

Youth, Schools, Family and Communities

In 2003 I told my 93 year old Mother I was going to Parliament Hill in Ottawa to give a speech on how to help end prohibition. She sat back in her chair and looked quietly at me and said, “Well dear, remember ~ don’t break the law! I sat for a moment and thought about her request, then asked, ‘But what if the laws are unjust and do more harm to the people?’” She didn’t reply right away and sat looking out the window then turned to me and said, “Well then the laws have to be changed.”

We are at the turning point in Canada as we witness the full legalization, regulation and taxation of Cannabis. It is a historic moment for all of us who have been working for decades to bring about an end to unjust prohibition laws. Thanks to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his Liberal MP’s who are dedicating their time and energy in listening to the people.

It is a unique opportunity to re-organize an existing market and drug education in particular as it affects minors in the public education system. Right now there are tensions between public health and the public health framework – of trying to identify and control various harms related to cannabis and an industry which presumably wants to increase or maximize profits.

Educators have known for decades a policy document must emphasize the roles of treatment and harm reduction in responding to addiction as a medical issue.

As the Executive Director of EFSDP, a registered non-profit Canadian Corporation I represent dedicated educators wanting to bring about the end of prohibition.

I am also a former First Nation Principal and a Secondary School teacher in B.C. My International experience took me to China as a researcher with Simon Fraser University and the University of Victoria in 1999-2000 and in my earlier years as an educator In Japan. Both of these experiences were life changing.

After my experience in China I was offered a position as a First Nation administrator in 2001 not only was this experience life altering but it was one that made me realize how ordinary Canadian educators and citizens have no idea what misfortunes, tragedies and adversities many indigenous young people experience by the time they reach adolescence, how many deaths, what abuse they endure what despair they feel.

I met Dr. Gabor Mate a well known Drug Addiction Psychologist and author of many books, including ‘In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts and Hold on To Your Kids’. Several times our paths crossed at conferences and in 2006 at a Drug Policy Alliance conference he said, “the despair FN youth feel, what self-loathing plagues them, what barriers to a life of freedom and meaning they have to face, it is the educator that must always remember to ask”.**‘don’t ask why the drug, ask why the pain’**

In my discussions over the years with Dr. Mate he said, “when somebody goes to a liquor store one doesn’t know if they are buying wine to have a drink over dinner or whether they are buying it to get blasted because they are so miserable in their lives that they can’t stand how they feel. The people who are worried about marijuana being used addictively are quite right to be worried, but that’s not an argument for it to be illegal or more heavily controlled than other substances”. As we continue to work with the Liberal government and lawmakers we need to understand the larger issues behind addiction, such as emotional pain and unhappiness.

At the core of unresolved traumas passed from one generation to the next, along with social conditions that induce further hopelessness I witnessed untold multigenerational trauma in several aboriginal communities

Aboriginal history must be taught fully in our public schools. I know the initiative has already begun regarding residential school history but we need to go further. We need to know the stories, we need to resonant with

aboriginal youth and their brilliant art, their dances, their music and their wisdom, he said, “when Educators see their First Nation’s peers they witness their humanity, grandeur, unspeakable suffering and strength”

While in northern B.C, I decided then to devote the rest of my education career helping to promote and support evidential, nonjudgmental and reality base drug education for Canadian youth and personally for me, particularly in aboriginal communities!

Colonial trauma of disempowerment, loss and dispossession must be denounced. Institutions and individuals interacting with native people must become deeply trauma informed. Mate said that teachers, law enforcement officers, nurses, doctors, psychiatrists, social workers, public employees policy makers, all must understand what trauma is, its multiple impacts on human mentality and behavior. He further said, “we must understand what trauma is, the best meaning people can unwittingly re traumatize those who can least bear further pain and loss.”

During my years up north I witnessed frequent apprehension of children without restorative justice or compassionate family support. This must change.

EFSDP’s affiliation with Drug Policy Alliance has helped. As a leading organization DPA and EFSDP have seen that the war on drugs has done more harm than good. In our vision of the future, individuals will not be punished simply for what they put into their bodies, only for harm done to others.

EFSDP fights for drug policies based on science, compassion, health and human rights and seeks to promote dialogue on cutting-edge education drug policy issues around the country.

Our research works to ensure Canada’s drug policies no longer arrest, incarcerate disenfranchise and otherwise harm millions of non-violent youth, especially people of colour and, like our African American male neighbor our Aboriginal male youth are more likely to face a **‘from school to prison pipeline’** and it is for this reason I want to ensure accurate science in their studies.

When we continue to prosecute youth for cannabis-related charges, particularly first time offenders we are sending the wrong message, we are treating drug education as a coercive and punitive approach and drug education reformers are asking the Liberal government to expunge this completely and take up the gauntlet of mental health and health wellness to address the issues of pain and suffering.

EFSDP’s goals have always been to promote alternatives to failed, punitive drug policies.

Student’s in the public education system an estimated 22 million Canadians 15 years of age and older 11% of these young Canadians aged 15 years or older reported having used cannabis and further in our research it shows that youth in Canada have some of the highest cannabis using rates in the world. And, in Ontario, student’s say cannabis is one of the easiest drugs to obtain 46% report that it would be fairly easy or very easy to obtain.

Educators are now confident that a criminal approach to cannabis possession and that includes production and distribution outside the law is counterproductive and causes more harm than student’s actions. These actions must not be criminalized. Criminal records further the misery and unhappiness of some youth and can in many ways become the ‘gateway to prison’ and the continuation of the ‘from school to prison pipeline. We do not want to see a more criminalized approach in the new regulatory regime, our student’s should not be worse off under legalization.

While a principal in Bella Coola I met Ernest. He was brought to my office on many occasions, this time it was about cannabis. Ernest had been caught smoking near the school grounds and consequently reprimanded by his grade nine teachers then sent to me. He sat across my desk and with a smirk said to me, **“I know what you want me to be Ms. Renaud, you want me to be good you don’t want me to be bad! Well, I want to be bad.”**

It was at this time that I realized that one of the biggest barriers we face as educators in evidence and reality based drug education is to help reduce the stigma surrounding marijuana.

We already know that Ontario youth and young people across Canada from coast to coast to coast have already been introduced to cannabis use in their early teens through friends, family and associates, therefore it will be school administrators and teachers in collaboration with health care professionals and mental health providers that will help bridge the gap between what I call ~walking the science not talking street smarts. If we continue to support an all-inclusive drug education supporting youth input and young people who use cannabis, drug education curriculum will not only be inclusive but also safer ~ using a **BETTER** approach – **'Be Educators That Teach Evidence Research'**

This should be mandatory.

Our advocacy work has been directed to parents and educators and young people. Like our neighbor to the south we support honest, comprehensive reality based youth drug education rather than approaches based primarily in fear and misinformation. We support alternatives to zero tolerance policies and drug testing in schools, which are unrealistic, ineffective and even harmful.

EFSDP endorses and follows the widely disseminated publications of **"Safety First" by Dr. Marsha Rosenbaum and "Beyond Zero" Tolerance Dr. Rodney Skager** at www.drugpolicy.org

The concept of harm reduction is to use the most effective approaches to address teen drug use. For over 14 years we have consulted with experts, parents, teachers, researchers and young people themselves.

We bring a voice to educators who would like to see changes in our drug education programs. Our primary motivation is the fact that teachers, more than any other professional group have a responsibility to provide children with accurate and useful information as a foundation for further knowledge. EFSDP is an organization devoted to bringing the training, influence and credibility of the teaching profession to drug related issues and drug law debate and reform. As a public health philosophy harm reduction seeks to lessen the dangers that drug abuse and our drug policies cause to society.

Current policies are proving to be both very expensive and also ineffective, judging from increased incidence of drug use/abuse one of EFSDP's objectives is to reduce the harm caused by unworkable policies. More money is spent, more arrests are made.

We would all agree that abstinence should continue to be presented as the safest and wisest choice to make regarding drug use. But the idea that we can convince every young person out there to never experiment with a substance is unrealistic. As hard as we try, we will never convince 100 percent of youth to say no 100 percent of the time.

Despite our efforts, many students will say maybe, or yes, or sometimes, and as many parents understand even the most gifted, talented, promising child is likely to choose to experiment, even just once. And to me, this is an important point. Within the context of our present drug education programs, students and their parents have made themselves perfectly clear; they want to see plans implemented to develop drug curriculum based on solid scientific evidence, non-judgmental reality based programs designed to meet the comprehensive continuum of services built on the fundamental principles of health promotion, harm reduction and community capacity building.

We need to ask ourselves **"what does evidence based mean?"** What programs are currently out there and which high schools want to use a prevention program, how do we find them?

My discussions with the Liberal Senate in February of this year on the Legalization of Marijuana asked for a 'moratorium on cops in classrooms' hand over the gauntlet of teaching drug education to professional drug educators, healthcare professionals and mental health providers rather than law enforcement officers who use a criminal perspective rather than a health/wellness perspective. It was agreed that anything illegal cannot be regulated and so too, anything illegal cannot be comfortably taught by professional high school educators for fear of losing their jobs. It was agreed by all Senators and the Association of Chief of Police that once marijuana is legal then having law enforcement officers in the classroom such as the Odd Squad and/or the DARE program would be deemed unnecessary. This could take a long time ~ years. The trick will be to balance concerns for health and safety, an opportunity for industry, government which includes the provincial Ministries of Education and the community to work together to create a really good system.

So that brings us to what next?

My goal as an educator is to reflect the tone of the Liberal Marijuana Legalization and Regulation Task Force to understand that educational leaders can greatly benefit from a collaborative perspective improving educator's work in all areas of drug education as it affects the health and wellbeing of our students. We see the potential for an educational structure built in accordance with educational standards for the broadest possible use with the primary focus to work collaboratively with drug policy reform educators, health care professionals and mental health providers. Eventually EFSDP envisions research in this field which focuses on evidence and science based drug education. A comprehensive drug curriculum has the potential of developing into a multidisciplinary level of approach, one that integrates subjects with classes that students are already taking. It is clear that in a legalization regime the age of majority is where we are heading and our research and experience has suggested the longest age range of use is 15 – 24 years old. It is also suggested parental/guardian permission for those under the age of majority for both medical and recreational.

This brings me back to Ernest and the issue of the 'stigma of cannabis' – the challenging question:

1. Would a lower age limit create less harm?

The illegality of cannabis has resulted in criminal records of thousands of youth and young people. Approximately 15,300 youth aged 12-17 were accused of drug offenses under the Controlled Drug and Substance Act (Stats Canada 2014) A young person of 18 with a criminal record history can effects school loans, housing, financial aid and some jobs. Educators believe and stress that laws around cannabis are important consequences, and yet we know the challenge is to have no threat of a criminal record for a minor whilst maintaining the integrity of the law as it establishes norms around cannabis use and access. Which is why educators see a need to address the more vulnerable, at risk or homeless youth. We see more education for Doctors is essential so the dialogue between patients and Doctors, students and Educators is a meaningful part of the care they can provide.

Just recently I received a letter from a practicing physician in Kamloops after the community experienced the death of a young adult from an overdose of Fentanyl and he asked:

"My school district in Kamloops is looking for some educational resources following the recent wedding death of a former student. I'm involved in the naloxone program in Kamloops, I'd like them to stay away from the prohibition mindset- mostly everyone wants to know 'how to talk to kids about this' "

It is apparent that educators, parents, youth and health care professionals must work together as we develop curriculum on cannabis and yes, all drugs. We see the need to draw on decades of experience working with experts in the field of addiction in drug policy reform..... andby using a compassionate understanding that builds on an open mind. We have to talk about the risks of all drug use, and about the possible benefits and alternative therapies, especially as it relates to medicinal marijuana.

Presently in the Vancouver school district there is a young child who has been given permission to use cannabis with her vaporizer in her elementary school to lessen the numbers of her epileptic seizures. The parents and the school administrators realized that marijuana had proven successful enabling her to concentrate on her schoolwork. This is a progressive step for the district and one that requires full participation from everyone involved!

Compared to the depth and complexity of curriculum, which would mirror and draw from human history and experience the responsibility of qualified drug educators is to improve school support around high school drug education using the three most important policy goals:

harm reduction, restorative practices and positive youth development.

Dr. Andrew Weil said in his book 'From Chocolate to Morphine' **"drugs are neither good or bad, it is our relationship with these drugs'**

The very first thing for qualified drug educators to do is to receive the teachings with the right motivation and the right incentive. This means we must come to this progressive process with a mental attitude of respect and compassion. There has been discussion about who is best qualified to deliver school-based drug education. Some say 'trained facilitators' rather than teachers or authority figures because of possible reprimands and/or repercussions. Some feel that even if teachers wanted to give students access to accurate information there would be a fear of being seen as promoting use.

Yes, this perspective was born from a prohibitionist approach but should not be a directive in a legalization regime. EFSDP's suggestion is to consider that the entire question of 'community' will have to be addressed. As too often is the case, programs brought forward from outside trained facilitators do not carry with them a consistent day to day week to week relationship which teachers bring to the table. Our research has included that the value of curriculum taught by teachers and health colleagues together and in collaboration will address what evidenced based means, what fact-based information is age appropriate, what programs are currently in public schools and what widely used drug education programs and internet information is out there, and do they actually work?

Canadian parents have told us they are patiently waiting for this, as are the youth. They see this as a progressive step forward in our public schools. Up to now EFSDP has been providing parents and teachers with the tools needed to evaluate and discuss strategies for protecting youth from drug misuse. Given how legalization is, there is little public health data to show educators what the larger effects will be on children and adults.

We have concluded that the inclusion of youth voices is mandatory to help mitigate the stigma surrounding cannabis and that the creation of a new regulatory regime for cannabis is critical and vital. Educators truly want to protect the interests of young people, including those who choose to use.

We propose:

1. to implement drug education based on science, compassion health and human rights
2. to commit to drug education that is honest, balanced interactive and delivered with full participation from students
3. to help reduce the many harms of drug use and or drug laws
4. to increase and create new partnerships and continue collaborating with existing partnerships
5. to deliver, design, and evaluate current drug curriculum in Canadian schools
6. to support mentors in the field of health, wellness and drug education, keeping in step with historically progressive approaches to social issues as they relate to developing a high school drug education curriculum based on the principles of:
 - a) harm reduction
 - b) restorative practices
 - c) positive youth development

Some Segments of our society, like our First Nation communities, have been sadly neglected. More and more I hear how involved the youth of Canada want to be in the business of cannabis and in their own personal development in health and wellness. Not only do we want student's to be safe and knowledgeable but also we want well informed and participatory students. We can change the industry for the better using the talents of youth. This is a win win situation for all involved. The directives for this are endless within a school community as classes respond within the fields of botany, chemistry, agriculture, marketing, law, etc all can address the topic using creative and innovative thinkers! **Let's stop thinking about the 'harm' and concentrate on the 'healing' for others. Turn the kids into humanitarians not criminals.**

Thankyou,
Judith Newbergher-Renaud B.A. M.A.

Executive Director
Educators for Sensible Drug Policy

Facebook:
www.facebook.com/EFSDP
www.facebook.com/JudithAnnRenaud

Twitter:
www.twitter.com/JudithRenaud

Website:
<http://www.efsdp.org>

LinkedIn:
<https://ca.linkedin.com/in/judith-newbergher-renaud-62b4ba5a>

