

NEWS

Worcester officials: South High student rushed to hospital after eating cannabis edible

**Jeff A. Chamer**

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WORCESTER — A ninth-grade student at South High Community School became ill Monday and required medical attention after ingesting a cannabis edible, school officials said.

Police, firefighters and EMTs were called to the school.

Three students were involved in the incident. Two students were dismissed and the third was transported to the hospital, School Safety Director Robert F. Pezzella said.

"Two of them were OK to be dismissed and the third one was transported to the hospital as this student became very ill," Pezzella said. "This is an issue that we're dealing with in our schools and we are very vigilant in trying to provide education to these students who are engaging in high-risk behaviors."

Pezzella said Monday afternoon he did not know the condition of the student taken to the hospital.

School officials said they did not know how the students came to acquire the edible, but it did come from a dispensary, he said.

"This edible chocolate bar did come from a facility that got into the hands of a teenager and it caused that teenager to become violently ill and transported to the hospital," Pezzella said.

Resembled 'regular food'

Superintendent Maureen Binienda said that part of the issue is that the edibles resembled "regular food."

"We shouldn't be selling things that look like regular food," Binienda said.

Pezzella said that while people are advocating for marijuana legalization, not enough are advocating for "the other side of the issue."

"We have an opioid epidemic in our country that's filtered on down to the local level and it all starts, in a lot of cases, where teenagers are experimenting with drugs like marijuana and end up progressing to more severe drugs like opiates," he said. "That's what ends up causing them in the long run chronic drug use and abuse and addiction."

He said he is not a proponent of legalizing any drugs.

"I wasn't a proponent of legalizing marijuana two years ago because it's getting in the hands of kids," he said.

Pezzella said the students are likely to participate in a drug education program, rather than face suspension.

"Rather than suspending students, where they don't learn much, there is an alternative — a five-day education program where students can attend, after they're in possession of any type of drug," Pezzella said.

During normal school hours, students travel to the program and get a variety of lesson plans taught by a health educator on the impact drugs can have on a student's life and body.

Beth Rouse is one of the health educators providing these lessons.

"We break the school days into particular subjects, so the majority of the time we have a kind of set routine that we would use," Rouse said. "We usually talk about the brain on our first day because we need to explain to students the impacts of drugs and alcohol on their brain."

Rouse said that each class is capped off at five students each day, with students starting and ending on different days depending on when they enter the program.

The reason for the small number of students to be able to provide them individualized attention, she said.

"They learn about the effects of marijuana, and how it affects your learning abilities and how it affects your brain and how detrimental it can be," Rouse said. "For teenagers, we talk about alcohol, opioids and some of the harder drugs like cocaine and MDMA's ... then on our fifth day, we usually talk about addiction, what addiction is, how you can prevent addiction."

She said that teenagers often do not understand how they are more susceptible to addiction as their brains have not fully developed.

"It's about teaching them so they're educated enough to make better choices," she said. "Whether it's peer pressure or what happened with COVID ... they're turning to these things and not really understanding."

The program also involves providing students with counseling services.

Kelly Solitro, a school adjustment counselor who works in the drug education program said that while students are reluctant about joining the program when they first enter, by the end they realize the program exists to help them and educate them.

"They're trying to fit in. Socially, we've been isolating for two years during the pandemic, and a lot of these kids don't really know where they fit in," Solitro said. "Certain kids have adjusted well, others have not."

As the counselor, Solitro coordinates with the schools by doing an exit meeting at the end of students' five days in the program.

"So that we can get them connected with their school counselors so that they're on their radar," she said. "So that we have some follow through with following up to make sure that these students have someone to talk to a trusted adult — at the school."

Two of the students involved in the incident Monday have been referred to the program thus far, Pezzella said.