Educating Those at Risk: Spreading Knowledge to Combat the Opioid Epidemic

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Thesis
In order to combat skyrocketing opioid abuse in New York State, the NYS Education Department should introduce opioid awareness and prevention programs into its mandated health curriculum in the same vein as the 2014 amendments to the Mental Hygiene Act.

Background Analysis
America, and New York State in particular, is facing an opioid epidemic. While the issue is prevalent in rural communities, it is actually more common in small metropolitan areas, which account for over 20 percent of nonmedical opioid usage. Counties with the highest mortality from opioid use have a high percentage of whites, veterans, and people relying on Social Security and Disability Insurance or reporting poor health. These places tend to have lower median income, lower educational attainment rates, and higher unemployment. Every day in America, more than 650,000 opioid prescriptions are dispensed, and 3,900 people abuse these prescriptions. Seventy-eight people die each day from an opioid overdose. Opioids were historically used to treat very serious injuries and cancer pain, but since 1999 they have become more commonly prescribed for less severe ailments. These treatments are addictive and an estimated 25 percent of people taking opioids to manage pain struggle with dependency. The opioid epidemic must be stopped so the affected communities can recover and thrive. A 2014 law amended the Mental Hygiene Act in New York, establishing a multimedia public education measure regarding opioid abuse through the Department of Health (DOH). The law focuses on the risks of opioid abuse, how to recognize signs of addiction, resources available to cope with addiction, and a brief coverage of the state’s Good Samaritan Laws that protect bystanders contacting emergency services in a crisis.

Talking Points
- The opioid epidemic shows no signs of slowing down.
- Educating people about the dangers of opioids and drug abuse is key to curbing the crisis.
- Amending school curriculums is necessary to spread awareness. Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit.
- Because a similar New York DOH policy has already been enacted, the resources to expand the policy to the Education Department are already in place.

Policy Idea
The New York State Education Department should change the health curriculum to emphasize community outreach and advocacy. This change would be similar to amendments made recently to the Mental Hygiene Act in the DOH to combat the opioid epidemic in the Northeast. Public school health curriculums should be revised to

KEY FACTS
- Opioid overdoses kill 78 people daily. 3
- One in 25 adults take opioids for chronic pain rather than severe symptoms.
- $189 million was allocated to addressing the issue in the New York State 2016–17 budget. 4
- Accidental overdose or suicide resulting from prescription drug abuse kills an American every 19 minute. 5
convey important information about the opioid crisis, such as signs of addiction, preventative measures such as Naloxone, and New York’s Good Samaritan Laws.

**Policy Analysis**
This policy should be enacted through the Department of Education to supplement the existing policy of the DOH. The budgetary impact of this policy would be negligible. Many of the resources needed to change the curriculum are already amassed through the DOH’s policy, and the majority of work left to do is to adapt the system used in Health to Education. Additionally, this policy would supplement the mere $189 million allocated to the issue federally for 2017, and would have a significantly larger local impact than the federal spending. This policy would find strength in adopting clauses from the 2014 State Assembly Bill A10120, which planned for a more extensive policy to also address reducing addiction stigma and provided guidelines for annual Commissioner Reports. The mix of A10120 and Mental Hygiene Amendment frameworks will reach massive numbers of people through the public education system and alert them to the dangers of opiates, heading off the crisis before it develops further in the state. Many cities such as Ithaca, New York, haven’t had major changes to their drug education curriculum since 1999, and it is high time for the curriculums to adapt and reflect the turbulent circumstances New York State faces today.

**Next Steps**
A coalition of Cornell University’s most involved groups, such as Cayuga’s Watchers and the Drug Information Association Student Chapter, will help us network with relevant people and organizations such as Head Nurse of the Ithaca School District Judy Hoffman, Cornell Initiatives Coordinator Laura Santacroce, and the Drug Policy Alliance. A policy pitched by this support system and backed by petition will bring Ithaca’s schools to the table and align with Mayor Svante Myrick’s goals of reforming Ithaca’s approach to drugs. The mayor would present the proposal to the Ithaca City School District to initiate an update to the drug education curriculum. This updated curriculum would serve as a model when presenting the plan to State Assemblymember Steven Cymbrowitz and the cosponsors of the Mental Hygiene Act Amendments. Through the State Assembly, this plan would become policy statewide.

**End Notes**

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