



Statement of

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Hearing of the United States House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
Subcommittee on Health Care, Benefits, and Administrative Rules

“Local Responses and Resources to Curtail the Opioid Epidemic”

Wednesday, April 11, 2019 10:00 a.m.

2154 Rayburn House Office Building

To: House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, Subcommittee on Healthcare, Benefits and Administrative Rules. Rep. Jim Jordan, Chairman and Ranking Member Rep. Raja Krishnamoorthi

I am submitting this written testimony to advocate for more targeted prevention education for youth in elementary, middle and high school. I am the Executive Director of the Robert Crown Center for Health Education, located in Hinsdale, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago. For nearly a decade, RCC has been working with researchers, health professionals, and local government agencies to deliver effective opioid prevention education to youth across metro Chicago. It is our belief that all middle and high school students in the United States need to learn the latest brain science and drug facts about the highly addictive nature of opioids, so they can make sound decisions before it is too late. I offer our experience partnering with Illinois schools, federal and local government and private funders to promote comprehensive opioid education, so you may understand some of the local actions and barriers for increasing opioid/heroin prevention education.

Robert Crown Center for Health Education is a non-profit organization that was founded in 1974. Each year we deliver health education to over 70,000 students. For the past seven years, our staff has been active with several local prevention coalitions and heroin task forces in northern Illinois, including the Prevention Leadership Team, a Drug Free Community grantee located in DuPage County. While strides have been made in Chicago to collaborate across sectors (education, health, public health, law enforcement, youth development, social services) and leverage resources, we see the need to dedicate more resources to improve prevention education for youth. I hope that this committee will prioritize school-based education programming for youth and support for increasing community awareness since these two prevention initiatives work in tandem to reduce the terrible statistics in the news.

Schools are a perfect place to reach youth and their parents, and the goal is to make it less likely for people to begin abusing prescription drugs such as Norco, Oxycontin and morphine and end up using heroin, fentanyl or worse. The Robert Crown Center health educators travel to schools across eleven Illinois counties to deliver our Science Behind Drugs programs every day. They teach students about the effects that alcohol and other drugs have on their bodies and introduce the concept of medication misuse in the fourth grade. They begin talking about medicine versus illicit street drugs with nine and ten-year olds because we know that many already see adults and older youth abusing medications (ADHD drugs are used as study drugs, people take opioids long after their back injury) and we want them to be well-prepared to handle any future instances where they may be tempted to use a painkiller off label. Teenagers are more vulnerable to substance use disorders, because their brains are still developing, and some areas of the brain are less mature including where they process feelings of reward and pain which are crucial drivers of drug use.ⁱ As children mature, they require more information and details regarding how drugs interact with the body and how to best avoid situations where they may be asked to use alcohol or substances. We incorporate more advanced science and age-appropriate discussions to help 6th-12th graders become more knowledgeable and resistant to using drugs.

In 2011, at the request of a local businessman who had a grandson who died because of heroin, we developed our first stand-alone heroin prevention program. At the time, many were dying of heroin overdoses in the Chicago suburbs, but area high schools were not yet educating teens about the pathway between prescription drug misuse and street heroin. We partnered with the Illinois Consortium on Drug Policy at Roosevelt University in Chicago to conduct primary research with young heroin usersⁱⁱ. Their interview and focus group findings revealed that young heroin users were unaware of many key facts about the drug back when they were still in high school, including:

- heroin can alter their developing brains.
- prescription pain medications are a pathway to heroin use.
- teens and young adults are at greater risk for using heroin during times of transition, stress, or when mental health issues, like depression, are present.
- heroin use can rapidly progress from experimentation to addiction to overdose.
- addiction can be mistaken for flu-like symptoms and discomfort that leads to increased use, loss of relationships, poor school and work performance and criminal behavior.
- repeated heroin use leads to an addiction that is extremely difficult to overcome and often results in death.

Our Science Behind Drugs (SBD) Curricular Resources were developed to assist diverse teachers to incorporate cross-cutting issues such as addiction science, neurological development and social-emotional skill building exercises, embedded in engaging age-appropriate lessons and activities. We incorporated current neurological research and successful prevention practices so that schools can enhance their classes with simple and customizable segments. We have worked closely with educators who want to target existing curricular areas allowing significant flexibility for content delivery throughout the school curriculum. All program materials are housed on our password-protected learning management system (LMS) with varied access based upon the individual school's need.

Our online teacher-led heroin curriculum has been used by middle and high school teachers to educate 36,765 students since 2012. This science-based program incorporates social-emotional learning concepts proven to increase resistance skills. The multi-session program addresses addiction science, the highly addictive nature of opioids, a self-assessment for heroin abuse risk and skills for starting conversations with peers, parents and trusted adults about heroin abuse. The intention of the program is to emphasize strong normative beliefs against opioids and substance abuse, to improve student knowledge of opioids and improve resistance skills and self-efficacy such that if students find themselves confronted with heroin, prescription pain pills and/or friends in need of substance abuse support they will know how to resist and seek support.

Over the past six years we received local and state government support as well as the backing of private individuals and foundations to create, deliver and evaluate our programs and we included improvements based on teacher and student feedback to our lesson plans and added additional interactive software for alcohol and marijuana. We have received funding from the state of Illinois Substance Abuse Prevention grant which utilizes the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (SAMHSA) Treatment Block Grant funding. We also partner with county governments and private funders keen to provide high quality drug education in their schools. In 2016, we received funding from Chicago's High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA) to create an interactive brain software program and have delivered drug education programming to 13,000 4th- 8th graders across metro Chicago with HIDTA support. While it is wonderful to be able to offer free programming, it is not always enough to motivate school administrators to spend time on this topic. Addiction and mental health diagnoses are still stigmatized in some communities and school districts may be reluctant to be labeled as a "school with a drug problem" or as the "heroin school." Often it is a community tragedy or coordinated coalition that pushes schools to act. The community of Naperville in DuPage County lost several young people to heroin overdoses in a short period of time a few years ago and it galvanized the entire community to face the underlying issues directly. The schools in Naperville have been some of our best partners and we continue to work there today.

Mr. McBride, the principal of Nequa Valley High School, endorsed our curriculum in 2015 urging "every middle and high school...to take advantage of the opportunity to use the Robert Crown Center heroin curriculum. The program is extremely flexible and was easily integrated into our current curriculum." Our graphic novel stories are the most popular component as they engage the youth aged 12-18 and create a good starting point for reflection and group discussion on how these different drugs could affect someone like them. High school students from Naperville, Illinois gave powerful testimony on why they like the opioid graphic novel story:

- *the software was entertaining, it brought it down to a personal level.*
- *it was not just some guy coming in saying how you should not do drugs, it was kind of like a choose your own adventure book.*
- *It seemed like it was real life, it reminded me of how my friends are, how they talk.*
- *He did not set out to use heroin, he just went to the dentist and he ended up dead in a park*

Our middle and high school heroin education program is well-designed, and we have conducted multiple evaluations to determine students' learning gains. Our formative evaluation research found a 63% increase in those students who scored 80% or higher on heroin and opioid knowledge when comparing pre and post-test scores. Youth and parents surveyed were very pleased with the content and format and the majority wanted additional class time to discuss content and practice refusal skillsⁱⁱⁱ. (refer to our program [research evaluation and results page](#)). We have had some difficulty convincing school administrators to allocate sufficient classroom time to address the heroin and opioid prevention. In wealthy suburbs surrounding Chicago, there has been some resistance to adopting our heroin curriculum or to discuss prescription drugs and opioids with children in middle school out of a fear of a parent backlash. In other areas, we heard that there is simply not enough time to separate prescription pills, opiates and heroin from the other drugs that are more commonly used by teenagers. The wide-spread stigma about heroin, the assumption that prescription drugs and heroin affect older youth and the low awareness of the direct pathway from prescription pills to street heroin has impeded our ability to reach as many middle and high school youth as we would like. This is even though we have been working in concert with local coalitions and media to raise awareness in the general population and increase acceptance of drug prevention and parent-child conversations as key protective measures to ward off deadly addictions.

After implementing our complete heroin train-the-trainer model with dozens of schools in four Illinois counties, we surveyed the school personnel to see which parts of the program were most beneficial and which were least effective. Based on those findings, we modified our program and are currently marketing it as a more

flexible a la carte resource for teachers, so they can access the lessons they need and fill any gaps in their curriculum without the formality of getting school districts to approve an outside curriculum. These Heroin and Opioid Curricular Resources are housed in an online learning management system (LMS) along with Alcohol and Marijuana lesson plans and software stories so there is significant flexibility for content delivery throughout middle school or high school curriculum.

Our unique [web-based learning platform^{iv}](#) helps classroom teachers bring critical issues to life for students and they can use group discussion or individual assignments, so students can see what happens when opiates interact with the brain or how a simple visit to the dentist can end in a full-blown addiction. We have tried to adapt to what schools will allow or feel comfortable doing, but it is worth noting that many parent groups and schools across Chicagoland prefer to host a community panel or bring in an outside speaker during the day or evening than having more time dedicated to heroin and opioids during classroom teaching. While outside speakers and adult guests are powerful educational opportunities for adults, the shocking story from a former addict, or seeing grieving parents is not a substitute for the classroom learning with in-depth discussion, social emotional learning and opportunities to build skills necessary to face tough choices and stay safe in risky situations.

The Robert Crown Center for Health Education has been leading the fight to get more prevention education into elementary, middle and high schools so that youth can be armed with the facts and prepared to face the reality of brain science, understand the unique effect of opioids on the brain and recognize that heroin and opioid derivatives are in a class apart as highly addictive and deadly. One of our seasoned educators, Rose Tenuta, has been teaching drug prevention topics to youth since 1974 when she began as a high school science teacher. She has taught our heroin prevention program since 2008 and was involved in developing our curriculum, teaching faculty and parents about the opioid crisis and trained dozens of high school and middle school teachers in the use of our curriculum. Rose remarks that today's youth need this resource since many are "not aware of the extreme addiction potential of opioids" and that some "believe that if they snort or smoke heroin, they cannot overdose."

Many programs that address the opioid crisis begin once a person has already become addicted to opioid drugs. While this is essential, it is responding to a problem that has already developed. The Robert Crown Center for Health Education believes that prevention is a powerful way to allow children and adolescents to understand the consequences of drug experimentation **BEFORE** becoming addicted and thereby avoiding the need for treatment. In our prevention-oriented programs, students learn how their brains are more susceptible to addiction because they are still developing, and how drugs hijack their nervous system by mimicking their natural brain chemistry.

In 2018 with a raging opioid epidemic, it is not acceptable that so many adults are still misinformed, and that schools are not fully prepared to teach students the latest research in addiction science and the unique effects that opioids have on the human brain. It is essential that Congress focus resources to ensure that all young people are taught about opioids before high school graduation. I hope that you will invest in improved school-based drug prevention education as a key measure to stem the tide of this epidemic.

ⁱ <https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/principles-adolescent-substance-use-disorder-treatment-research-based-guide/introduction>

ⁱⁱ Understanding Suburban Heroin Use: Illinois Consortium on Drug Policy, Roosevelt University
https://www.robertcrown.org/files/Understanding_suburban_heroin_use.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.robertcrown.org/programs/science-behind-drugs-curricular-resources/heroin-prevention-program-research-and-evaluation/>

^{iv} <https://www.robertcrown.org/programs/science-behind-drugs-curricular-resources/>