals the alarming rise in overdose deaths, particularly among adolescents, and underscores the disproportionate impact on certain demographic groups, including American Indian and Alaska Native populations and Black individuals. Moreover, the section explores the factors driving the crisis, such as the increased availability of counterfeit pills, facilitated by social media platforms, and the lack of awareness among young people about the risks associated with opioid use. Additionally, societal pressures and changes in drug use patterns contribute to the escalating problem, highlighting the need for targeted intervention efforts within educational settings.

In Section 2, educators will explore proactive measures and intervention strategies to address the fentanyl crisis within school environments. By building upon the foundational understanding established in Section 1, educators will delve into practical approaches to promote awareness, prevent substance misuse, and support students affected by opioid addiction.

Section 1 Key Terms

Counterfeit Pills - Fake prescription drugs designed to mimic legitimate medications like painkillers, anti-anxiety drugs, and stimulants. These pills often contain fentanyl and are distributed illegally, posing a significant risk of overdose and death to users.

Epidemiology - The study of the distribution and determinants of health-related states or events in specified populations and the application of this study to the control of health problems.

Fentanyl - A powerful synthetic opioid that is often associated with high overdose risk.

Illicitly Manufactured Fentanyl (IMF) - Fentanyl that is produced illegally and sold on the streets. IMF is frequently mixed with other drugs to reduce production costs and increase addictiveness, posing significant health risks to users.

Opioid Crisis - A public health emergency characterized by the widespread misuse and addiction to opioid drugs, including prescription painkillers, heroin, and synthetic opioids like fentanyl.

Overdose - An excessive and dangerous dose of a drug, resulting in adverse physiological effects, ranging from non-life-threatening symptoms to potentially fatal consequences.

Potency - The strength or effectiveness of a drug, typically measured by its ability to produce a specific effect at a given dose. Fentanyl is renowned for its high potency, being estimated to be 100 times stronger than morphine and 50 times stronger than heroin.

Synthetic Opioid - A category of opioids that are chemically synthesized rather than naturally derived from opium poppies. Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid known for its potent analgesic effects.

Trafficking - The illegal trade or transportation of drugs, often involving the distribution and sale of controlled substances such as fentanyl.

Youth - Individuals in the early stages of life, typically referring to children and adolescents up to the age of 18, who are particularly susceptible to the influences of their environment and social factors.

Section 1 Reflection Questions

1. Consider the ethical implications of addressing substance use and addiction in a school setting. How can educators balance the need for support and intervention with respect for student autonomy and confidentiality?
2. Reflect on your own experiences with students who have been affected by substance use or overdose. How have these experiences influenced your perspective on the importance of addressing the fentanyl crisis within educational settings?
3. Analyze the factors driving the fentanyl crisis, such as the increased availability of counterfeit pills and the role of social media in facilitating access to opioids. How might these factors influence substance misuse among students in your school?
4. Reflect on the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic in exacerbating the fentanyl crisis. How have disruptions to traditional support systems and increased social isolation impacted substance use trends among youth in your community?
5. Consider the short-term and long-term effects of fentanyl outlined in the section. How might these effects manifest in the academic performance, behavior, and overall well-being of students who are struggling with substance use?

Section 1 Activities

1. **Analyze School Data:** Review student attendance, behavior, and academic performance data to identify any potential correlations with substance use trends. Look for patterns that may indicate a need for targeted intervention or support.
2. **Reflective Journaling:** Encourage students to keep reflective journals to document their thoughts, feelings, and observations related to substance use and the fentanyl crisis. Use journal entries as a basis for classroom discussions and personal growth.
3. **Parent-Teacher Communication:** Initiate conversations with parents and caregivers about the importance of open communication regarding substance use. Provide resources and guidance for discussing sensitive topics with their children.

Section 2: Responding to the Crisis in Educational Settings

As the fentanyl crisis continues to escalate, educational settings are increasingly recognized as critical arenas for addressing substance use and providing support to vulnerable youth. Section 2 delves into proactive strategies and intervention approaches tailored to the unique context of schools. Various strategies for early identification and intervention will be discussed, emphasizing the importance of recognizing signs and symptoms of substance use among students. This includes understanding behavioral indicators and red flags for fentanyl use and overdose risk within educational contexts. The implementation of evidence-based prevention programs, educator training initiatives, and school policies aimed at reducing harm and promoting student well-being will also be explored. Integrating

substance use education into the curriculum and fostering open discussions on the topic will empower students to make informed choices and challenge misconceptions about drugs. Furthermore, we'll highlight the importance of collaboration with families, communities, and external agencies, leveraging collective resources to support students effectively.

Recognizing Signs and Symptoms and Early Intervention

Physical & Behavioral Indicators of Fentanyl Use Among Youth

Fentanyl use, especially among teenagers, can manifest through various physical signs that may alert observers to the need for immediate intervention. One of the most notable signs is the presence of "pinpoint pupils," where the pupils become unusually small and do not respond normally to light changes (Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2024). Users might also exhibit signs of severe sedation; for instance, they could appear unusually sleepy, have trouble staying awake, or fall into sudden bouts of sleep. Respiratory distress is another critical symptom, characterized by slow, shallow breathing that can escalate to dangerous levels, potentially resulting in respiratory arrest. Physical unresponsiveness is also common, where the individual may seem limp and unable to react to stimuli. In some cases, users may exhibit cold, clammy skin or a bluish discoloration around the lips and fingernails, indicating insufficient oxygen levels in the blood. These symptoms reflect the potent impact of fentanyl as it depresses the central nervous system, and recognizing these signs can be vital for timely and potentially life saving intervention.

Behaviorally, identifying if a young person is using fentanyl can be challenging due to the subtle nature of some signs, but several behavioral changes can indicate possible misuse. It's important to be vigilant and observant as these changes

might be the first visible clues to a deeper issue. According to Destinations (2023), some key behavioral indicators include:

- **Sudden Changes in Mood:** Unexpected and dramatic shifts in mood, such as increased irritability, anxiety, or periods of intense euphoria, can be a sign of drug use.
- **Social Withdrawal:** If teenagers start to isolate themselves from family and friends, or lose interest in activities they previously enjoyed, it could be indicative of substance abuse.
- **Altered Sleep Patterns:** Fentanyl use can lead to excessive sleepiness or unusual sleep schedules, where the teen may seem lethargic during the day and awake at unusual hours.
- **Physical Appearance:** Neglect of personal hygiene and grooming can be a telltale sign. Look for sudden weight loss, unkempt appearance, and less attention to clothing and cleanliness.
- **Unexplained Absences or Poor School Performance:** Missing school frequently or a noticeable drop in academic performance may be linked to substance use issues.
- **Secretive Behavior:** If teenagers become secretive or defensive about their activities, or if you notice they are making secretive phone calls or hiding their phone screen, it could suggest they are hiding drug use.
- **New Peer Groups:** Abrupt changes in friendships, especially if the new friends are less known to the family or seem to exert a negative influence, can also be a red flag.

Recognizing these signs early can be crucial for intervening effectively to prevent further harm. If you suspect fentanyl use, it's important to approach the situation with care and seek professional help.

Prevention, Intervention, and Harm Reduction in Schools

Integrating Substance Use Education into the Curriculum

The importance of health education programs in schools cannot be overstated, especially when it comes to substance abuse prevention. According to the California Department of Education (2022), health education serves as a powerful, comprehensive platform to educate, inform, and empower youth to make well-informed decisions that promote good physical, mental, social, and emotional health throughout their lives. High-quality health education programs are centered on building skills and increasing health literacy for all students. Health literacy, as defined by the World Health Organization, encompasses cognitive and social skills that enable individuals to access, understand, and utilize information and services in ways that support and maintain good health (As cited in California Department of Education). By focusing on health literacy, educators aim to improve students' health and education outcomes while preventing substance use among youth.

California's Health Education Framework underscores the importance of substance abuse prevention across all grade levels. Beginning with general lessons for young students about healthy habits and resisting peer pressure, the curriculum progresses to more detailed discussions for older students on the effects of illicit drugs on adolescent brain development, and analysis of drug use and overdose statistics (California Department of Education, 2022). The framework emphasizes connecting health education with essential life skills such as critical thinking, decision-making, goal-setting, and relationship-building. Substance use prevention instruction is integrated into the curriculum at various grade levels, with specific lessons tailored to different age groups. For example, students are taught refusal skills as early as second grade and learn to identify external influences on drug use by fourth grade. As students progress through

middle and high school, they engage in role-playing exercises to practice responsible decision-making regarding opioids and explore the legal and statistical impacts of drug use, including opioid-related overdoses. These examples highlight the comprehensive approach taken by California's public-school system to address substance abuse prevention through health education. By providing students with knowledge, skills, and resources to make informed choices and resist peer pressure, schools play a crucial role in promoting lifelong health and well-being. Through collaborative efforts with educators, families, and communities, schools can effectively prevent substance use among youth and foster a supportive environment for positive decision-making and healthy behaviors.

Integrating substance use education into the curriculum equips students with critical knowledge about the dangers of fentanyl and other drugs, enhancing their ability to make informed decisions. This proactive educational approach fosters a deeper understanding of the consequences of drug use, potentially reducing experimentation and misuse among students. In 2024, a new law was enacted in Illinois that requires all school districts to include fentanyl education within their health curriculum starting with the 2024-2025 academic year (Terry, 2024). This legislation addresses both the legal and illicit aspects of fentanyl use, highlighting the drug's medical applications alongside its dangerous misuse. The curriculum will also cover the prevalence of drug lacing with fentanyl, explaining why and how often this occurs, which can provide critical, life-saving information to students. Moreover, the program aims to educate students on recognizing and responding to potential overdoses, an increasingly vital skill given the rise in opioid-related incidents. This educational initiative could significantly contribute to preventing fentanyl misuse and overdoses among students by raising awareness of the drug's potency and dangers. By understanding the contexts in which fentanyl is used and misused, students may be better equipped to make safer choices and help others in crisis situations.

Components of an Effective Fentanyl Education Program

An effective education program about fentanyl should emphasize several key components. Firstly, it's crucial to underscore the significant risks associated with purchasing "prescription" pain medications from unreliable sources, particularly due to the prevalence of fentanyl in these pills (Pettegrew, 2022). Students need to understand the challenges in visually distinguishing these counterfeit medications from legitimate ones, highlighting the potential dangers of obtaining drugs online or from the street. Secondly, the program should educate students about the symptoms of a fentanyl overdose, including dizziness, abnormal breathing, cold and clammy skin, and blue-colored lips and fingernails (Pettegrew, 2022). Recognizing these signs is essential for prompt intervention and potentially life-saving actions. Furthermore, students should be informed about the appropriate steps to take after a known or suspected overdose, such as immediately calling 911 and providing basic life support measures like CPR if necessary. Depending on applicable laws and the location of the overdose (e.g., on school property, at a student's home, or elsewhere), additional actions may be recommended. For instance, if naloxone is available, it should be administered promptly.

Within the context of applicable laws, young people should also be taught about their state's legal protections in regard to overdose prevention, often referred to as Good Samaritan laws. Many states have laws that protect individuals seeking medical assistance for drug-related overdoses. These laws ensure that those who seek help for themselves or others experiencing an overdose will not face charges or prosecution for possession of a controlled substance, even if evidence of possession is obtained during the emergency (SAMHSA, 2017). Good Samaritan laws, particularly overdose Good Samaritan laws, aim to address the reluctance of bystanders to seek emergency assistance during opioid-related emergencies due to fear of arrest or prosecution. These laws provide protection to both overdose

victims and those who call for help by shielding them from potential legal consequences. By removing barriers to seeking assistance, Good Samaritan laws encourage prompt action in opioid emergencies, potentially saving lives.

Lastly, the program should emphasize actions to avoid in the event of an overdose, such as putting victims into cold water, slapping them, or inducing vomiting (Pettegrew, 2022). These actions can exacerbate the situation and should be replaced with appropriate emergency response measures outlined previously. By covering these vital components, the education program can empower students with the knowledge and skills needed to respond effectively to fentanyl-related emergencies and potentially save lives.

Providing Access to Reversal Medication

Incorporating access to reversal medication like naloxone in schools is crucial for addressing the opioid crisis effectively. Naloxone, also referred to as Narcan, is a rapid-acting opioid reversal medication that can effectively rescue individuals experiencing fentanyl overdose, potentially preventing fatalities (Pettegrew, 2022). It's advisable, depending on local regulations, to ensure widespread availability of naloxone within school communities. Law enforcement officers or school resource personnel, typically the first responders to overdose emergencies, should ideally carry and be trained in naloxone administration. Furthermore, college campus clinics, pharmacies, and student health services should have naloxone readily available. Certain state laws, like those in California, Maryland, New Mexico, and New York, may even require public schools to stock naloxone and train school nurses and staff on its usage.

In Washington, a bill has been proposed to mandate naloxone availability in high schools of all sizes, expanding on a previous law limited to districts with 2,000 or more students (Deng, 2024). Advocates, including students from Lake Washington High School, emphasized the necessity of this expansion, highlighting the

collective trauma experienced by students, parents, teachers, and administrators in the face of overdoses. The bill has garnered support from first responders, police officers, and various stakeholders, with no opposition voiced during testimonies. Data from the 2022-2023 school year indicated at least 42 instances of naloxone use in schools (Deng). Additionally, the FDA's approval of naloxone for over-the-counter use and its increasing availability in drugstores have reinforced its role as a life-saving harm reduction measure. Furthermore, the state Health Care Authority launched the "Friends for Life" campaign, encouraging young adults and teens to carry naloxone and providing training on its administration (Deng).

This proactive approach not only prioritizes the health and safety of students but also demonstrates a commitment to providing comprehensive support and resources to address substance abuse issues within educational settings. Additionally, access to reversal medication empowers school communities to take proactive steps in combating the opioid epidemic, fostering a safer and more supportive environment for all students.

Counseling & Mental Health Support

In the midst of the fentanyl crisis among school-aged youth, it is imperative to recognize the interconnectedness of substance abuse and mental health issues. As identified by the US Surgeon General, the rise in adolescent substance abuse is part of a broader mental health crisis, which was further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (California Department of Education, 2024). To effectively address these intertwined challenges, schools must prioritize access to counseling and mental health support for students and their families. By increasing easily accessible school-based mental health services and substance abuse intervention programs, educational institutions can play a crucial role in supporting students who may be at risk of or affected by fentanyl use. Collaborating with local

community-based organizations to offer substance abuse intervention services on campus has shown promising results, particularly when utilizing harm reduction models that prioritize supportive interventions over punitive measures (California Department of Education). By implementing such initiatives, schools can provide vital support to students, families, and communities grappling with the impacts of the fentanyl crisis and the broader mental health challenges facing today's youth.

California is taking significant steps to enhance mental health support in schools. State Superintendent Thurmond's initiatives aim to recruit 10,000 new counselors and mental health professionals, offering aspiring professionals almost free graduate education if they commit to serving in California public schools (California Department of Education, 2022). This initiative will decrease counselor ratios, enabling proactive identification and prevention of substance abuse.

Furthermore, California has allocated \$7.9 billion in general fund investment for learning recovery grants, allowing schools to increase instructional time, provide literacy interventions, individualized tutoring, and mental health support services to students. Additionally, Title IV funds can be used for activities supporting safe and healthy students, further bolstering mental health resources in schools.

School counselors play a crucial role in assessing student needs and responding to emergencies. They establish rapport with students to evaluate their mental health and overall well-being, identifying if they require mental health support, coping skills, or family assistance. Additionally, counselors help raise awareness among educators, families, and students about the signs of opioid overdose, including pinpoint pupils, loss of consciousness, shallow breathing, and cold/clammy skin, enabling timely intervention and support. Therefore, initiatives like the ones in California are crucial to increasing mental health support in schools.

Educator & Bystander Training

Educator and bystander training play pivotal roles in addressing the fentanyl crisis within educational settings. Educators, including teachers, school counselors, and administrators, can benefit from comprehensive training programs that outline ways to recognize signs of fentanyl misuse and to respond effectively to potential overdose situations (Pettegrew, 2022). Training sessions should focus on educating school staff about the prevalence of fentanyl-laced counterfeit pills and the behavioral indicators of fentanyl use among students. By familiarizing educators with the symptoms of a fentanyl overdose, such as pinpoint pupils, respiratory distress, and unconsciousness, they can be better equipped to swiftly identify and respond to emergency situations.

Moreover, bystander training empowers students, staff, and other individuals within the school community to intervene in overdose scenarios effectively (Pettegrew, 2022). Training sessions should emphasize the importance of prompt action, including calling 911, administering naloxone if available, and providing basic life support measures such as CPR. Several organizations offer free online training in overdose prevention for bystanders, first responders, and other individuals and group members who want to be involved in such efforts. By equipping educators and bystanders with the knowledge and skills to recognize, respond to, and prevent fentanyl-related overdoses, schools can create safer environments for students and staff alike. Through ongoing training initiatives and awareness campaigns, educational institutions can play a crucial role in mitigating the impact of the fentanyl crisis on youth and fostering a culture of support and intervention within their communities.

Connecting Students and Families with Community Resources

One critical aspect of addressing the fentanyl crisis in educational settings is facilitating access to community resources and treatment services for students

and their families. Schools serve as vital hubs for identifying students in need of support and linking them with appropriate resources to address substance use disorders and related issues (Pettegrew, 2022). Educational institutions can establish partnerships with local community organizations, healthcare providers, and treatment facilities to ensure that students and families have access to a comprehensive range of support services. These resources may include substance abuse counseling, mental health treatment, peer support groups, and family therapy programs tailored to the unique needs of adolescents and young adults.

Furthermore, schools can play a proactive role in raising awareness about available resources and reducing the stigma associated with seeking help for substance use disorders (Pettegrew, 2022). By integrating information about community resources into health education curricula, school websites, and outreach materials, educators can empower students and families to seek support without fear of judgment or discrimination. Additionally, school personnel, such as counselors, nurses, and social workers, can serve as liaisons between students, families, and community service providers, facilitating referrals and coordinating care plans to ensure continuity of support. By fostering collaboration between schools and community partners, educational institutions can create a supportive network that promotes holistic well-being and resilience among students impacted by the fentanyl crisis.

Advocating for Policy Change and Promoting Youth Perspectives

As educators, it's crucial to understand the legislative initiatives and policy proposals that directly impact our students and communities. By staying informed about relevant policies, we can better advocate for the resources and support needed to address the fentanyl crisis effectively. Educators should familiarize themselves with legislative initiatives and policy proposals related to substance use prevention, treatment, and harm reduction efforts. This includes

understanding laws and regulations governing access to naloxone, funding for addiction treatment programs, and initiatives aimed at reducing stigma and promoting awareness (Seattle Public Schools, 2024) .

By staying informed about relevant policies, educators can better advocate for comprehensive and evidence-based approaches to addressing the fentanyl crisis in educational settings. This knowledge also enables educators to engage in informed discussions with policymakers and community stakeholders about the needs of students and families affected by substance use disorders (Seattle Public Schools, 2024). Educators play a vital role in advocating for policy changes that prioritize the well-being and safety of students. This includes engaging in advocacy efforts at the local, state, and federal levels to support legislation and initiatives that address the root causes of the fentanyl crisis and provide resources for prevention, intervention, and treatment. Teachers can participate in advocacy campaigns, attend community meetings, and communicate with elected officials to voice their support for policies that prioritize substance use prevention and support services in schools. By leveraging their collective voice and expertise, educators can influence policy decisions and ensure that the needs of students and families are represented in legislative discussions.

Youth perspectives are also essential in shaping effective policies and interventions to address the fentanyl crisis. Educators can empower students to share their experiences, insights, and concerns related to substance use through forums, surveys, and youth-led advocacy initiatives (Seattle Public Schools, 2024). By incorporating youth perspectives into policy development and advocacy efforts, educators can ensure that proposed solutions are relevant, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of young people. This collaborative approach not only promotes youth engagement and leadership but also fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment among students in addressing the fentanyl crisis in their communities.

Section 2 Conclusion

Section 2 underscores the critical role of educational settings in combating the fentanyl crisis and supporting the well-being of students. By implementing proactive strategies for prevention, intervention, and harm reduction, schools can effectively address substance use issues and mitigate the impact of fentanyl on youth. From early identification and intervention to integrating substance use education into the curriculum, educators are equipped with the tools and knowledge needed to empower students to make informed decisions and seek help when needed. Furthermore, fostering supportive environments, connecting students and families with community resources, and advocating for policy change are essential components of a comprehensive response to the fentanyl crisis. By working collaboratively with families, communities, and external agencies, educational institutions can create a network of support that promotes holistic well-being and resilience among students.

Section 2 Key Terms

Behavioral Indicators - Observable changes in behavior that may suggest substance use, such as mood swings, social withdrawal, or secretive actions.

Community Resources - Local services and support systems, including healthcare providers and treatment facilities, available to assist students and families.

Critical Thinking - A key skill promoted in health education, involving analysis and evaluation of information to make informed decisions.

Evidence-Based Prevention Programs - Interventions and strategies that are supported by research and proven to be effective in preventing substance use.

Fentanyl Education - Curriculum content focused on the risks and effects of fentanyl use, aimed at educating students about the dangers of this drug.

Good Samaritan Laws - Legal protections that encourage individuals to seek emergency help for overdoses without fear of prosecution for drug possession.

Health Literacy - The ability to access, understand, and use health information and services to make informed health decisions.

Harm Reduction - Strategies and policies aimed at reducing the negative consequences of drug use, rather than solely focusing on eliminating drug use.

Intervention - Actions taken to identify and address substance use issues early, preventing escalation.

Naloxone - A medication that can rapidly reverse opioid overdoses, also known by the brand name Narcan.

Overdose - A potentially life-threatening condition resulting from consuming too much of a substance, such as fentanyl.

Peer Pressure - Social influence from peers that can lead individuals to engage in behaviors, including substance use.

Pinpoint Pupils - A physical sign of opioid use where the pupils become very small and unresponsive to light changes.

Respiratory Distress - Difficulty in breathing, a critical symptom of opioid overdose.

School-Based Mental Health Services - Mental health support provided within the school setting to help students manage and improve their mental health.

Section 2 Reflection Questions

1. Reflect on your school's current policies and practices related to substance use prevention and intervention. In what ways are these efforts aligned

with the strategies outlined in the section, and what areas might require additional support or resources?

2. Reflect on the importance of providing access to reversal medication like naloxone in schools. How feasible is it to implement this in your school, and what steps would be necessary to make it happen?
3. How is substance use education currently integrated into your school's curriculum? What improvements or changes could be made to enhance its effectiveness, particularly regarding fentanyl awareness?
4. Reflect on the training initiatives for educators mentioned in the section. How well-prepared do you feel your school's staff is to handle substance use issues? What additional training might be necessary?
5. Reflect on your ability to identify the physical and behavioral signs of fentanyl use among students. How confident are you in recognizing these signs, and what additional training or resources might you need to improve your skills in this area?

Section 2 Activities

1. **Peer Education Program:** Explore the possibility of implementing a peer education program focused on substance use prevention. Train student leaders to deliver peer-led workshops, presentations, or awareness campaigns.
2. **Policy Review:** Review school policies and procedures related to substance use prevention, intervention, and support. Identify areas where policy updates or revisions may be needed to better address the fentanyl crisis.

3. **Survey Development:** Develop a survey instrument to gather data on students' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors related to substance use. Pilot the survey with a small sample of students to ensure clarity and relevance before administering it school-wide. Analyze the survey responses to gain insights into students' experiences and inform prevention efforts.
4. **Create a Resource Library:** Compile a list of reliable resources (websites, articles, videos) on fentanyl use and prevention to share with students, teachers and parents. Include a guide listing community resources for substance abuse counseling, treatment centers, and support groups. Distribute this guide to students and families. Ensure it includes up-to-date and relevant information.
5. **Behavioral Indicators Checklist:** Create a checklist of physical and behavioral indicators of fentanyl use. Share this checklist with fellow educators to aid in early identification.

Course Conclusion

It is evident that educators play a vital role in addressing the pressing issue of fentanyl use among students. Throughout this comprehensive course, we have explored the multifaceted nature of the fentanyl crisis and equipped educators with the knowledge and skills necessary to respond effectively. In Section 1, we laid the foundation by defining fentanyl and examining its characteristics. By understanding the prevalence and impact of fentanyl in the United States, educators gained valuable insight into the specific risks it poses to school-aged youth. Recognizing the gravity of this crisis is essential, as it directly affects the health and safety of students and the broader community.

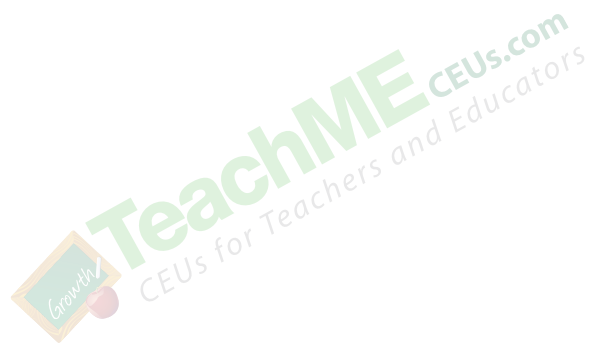
Section 2 focused on practical strategies for responding to the crisis within educational settings. From recognizing signs and symptoms of substance use among students to considering evidence-based prevention, intervention, and harm reduction strategies, educators explored proactive approaches to create safer and more supportive environments for students. Participants are now equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively take action in response to the fentanyl crisis in their educational settings. Together, we have taken significant steps toward creating safer and healthier environments for our students to thrive. It is through our collective efforts and commitment to action that we can make a meaningful difference in the lives of those affected by the fentanyl crisis.

School Site Example

Mrs. Porta, a dedicated high school health education teacher, found herself confronting a daunting challenge as the fentanyl crisis intensified within her community. Despite her expertise in health education, Mrs. Porta faced several specific challenges within her school environment while navigating the complexities of the fentanyl epidemic. One of Mrs. Porta's primary challenges was the lack of awareness and understanding among students, staff, and parents regarding the prevalence and dangers of fentanyl. Many individuals within the school community were unaware of the specific risks associated with this synthetic opioid, making it difficult to initiate meaningful conversations and implement effective prevention strategies.

Despite recognizing the urgent need for intervention and support, Mrs. Porta encountered limitations in the resources available within her school. Counseling services, mental health support, and substance abuse treatment options were

often insufficient or inaccessible for students in need, exacerbating the challenges of addressing the fentanyl crisis effectively. Mrs. Porta also observed disparities in access to resources and support services among students from different socioeconomic backgrounds within her school community. Students from marginalized communities often faced greater barriers to accessing essential services, including healthcare, counseling, and substance abuse treatment, exacerbating the impact of the fentanyl crisis on vulnerable populations.



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