

ASD: Marijuana-related suspensions up since cannabis legalization

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ANCHORAGE (KTUU) - With marijuana now legal in the state of Alaska, the Anchorage School District is grappling with a growing problem of its own: Pot seems to be sprouting up more often in ASD schools.

"We are finding more suspensions due to marijuana and marijuana edibles from three years ago to now," said ASD Superintendent Dr. Deena Bishop.

Joe Zawodny, ASD Dir. of Secondary Education, said the increase in suspension numbers is significant, and includes offenses for both possession and distribution of marijuana.

However, he said, he can't necessarily empirically attribute the rise to any one thing.

"We're assuming there is some connection to that legalization," he said, "but we're not sure how that's exactly affecting our students and behavior in our schools."

The prevalence of the drug has made its mark on Alaska communities, such as Anchorage, and now the school district has numbers of its own to prove it.

"Really, it does affect learning, and we want people to know that," Bishop said, "that smoking marijuana in a child's teen years will affect his or her ability to learn. And we want to curb that, and ensure our kids can learn at their best."

A summary report provided by ASD states, "When comparing first semester drug suspension data from the past three years, it is clear that marijuana abuse by ASD students has risen significantly."

According to the report, during the 2015-2016 school year, 69 students were suspended for marijuana-related offenses. A year later, 97 were out of school at some point during the first semester for the same thing. And over the course of the first semester this school year, 166 students have already been suspended over marijuana incidents.

That's nearly two-and-a-half times the rate three years ago. Zawodny, though, said the increase isn't entirely surprising.

"We expected when marijuana would be legalized, we'd start to see more usage in the buildings and with students," he said. "And we're seeing that now."

However, he said, there's also a silver lining here, too.

"To know there's an increase in students coming forward I think is the positive outcome here," he said. "Students want to ensure they have a safe learning environment, so they're communicating with adults."

"From the district perspective, we just want to make sure our students have a safe place to go every day and learn," he said.

Zawodny and Bishop both said they're working on programs to help educate students about marijuana. Additionally, Cary Carrigan of the Alaska Marijuana Industry Assn. said Tuesday that the group is working on a similar program to try to steer minors away from pot, which - like alcohol - does remain illegal for those under the age of 21.

More information on marijuana, including data specifically for parents, can be found at the [Alaska Dept. of Health and Social Services website](#).

