

# Substance Use, Academic Performance, and Academic Engagement Among High School Seniors

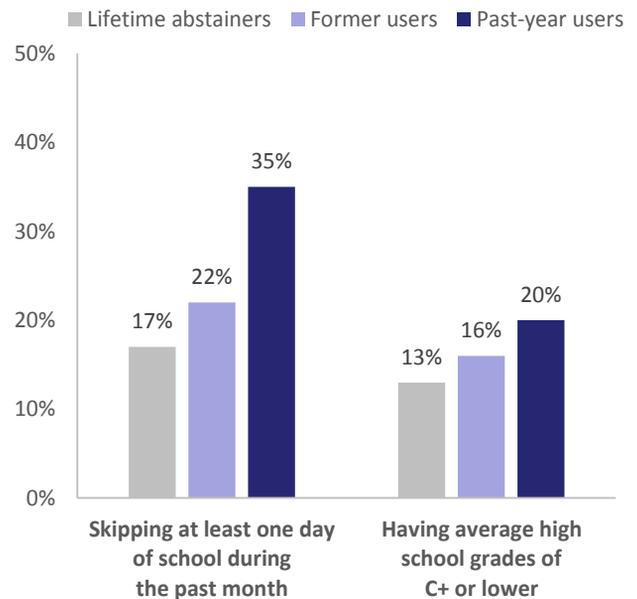
## MAJOR FINDINGS:

Adolescent substance use is a prevalent public health issue that is associated with reduced academic achievement. An increasing number of adolescents, however, do not consume alcohol or use other drugs. About one-third of American high school seniors have never consumed alcohol and half have never used an illicit drug.<sup>1</sup> This study sheds light on the relationship between abstinence from substance use and academic achievement among adolescents.

Data are from the 2015 Monitoring the Future (MTF) survey, a national survey administered annually to middle and high school students. This study compared three groups of high school seniors: (1) those who had never used any substance during their lifetime (including alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs); (2) those who had used at least one substance during their lifetime but not during the past year, called “former users”; and (3) those who had used at least one substance during the past year. Academic engagement was measured in two ways: academic self-efficacy, or confidence in one’s academic abilities, and emotional academic engagement, the positive and/or negative feelings one has towards their academic experiences.

Twenty-nine percent of the sample had never used any substances during their lifetime. Former users comprised 8% of the sample, and 63% were past-year users. Skipping class was more common among former users (22%) and past-year users (35%) than among lifetime abstainers (17%; see Figure 1). Past-year users had significantly lower average grades compared with lifetime abstainers (20% vs. 13%). Former users’ probability of having low average grades was not significantly different from lifetime abstainers or past-year users. Lifetime abstainers had significantly higher scores on both measures of academic engagement than past-year users. Former users had significantly higher emotional academic engagement scores than past-year users, but did not differ from the past-year users or lifetime abstainers on academic self-efficacy.

**Figure 1. Probability of skipping class and having low average grades**



The results of this study support prior research on the association between substance use, poor grades, and skipping school among adolescents. High school students who abstain from substance use are more engaged in school than students who drink or use drugs. Educational professionals who are concerned about promoting academic achievement should view drug use prevention as a viable strategy toward that goal.

### Of major interest to:

- College Administrators
- Parents
- Educators
- Health Professionals
- Students
- Law and Policy Makers



### Practice and Policy Suggestions:

These findings underscore the role of substance use prevention, screening, and intervention programs to promote academic success among adolescents. School-based drug prevention programs in particular, can be effective, especially when they target social influences and norms, as well as encourage commitment not to use. Screening and brief intervention is also considered an evidence-based practice to prevent the escalation of problems among adolescents who have already started using substances. Screening tools such as the CRAFFT<sup>2</sup> have been shown to be valid for use with adolescents, and brief interventions can be particularly effective during early adolescence. The impact of substance use on academic performance can be a compelling way to convey to parents and students the importance of abstaining from substance use during high school. School-based interventions to increase academic engagement should be considered as a way to both prevent adolescent substance use and promote academic achievement.

### References:

<sup>1</sup>Miech, R.A., Johnston, L.D., O'Malley, P.M., Bachman, J.G., Schulenberg, J.E. (2018). *Monitoring the Future: National survey results on drug use, 1975-2017: Volume I: Secondary school students*. Ann Arbor, MI: Institute for Social Research, The University of Michigan. Available at: [http://www.monitoringthefuture.org/pubs/monographs/mtf-vol1\\_2017.pdf](http://www.monitoringthefuture.org/pubs/monographs/mtf-vol1_2017.pdf).

<sup>2</sup>Knight, J.R., Sherritt, L., Shrier, L.A., Harris, S.K., Chang, G. (2002). Validity of the CRAFFT substance abuse screening test among adolescent clinic patients. *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*. 156(6), 607-614.

**The complete publication referenced in this research brief can be found here: Bugbee, B.A., Beck, K.H., Fryer, C.S., Arria, A.M. (2019). Substance use, academic performance, and academic engagement among high school seniors. *Journal of School Health*. 89(2):145-156. doi:10.1111/josh.12723**

*This research brief was prepared by Christina Parisi.*

