

Students for Sensible Drug Policy

MAPS speaks with SSDP Board Chair Matt Atwood

www.ssdp.org



Students for Sensible Drug Policy (SSDP) is committed to providing education on harms caused by the War on Drugs, working to involve youth in the political process, and promoting an open, honest, and rational discussion of alternative solutions to drug problems in the United States. SSDP includes 120 university and high school chapters across North America. Some of the issues about which they help raise public consciousness are: the Drug-Free Student Aid Provision, which was amended to the Higher Education Act of 1998, urine testing in schools, and replacing zero tolerance with harm reduction. SSDP Board Chair Matt Atwood can be reached by e-mail at matt@ssdp.org.

What does SSDP think about drug education; are there any programs or approaches it endorses?

SSDP believes it is imperative that all students receive a comprehensive drug education. The vast majority of current drug education programs—those espousing “Just Say No” solutions to the problems of youth drug abuse—have failed. We need drug education programs that use a harm reduction model instead of zero tolerance reinforcements of the prohibitionist mind set. Safety First, a concept championed by Marsha Rosenbaum of the Drug Policy Alliance, is a reality-based effort to educate parents and teens. By following Dr. Rosenbaum’s lead, many other programs could be designed to fit the needs of diverse communities, while still minimizing the risks associated with potentially dangerous behaviors.

The most important factor in judging any drug education program is its ability to pass the honesty test. While accepting the reality of drug use amongst teenagers, successful programs must deal honestly and openly with the reasons for drug use, the harms associated with risky behavior, and the ways in which these harms can be minimized.

How is the SSDP “Have you talked to your parents about drugs?” project going?

The project is currently in the process of being evaluated. While we still stress the importance of honest and open communication between parents and children regarding drug use and the problems caused by prohibition, it is often difficult to gauge the success of an effort to influence thousands of individual interactions. The short answer is: students still need to talk to their parents, and we will continue to encourage this throughout our organization’s existence. In the future we hope to develop the idea into book form, tentatively titled *How to Talk to Your Parents About Drugs*, in which we discuss

at length the need for open discussions between parents and teens about drug use and drug policy. The book would also investigate the consequences when that discussion fails to occur, both at the individual and policy-making levels.

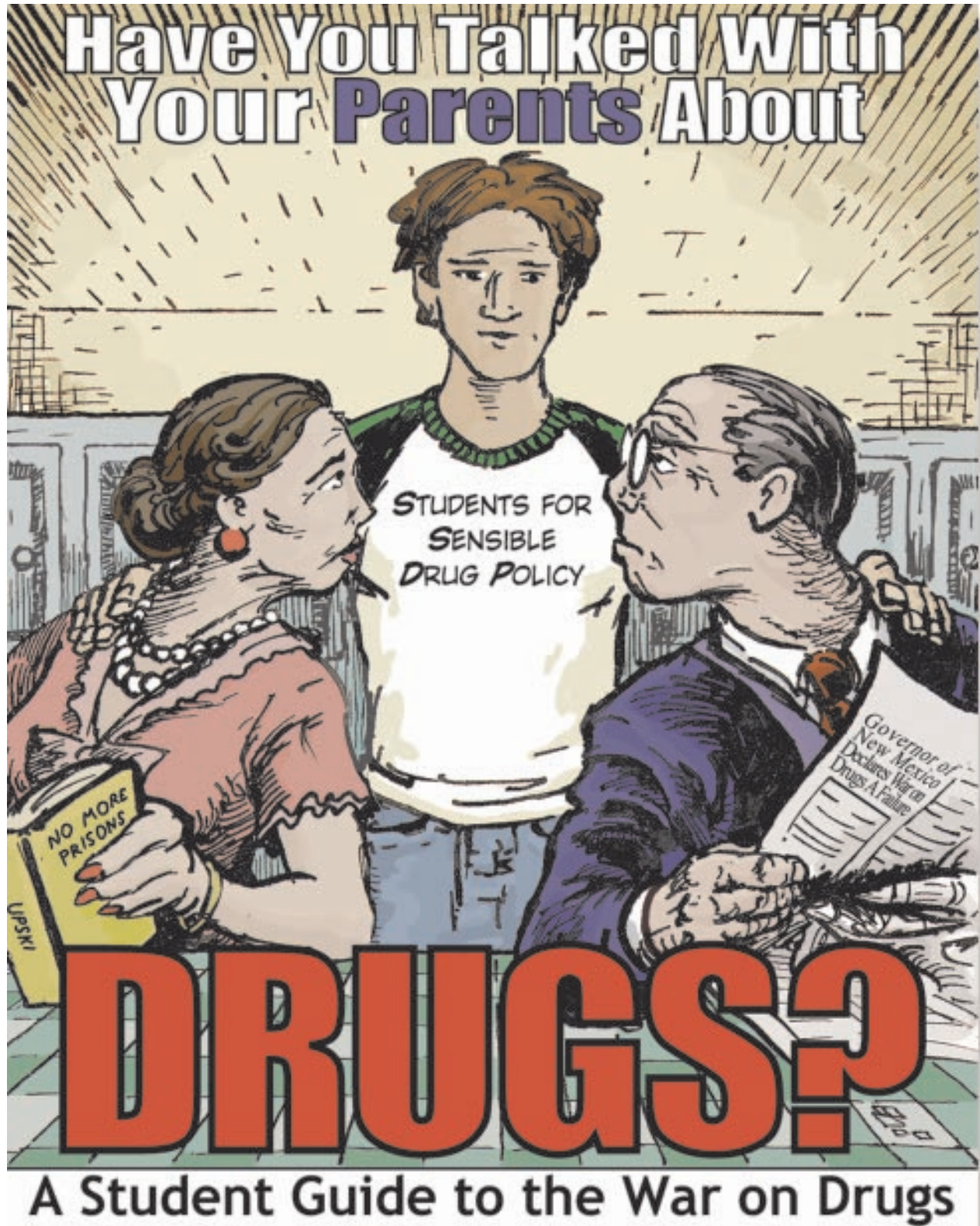
Do you have age limits or requirements related to who can be a volunteer or have a position of leadership in your organization?

There are no age limits in SSDP, either for who can join a chapter or who can take a leadership role in the organization. For instance, David Brown is a high school student in Florida and has been a trustee of the Board of Directors for almost two years. David recently remarked in an e-mail:

Contrary to what most people seem to believe, my being in high school [is] more of a crutch than a detriment. Nearly everyone in SSDP is very enthusiastic about having high school students involved. In fact, many of them seem to have more respect for anyone who can get involved at a younger age.

Drug policy reform is about changing attitudes before changing laws and that’s exactly what SSDP is doing. In my freshman year of high school, a student in my debate class once mentioned the idea of marijuana decriminalization and everyone laughed. Today, someone that mentions drug policy reform will at least get an earnest response, which is a huge improvement from years past.

SSDP welcomes and values the opinions of all students, especially with regard to how they have been affected by the War on Drugs. Placing an age restriction on public participation in the political process would be contrary to the mission of SSDP, which seeks to involve youth in the political process of reforming our nation’s drug laws. •



SSDP T-SHIRT DESIGN

Proceeds from the sale of SSDP T-shirts go to help students who have lost their financial aid as a result of the Higher Education Act Drug Free Student Aid Provision. To purchase a T-shirt, or otherwise donate to SSDP, see www.ssdp.org.