

Perception or Reality?

Student Alcohol and Drug Use in the Minnetonka School District



You may hear that "lots of kids drink" or even that "most kids party." The reality is that most MHS students **do not** drink alcohol or use other drugs. Correcting this misperception is the purpose of the Tonka CARES "Reveal what's Real" campaign.

Key findings from the May 2009 MHS student survey of drug and alcohol use include:

- **ALCOHOL The Perception:** 92% of students believe that most students used alcohol in the last 30 days. **The Norm:** 30% of students report alcohol use in the last 30 days. **The Gap:** 62 percentage points. **The Message:** Most MHS students (70%) report **not** using alcohol in the past 30 days! ¹
- **MARIJUANA The Perception:** 83% of students believe that most students used marijuana in the last 30 days. **The Norm:** 21% of students report marijuana use in the last 30 days. **The Gap:** 62 percentage points. **The Message:** Most MHS students (79%) report **not** using marijuana in the past 30 days!
- **TOBACCO The Perception:** 75% of MHS students believe most of their peers smoked during the last 30 days. **The Norm:** 12% of students report cigarette use in the last 30 days. **The Gap:** 63 percentage points. **The Message:** Most MHS students (88%) report **not** using tobacco in the past 30 days!

You can see from these statistics that students, like most of us, tend to believe that drug and alcohol use among students is higher than it actually is. You may wonder why this is the case. One explanation is that we notice, remember and discuss exceptional or unusual events that have high emotional impact. When several events occur at the same time or have high visibility, we tend to generalize and believe that "it's happening all the time" or "so many people are doing it," when in fact these behaviors are not the norm for most MHS students.

Our perception of what everyone else is doing has a direct impact on our behavior.

National research reveals that when students incorrectly believe that alcohol and drug use is more common than it is, there is a greater likelihood that they themselves will "use" and not question that behavior. The Tonka CARES "Reveal what's Real" campaign is designed to correct these misperceptions. Over time, changing perceptions will lead to students making healthier choices.

While we applaud the majority of students in our community who make healthy choices,

some students continue to make unhealthy choices. Underage drinking is a leading cause of death among young people and is also associated with drug use, risky sexual encounters, violence and traffic accidents. When your child is faced with whether or not to use alcohol and/or other drugs, accurate information is an absolutely critical element in influencing that decision.

¹ All data cited is from the anonymous survey of 2490 Minnetonka High School students in 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th grades administered in May 2009, usually referred to as the May 2009 MHS student survey. Questions were identical to validated questions used in the Minnesota Student Survey. For more information, please visit www.tonkacares.org.