## KEY LEARNINGS:

- Use hyperlocal data points from recent surveys to increase believability and decrease skepticism of the accuracy of the positive norms.

- Implement rotating campaigns that refresh social norming messages every few weeks to maintain student engagement and prevent message fatigue. Remember: this is about reducing the gap between perception and reality by repeatedly sharing credible data—data youth trust because they know the survey is real and may have even participated in it.

- Keep campaigns simple—creative doesn't need to be fancy to be effective. Simpler designs often feel more organic and authentic.

- Empower youth to participate in all phases of the campaign—from design to implementation—through training and support.

- Recruit trusted adults to champion the campaign and reinforce positive norms among students and staff.

- Partner with a local community prevention organization to support schools with implementation, especially when schools need additional support or capacity.

# SE2

SE2 is a public health communications and marketing firm that creates data-informed, youth-centered campaigns rooted in social norms science to inspire healthy choices and drive lasting behavior change.

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**ADAPT**
A Division for Advancing Prevention & Treatment
CULTIVATING PREVENTION

ADAPT is a national leader in using social norms science to reduce youth substance use through data-driven campaigns that celebrate the healthy choices most young people already make.

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**THE MONTANA INSTITUTE**

The Montana Institute is dedicated to fostering healthier, safer, and more supportive communities through innovative applications of the Science of the Positive and Positive Community Norms frameworks.
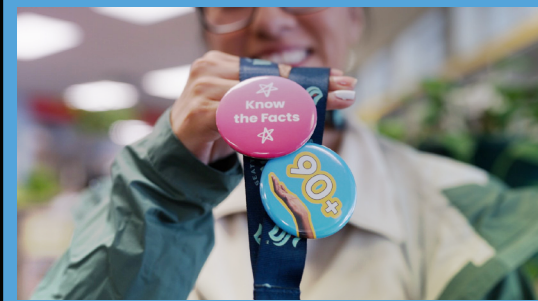
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# CORRECTING TEEN MISPERCEPTIONS ENCOURAGES HEALTHY CHOICES

*Highlight Positive Social Norms to Support Youth Tobacco Prevention*

## 1. INTRODUCTION: A PROVEN APPROACH TO PREVENTION

Youth prevention campaigns often focus on what not to do: *"Don't smoke"* or *"Just say no."* These messages can unintentionally reinforce the perception that risky behaviors are the norm.

Research supports a better way: a strengths-based approach that establishes healthy choices as the norm can prevent the onset and escalation of substance use in youth.

## 2. THE SCIENCE: WHY MISPERCEPTIONS MATTER

- Youth tend to overestimate how many of their peers engage in risky behaviors like smoking and vaping.

- Youth often misjudge caregivers as being more permissive and more accepting of unhealthy behaviors than they truly are

- These misperceptions influence behavior — if teens believe "everyone is doing it," they're more likely to smoke or vape themselves, and are less likely to intervene when others do.

- Social norms campaigns correct these misperceptions.

- Most youth don't use nicotine. Sharing this truth builds confidence, supports healthy decisions, and fosters a culture of wellness.

**Key Insight:**
When we highlight true positive norms, healthy choices become contagious.

Social norms-based prevention is a powerful shift from fear-based messaging to promoting the positive norms and protective factors that already exist.

## 3. APPLY IT:

### DATA + COMMUNITY + MESSAGING = IMPACT

#### Start With Data

Survey local youth anonymously. Include questions about their own attitudes and behaviors, and their perception of what their peers do and think.

Surveys don't have to use sophisticated or expensive methodology. The more local the more relatable it will be (school data is better than school district data and county data is better than state data).

Identify misperception gaps (e.g., local teens think 60% vape, but only 15% actually do).

#### Craft Effective Messaging

Use simple, affirmative language highlighting positive social norms and specific local data points (e.g., 87.5% of students at our school choose to be tobacco-free).

Keep visuals youth-friendly and authentic, ideally with images that reflect the local community and environment.

Focus on the actual norm of non-use, taking care to use language that does not stigmatize or shame those who do use.

#### Measure Impact

Schedule follow up surveys to track the change in perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors.

*Pro Tip:*

Message test with your audience early and often to make sure the positive social norm message is getting across.

## 4. TEN COMMUNITIES STRONG: A NATIONAL MODEL FOR CHANGING YOUTH NARRATIVES

*The Challenge: Youth overestimate how many of their peers engage in risky behaviors like vaping or substance use, leading to pressure to conform to false norms.*

### CAMPAIGN STRATEGY:

- Focus the campaign on 10 middle schools across four states.
- Survey students on their attitudes and behaviors around substance use and what they believe to be the attitudes and behaviors of their peers.
- Deploy campaign materials for each school, rotating social norm messages every other week to keep content fresh and engaging.
- Reflect each school's unique student data points on healthy behaviors.
- Develop and deploy materials including posters, floor decals, stickers, buttons, and cafeteria table tents.
- Use trusted messengers to share info through morning announcements and teacher discussions to amplify the campaign.



Fairview Middle School students choose not to use!

Over 90% think it is wrong to use alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, or pills.

Information from student survey spring 2022

*Campaign poster*



9 OUT OF 10 FAIRVIEW MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS CHOOSE NOT TO USE!

HERE'S HOW:
- I do not go where students use.
- I leave places where students are using.
- I avoid students who use.
- I hang out with students who don't use.
- I tell students I don't want to use.

*Information from FMS anonymous spring 2023 survey

*Campaign poster*

### OUTCOMES:

- Misperceptions of peer substance use declined by more than one-third
- Rates of substance use dropped across all substances
- Substance use was lowest among students with high exposure to campaign messages