

## Teaching Project ALERT in the Real World: Experts Weigh in on the Issues

By Andrea Warren

Ask educators who are teaching Project ALERT if they change anything in the program to fit their specific needs, and most will say "yes." Whether it's Project ALERT or any other course, research shows that only 15 percent of teachers carefully follow curriculum guides. The rest adapt as needed, shortening or dropping lessons, and adding or deleting materials to make them more relevant to local circumstances or to a teacher's specific needs.

This process of "adaptation" and how it affects the outcomes of Project ALERT was one of many issues under discussion when a dozen experts in the fields of research, dissemination, and implementation of drug abuse prevention education met last March in Los Angeles.

Other topics of discussion included the most effective ways to train teachers to use Project ALERT in the classroom, how to reward participating teachers, and how to offer them the best support. Here are some highlights from the day's discussion, which was sponsored by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation and the BEST Foundation For A Drug-Free Tomorrow.

### Program Fidelity and Adaptation

According to Tom Backer, PhD, a clinical psychologist and president of an institute that studies issues related to change, schools have only recently begun using research-based programs like Project ALERT. Before that, they often devised their own programs. For a new program to be successfully integrated into a school, Dr. Backer said the district must have supportive administrators and committed program coordinators and teachers. Once trained, teachers need to be able to get technical assistance and general support to help them implement the program. But even then, adaptation will occur.

"That's not necessarily bad," commented Phyllis Ellickson, PhD, of RAND, who guided the development of Project ALERT. She said that the program was designed to allow and encourage teachers to adapt the curriculum to their own style and to bring it alive in their own way. "There's lots of good adaptation. You can still stay within the structure of the overall program, yet give teachers a feeling of ownership," she said.

Tena St. Pierre, PhD, associate professor at Pennsylvania State University who is currently doing data analysis on Project ALERT, pointed out that there are many kinds of adaptations. Some teachers must condense lessons, she said, while others don't have time for all the videos or the role-playing. Still others personalize the program to fit local issues. Most teachers understand the importance of teaching a research-based program like Project ALERT the way it is designed so they don't

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compromise its effectiveness. "Even knowing that, they may not be able to do it," observed Susan Ennett, PhD, associate professor at the University of North Carolina, whose specialty is the assessment of school-based drug prevention programs. Time is a major issue. She said that teachers often are pressured by too much to do in too little time. "Teaching the course as it's designed can be exhausting and sometimes they start cutting corners," commented Dr. Ennett.

### Teacher Support and Rewards

On the topic of supporting educators, Bridget Ryan, President of the BEST Foundation, mentioned several effective ways her staff does this. One of the most important is maintaining the Project ALERT website, which gives teachers a place of their own where they can learn about the program and exchange information. The website includes an online faculty advisor who answers questions. Another important means of support is the newsletter, with features on individual educators and school districts and how they incorporate Project ALERT into their curriculum. Also, whenever possible, Ms. Ryan's staff promotes the sharing of ideas among teachers. "Peer interaction and guidance are our best tools," she said.

Robin Sinks, Health Education Curriculum Leader for the Long Beach, CA, Unified School District, suggested that districts have a Project ALERT specialist or facilitator at the district level who would in turn offer support to teachers using Project ALERT in the classroom. "These teachers can then be called on as resources," she said. "They can answer such questions as, How do I work with special needs learners? How do I work with a block schedule versus a regular schedule? Peer level support is very important."

According to Ms. Ryan, Project ALERT is currently a presence in 10,000 sites located in 3,500 school districts (the United States has a total of 13,500 districts). Of the 37,000 teachers who have been trained to teach Project ALERT, her staff is still in touch with 23,500. Teachers can now get their training online, and almost half of them do. As an incentive to complete the training process, the BEST Foundation periodically offers trained teachers updated curriculum materials and classroom videos free of charge. The Foundation also awards certificates showing completion of training.

Some schools pay teachers while they're taking the training, whether it's in a group setting, or online. Others do small things like sending teachers Cliff bars or other goodies to show their appreciation and support.

### Project ALERT and Academic Achievement

Another subject that interested participants was linking Project ALERT and academic achievement. Dr. St. Pierre noted that this

would be difficult, but said every school she has talked to would adopt Project ALERT if they knew that it improved academic achievement. "Schools are under a lot of pressure right now to show improvement," she said.

Ms. Sinks supported this idea, suggesting that Project ALERT make it clear that it helps students succeed in school, as well as help to prevent drug abuse. "We need any linkage we can make between drug prevention generally, and academic performance," she said.

Donna Blanchard, whose official title is Middle School Comprehensive Health Educator for the San Francisco Unified School District and who is directly responsible for the implementation of Project ALERT in the San Francisco schools, agreed. "Kids are in school to learn. Definitely link it to academic achievement," she said.

### Looking to the Future

In discussing the various strengths of Project ALERT, Rona Cole, who is the coordinator of health education for Los Angeles Unified School District, complimented the Hilton Foundation for supporting the program. "It's really important to school districts like mine that this program won't be dropped, leaving us stuck with outdated curriculum," she said.

Steve Gardner, PhD, who formerly worked with the federal government's Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, said that one reason Project ALERT interests educators is because the costs are reasonable. "Cost is such an overwhelming issue," he said, adding that another strength of Project ALERT is the ongoing effort to keep the curriculum fresh and updated.

Dr. Ennett mentioned in particular Project ALERT's emphasis on training and the packaging of training materials. "You've figured out how to best connect with people, how to do the training, and you still allow teachers leeway to be creative," she said.

As for the future, Dr. Ennett suggested more linkage between Project ALERT and family and community based programs. She said Project ALERT could help push communities toward a more comprehensive approach to drug prevention. "Right now," she noted, "we risk investing too much of our hopes in school-based programs. They can only do so much."

Dr. Gardner expressed his opinion that staying in touch with Project ALERT educators is very important. There aren't many models that do this, and the more of it you do, the better it is. Overall, he said, "I think Project ALERT is doing very well."

In her closing comments, Ms. Ryan summarized the day's discussion. "No one can predict where our program will be in five years," she said, "but whatever comes, whether it's the same program or something new, we'll take our strength from the work and discussion that has gone on before." ■

## Long Island Teachers Try Out Online Training

By Andrea Warren

Threatening thunderstorms and muggy heat kept outside temperatures unpleasant, but the air-conditioned library at Sachem High School in Lake Ronkonkoma, Long Island, was invitingly cool on a Thursday last June when 25 sixth grade teachers reported for a day of Project ALERT computer online training.

Though they entered a hushed building where students were completing mandatory state testing, there was lots of chatter in the library as teachers greeted each other and were welcomed by Lori Hewlett, chairperson for secondary health education in the Sachem School District.

With an enrollment of 17,000 students, Sachem is New York's second largest suburban school district and encompasses a number of communities. Administrators had decided to move Project ALERT from the seventh grade to the sixth, beginning with the 2004-05 school year. That meant all sixth grade health and science teachers needed training before the new school year began. So did eight special education teachers whose students would be taking Project ALERT in regular classes.

The change coincided with reorganizing the district schools. Half day kindergarten was being expanded to full day; sixth grade was becoming part of middle school instead of elementary; and ninth graders were moving up to high school. The elementary teachers attending training for Project ALERT were going to be middle school teachers in the fall and were moving to new buildings.

With so much change afoot, Hewlett had her work cut out for her. She knew some of the teachers were approaching the day's training with reluctance - just something else imposed on them by the district. Also, when she received training in Project ALERT, it had been in a group setting with an in-person trainer. To prepare, she had worked through the online training on her own. While she was unsure how the day would go, she did know this would be the most timely and cost effective way to ready her teachers to teach Project ALERT, and she was committed to making it work.

### Getting Started

Once teachers had selected one of the computers in the library's tech lab area, they logged on to [projectalert.com](http://projectalert.com) and entered their pre-established user names and passwords. Hewlett explained how the day would proceed. Online, the teachers would work

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through each of the core Project ALERT lessons. To receive necessary credit for the day, they needed to complete the eleven modules that comprised the training, but did not have to do it in one day if they preferred to move at a slower pace. Working through the booster lessons was not required since these sixth grade teachers would not be presenting them, though it was encouraged so they would be familiar with them.



*Lori Hewlett, Carla Wasnick and John Horst worked as a team to provide a meaningful training experience.*

"Once you've completed the training, you can review or revisit specific lessons any time you want, and you may find it useful to do this just before you teach a lesson," Hewlett said. "With today's training, the first lesson will take the longest to complete, so don't worry if it seems to take quite a bit of time."

Hewlett warned teachers not to double click on answers. "That's a no-no," she said. "I know you'll want to do it, but this program doesn't allow it."

She introduced John Horst and Carla Wasnick, who had both taught Project ALERT for several years and would be available throughout the day for assistance.

"Once you get used to the guidelines, it'll go well for you," Horst assured them.

### Online Training by Trial and Error

Without further ado, teachers began Lesson One, familiarizing themselves with how everything worked. They quickly learned to take seriously any choices they had to make regarding answers to questions. If they did not pick the best one, they

were not only informed why, but didn't get as high a final rating on the lesson. This proved to be a strong motivator for grade-conscious educators.

Two teachers tried working together on one computer until they realized that only one of them could get credit. Other teachers started out working together side by side, then gave up because they worked at different speeds.

Several others deliberately paced themselves so they stayed together, conversing with each other about the lessons and helping each other when needed.

Most talking gradually subsided as teachers got deeper into the lessons, reading, answering questions, watching snippets of video on the screen, and learning about Project ALERT.

"I like the teaching tips," said teacher Bill O'Connell. "Usually teacher training tells you to present information to students, but Project ALERT shows you how to get the kids to come up with the information themselves. I think that's a much better way to do it."

Hewlett, Horst, and Wasnick walked among the teachers, offering advice and solving problems. Remembering to not double click proved challenging for a few teachers. Some computers were slow, causing users to complain that it took too long to download the lessons. Many teachers found that it took them about 45 minutes to get through the first lesson and were relieved when they found they could do subsequent lessons much more quickly, just as Hewlett had said.

By mid-morning, the group was making good progress. They understood how the website worked and what was expected of them.

Then the computers began to shut down.

### A District -Wide Computer Snafu

Amid groaning and resigned chuckles from the teachers, Hewlett had to think fast. Every once in a while this



happened when too many people were using the district's computers at the same time. It could last a few minutes or up to an hour. She gave teachers a break, then gathered them to discuss their progress so far

and to watch the Project ALERT introductory video. While discussing the video, the computers came back on. However, teachers learned they had lost the individual lesson they were working on when the shutdown occurred. As they restarted their

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computers and returned to the beginning of the lesson, most just shrugged. It was all part of working for a school district.

**Positives and Negatives**

Back at work, most made up for lost time. They clipped along, intent on finishing all lessons before the day ended. By noon, they had opted to phone out for pizza delivery so they could keep working instead of going out for lunch.

"I want to finish today," one teacher said. "I have so much else to do, but I don't want to leave with this undone. I am getting tired, though." Her complaint was echoed by others, who mentioned stiff joints and eye strain. "I don't know how kids can sit at computers hour after hour," one said. "It's really hard on the body. I'm surviving by getting up and moving around pretty often. Otherwise, I think I'd get a headache because there's a lot of reading and clicking to do, and you have to really be thinking while you work or you miss something."

Early in the afternoon, when Christine McDonough was the first to finish all the lessons, Hewlett warmly congratulated her. "I'm so proud of you!" she said. McDonough, one of the eight special education teachers in the group, said her eyes were blurry but that she had otherwise enjoyed the day. "I thought the training was concise and full of good hints. It was an excellent overview, and a great introduction to the program. I liked that we could work at our own speed because I work fast, as you can tell."

McDonough said that with the new school year, special education students would no longer be in resource rooms but would be integrated into regular classrooms. She and other special education teachers would "shadow" their kids, attending class with them and assisting them with their lessons.

"Project ALERT will be good for my students," she said. "They have all the same temptations as other kids but are more at risk because they don't always have good decision-making skills. This program can help them with that."

Sixth-grade teacher Marnin Lack observed that it would be helpful to know ahead of time that the online training was tracking teachers' answers, so it wouldn't come as a surprise at the end of the first lesson. "Also, I would like the option of a back browser button so I could retry something I didn't get right. I think I'd learn more that way. Otherwise, I think this online training is great."

Lack kept his hard copy of the Project ALERT lessons next to his computer and went through them at the same time he worked through the online lessons, making notes on the pages. "It helps to do them together," he said.

"I won't be teaching Project ALERT until next spring. This way I'll remember what's online to help me review each lesson for the classroom."

**Kids' Access to Drugs**

Lack said he was looking forward to presenting Project ALERT to his students and approved the district's decision to move it to the sixth grade. "You can still reach kids at this age," he said. "They're pliable. Drugs are readily available in all areas. Dealers have been known to park across the street from schools, waiting for kids to leave the school ground. Younger students are getting into inhalants. They can go into any store and buy them legally.

"I've taught for 32 years and it seems like it's getting harder and harder to keep our students drug free."

Carla Wasnick, who has taught Project ALERT for four years in the Sachem schools, agreed. "Prescription drugs have become a problem. Kids on Ritalin sell their pills to other kids. We have to make sure they swallow their pills in front of the school nurse. We also have kids getting high on over-the-counter things like Robitussin. They call it "Robotripping."

Teaching kids resistance skills has never been more important.

"I don't think kids today are any more sophisticated than before," added John Horst, "but they're more exposed to things. They definitely have access to drugs."

Horst said Project ALERT gives his students "reasons to say 'no' and ways to say it. They get to practice it. I think that's one of the most effective parts of this program."

Horst is also a fan of the Project ALERT website. "I often go to the website to get ideas on how to tweak lessons," he said. "It helps to know everything is online, but I use printed lesson plans to review before class. I also read the Project ALERT newsletter and get good suggestions there."

As for which type of training is best, Horst thinks the optimal would be combining online and in-person. "A real person can keep you on task and on time," he said, "and can answer your questions when you have them. The computer can't do that."

**Convenience and Cost Advantages**

But Hewlett thinks the convenience of online training offsets any negatives. "We were able to schedule this on short notice, and I knew that if any teachers couldn't come for some reason, or if we get a new teacher, they can do the work online, and still be prepared to teach Project ALERT this next school year. That is a big plus." She also noted that the school district got the training

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*John Horst, who has taught Project ALERT for years, walked among the teachers, offering advice and solving problems.*

for free by taking advantage of Project ALERT's "e-code" benefit, which offers free online training of new teachers in districts where Project ALERT already has a presence.

Sachem School District administrator Gary Beutel, who oversees the district's health, physical education, health services, and athletics, stopped by to observe the training session and liked what he saw. "This is wonderful for our teachers and wonderful for the district," he said.

"Sometimes if you hand teachers a textbook when they're going to teach a new class, they just glance at it. By going through this training, they get a thorough overview of what's in the program.

"Project ALERT addresses our day to day concerns for our students. Obviously new concerns can come up during the year, but we try to stay on top of those and handle them separately. This program gives young people decision-making skills that can carry over to whatever else comes along."

### What To Do Next Time

By 2 p.m., as teachers were finishing up, most said it had been a valuable day. "I like in-person training, but in some ways this was better because you were forced to pay attention," one

teacher said as he shut down his computer. "You might rush, but you can't fake it. I feel like I now know this program. With some review, I'll be ready to teach it."

In looking back on the day, Lori Hewlett had several reflections. "The worst moment was when the computers went down," she said. "When they came back on, it frustrated everybody that they had to start that lesson over. It would help if the program had a save feature. I wish we'd had state-of-the-art computers that could download quickly and move along quickly because I know the slowness frustrated people. Our district is upgrading its computers and is replacing the ones we used today. We'll have the benefit of that next time."

For a future training, Hewlett said she would prepare more instructional materials to help teachers get started. "Sort of an overview of how it all works so people won't be surprised to learn they were being tracked and evaluated by the program and that they can't just read the lessons. They actually have to work through them."

Hewlett would also build in required breaks. "I'm concerned that people wore themselves out. I think I'd try to vary the day with some videos and presentations so it's not just hour after hour of work at the computer. I'd also enforce coffee breaks and a lunch break. People had plenty of time to finish, but they worried about this, so they pushed themselves. I don't want fatigue to be one of their memories about this. If we could swing it, it might be better to break the training into two sessions on different days.

"We had given everyone a hard copy of Project ALERT several weeks in advance and asked them to review it carefully. Also, everyone met a week ago to complete online registration and establish user names. I'd do both those things again. They were helpful.

"All in all, it went very well. Would I suggest we do it again? Absolutely. I think it was very successful. Next time we'll have the kinks worked out and get it just right." ■

#### ANDREA WARREN

Andrea Warren is a freelance journalist who lives in Kansas City. A former teacher, her award-winning nonfiction books for young readers include *Orphan Train Rider*, *One Boy's True Story*, and *Surviving Hitler: A Boy in the Nazi Death Camps*.

Visit [www.andreawarren.com](http://www.andreawarren.com)



**G. Bridget Ryan**  
President  
BEST Foundation For A  
Drug-Free Tomorrow

## Getting Acquainted With Project ALERT Online Training

G. Bridget Ryan, president of the BEST Foundation, which disseminates Project ALERT under a grant from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, noted the following regarding some of the challenges encountered by the Long Island teachers going through a day of Project ALERT online training.

Any time you design web-based training, you encounter technical constraints caused by differing software and hardware versions, download times, and so forth.



When we designed Project ALERT's online training program, we had to walk a fine line between making the most of technology, and excluding end-users with older equipment or software.

Here's why we made some of our choices:

### Download Time

The file teachers download to begin the online training is larger than we ideally would like, but we wanted to include all the media necessary to make the classroom a rich, complete environment. This is not a problem on computers that have efficient, high speed connections, but it's more challenging on older machines. To make things as simple as possible for everyone, we designed the program to have one initial download, after which it will run without delay.



If you are viewing it over a modem connection, we recommend that you start the download, then go get a cup of coffee and return in a few minutes. After the download is complete, you will experience the same performance, whether you have a modem connection or a high-speed connection.



### Back Button

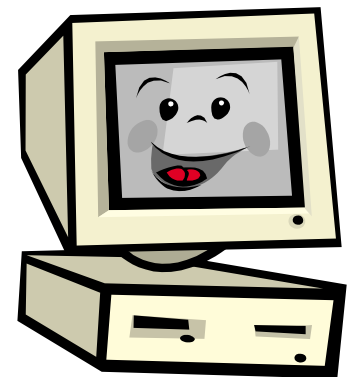
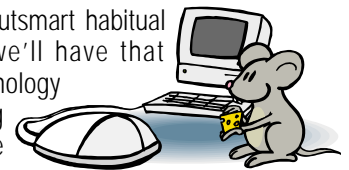
There are pluses and minuses to including back browser buttons in software programs. We know that some users would like a back button so they can redo things they didn't get right the first time. We decided not to include such a button for two reasons:

- ← Learning has already taken place when we fail to get something right and puzzle why, and
- ← It's important to keep learners moving along at a good clip in order to deliver all Project ALERT activities during a restricted period of time. As teachers know so well, pacing, using teaching strategies to optimize student responses and then moving on quickly, is one key to classroom success.

### Double Clicking

While many of us are habitual double clickers, extra clicking can cause double downloads in many computer programs. If there is a lot of information to be downloaded, double clicking can slow things down.

Now programming can outsmart habitual double clickers, and we'll have that feature in our first technology upgrade of the training program, which will be available this year.



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## Study: Teens Saw More Alcohol Ads in 2002

By Hope Yen, Associated Press

The alcohol industry poured money into advertising in 2002, with many of the ads reaching young people not old enough to drink, a university study says.

The report by Georgetown University's Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth, released Wednesday (04/21/04), said the overall number of ads on network, local and cable television increased to 289,381 in 2002 - a 39 percent jump from the previous year. Industry spending on ads grew by 22 percent to more than \$990 million.

The study found that significant ad increases for distilled spirits and low-alcohol refreshers such as Smirnoff Ice and Skyy Blue accounted for much of the ad jump.

Teens were more likely on a per capita basis than adults to have seen 66,218 of the ads, a 30 percent increase since 2001, according to the study.

Some of the biggest spenders on such ads were beer companies, led by Heineken and Miller Lite. All 15 of the shows most popular among teens included alcohol ads, according to the study. "Survivor," "Fear Factor" and "That '70s Show" were among those with the most ads.

"This dramatic increase in alcohol ads seen by our children in

2002 suggests the problem got worse," said Jim O'Hara, executive director of the center. "The data demonstrate that the alcohol industry needs to make major changes in its advertising."

The Washington-based Distilled Spirits Council disagreed, saying the "vast majority of alcohol ads are viewed by adults and that self-regulation is working." It noted the center's own report found teens on average represented just 10 percent of the total audience for shows with alcohol advertising.

"To make further progress on underage drinking, we must focus on science-based solutions. Study after study shows that parents and other adults are the primary influence over a youth's decision regarding drinking, not advertising," said Peter Cressy, president of the spirits council.

Under guidelines announced last September, the alcohol industry said it would voluntarily regulate advertising if a television show's youth audience composition was 30 percent or more. The center said that threshold might be too high since teens on average represent just 13.3 percent of the national TV viewing audience.

It urged a more protective threshold of 15 percent, as recommended by the Institute of Medicine. That guideline would allow 77 percent of total television programming to be eligible for alcohol advertising while forcing advertisers to pull a substantial number of ads on programs aimed at youth, the center said.

### On the Net:

Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth: <http://camy.org/>

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