

Athlone Community College Substance Abuse Policy

Introduction

Athlone Community College is committed to protecting the health, safety, and wellbeing of every young person in line with the Education Act 1998 and the Education (Welfare) Act 2000. This policy sets out the framework within which the school manages issues relating to alcohol, drugs, vaping, and substance misuse. The primary aim of this policy is to safeguard the welfare and protection of all members of the school community. This policy should be read in conjunction with the Code of Behaviour, Health and Safety Policy, Child Safeguarding Statement, and Suspension and Expulsion Policy.

Rationale

Substance misuse presents a significant challenge for students, families, and the wider community. The Education Act 1998 requires schools to promote students' social and personal development and to provide health education. Additionally, the National Drugs Strategy highlights the important role of schools in prevention and requires the development of a substance use policy. This policy reflects a whole-school approach that prioritises prevention, education, early intervention, and support.

Scope of the Policy

This policy applies to all members of the school community, including students, teaching staff, non-teaching staff, parents or guardians, visitors, and external groups using school facilities. The policy applies during the school day, on school premises, and at all school-related activities, including trips, extracurricular events, and activities outside of normal school hours. It also applies where students are representing the school or are identifiable as members of the school, including when in uniform.

Definitions of Substances and Misuse

A substance is defined as any chemical that alters the normal functioning of the human body physically, mentally, or emotionally. This includes alcohol, illegal drugs such as cannabis and cocaine, tobacco products including e-cigarettes, vaping devices and nicotine pouches, solvents, and prescription or over-the-counter medication when misused. Substance misuse refers to the use of any substance in a manner that adversely affects a person's health, behaviour, relationships, or ability to function effectively in school.

School Position on Substance Use

Athlone Community College strictly prohibits the possession, use, consumption, sale, or distribution of any prohibited substance. This includes alcohol, illegal drugs, vaping devices, tobacco products including nicotine pouches, and drug paraphernalia.

Students are not permitted to misuse prescribed or non-prescribed medication under any circumstances. These rules apply on school premises, during school activities, and while students are under the care or supervision of the school.

Legislative and Policy Framework

This policy is informed by national legislation and Department of Education guidance, including:

- The Education Act 1998, which requires schools to promote students' social and personal development and provide health education
- The Education (Welfare) Act 2000, which places an emphasis on student welfare and attendance
- The Child Care Act 1991, which outlines responsibilities in relation to child protection
- The Misuse of Drugs Acts 1977–2016
- The Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018 and tobacco-related legislation

It also reflects:

- Department of Education Guidelines for Developing a School Substance Use Policy
- SPHE and Wellbeing curriculum requirements
- Department guidance on the use of evidence-based resources only

Education and Prevention

Athlone Community College recognises that education is central to preventing substance misuse and promoting wellbeing. The school provides structured learning through the SPHE curriculum and the Wellbeing programme. These programmes aim to equip students with the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to make informed and responsible decisions regarding substance use.

Students are supported in developing resilience, self-esteem, and the ability to manage peer pressure and risk situations.

The school uses evidence-based resources developed by the HSE, NCCA, and other credible organisations. Resources funded by industries with a vested interest, such as the alcohol industry, will not be used in line with Department of Education and HSE advice. The school may also facilitate staff training and, where appropriate, invite external speakers to support student learning.



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Partnership with Parents

Athlone Community College recognises that parents and guardians play a vital role in supporting young people. The school will communicate with parents in relation to any concerns regarding substance use and will involve them, where appropriate, in responding to incidents. Parents are expected to cooperate fully with the school in addressing such issues and to support the implementation of this policy.

In most cases, parents will be informed where an incident arises. However, in exceptional circumstances where informing parents may place a student at risk, the school will act in accordance with child protection procedures.

Procedures for Managing Substance Use Incidents

In the event of a substance-related incident (including the possession, use, consumption, sale, or distribution of any prohibited substance), Athlone Community College will respond in a structured, fair, and consistent manner, with the health, safety, and wellbeing of all students as the primary concern. The school will also ensure that all procedures are in line with its duty of care obligations under the Education Act 1998 and Education (Welfare) Act 2000.

1. Immediate Response

When an incident is reported or suspected, the member of staff involved will take immediate steps to ensure the safety of the student(s) and others present. If a student appears to be under the influence of a substance, appropriate medical attention will be sought where necessary. The situation will be handled calmly, respectfully, and without causing unnecessary alarm. The incident must be reported to the Principal or Deputy Principals as soon as possible.

2. Preliminary Assessment

The Principal or Deputy Principals will conduct an initial assessment of the situation to determine:

- The nature and seriousness of the incident
- Whether there is an immediate risk to any individual or to the school community
- Whether external agencies (such as medical services or An Garda Síochána) need to be contacted promptly

Where necessary, steps will be taken to secure any substances or related items found.

3. Investigation Process

The Principal or Deputy Principals will lead the investigation and may delegate specific tasks to relevant staff members. The investigation will include:

- Collecting and recording all relevant information in writing
- Taking statements from students, staff, or witnesses as appropriate
- Giving the student(s) involved a clear explanation of the concerns or allegations

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- Providing the student(s) with an opportunity to respond and give their account
- Ensuring that fair procedures and natural justice are applied at all stages

All records will be dated, factual, and securely stored.

4. Communication with Parents/Guardians

Parents or guardians will normally be informed at an early stage of the process. The school will outline the nature of the concern, the steps being taken, and any proposed actions. In exceptional circumstances, where informing parents may place the student at risk, the school will seek guidance and follow child protection procedures, prioritising the student's welfare.

5. Involvement of External Agencies

Where appropriate, the school will consult or involve external supports, including:

- An Garda Síochána, particularly in cases involving illegal substances or refusal to comply with a search
- HSE Drug and Alcohol Services, where support or intervention is required
- Tusla, where there are concerns regarding the safety or welfare of a student

The decision to involve external agencies will be made by the Principal, taking into account the seriousness of the incident and legal obligations.

6. Decision-Making and Outcome

Following the investigation, the Principal will determine the appropriate response. This decision will consider:

- The nature and seriousness of the incident
- The age and circumstances of the student(s) involved
- Any previous incidents or patterns of behaviour
- The impact on the school community

The outcome may include disciplinary action, supportive interventions, or a combination of both.

7. Recording and Documentation

A formal written record of the incident will be maintained, including:

- Details of the incident
- Actions taken
- Communications with parents and external agencies
- Final decisions and outcomes



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All documentation will be stored securely in line with GDPR and school data protection policies.

8. Follow-Up and Support

Following an incident, the school will monitor the situation and provide appropriate follow-up supports. This may include:

- Pastoral care support within the school
- Referral to guidance counselling services
- Engagement with external agencies where needed

The aim of follow-up is to support the student's wellbeing and prevent recurrence.

Search Procedures

The school reserves the right to search lockers, school bags, personal belongings, and other property where there are reasonable grounds to suspect the presence of prohibited substances (alcohol, illegal drugs, vaping devices, tobacco products including nicotine pouches, and drug paraphernalia). Searches will be conducted respectfully and, where possible, in the presence of two staff members. Students may be given the opportunity to voluntarily surrender any substances prior to a search. The search procedures apply during the school day, on school premises, and at all school-related activities, including trips, extracurricular events, and activities outside of normal school hours. It also applies where students are representing the school or are identifiable as members of the school, including when in uniform.

If a student refuses to cooperate and there is reasonable suspicion of possession of illegal substances, An Garda Síochána may be contacted. Every effort will be made to inform parents or guardians before a search is carried out.

Sanctions

Sanctions will be applied in line with the school's Code of Behaviour and will be proportionate to the seriousness of the incident. The school recognises the importance of balancing discipline with support and intervention.

All sanctions will:

- Be fair, consistent, and applied in accordance with due process
- Consider the individual circumstances of the student
- Aim to promote learning, responsibility, and positive behaviour
- Consider the safety and wellbeing of the entire school community

Depending on the severity of the incident, sanctions may include:

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- A verbal warning issued by a teacher, Year Head, or member of senior management, outlining the nature of the breach and expected behaviour
- A written warning, which will be recorded and communicated to parents or guardians
- Temporary removal from class or supervised detention where appropriate
- Suspension from school for a specified period, in line with Department of Education procedures
- Expulsion, in cases of serious breaches such as the sale, supply, or distribution of illegal substances, or repeated serious offences

The severity of sanctions may be increased where:

- There is evidence of supplying or distributing substances
- The incident involves a significant risk to other students
- The student has a history of previous incidents
- There is refusal to cooperate with school procedures

In certain situations, the school may impose precautionary measures while an investigation is ongoing. These may include:

- Temporary suspension pending investigation
- Restricted access to certain areas or activities
- Increased supervision

Such measures will be used only where necessary to ensure safety.

Alongside sanctions, the school will seek to provide support to the student. This may include:

- Referral to the Guidance Counsellor or pastoral care team
- Behaviour support plans or monitoring arrangements
- Encouragement to access external supports, such as HSE drug and alcohol services

The aim of these interventions is to address underlying issues and support positive change.

The outcome of any disciplinary process will be communicated clearly to the student and their parents or guardians. This communication will outline:

- The findings of the investigation
- The sanctions applied
- Any supports or follow-up actions required

Students and parents will also be informed of their right to appeal decisions, in line with school procedures.



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Drug Testing

The Board of Management reserves the right to require a student to undergo drug testing in certain circumstances. These may include situations where a student has tested positive previously, has been found in possession of drugs, or where there are significant concerns regarding substance use.

A positive drug test result will be treated as a breach of this policy.

Medication

Students who require prescribed medication must inform the school in advance. This notification must be provided in writing to the Year Head, who will ensure that relevant staff are informed.

For school trips and activities, parents or guardians are responsible for providing accurate and up-to-date information regarding any medication a student may require.

Roles and Responsibilities

- **Principal**
The Principal has overall responsibility for the implementation and monitoring of this policy. The Principal will oversee all investigations, make decisions in relation to incidents, liaise with external agencies, and ensure that accurate records are maintained.
- **Staff**
All staff members have a responsibility to promote a safe and healthy school environment. Staff should remain vigilant to signs of substance misuse, report concerns to the Principal, and support students in making positive choices.
- **Parents/Guardians**
Parents/Guardians are expected to support the aims of this policy and to cooperate with the school where concerns arise. They play a key role in reinforcing the messages communicated through the school's educational programmes.

Signs of Substance Misuse

The school acknowledges that certain behavioural, emotional, or physical changes may indicate potential substance misuse. These may include a decline in academic performance, changes in mood or behaviour, irregular attendance, or association with different peer groups.

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Such signs are not, in themselves, proof of substance misuse but may indicate the need for further monitoring or support.

Confidentiality and Child Protection

All information relating to substance use incidents will be handled sensitively and shared only on a need-to-know basis. However, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed where there are concerns regarding the safety or wellbeing of a student. All child protection concerns will be managed in accordance with the school's Child Safeguarding Statement and statutory requirements. Where necessary, referrals will be made to Tusla.

Media

The Principal, or a nominated representative, will act as the school's spokesperson in any dealings with the media. The school will not comment on individual cases while an investigation is ongoing.

Monitoring and Review

This policy will be reviewed every three years or more frequently if required. The review process will take account of changes in legislation, Department of Education guidance, and the needs of the school community.

Ratification

This policy was ratified by the Board of Management:

Date: 15th June 2026

Chairperson: *Janet Hara*

