

Trial Scheme on School Drug Testing in Tai Po District (School Year 2009/10)

Evaluation Research Supplementary Report

I. Background

1. The Trial Scheme on School Drug Testing in Tai Po District

1.1 The Scheme was a joint initiative of the Government (led by the Narcotics Division (ND) of the Security Bureau (SB) and Education Bureau (EDB)) and 23 secondary schools in the Tai Po District, supported by parties in the social welfare, healthcare and related sectors.

1.2 The students identified to have taken drugs under the Scheme may continue to receive support services outside the Scheme from the designated CCPSA, school social workers, designated teachers, the mentoring scheme and the relevant parties. Other services from relevant government departments (e.g. Integrated Family Service Centres (IFSC) of Social Welfare Department (SWD)) and NGO may also be available to those students and/or their parents or guardians.

1.3 The evaluation research on the Scheme was completed and the report on the findings of the evaluation was published. For details, please refer to the research reports. As part of the research, the downstream support services provided to students identified to have abused drugs in the Scheme have also been evaluated and the findings are presented in this supplementary report.

1.4 In conducting the evaluation, opportunities have been taken to examine case information on students who have self-referred to the designated CCPSA in Tai Po during the school year 2009/10 and 2010/11, as the information is considered useful to the present evaluation.

II. Methodology

2. Research methodology adopted

2.1 In the Scheme conducted during the school years 2009/10 and 2010/11, no confirmed case was identified. As a result, the downstream support services had not been activated. It was thus not possible to evaluate the downstream support services based on experience of students receiving the services as well as that of social workers and related personnel in providing such services. However, a number of students who have abused drugs self-referred themselves to the CCPSA in Tai Po for downstream support services. These included guidance and counselling services provided by School Social Workers (SSW), community support services outside school provided by social workers of the CCPSA, basic medical support, mentoring, and where necessary, psychiatric and specialist medical services provided by the Psychological Medicine Clinic of Alice Ho Miu Ling Nethersole Hospital or Substance Abuse Clinic (SAC) at Prince of Wales Hospital.

2.2 The present evaluation is based on downstream support services provided to students self-referred to the CCPSA in Tai Po. Quantitative and qualitative data of the self-referrals were collected from the designated CCPSA. In addition, views were gathered from social work and medical professionals on the perceived effectiveness and likely challenges in providing such downstream services.

2.3 It should be noted that the present study is an evaluation of the downstream support services for the Scheme and not an evaluation of the work of CCPSA and related supporting services. In addition, the present study is based on the experience of students who self-referred themselves to the CCPSA in Tai Po. The profiles of these students and their willingness to accept treatment and related support services may be different from students identified through drug testing.

2.4 Qualitative information required for the evaluation was gathered through in-depth interviews after the completion of the Scheme with social workers of the six CCPSAs¹, medical practitioners of SACs, staff of DTRCs and representatives of SWD. In addition, the present report also makes reference to, as appropriate, information gathered from social workers of the nine NGOs providing school social work services to secondary schools in Tai Po. Views expressed by the interviewees are presented in such a manner that the identity of individual interviewees is not revealed.

III. Findings

3. Students identified to have abused drugs

Overview

¹ CCPSAs serving Kwun Tong, Kowloon City and Yau Tsim Mong, Tai Po and North district, Tsuen Wan and Kwai Tsing, Tuen Mun and Yuen Long

3.1 Based on experience of social workers of CCPSAs we have visited, students found to have abused drugs were mostly occasional abusers. Ketamine was the most common type of drugs abused. These students had not developed any psychological dependence on drugs. Students found or suspected to have abused drugs were usually referred to CCPSA by school principals, teachers, SSWs or their parents. Given that teachers and SSWs knew the students quite well and were in day-to-day contact with the students, they were usually in a very good position to engage students who might have abused drugs and encourage them to seek help and treatment from CCPSAs.

Self-referrals in school year 2009/10 and 2010/11

3.2 Based on information provided by the CCPSA in Tai Po, there were 82 and 31 self-referral cases from Tai Po secondary schools in the school year 2009/10 and 2010/11 respectively, as shown in the table below. In the school year 2009/10, 23 were male and 59 female students. About 43% of them were aged below 15, 29% aged 15 - 16 and 28% aged 16 or above. In the school year 2010/11, 11 were male students and 20, female students. About 48% of them were aged below 15, 16% aged 15 - 16 and 36% aged 16 or above. Student drug abusers who self-referred themselves to CCPSA covered students in different age groups.

Age	School year 2009/10		School year 2010/11	
	No. of students	Percentage distribution	No. of students	Percentage distribution
12 to <13	6	7.3%	6	19.4%
13 to <14	10	12.2%	5	16.1%
14 to <15	19	23.2%	4	12.9%
15 to <16	24	29.3%	5	16.1%
16 to <17	15	18.3%	4	12.9%
>=17	8	9.8%	7	22.6%
	82	100.0%	31	100.0%

4. Helping students identified to have abused drugs

Through treatment and counselling programmes

4.1 Ability to engage students and trigger their motivation to quit drugs was considered a critical factor in treating students who had abused drugs. Through group activities in or outside schools and that could be attractive to the students (e.g. outings, sports, makeup class, dancing class, etc.), social workers of CCPSAs made an attempt to get to know the students requiring assistance and to gain their trust. Preaching about the harmful effects of drugs was usually not effective, as most students were already aware of it. It was also desirable to avoid any labelling effects on the students by merging them with those who had not abused drugs in group activities.

4.2 Based on views of the social workers interviewed, students who had abused drugs usually approached social workers for assistance when they had encountered problems arising from abusing drugs, for example, health problems. These students were more receptive to the counselling and treatment offered by social workers and medical professionals, as compared to, say, teachers, probably because they believed that social workers and medical professionals would not punish them.

4.3 Views of social workers and medical professionals outside Tai Po were solicited. According to social workers of CCPSAs in and outside Tai Po, for students identified to have abused drugs and referred to them for assistance, they would draw up a treatment and counselling programme for the students concerned, taking into account the students' social and family background and the extent of drug abuse. For occasional drug abusers, based on the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Substance Use Disorder (SUD) (DSM-IV; American Psychiatric Association, 1994) and the assessment of social workers, intervention programmes like interest groups, small groups focusing on counselling and treatment as well as mentoring are considered to be effective. The purpose is to strengthen the drug abusers' resolve to stay away from drugs, preventing them to become addicted to drugs.

4.4 From the experience of social workers of CCPSAs, such treatment and counselling services would in most cases last for about 6 to 12 months, though the mentorship programme might need to be extended beyond one year in order to help students develop positive lifestyle and strengthen their resolve to refuse drugs. However, for students who were habitual drug abusers, individual case work might be required in addition to group work. If the students were more willing to receive help, the time required for treatment and counselling services would be shorter.

4.5 Social workers of the CCPSA in Tai Po explained that the modification of addictive behaviours involved progression through five stages, namely pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action and maintenance. Drug abusers might go through these five stages several times before final abstinence from drugs. The characteristics of these

five stages are briefly summarized as follows: ²

- a) Pre-contemplation: This is the stage at which the drug abusers have no intention to change their behavior. They may be unaware of or under-estimate the seriousness of their problems;
- b) Contemplation: This is the stage in which drug abusers are aware of their problems and are seriously thinking about overcoming these problems. However, they have not yet made a commitment to take action;
- c) Preparation: At this stage, the drug abusers are prepared for action and have shown small behavioural changes. However, they have not reached a stage for effective abstinence from drugs;
- d) Action: This is the stage in which drug abusers have modified their behaviour, experiences and environment in order to overcome their problems. Visible changes in drug abuse behaviour are observed;
- e) Maintenance: This is the stage in which drug abusers strive to prevent relapse and consolidate achievements made in the early stage.

4.6 In the paragraphs below, the treatment and counselling programmes for self-referral cases in Tai Po are discussed. The treatment and counselling programme for experimental or non-dependent drug abusers will be different from that for addicted or dependent drug abusers, and they are separately presented below.

Self-referred occasional drug abusers

4.7 Among the self-referred drug abusers, 47 and 18 of them were occasional drug abusers in the school years 2009/10 and 2010/11 respectively. These drug abusers were classified as occasional drug abusers based on the DSM-IV and the assessment of social workers. Social workers concerned assessed whether a person was an occasional drug abuser who is not suffering from substance abuse or substance dependence, having regard to recommendation of the DSM-IV which spelled out criteria for substance abuse and substance dependence. In the school year 2009/10, 21% of them completed their treatment programmes in less than 10 months and most (87%) completed their treatment programmes in less than 18 months. For self-referred drug abusers in the school year 2010/11, about half of them completed their treatment programmes in less than 10 months.

Treatment Period	School year 2009/10 self-referrals	School year 2010/11 self-referrals
0 - 9 Months	10 (21%)	9 (50%)
10 - 17 Months	31 (66%)	1 (6%)
>= 18 Months	6 (13%)	-
Still under treatment	-	8 (44%)
	47	18

² Prochaska, James O, et al (1992), "In search of how people change: applications to addictive behavior", in *American Psychologist*, 47(9): 1102 – 1114.

4.8 Three self-referral cases that were occasional drug abusers were reviewed by the research team in the presence of social workers responsible. The case records kept by social workers, with the personal identity of the drug abusers removed, were shown to the consultant team. The social workers highlighted salient points of the treatment programs and the progress at different stages of treatment. The three cases were chosen by social workers of the CCPSA in Tai Po to reflect the variety of cases in terms of gender, age, types of drugs abused and whether family members were aware of the situation, following the principle of maximum variations and minimum number of cases involved. No information was available on whether these students had participated in the Scheme or not, as such information was confidential according to the Protocol of the Scheme.

Self-referred habitual drug abusers

4.9 For self-referred habitual drug abusers from the school year 2009/10, as shown in the table, about 49% completed their treatment programmes in less than 18 months. These drug abusers were classified as habitual drug abusers based on the DSM-IV and the assessment of social workers. Following the recommendations of the DSM-IV, the social workers assessed whether there were symptoms of drug abuse like continued substance abuse despite persistent or recurrent social or interpersonal problems caused by drug abuse or symptoms of drug dependence like drug tolerance or withdrawal. For self-referred drug abusers from the school year 2010/11, only one has completed the treatment programme in less than 18 months.

Treatment Period	School year 2009/10 self-referrals	School year 2010/11 self-referrals
0 - 9 Months	1 (3%)	-
10 - 17 Months	16 (46%)	1 (8%)
>= 18 Months	18 (51%)	-
Still under treatment	-	12 (92%)
	35	13

4.10 Five self-referral cases who were habitual drug abusers were reviewed following the procedure as mentioned in para.4.8 above. Similarly, the five cases were chosen by social workers of the CCPSA in Tai Po.

4.11 It is apparent from the above discussion that the duration of counselling and treatment for habitual student drug abusers was usually much longer. While the situations differ from case to case, there was certain commonality in these cases. First of all, as the extent of drug abuse was more serious and prolonged, many habitual drug abusers concerned had been suffering from a number of physical and mental health problems, which required medical follow up services. Secondly, the students were usually under bad peer influence, which made the prevention of relapse difficult. A much longer period was required by the social workers to help the students to manage their personal relationship with peers, build up good peer support and strengthen their resolve to refuse drugs. Despite the difficulties encountered, as evidenced from cases reviewed during the research study for school year 2009/10, the counselling and treatment services provided by the CCPSA would

help students stay away from drugs and establish positive life values. Indeed, from several of the cases reviewed during the research study, the students were able to successfully complete the treatment programs.

4.12 Several social workers cautioned that in the scenario that the Scheme had identified some drug abusing students, these students might not be willing to accept treatment and guidance services from CCPSA. Unlike drug abusers who were under court order to undergo treatment at CCPSA, it was not possible to force such students to accept treatment. More time and effort would be required to engage them. If the students were not motivated, counselling and treatment by CCPSA would not be effective. The social workers would have to resort to cooperate with SSW to engage these students through school-based group activities, treating them as “high risk” groups.

Through maintaining linkages with schools

4.13 In providing treatment to students referred by schools, social workers of CCPSAs would usually reach an agreement with the schools so that the students concerned were allowed to remain in schools to continue their studies. It was also pointed out by social workers that students who had abused drugs usually had other behavioural problems. Their relationship with teachers or even classmates was not good. As a result, these students were more likely to drop out from schools.

4.14 If students were suspended temporarily from their schooling for misconduct, social workers of the CCPSA would have to work closely with schools to ensure that remedial teaching could be provided to the students such that they would not lag too much behind in their school work. Most social workers interviewed were of the view that these students should be allowed to return to school after they had stopped taking drugs. Many of these students were still interested in going to school. Schools should also make it clear to students that those who had abused drugs would be given a chance to “rehabilitate” and return to schooling.

4.15 A number of social workers cautioned that in some cases it was beneficial to the drug abusing students to aim at “harm reduction”, i.e. to gradually reduce the amount and frequency of drug abuse, rather than putting abstinence from drugs as both a requirement for and goal of treatment as stressed by most if not all schools. The harm reduction approach was considered more acceptable by some students and as a result, the social workers could more easily engage the students and provide assistance. In addition, while some social workers expressed confidence in working with schools in providing guidance and treatment to drug abusing students identified through school drug testing, other social workers had doubt if schools would be prepared to accept these student drug abusers in their schools.

4.16 Most social workers interviewed were of the view that schools and CCPSA should work closely together to engage the students with drug problems. They pointed out that such students are likely to be low achievers, having low self-esteem and little sense of belonging to schools. Research showed that while drug-using peers were a significant

predictor of drug use initiation and on-going use, positive peer support is associated with reduced drug use and long-term recovery.³ Thus, every attempt should be made to enhance to their sense of belonging to schools and to their classmates and raise their interest in schooling. Students should be encouraged to participate in school activities that they are interested in. Schools should also show their concern over the well-being of students who have abused drugs, by cultivating a caring and inviting school environment.

4.17 Among the cases reviewed by the Project Team, students were mostly referred to the CCPSA by social workers, including SSW. Schools concerned however might not be aware that the students were being treated by the CCPSA. Indeed, as emphasized by social workers of the CCPSA, without the explicit consent of students, their schools would not be informed of the fact they were under treatment by the CCPSA. While schools might not, in such cases, be able to play a supportive role in the treatment of the students concerned, the students' linkage with schools was still maintained. With the encouragement and help from SSW and social workers from CCPSA (e.g. providing assistance to the students in their school work), the students would be able to continue their schooling during and after their treatment at the CCPSA.

4.18 It should also be noted that the Scheme was an innovative initiative designed to primarily enhance the resolve of students who have not taken any drugs to continue to stay away from drugs, and to trigger the motivation of students with drug problems to quit drugs and seek help. Accordingly, as has been confirmed with the prosecution authorities, "a participating student who has been tested positive or who admits drug abuse pursuant to the Scheme will not be prosecuted for consumption of drugs contrary to section 8 of the Dangerous Drug Ordinance and will not be expelled from school." This shows that efforts were made by participating schools to maintain the linkage with student drug abusers.

4.19 In addition, the purpose of the Scheme was not to identify drug abusing students. The Scheme was aimed at, among other things, triggering students' motivation to seek help. Indeed, statistics kept by the CCPSA in Tai Po showed that the number of students who have sought help since the launch of the Scheme had increased. Furthermore, most students enumerated in the school survey conducted as part of the evaluation were of the view that the Scheme had helped trigger students' motivation to seek help.

³ Passetti, Lora L, et al (2008), "Adolescents' perceptions of friends during substance abuse treatment: a qualitative study", in *Contemporary Drug Problems*, 35: 99 – 114.

Through mentorship

4.20 Mentorship programs were arranged for most of the self-referral cases, with their consent. Mentors could be football players, physical education trainers or even ex-drug abusers who usually shared common interests or life experience with the students. The mentor would share his life experience with the student and join hand with the case manager to help the student to resist and abstain from drug. In the Scheme, a mentor was matched with a drug abusing student, taking into account the background of the student, interests, extra-curricular activities, etc. Individual and group activities were also organized for the students, with participation of the mentors. Through regular contacts such as face-to-face meetings, by telephone or through online media (e.g. Facebook), the mentors would try to establish mutual trust with the students concerned and offer advice in tackling problems encountered by students. The mentors would also ask the students to make a pledge to stay away from drugs and would take every opportunity to remind students the adverse impact of drugs.

4.21 Social workers of CCPSAs who had experience of the mentorship programs were of the view that the mentorship had worked. In the case of Tai Po, most students (80%) who were identified to be occasional drug abusers were willing to participate in the mentorship programme. For social workers from CCPSAs that did not have mentorship programs, they were of the view that mentorship would only work if the mentors were committed, spoke similar “language” as their clients and were able to have meaningful interactions with m. On the whole, judging from the positive improvement in the attitudes and behaviour of their student mentees, most mentors were of the view that the mentoring scheme was effective in helping students stay away from drugs.

Through family support

4.22 As noted by the Task Force, parental absence, loose parental supervision and sanction against drug abuse, lack of positive relationship with adults and lack of family strength were the common risk factors of drug abuse⁴. Most social workers interviewed also pointed out that for students who had abused drugs, especially those who were habitual drug abusers, their families might also have other problems (e.g. divorce, domestic violence and drug abuse) that required intervention by social workers. Apart from organizing preventive education to parents in general to raise their understanding of drugs and help them identify children who might have abuse drugs, social workers would provide support services to parents in need of help, by organizing, say, mutual support network among parents.

4.23 Several social workers, on the other hand, opined that if family members were not aware of the drug taking behaviour of their children, it would not be possible to leverage their support in providing counselling and treatment to the students. Nevertheless, if the students concerned were afraid of letting their family know that they had abused drugs and

⁴ Report of the Task Force on Youth Drug Abuse (November 2008), p.25.

would like to maintain good relationship with their parents, they would be more motivated in trying to quit drugs. As a result, the treatment and counselling services provided by social workers would be more effective.

4.24 It was noted by the Project Team that the Government has provided resources to CCPSAs to provide support services to parents whose children were found to have abused drugs. Parental anti-drug education was within the service areas of CCPSA. Besides, there are 65 Integrated Family Services Centres (IFSCs) in Hong Kong, run by SWD and NGOs. These IFSCs work with CCPSAs in providing support services to families with drug abusers. In addition, parent education workshops, sponsored by the Beat Drugs Fund, have also equipped parents with the necessary knowledge and skills in helping their children to stay away from drugs.

4.25 Several social workers remarked that these parents are desperately in need of help. As family support is one of the critical success factors in treating drug abusers, a number of social workers commented that it is desirable to further enhance the services of CCPSAs in providing support to parents. It is noted by the Project Team that CCPSAs are receiving subventions under Lump Sum Grant (LSG) mode, CCPSAs are accorded flexibility in the use of the grant to provide support services to parents / family members.

Through referrals to specialist medical treatment

4.26 According to social workers interviewed in the course of the study, not many drug taking students were required to be referred to SACs for treatment, as most of them were occasional drug abusers. Those habitual drug abusers and those who have developed psychological dependency on drugs were usually school drop-outs. Thus, views expressed by social workers as presented in this sub-section are relevant in the wider context of providing downstream support services to students in need. In fact, for the cases reviewed during this research study, none of the students have been referred to SAC for treatment.

Through residential care services

4.27 Similar to discussions on referrals to specialist medical treatment discussed above, views expressed by social workers as presented in this sub-section are relevant in the wider context of providing downstream support services to students in need. In fact, for the cases reviewed during this research study, none of the students have been referred to residential drug treatment and rehabilitation centres.

Anticipated challenges for downstream support services under the Scheme

Workload

4.28 Views expressed by social workers as presented in this section are relevant in the wider context of providing downstream support services to students in need, in anticipation that the Scheme will be continued in Tai Po and replicated in schools in other districts. As noted by the Task Force, “given the increasing community awareness of the youth drug problem, enhanced upstream efforts to seek out abusers and the gradual surfacing of health problems due to psychotropic substance abuse, further surges in the downstream service demand is anticipated in the longer run.”⁵ Most social workers of CCPSAs interviewed in the course of the study remarked that there was great demand for their services. A few of them lamented that the level of resources was similar for all CCPSAs under LSG. Each CCPSA had to devise programmes / services that cater for the needs and characteristics of drug abusers in their respective district.

4.29 Furthermore, a few social workers pointed out that CCPSAs were provided with sufficient resources to take up a predetermined level of caseload. The level of service provision would be reviewed upon the renewal of the 3-year Funding and Service Agreement with SWD. They pointed out that although the number of CCPSAs had been increased, the level of service provision remained over the years. A number of them anticipated that their workload would be increased if there were students to be identified to have abused drugs through school drug testing.

⁵ Report of the Task Force on Youth Drug Abuse (November 2008), p.67.

IV. Observations and Recommendations

5.1 According to the Protocol drawn up for the Scheme, for students identified to have abused drugs through drug testing, the case manager would convene a multi-disciplinary case conference to formulate a support programme for the identified students. The case manager would also have to coordinate treatment and counselling services to be provided to the students by schools, CCPSAs, SACs and other related organisations. Effective coordination among parties concerned played an important role in reducing attrition and increasing the rate of success in treatment and rehabilitation. As no student had been identified in the Scheme, the Research Team was not in a position to evaluate if the arrangement as stipulated in the Protocol was effective.

5.2 Nevertheless, in conducting the study, the Project Team was impressed by the close working relationship between social workers and other staff of the CCPSA in Tai Po responsible for drug testing on the one hand and principals of secondary schools in Tai Po on the other, in ensuring that drug testing was conducted in a highly efficient and professional manner. Utmost care and caution were taken to ensure that drug testing had had minimal adverse impact on students. Parents and other school staff were adequately briefed about the Scheme, allaying any concern they might have on drug testing. Thus, the Research Team had reasons to believe that if students were identified to have abused drugs in the Scheme, the case manager of the CCPSA should be able to effectively coordinate and monitor support services required to be provided to the students concerned and where applicable to their parents.

5.3 However, judging from views expressed by several social workers interviewed in the course of the study, the same close working relationship between the CCPSA in Tai Po and secondary schools in Tai Po might not be easily replicated in other districts. This was because social workers in several CCPSAs had doubt if schools were willing to allow drug abusing students to remain in schools. Besides, social workers held different views from teachers on how to tackle the problem of drug abuse schools, with the former favouring “harm reduction” and the latter emphasizing “zero tolerance”. For effective provision of downstream support services, close cooperation and trust between CCPSA and schools as well as other parties concerned were vital. For example, a few social workers of CCPSA in other districts believed that it was not advisable to inform schools about the results of drug testing, while most school principals interviewed insisted that schools should be informed.

5.4 *It is recommended that in pairing up CCPSA and NGO (if CCPSA is not responsible for conducting drug testing) with schools to conduct drug testing in other district(s), there should be clear understanding by all parties concerned on the follow up actions on students identified to have abused drugs through drug testing that would be pursued by schools and CCPSA and NGO (where applicable) responsible for drug testing, bearing in mind that the interests of students concerned should come first and that every effort would be made to maintain the students’ linkage with schools.*

Providing support after completion of the Scheme

5.5 From the statistics presented above on self-referrals in Tai Po and the cases reviewed, the duration of counselling and treatment services provided by the CCPSA varied from case to case, and in most cases the duration lasted for more than six months. In the case of Tai Po, only about 13% of student drug abusers who self-referred to the CCPSA completed their treatment in less than 10 months. More than half (57%) of these students had to receive treatment and counselling services for 10 to 17 months, and a further 29% required treatment and counselling services for 18 months or more. According to the Protocol, the support programme under the Scheme may last for up to six months generally, and will not go beyond 31 December 2010 upon completion of the Scheme. After the six months' period or after 31 December 2010, the CCPSA would have to provide support services outside the Scheme to the students concerned. The implications of the need to provide continued support to students concerned are discussed in the next section.

5.6 Continuous support to students identified to have abused drugs through drug testing is important. In other words, the support programme provided by CCPSA to identified student should extend beyond the six months period upon completion of the Scheme, if there is a need to do so. It is noted that additional resources have been provided to CCPSAs with the opening of new CCPSAs in different districts. Thus, additional resources required to provide continuous support to drug abusing students would have to be catered for by resources currently available to CCPSAs. In the long run, for schools with drug testing, the Scheme will become part and parcel of the on-going healthy school programme of these schools. By the same token, *it is recommended that CCPSAs should provide support programme to students in need, regardless of whether these students are identified through the Scheme or from other channels.*