

Mechanisms for Preventing and Protecting Drug and Substance Use among Students at Schools in Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Challenges and Solutions

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Abstract: The study on mechanisms for preventing and protecting drug and substance use among students at schools in Phnom Penh has three objectives. First, the study attempted to identify the status of drug and substance use among students at schools. Second, it tried to identify the engagement and challenges of students, parents, schools, competent authorities in preventing and protecting drug and substance use among students. Finally, it sought to determine the effectiveness of mechanisms of competent authorities, schools, and parents to reduce and eliminate the use of drug or addictive substances among students. This study is cross sectional conducted in 6 Khans of Phnom Penh Capital city of Cambodia – Chamkar Mon, Chhbar Ampov, Chroy Chanva, Dong Kao, Doun Penh, and Sen Sok Khan. 443 students from 6 schools participated in the survey and 65 individuals who were police officers, parents, and education staff for focus group discussion and in-depth interview. The statistical findings confirmed that the mechanisms to be implemented by schools and police forces were effective in reduction and elimination of drug or substance use. Public awareness and legal reinforcement were found as the most effective mechanisms among all else that schools and police forces were practicing. However, challenges were identified existing in the mechanisms of schools and of police forces. The study noticed the need for strong collaboration and participation from all stakeholders because it has better opportunities to reduce or eliminate the use of drug or addictive substances use among students.

Keywords: Mechanism, Prevention and Protection, Drug and Substance Use, Drug and Addictive Substances.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The numbers of drug and substance users were reported to be on the rise throughout the globe among youth (bin Shafie et al., 2024). The world drug report statistic of the United Nations on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimated the number of drug users around the globe confirming that there were 296 million or 5.8 per cent in 2021 (UNODC, 2023) increased from 284 million or 5.6 per cent in 2020 of the world population aged 15-64 in the last 12 months (UNODC, 2022). UNODC (2023) confirmed that 219 million users consumed Cannabis, 60 million people engaged in non-medical opioid used, 36 million users used Amphetamines, 22 million used cocaine, 20 million used ecstasy. In ASEAN, 567,609 drug users were found to access treatment facilities in 2022 and the type of drug used found were Amphetamine Type Stimulants (ATS), Opiates/opioid, cannabis, New psychoactive substances (NPS), Cocaine, Central Nervous System (CNS)

depressants, hallucinogens, and others of which ATS was the most widely used followed by opiates/opioids and others/polydrugs (ASEAN Narcotics Cooperation Center, August 2023). UNODC (2023) identified that most cannabis users were men (about 70 per cent) globally and 42 per cent of Cannabis users were women in North America. Regarding ecstasy type substances users were identified as higher among female (45 per cent of users) and non-medical use of pharmaceuticals (between 45 and 49 per cent of users were women) while men were found high share of users in opiates (75 per cent) and cocaine (73 per cent).

The influence of drug and substance abuse continues to have negative impacts on physical and mental health of the lives of many people, including school age youth throughout the globe. Infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS and hepatitis C, depression and anxiety were the explanation caused by drug and substance abuse among youth (UNODC, 2020; bin

Shafie et al., 2024). Moreover, it affected family's economic productivity and creating conflict among members, and social wellbeing, including families, neighborhoods, and communities (Cooperation Committee for Cambodia, April 2004; UNODC, 2020; & bin Shafie et al., 2024), behavior problems, violent crimes, antisocial behavior (Stefanidi & Tsitsas, 2015), disrupted normal brain development and impacted their academic achievement (The White House 2023) or health education (Botvit & Griffin 2003), causing from dropping out of school (Cooperation Committee for Cambodia, April 2004). This is because the drug and substance users were interrupted by their intellectual function, memory, emotional regulation, and decision making by the influence of the drug or the substances used.

Such effects of drug and substance use attracted the attention of many stakeholders throughout the world, including school on how to combat drug and substance use among students. As a result, many drug education and substance use prevention programs developed. In Eastern Europe and Central Asia, there were school based measures to prevent substance use by offering compulsory and optional educational curricula, extracurricular activities, parent and family education programs together with the cooperation between educational institutions, health care facilities, and drug control services to prevent drug and substance use and the rehabilitation of students who are drug dependents (UNESCO 2015). Similarly, WHO (2006) raised two main approaches to drug use prevention in school – developmentally inspired and specific drug content programs. These programs incorporated classroom-based interventions, improving family relationships, and dealing with the effects of drugs, and attitudes and behaviors causing from drug use. Additionally, school-based educational programs maybe identified as effective when the programs focus on life-skill training, decision making skills, and peer-pressure resistance training (Martin et al., 2008).

The mechanism was also in place for the content of Cambodia. Royal Government of Cambodia has 5 measures – awareness raising, administration, rehabilitation, legal practice, and corporation as set in its 9th campaign against illicit drug. According to this, schools throughout Cambodia took critical actions to prevent and protect drug and substance use among students through public awareness on the negative impacts of drug and substance use. However, substance use such as e-cigarettes were found at school (School Health Department 2024) as a social concern among the public and educational institutions (Sarom 19th February 2024) leading to the issue of instruction on the prevention of E-cigarette/vape and HTPs' products in an around educational institutions both public and private sector throughout the country (MoEYs, 24 May 2024). Until today, the issues of drug and substance use among school age youth are still a concern. Understanding the root causes of drug and substance use among students at schools would be significant to proposal possible solutions.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine the mechanisms that are applicable and effective to prevent and protect drug and substance use among students at schools in Phnom Penh.

➤ *Objectives of the Study*

This study has the overall objective to examine the effective mechanisms to prevent and protect drug and substance use among students at schools in Phnom Penh. The findings of this study contribute to understanding ways of preventing and protecting drug and substance use and proposes additional mechanisms available to reduce and eliminate drug and substance use among school students.

This study has three specific objectives:

- Identify the status of drug and substance use among students at schools in Phnom Penh.
- Determine the engagement of students, parents, schools, and competent authorities in prevention and protection of drug and substance use among students.
- Determine the effectiveness of mechanisms of competent authorities, schools, and parents to reduce and eliminate the use of drug or addictive substances among students.

➤ *Research Questions*

The study has three specific research questions as of the following:

- What is the status of drug and substance use among students at schools in Phnom Penh?
- What are the engagements of students, parents, schools, competent authorities in prevention and protection of drug and substance use among students?
- What mechanisms of the competent authorities, schools, and parents, to be considered effective in reducing and eliminating the use of drug or addictive substances among students?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

➤ *Drug and Substance Use at Schools*

The use of drug and addictive substances at schools was discovered by many studies such as the study of Townsend et al., (2007); Chukwu et al., (2017); Bonyani et al., (2019). UNODC (2023) emphasized that drug and substance use among school students were generally higher compared to the public. Based on those studies, there were various effects of drug and addictive substances on users' health mentally and physically. Bin Shafie et al., (2024) found that the use of drug and addictive substances caused a person to change their mental, emotional, and physical state. This is because drug and addictive substances are the psychoactive chemicals that are intoxicating and hallucinating users creating addiction, dependence, and changing behaviors. Significantly, it has negative effects on students' education (Ekpenyong, 2012), poor academic performance, decreasing concentration ability, playing truancy (Chukwu et al., 2021), having of high absent rate, failure in exams (Marygoretty & Adhiambo, 2021), and dropping out of school (Townsend et al., 2007). These results

were from the excessive use of drug and addictive substances. Alcohol, cigarettes, e-cigarettes, marijuana were addictive substances that were often discovered (Ndeti, 2009; Sloboda et al., 2009; Anyanwu et al., 2016; Jin & Jaing, 2017).

Previous studies noticed that students involved in drug and substance use were more likely to be attracted to by friends or peers' pressures and may be caused by experiences of stress, family conditions, lack of socioeconomic assistance, and neurobiological alterations (Ongwae, 2016; Bin Shafie et al., (2024). Other factors causing the use of drug and addictive substances were from parental influence and strict school administration that create stresses among students (Ongwae, 2016). The Global School-Based Student Health Survey 2013 (GSHS 2013 in Inter-Ministerial Committee on School Health, July 1st, 2022) noticed similar cases that 10% of secondary school students experienced drinking alcohol and 0.8% used amphetamines or methamphetamines at least once in Cambodia because they influenced by their parents or guardians or peers. The study of the department of school health (2024) also confirmed that 7% out of 1,317 participants participated in the survey smoke e-cigarettes in the last one year while 40% of them confessed that at least one of their friends' used e-cigarettes. Noticeably, 75% of those who experienced using e-cigarettes were students.

➤ *Mechanisms for Drug and Substance Use Prevention at Schools*

Prevention and protection of drug and substance use through prevention programs at schools has been observed in many countries. These prevention programs were confirmed to be effective in preventing and protecting the use of drug and addictive substances at schools (Faggiano et al., 2008; Sloboda et al., 2009; Bonyani et al., 2019). According to the study of Stefanidi & Tsitsas (2015) emphasized that the mechanism to prevent drug and substance use was to consider the learning outcomes, surrounding factors, and collaborations. Whereas Bonyani et al., (2019) assured that using Video clips as well as lectured based methods was effective in changing students' attitudes toward drug and substance use. Thus, teaching and learning methods were relying on the social learning theories, requiring role-play and discussion to encourage participation of students. Additionally, Chakravarthy et al. (2013) stated that effective prevention and protection programs needed to focus on multiple threats so that schools could arrange available resources to equip students' knowledge enough to resist the temptation from peers to engage in drug and substance use.

III. METHODOLOGY

➤ *Research Design*

This is a cross-sectional study conducted in 6 Khans of Phnom Penh Capital City of Cambodia – Chamkar Mon, Chhbar Ampov, Chroy Chanva, Dong Kao, Doun Penh, and Sen Sok Khan. The selection of Phnom Penh and its six Khans

was based on the annual report of the implementation of the 8th campaign against illegal illicit drug from January to December 2023 and the Drug Office of Police commissariat of Phnom Penh for a high rate of drug cases and arrests by police forces. Six lower and secondary high schools under the management of the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports and six police Khans under the Phnom Penh Police Commissariat were chosen.

➤ *Participants of the Study*

The study used mix method approach. Purposively, this study recruited 3 types of participants, police officers, education staff at the lower and secondary school, and parents of youth for qualitative data. The study invited 47 police forces, including chief and deputy chief of police Khans and chief of police post administration, 6 parents and 12 education staff leading and teaching at the lower and secondary school. Additionally, the study surveyed 443 students from six schools locating the six Khan in Phnom Penh.

➤ *Data Collection Tools*

This study developed an interview questionnaire for data collection based on its objectives and literature review. The questionnaire's contents were designed into 5 sections. Section I is the demographic information, Section II, III, IV, and V responded to the study objectives. The questionnaire was reviewed by two specialists working on drug and substance abuse and then sent to the thesis supervisors for its validation. The adoption of the questionnaire after their input was then piloted to see satisfactory responses with few corrections before presenting it to participants.

➤ *Data Collection and Analysis*

This study collected data from August to September 2024. Participants were requested and informed about the study, its objectives, confidentiality and consent as well as privacy. Survey, focus group discussion and in-depth interview were conducted in the data collection process. The students were requested and agreed to complete the survey questionnaires while parents, teachers, school principals, and police officers were invited for in-depth interview and focus group discussion. IBM SPSS v.25 was used to analyze descriptive data for quantitative research methods and thematic analysis was used for qualitative data.

➤ *Ethical Considerations*

This study received approval from the Police Academy of Cambodia, General Commissariat of National Police, Phnom Penh Police Commissariat, and the Ministry of Education of Youth and Sports. Letters of approval have been sent to all police Khans and designated lower and secondary schools. The study also gained voluntarily consent from all participants at police Khans, and school principals and teachers in a written agreement.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

A. Results of the Study

➤ Drug and Substance Use Among Students

Students in Phnom Penh schools were found to be using drugs or other substances. The survey results in table 1 below describe the grade level of students who have used drugs or addictive substances, as well as students who have friends who have done so. The findings revealed that 2.9% (6 students) of students in grade 9 had informed about their experiences with addictive substances, however no such information was found among students in grades 10 to 12. This study revealed that drug and addictive substances have

negative effects on kids in grade 9, despite the fact that the number of users is minimal.

Rather, students in grades 9 through 12 who claimed to have no experience with drugs or addictive substances had several of their peers use them. 1.9% (4 students) of pupils in grade 9 had friends who used drugs or addictive substances, followed by 3.8% (1 student) in grade 10, 3.8% (6 students) in grade 11, and 3.8% (1 student) in grade 12. This result explained that drug and substance use is a sensitive issue among school-aged children from grades 9 to 12. Even though the student participants in the survey did not use drugs or addictive substances themselves, their friends who did expressed concern about their health and how it affected their education.

Table 1. Grade of Students and their Friends Who Used to Use Drug and Addictive Substances

		Students Used to Use Drug and Addictive Substance		
			Used to	Never
Grade 9	Students who have friend who used drug and addictive substances	Yes	0	4 (1.9%)
		No	4 (1.9%)	135 (65.5%)
		Don't know	2 (1%)	61 (29.6%)
Grade 10	Students who have friend who used drug and addictive substances	Yes	0	1 (3.8%)
		No	0	19 (73.1%)
		Don't know	0	6 (23.1%)
Grade 11	Students who have friend who used drug and addictive substances	Yes	0	6 (3.8%)
		No	0	105 (65.6%)
		Don't know	0	49 (30.6%)
Grade 12	Students who have friend who used drug and addictive substances	Yes	0	1 (3.8%)
		No	0	17 (65.4%)
		Don't know	0	8 (30.8%)

➤ Knowledge and Drug and Substance Use

Students who participated in the study and were discovered to be using drugs or drug substances did so via smoking or swallowing. One of these grade 9 kids uses an e-cigarette, and they are aware of the dangers of drugs and addiction. Rather, the other four kids smoke e-cigarettes, with one claiming to have swallowed it without knowing of such drugs and addictive chemicals. This finding indicated the danger and hazard to the health of those pupils who used drugs or addictive substances, as well as the level of public awareness about the dangers of drug and substance usage, which government authorities frequently advocated to the public. See table 2 below.

Table 2. Knowledge of Students that Used Drug or Addictive Substances

			How did you use it?	
			Smoke	Swallow
Knowledge about drug and addictive substances	Yes	Grade 9	1 (100%)	0
	No		4 (80%)	1 (20%)

In addition to the above findings, the study discovered that some students in grades 9 through 12 who have friends who use drugs or addictive substances have knowledge about them from public awareness, whilst others do not. Many of the pupils who have friends who use drugs or drugs have learned about drugs and addictive substances through public awareness. 1.8% (4 students) of grade 9 students who have friends who use drugs or addictive substances were aware of drug and addictive substances through public awareness,

whereas 0.9% (2 students) were not. However, 3.6% (1 student) of grade 10 pupils reported no knowledge of drugs or addictive substances from public awareness when asked whether they had friends who used them.

In contrast, among students in grade 10, 1.8% (3 students) said yes and 3% (5 students) said no to knowing about drugs and addictive substances through public awareness after seeing their peers use them. Rather, 6.7% (2

students) in grade 12 claimed to know about drugs and addictive substances through public awareness, despite having friends who used drugs or addictive substances. This finding revealed that, while some students in grades 10 to 12 are aware of drug and addictive substances through public

awareness, their relationships with friends who use drugs or addictive substances have the potential to lure them into testing the substances and eventually using them. See table 3 below.

Table 3. Grade of Students Who had Knowledge and Friends Who Used Drug and Addictive Substances

			Your friends Who Use Drug or Addictive Substance		
			Yes	No	Don't know
Grade 9	Knowledge about drug and substance use from public awareness	Yes	4(1.8%)	50(23%)	21(9.7%)
		No	2(0.9%)	98(45.2%)	42(19.4%)
Grade 10	Knowledge about drug and substance use from public awareness	Yes	0%	10(35.7%)	5(17.9%)
		No	1(3.6%)	11(39.3%)	1(3.6%)
Grade 11	Knowledge about drug and substance use from public awareness	Yes	3(1.8%)	51(30.9%)	24(14.5%)
		No	5(3%)	57 (34.5%	25(15.2%)
Grade 12	Knowledge about drug and substance use from public awareness	Yes	2(6.7%)	12(40%)	1(3.3%)
		No	0%	7(23.3%)	8(26.7%)

➤ *Causes of Drug or Substance Use Among Students*

Students' usage of drugs or addictive substances has a negative impact on their health and even their academic performance. Both quantitative and qualitative results clarified why students in Phnom Penh used e-cigarettes on and near school campus, particularly in the restrooms. Four factors contributed to these students' use of e-cigarettes in class. The first was peer pressure or attractiveness, which drew them into the group. Second, a few pupils wanted to take a taste of the smoke of e-cigarettes. Third, it was established that e-cigarettes could be easily purchased online with delivery. Fourth, e-cigarettes were affordable enough to purchase. These results suggest that, in the current environment, it would be imperative to prevent and protect pupils from using e-cigarettes or other addictive substances, or else these students might encourage their peers to take these substances with them.

➤ *The Involvement of Students, Parents, Schools, and Competent Authority in Preventing and Safeguarding Students' Use of Drugs or Other Substances*

According to the qualitative data, students' health and academic performance are not the only things impacted by drug or addictive substance usage. Instead, it has detrimental effects on the community as a whole, schools, parents, and other children. According to the study, parents, students, schools, and responsible authorities used a number of preventative and protection strategies to lessen and eventually eradicate student drug and addictive substance usage.

According to the survey, several students took an active role in keeping their peers safe from e-cigarettes. By informing their professors or school principals about e-cigarette use both on and off campus, they participated in enhancing school discipline. It was also discovered that parents were worried about their children's school

performance. They talked with their children about the study program and class sessions in order to ensure that their children were performing well in school. They also ensured that their children were studying in class and working well with the school. Most significantly, several parents talked to their children about the negative impacts of drugs and other addictive substances. However, schools were crucial in preventing and safeguarding drug use and substance use among students. Four important roles were identified. First, public awarenesses on drug regularly after the solute of the national anthem in the morning before class. That was to promote students understanding the bad impacts of drug or addictive substances on students. Second, schools took tough measures on school disciplines in order to guarantee the correct manners of students at schools. Third, schools organized parents-schools' gatherings to share knowledge and experiences of delivering education services to students and to suggest the engagement of parents to assist their kids in learning. Finally, schools made good collaboration with competent authorities so they could request for intervention of any abnormalities, violent acts or crime cases at schools. However, competent authorities, police force used 5 mechanisms to prevent, protect, and crackdown drug or substance use among people or students. At schools, police played two roles. The public awareness role on enhancing understanding of the harmful effects of drug or addictive substance to schools as requested and collaborated with schools as well as intervention at schools once report received. Based on these findings, it could be assumed that the involvement of students, parents, schools, and competent authorities as mentioned above is beneficial to the reduction of drug or substance use at schools.

Even though the engagement of students, parents, schools, and competent authorities would reduce the use of drug or addictive substances among students, some challenges

since some parents were much busy with their own work and did not have enough time to care for their kids concerning their education. Students who were assigned to assist schools in strengthening schools' disciplines were not enough to manage their tasks throughout the school shifts. Students who use e-cigarettes were solved only at school level with parents in the form of agreement but not a proper use of helping system like school counseling. Rather, the police force has more obligations, making it hard for them to have enough time to patrol often at school due to the lack of police labor force at the local level.

➤ *Relationship Between Knowledge, Behavior, Awareness, Corporation, and Legal Reinforcement*

Mechanisms to handle or reduce the use of drug or addictive substances were found significant difference with drug or substance use among students at schools. The results from Pearson's Correlations in table 4 below explained this significance. The findings noticed that drug or addictive substance use has significant difference with public awareness on the hazardous drug or substance use, collaboration among competent authorities with schools, legal reinforcement on the use of drug or addictive substances, and the behavior of students. However, the result confirmed that drug or substance use was not significant difference with knowledge of drug and addictive substances. This finding suggested that public awareness, collaboration, and legal reinforcement were necessary to reduce drug or substance use. See table 4 below.

Table 4. Pearson's Correlations between Knowledge, Behavior, Awareness, Corporation, and Legal Reinforcement

	Drug or substance use	Public awareness	Collaboration	Legal Reinforcement	Behavior	Knowledge
Drug or substance use	—					
Public awareness	-.117*	—				
Collaboration	-.159**	.302**	—			
Legal reinforcement	-.131**	.270**	.413**	—		
Behavior	-.123**	0.025	0.061	0.037	—	
Knowledge	0.013	-.105*	-0.056	-.117*	.107*	—
Note: *. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)						
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).						

B. Discussion

The results of the study found three main groups that were playing critical roles in addressing the issues of drug or substance use among students at schools. These were parents, schools, and competent authorities of whom set appropriate mechanisms to cut off the use of drug or addictive substances. Based on these findings, the contribution of parents, schools, and competent authorities are discussed below:

The involvement of parents in following up their children in their studies was found significance in preventing and protecting drug or substance use. But this was not effective because parents were overwhelming with their tasks and businesses causing them to pay less attention to their kids' issues. They even depended on only schools while schools found it hard to manage the education of many children. Some of them even could not attend the invitation from school to listen to the sharing information of their kids' educational accomplishment. This conclusion is becoming a striking contrast to how parents should support their children's education and prevent drug or substance abuse. Rather, it provided opportunities for kids to be seduced and forced by their classmates into using drugs or addictive substances. In this regard, Bergman et al. (2019) suggested that monitoring

children is one of the methods for minimizing drug or substance use while also enhancing learning outcomes and academic accomplishment. As a result, parents' inability to watch their children and their lack of participation in school activities are not indicators of preventing and protecting their children from drug or substance use.

On the other hand, the study found that schools have used 4 mechanisms such as promoting public awareness to students, restricted internal disciplines, parents – teachers' gatherings, and collaboration with competent authorities to prevent and protect the use of drug or addictive substances among students. Each mechanism contributed its part in enhancing students to keep away from drug or substance use. This result reflected the study of Greenhill et al., (2016) which confirmed that once students understand comprehensively the information of drug or addictive substances such as e-cigarettes then there would be a reduction in the users. Additionally, the educational program to prevent and protect the use of addictive substances like e-cigarettes was effective to increase knowledge and ability to refuse the request to e-cigarette usage, especially the ability to reduce the willingness to smoke e-cigarettes (McCauley et al., 2023). Kelder et al., (2020) emphasized that the prevention and protection

programs of the schools were influential in the reduction of drug or substance use among students than schools without so doing. CDC (2012) also confirmed that schools that engaged parents in school activities not only supported parents to have responsibility for their children education, but also have capability to support, motivate, and direct their children toward the achievement of the educational goal. Though these findings demonstrated the effectiveness of schools' mechanisms to reduce drug and substance use among students. However, the mechanisms that were practicing at school were not enough. Standard counselling service prevention programs were not found existing at schools in Cambodian context. Tackling the issues of students who use drug or addictive substances was in the form of warning rather than emotional healing and motivation to learn making scare for those students who experience drug and substance use. This method was not seen as preventing those experiencing drug or substance use to stop, rather it might potentially push them to quit school and turn to use drug or addictive substances. This is different from what Adu (2022) claimed on the significance of school counselor in helping students to understand themselves and their decisions keeping away from unwanted behaviors. Also, it helped students to be aware of their talents and abilities to do things successfully in school and society.

Finally, the mechanisms of police force were discovered regarding public awareness, and legal reinforcement, and collaboration. These mechanisms were necessary for prevention and protection of drug and substance use. However, the public awareness mechanism was found to be less effective and yet was not permanently stable for its operation (NACD, 5th December 2022) while the collaboration with schools was good in order to help patrol and reinforce the law. Though there was effective in legal reinforcement, but the failure of public awareness reduced the success of the strategies to combating drug.

V. CONCLUSION

Drug and drug use was detrimental to both physical and mental health. Students who used such substances were found to have similar physical and mental health issues. This has an impact on their education, as well. Among the pupils who participated in the poll, a handful in grade 9 had used drugs or addictive substances such as e-cigarettes, but those in grades 10 to 12 had not. However, students in grades 10 through 12 had companions who used drugs or addictive substances. Students frequently used drugs or substances on and near school campuses, notably in toilets. Based on this, many techniques for preventing and protecting students from drug and substance use were identified by schools and the police. Anyway, the data showed that all the strategies were effective in reducing drug and substance use in schools, but schools lacked a regular counselling service program to assist kids who needed it. Overall, the study expected that collaboration among all parties involved, including parents, schools, local

governments, competent authorities, and others, would increase the mechanisms for eradicating drug and substance abuse.

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