



# False dawn for drug-free schools in Taiwan

*Performance indicators are fine, unless someone – perhaps everyone – is fiddling the figures. But when the pressure is on and resources can't be made to square with expectations, that's just what can happen.*

by **Mike Ashton**  
FINDINGS Editor

With the doors closing on their markets in Japan, in the late '80s Taiwanese amphetamine traffickers 'developed' their own youth market. By 1991 their success had led the Ministry of Education to launch a national anti-drug drive in schools – 'Spring Sun'. It too appeared a success; appearances were deceptive. Only an afterthought study, intended to learn the lessons of the programme's success, revealed that rather the lessons were of its failure.

Far away and a very different culture, but the reasons why it all went wrong are not entirely irrelevant to Britain: centralised target setting with sanctions for failing to deliver; the primacy of watching your own back; the imperative of avoiding the stigma of a 'drug-riddled' school; resources failing to match expectations; and the availability of a simple expedient for squaring the circle – fiddling the figures.

## ► Incredible success

Spring Sun was ambitious. Schools were supplied a list of behaviours symptomatic of adolescent drug use. Pupils thus identified were referred for further investigation. If drug use was confirmed they had to attend counselling sessions with one of the school's teachers who had been specially trained by the Ministry. Other pupils might be caught by regular urine tests. Drug using drop-outs were to be pursued and brought back to school for classes and counselling. Monthly returns from each school of the number of drug users were Spring Sun's key performance indicator.

To Western eyes the programme might seem overly prescriptive, but it did have the virtue of engaging teachers in a caring response to young drug users, with the emphasis on keeping them at school. Its scope was universal, promising to produce a cadre of trained and eventually experienced teachers in every school, and a simple measure

would regularly check progress. Above all, something was being done, done quickly, and (by using school staff) done cheaply.

It seemed a resounding and rapid success. Within months the 3850 students identified in the first month had plunged

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to under 200. Success was confirmed by the Ministry's outcome evaluation and the programme was lauded by the media. To inform future developments, officials decided to document just how the transformation had been achieved. In 1992 they invited a US-based researcher to investigate the programme's implementation ('process' evaluation). His work, the key source for this paper, exposed flaws which showed the outcome evaluation to have been an entirely misleading guide to the campaign's impact.

## ► Suspicions aroused

Even the Ministry had its suspicions. Within months of the programme's launch the entire nation's middle schools could identify just 55 drug using pupils. Officials reminded schools of the need for rigorous reporting. Soon the numbers had increased tenfold. About a year later the process evaluation was initiated. Researchers spent a day at each of 31 schools representative of the 734 in the programme. Intensive interviews, focus groups and questionnaires involving staff and pupils were used to document what had happened. Unlike the figures returned to the Ministry, the data was confidential to the research team; no school or teacher had anything to lose by being frank.

The evaluation uncovered a programme so poorly implemented that its reported success was literally incredible. Spring Sun had been foisted on schools without consultation and with little explanation, lead-

ing to communication difficulties. For the schools, the premium was less on reducing drug use, more on not being seen to fail. Problems hidden from the authorities were revealed to the researchers, to whom teachers admitted that they felt ill-equipped to counsel pupils. For continuing cases, the average 10 minutes spared by staff with other priorities – like the exam results their schools were judged on – lacked structure and purpose. Perhaps luckily, it seems most of their 'clients' were well-behaved pupils for whom drug use was an occasional lapse: there were insufficient resources to reach out to those in greatest need.

All this might have come out sooner had the monthly returns revealed something was wrong. But the statistics were fatally vulnerable to manipulation at source and urine tests were insufficient to act as a check. Even honest reporting risked being meaningless: a drug user was considered 'cured' after a negative urine test, but since most were occasional users this could easily be achieved with no change in their drug use. Even the fact that following the campaign arrests of school pupils for drug use increased by 80% did not dent Spring Sun's credibility. Police had their own priorities, and the prospect of performance credits had shifted these towards arresting amphetamine users. For police the desired trend of drug user identifications was up, for the schools it was down; both got their way.

Nobody, as far as we know, opened the police's 'black box', but this *was* prised open for the schools through interviews with five programme leaders who were guaranteed anonymity and with whom the researchers had established mutual trust. Such was the climate of suspicion that simply asking all schools to confidentially confirm their figures was considered a waste of time.

## ► What would you like to hear?

The five trusted correspondents told how schools which at first had frankly reported a large number of drug using students were immediately denounced by officials and parents: they quickly learned not to report

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Huey-tsyh Chen. "Normative evaluation of an anti-drug abuse program." *Evaluation & Program Planning*: 1997, 20(2), p. 195–204.

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the real numbers. Press reports that Ministry officials had considered cutting staff salaries in 'failing' schools did not improve reporting standards. Schools adjusted their returns so as not to seem out of line with neighbouring schools and to evidence an encouraging but not suspiciously dramatic improvement. It was this collective and spiralling deception which appears to have led to the national toll of 55 drug users which rang warning bells in the Ministry.

For the lead evaluator his results illustrate the need for study of what comes *out* of a programme – the outcomes – to be accompanied by a study of what goes *inside* it. It's a salutary thought that without such an investigation, Spring Sun might have still be masquerading as a resounding success – salutary, because many evaluations do lack a thorough investigation (or at least a detailed description) of how the intervention wrought the outcomes observed.

Spring Sun shows how an authoritarian, top-down implementation strategy tends to create mistrust and communication breakdown. Frontline workers are left no role other than to follow orders with no way to challenge and adapt these if they are unrealistic or under-resourced. What they do have is the choice of seeming to carry out

the orders, or admitting they cannot and being denounced as responsible for a failing institution; many will choose deception. In a vicious circle, back at the centre policymakers are fed misleading data which seems to confirm their plans are working and worth pursuing even more vigorously.

### It couldn't happen here?

Overbearing policymaking from on high and dramatic deception from below seems far removed from UK traditions. But lest we become too complacent, it's worth reminding ourselves again that elements of a Spring Sun scenario are to be found in Britain. With respect to drugs, the UK is firmly set on the road of adopting numerical performance indicators as an 'objective' means to evaluate drug policy.<sup>1</sup> Target setting has become increasingly centralised both across government<sup>2</sup> and down to local areas,<sup>3</sup> and the iron fist of threatened resource withdrawal for poor performance is unglorified as never before.<sup>4</sup>

All this, of course, comes at the end of an energetic consultation process, and implementation in the UK is devolved to drug action teams and other authorities less isolated and more secure than the unfortunate Taiwanese teachers. However, our own decision-makers would do well to realistically appraise the pressures on reporting bodies to make the figures look good, and the opportunities they have to do so. 🍊

**1** UK Government. *Tackling drugs to build a better Britain*. April 1998.

**2** Cabinet Office. "Targets set for tackling drugs misuse – Cunningham." *News Release*: 16 December 1998.

**3** UK Government, *op cit*, p 32–33.

**4** Cabinet Office. "Government's largest-ever push to tackle drugs menace." *News Release*: 1 September 1998, and remarks by Keith Hellawell at the associated press conference.