Anti-Alcohol Policies in Schools More Effective If Students Think They Are Enforced

School anti-alcohol policies are more effective when students think they are being enforced, researchers at the University of Washington have found.

Students' perceptions of the policies' enforcement are more important than the details of the policies.

Researchers studied school anti-alcohol policies in Washington state and Australia, and how effective they were in deterring eighth and ninth graders from drinking. Students were more likely to drink on campus if they felt the school did not enforce its anti-alcohol policies, even if the school had a suspension or expulsion policy, Science Daily reports.

If students believed school officials would enforce the policy, they were less likely to drink, even if the policy required milder sanctions, such as counseling. "Whatever your school policy is, lax enforcement is related to more drinking," lead researcher Richard Catalano said in a news release.

The study also found students were less likely to binge drink if they received an abstinence alcohol message or a harm minimization message, and if they believed teachers would talk to them about alcohol's dangers.
Catalano said harsh punishment for drinking at school can have negative consequences, such as causing students to feel disconnected from school. The students may end up drinking even more.

"What we've seen in other studies from this sample is suspension policies actually worsen the behavior problem," he noted. "What that says to me is, although you want policies and you want enforcement of policies, there are other ways of responding than suspension, expulsion and calling the police: Getting a student to talk to a teacher about how alcohol might be harmful, or a session with the school counselor."

The study appears in the journal *Health Education Research.*

Alcohol is widely available and aggressively promoted throughout society. It is the most

commonly used and abused drug among youth in the United States -- more than tobacco and illicit drugs -- and although drinking by persons under the age of 21 is illegal, people aged 12 to 20 drink 11% of all alcohol consumed in the United States. Click here to read more about Underage and College Drinking.