A leading US **school programme** has been successfully revised to focus more on **harm reduction**. Project ALERT was created by the respected non-profit RAND institution,❶ which has also evaluated it since the mid-80s. Their first study found that tobacco and cannabis use were reduced but that ALERT did not affect established smokers and effects on drinking were minor and transitory. Since most pupils had already tried alcohol, the decision was made to focus on harmful drinking rather than drinking as such, and also to add a smoking cessation lesson and involve parents in homework. The new curriculum consists of 14 lessons over what in Britain would be the first two years of secondary school. It was tested on over 4000 pupils in 55 schools randomly allocated to ALERT or to normal lessons.❷ Pupils were surveyed before the lessons and again 18 months later. At this time a fifth fewer ALERT pupils had smoked and about a quarter fewer were regular smokers or had used cannabis. Drinkers were also fewer but not significantly so. Compared to control pupils there had been a significant reduction in risky or harmful drinking and ALERT had curbed the growth of smoking even among smokers, validating the revisions. As intended, the lessons had reduced pupils' susceptibility to pro-substance use peer influences (especially the degree to which they overestimated substance use among their peers) and had increased awareness of potential harmful consequences.❸ These and other mechanisms are thought to be how ALERT affects substance use.

❶ But is now distributed by the BEST Foundation, www.projectalert.best.org.
❷ Ellickson P.L. *et al.* "New inroads in preventing adolescent drug use: results from a large-scale trial of project ALERT in middle schools." *American Journal of Public Health*: 2003, 93(11), p. 1830–1836. DS or summary at www.rand.org/publications/RB/RB4560/RB4560.pdf.
❸ Ghosh-Dastidar B. *et al.* "Modifying pro-drug risk factors in adolescents: results from Project ALERT." *Health Ed. & Beh.*: 2004, 31(3), p. 318–334. DS