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## Prevention Researcher Reacts to Recent Evaluations of D.A.R.E.

### The Bottom Line on D.A.R.E.

By Professor Joseph F. Donnermeyer  
The Ohio State University

As a professor at The Ohio State University who has conducted research on the D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) program, I was both amused and appalled by a recent news story about D.A.R.E. The story described an assessment of D.A.R.E. by a researcher who claimed that D.A.R.E. does not work. This conclusion was based on a recently published article from an 8-year follow-up study of sixth grade students from the 1987-88 school year in Lexington, Kentucky. Comparing an experimental group of students who participated in D.A.R.E. with a control group of similar students who had not participated in D.A.R.E., the researcher found that 8 years later, there was no difference between the two groups in terms of their behaviors and attitudes about using illicit substances.

The amusing part of the story is that it concluded what every parent and teacher already knows: children do not learn to read in a single lesson, so why should a prevention education program that is delivered at only one grade level expect to have long-lasting effects? Perhaps another way to express this is through the analogy of piano lessons: children, who do not practice their lessons, never learn how to play the piano well. At best, they might remember a few rudimentary sequences of notes, or how to play "chopsticks."

#### **Kentucky study**

The appalling part of the story is what was not mentioned. First, the control group in the Kentucky study also participated in a prevention education curriculum taught through those schools' health courses. In other words, there was no real control group in terms of elementary textbook rules about how evaluations using an experimental design should be conducted. Despite problems with the control group, the researchers earlier published reports mentioned a number of positive findings in which students who participated in D.A.R.E. scored higher than those in the control group. Second, the Kentucky research is based on a D.A.R.E. curriculum, which has twice been revised since 1988. In essence, the researcher's verdict was about a curriculum that no longer exists!

Plus, when one considers the two facts that the study is from a single community only, and focuses on a group of students who are a half generation removed from today's sixth graders, it is difficult to figure out why the research was newsworthy in the first place, and why the researchers could make such a sweeping claim about a program which is now international in scope.

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**Ohio and Pennsylvania study**

My research in Ohio, which included 3,200 subjects from 33 schools in central city, suburban, and rural communities across the state, found that the D.A.R.E. elementary program was effective when used in partnership with other prevention education efforts. This research was conducted in 1995 and published three years later in the Journal of School Health. In other words, I found the obvious too. Multiple programming efforts are more effective than single shot programs. **Students who participated in the D.A.R.E. elementary and middle school (developed since the Kentucky study began) programs had lower drug use, more positive attitudes about the police, communicated more with their families about the dangers of substance use, and had better peer resistance skills.** Also, D.A.R.E. students were more likely to participate in other prevention education efforts, such as Red Ribbon Week and Just Say No Clubs, and in turn, these programs reinforce the positive messages of D.A.R.E.

Furthermore, even those students from Ohio who only had the opportunity to be involved in the D.A.R.E. elementary program were better off on many measures of behavior and attitudes about substance use than those students who had never participated in any kind of prevention education.

The results of a study recently released by the Pennsylvania commission on Crime and Delinquency were identical to the Ohio study. This study included 2,500 students from schools in 14 communities across Pennsylvania. This research concluded that the elementary D.A.R.E. program is effective, especially when it is reinforced by other programs during the middle school and senior school years. The piano analogy holds: practice makes a positive difference.

I have also conducted statewide studies on parents' and educators' views of the D.A.R.E. program. Both groups give D.A.R.E. high marks. The vast majority of the 719 respondents in the parent study believed that the program is effective based on their observations of their child's reactions to the D.A.R.E. officer and the curriculum. Ninety-seven percent of the parents want to see D.A.R.E. continued in their child's school. In fact, the written comments from many of the 3 percent of parents who did not like the D.A.R.E. program indicated that they are currently using substances, especially marijuana, and feel threatened by all types of prevention education.

The 286 teachers and principals in the educator study have the same opinion as parents. In their opinion, the majority of students reacted positively to the D.A.R.E. officer and they felt that most students learned from their participation in the program. Almost 97 percent of educators also recommend that D.A.R.E. continue in their schools.

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**Why the negativity on D.A.R.E.?**

So why does D.A.R.E. seem to be the subject of so many negative news stories? One reason is that D.A.R.E. is the largest prevention education program in the world and one of the few evaluated by researchers who are NOT the authors of the curriculum. Nearly all other prevention education curricula that claim to be more effective than D.A.R.E. have been evaluated by the authors themselves (or someone close to the authors), and usually at the pilot stage. Most have not been "in the trenches" where it really counts.

Another reason is some experts in the prevention education field who openly criticize D.A.R.E. in the media, admit that if D.A.R.E. goes away, they can sell their own prevention education curricula to schools and "make a profit." This is not a make believe quote. It comes directly from a critic of D.A.R.E. made to an audience of prevention specialists on which the two of us were panelists.

Readers should keep in mind that D.A.R.E. is a not for profit program that depends on the cooperative efforts of local law enforcement and schools.

**The Bottom Line on D.A.R.E.**

The bottom line is this: All the research on D.A.R.E. indicates that it has a positive impact on the behaviors and attitudes of students. However, like all prevention education programs, the elementary school D.A.R.E. program is subject to its effects wearing off if it is not reinforced with additional educational efforts. Practice is essential to long-term learning.

In 1987-88, D.A.R.E. stood, practically alone, on the front lines of America's efforts to reduce adolescent substance use. Back then, a prevention education program was viewed as a "magic bullet" that was expected to take care of the problem, all by itself.

This is not true today. The D.A.R.E. elementary program provides a valuable first step toward continuous quality education for young people about the dangers of drug use. The middle and senior school D.A.R.E. programs are attempts to strengthen that investment, and the same can be said of Red Ribbon Week, Just Say No Clubs and the other prevention education programs that are now available to schools throughout the country. Parent drug education programs have started in many communities. Media campaigns help as well.