

Indiana Uses Innovative Approach to Offer Project ALERT

Mary Lay remembers the alarm she and her colleagues felt eight years ago when they realized that adolescent drug use in the state had risen above the national average.

Lay works at the Indiana Prevention Resource Center (IPRC), where drug use prevention is one of the Center's responsibilities. Staff not only provide prevention services for the entire state of Indiana, but also work alongside the schools to promote the use of evidence-based drug education programs.

“Our task is to supplement what the schools offer,” she says. “What Indiana students learn in school varies. Districts have minimum state requirements to meet, but may not have the time or budget to do more. Most do not have a dedicated course on drug education, so kids may get their information in other classes. In 1997 when we saw that the problem was getting worse, the state was supporting drug education programs, but it was clear that it was time to try something new.”

In addition to the rise in drug usage noted that year, the results from the IPRC's annual survey of Indiana students in grades 6-12 also showed that middle school students left alone after school were at greatest risk for experimentation with all types of risky behaviors, including vandalism, gang activity, and sexual experimentation. Lay and her colleagues began brainstorming how to respond, given the scope of the problem and the agency's limited funding.

“Afternoons R.O.C.K. in Indiana”

The result, begun in the 1997-98 school year, was a six-week after-school prevention program called “Afternoons R.O.C.K. in Indiana.” R.O.C.K. stands for Recreation, Object lessons, Culture and values, and Knowledge. Between 3 and 6 p.m., students participate in activities designed to teach them violence prevention, conflict resolution, refusal/resistance skills, and how and why to stay clear of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs. At least one-fourth of the 40-hour program is devoted to drug education. The program is currently in all 92 counties in Indiana and reaches more than 14,000 students ages 10-14.

“The students in the program are not necessarily high risk kids, though they are the ones who don’t have a good alternative to being by themselves after school,” Lay says. “They’re not in sports or theatre or other late afternoon activities. Usually when we get them they’re not yet into risky behaviors. Our goal is to give them the reasons and the skills to steer clear of those.”

Something’s working, Lay says. “The IPRC’s latest survey shows some improvement in overall drug usage among adolescents, and, she notes, ‘Afternoons R.O.C.K’ might well be part of it.”

Introducing Project ALERT

Until this year, drug prevention activities in the after-school program were based on strategies leaders found in the literature. New this year is the option of selecting Project ALERT from a “menu” of choices for the ten to twelve hours that will be devoted to drug education. Lay estimates that approximately 2,500 12-, 13-, and 14-year-olds will take Project ALERT this year.

“Indiana didn’t pick Project ALERT on the basis of a sales pitch or after going to a conference or in other usual ways,” she says. “We saw it listed on the national registry as an effective prevention program. We make a point of not offering programs taught in the schools, and no one was using Project ALERT. We took a look at it and we liked what we saw.”

In the spring of 2005 the IPRC staff reviewed the materials with Leslie Koomler, who works for the Indiana Division of Mental Health and Addiction and helps oversee “Afternoons R.O.C.K. in Indiana” and other state prevention programs. Lay and Koomler also consulted with David Bozell, bureau chief of the Indiana Division of Mental Health and Addiction. Together they made the decision to train a group of their program leaders to teach Project ALERT.

Feedback from the 125 educators at the training session was positive, leading to the decision to offer Project ALERT statewide as a pilot project this year in “Afternoons R.O.C.K.” When school ends in the spring they will evaluate results and determine whether Project ALERT will become a standard option leaders can choose from. Both Lay and Koomler are certain it will be. Early reports indicate program leaders are enthusiastic about the program.

Praise for Project ALERT

Lay is impressed that information in Project ALERT is presented from a developmental perspective. “Kids don’t know how to say no. The behavior modification approach used in Project ALERT is far reaching,” she says. “What they learn in this program also helps them avoid other kinds of risk-taking behaviors.”

Koomler likes the videos and the fact that they’re regularly updated, noting that students find anything outdated “stupid” and feel they can’t relate to it. “The Project ALERT videos present real situations that these kids could get into, and gives them real answers they could give in response to those situations and still be viewed as cool,” she says.

She also appreciates the support offered by Project ALERT staff. “They make it very easy for us to use the program, they give us tons of assistance, and they bring the training to us. The trainers who have come here have been knowledgeable about our state and our particular issues. I’ve enjoyed my interaction with them.”

Koomler is impressed that the program is on-line so leaders can get refreshers when they need it. “And because the program is affordable, we have no problem asking our providers to purchase it,” she says.

Indiana has committed to seven training workshops during the 2005-06 school year for the leaders who work with adolescents in “Afternoons R.O.C.K.” These leaders must be certified through the Indiana Association of Prevention Professionals. Some are classroom teachers, some work part time, others full time. All of them have at least a bachelor’s degree and 2000 hours of experience in direct prevention services or social services.

Settings for “Afternoons R.O.C.K.” range from churches and community centers to schools, Y’s, and boys and girls clubs. Some students in rural areas are bused up to 25 miles to reach a program site.

Paying for all this is one of David Bozell’s responsibilities. He sees to it that the program has the funds it needs every year from federal block grants designated for each state, based on population, to provide substance abuse prevention and treatment services. According to Bozell, “We’re always spending the previous year’s money. That way we know we have the funding to get through the year.”

Adolescent Drug Issues in Indiana

Bozell observes that people may wonder why a Midwestern state like Indiana has drug usage rates above the national average. There are several reasons, he says. “We’re not thought of as a tobacco growing state, yet we grow quite a bit of it in the southern part of Indiana and there’s more of an acceptance of smoking there. Also, Interstate 69 is a corridor for drugs coming in from Detroit and Fort Wayne to other parts of the state.”

Lay notes that production and usage of methamphetamine is a huge problem in Indiana, just as it is throughout the Midwest. “We rank third or fourth in the country in lab seizures,” she says. “Restricting the sale of ingredients may help, but you can make meth in rural areas and be totally undetected.”

“It’s really become a problem in the western part of the state,” adds Bozell. “The state has undertaken aggressive law enforcement efforts to find the labs.”

Lay cites the state’s economic problems, from companies moving out of state and out of country and taking jobs away, to media influences, affluence, and rural poverty. “We have the same problems everyone in our society has,” she says. “For instance, our inhalant rates in middle school are up, as they are across the country.”

While Lay feels “relatively positive” about impacting the problem of adolescent drug use with programs like Project ALERT, fiscal support is a major concern. “The federal reduction in the availability of funding could be harmful. When the federal government began to support programs we saw a change for the better. States and communities took the problems much more seriously. I don’t think states can pick up the slack if federal support is lessened or eliminated. They don’t have the money, and neither do communities.”

Koomler is concerned that schools and the government are having to take on roles traditionally assumed by parents. “We need programs like Project ALERT that have character components because we know that students are not necessarily getting this at home,” she says. “Part of our responsibility is to help communities realize how much positive influence these programs can have on adolescents. If we could get them into every school, they could have a very large impact.”

Lay is clear about her goal in that regard. “We work very closely with the state department of education and they are supportive of Project ALERT. My goal is to get this program into the schools so it doesn’t just help the students we can reach in our after school program, but instead helps every student in Indiana. And I believe that will happen.”

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Meet Mary Lay

Mary Lay has worked in public health for 20 years and has her master’s degree in public health from Indiana University. She helped create the original model for “Afternoons R.O.C.K. in Indiana.” In addition to her work with the after-school program, she is also responsible for the state’s initiative on prevention of problem gambling. Her official title is Coordinator for Indiana Problem Gambling Prevention Initiative. When it comes to any type of addictive behavior, she believes that “Prevention is prevention is prevention. I have a special concern about underage drinking, which I think is one of the most critical issues our society faces. I want to help create positive programs and environments where youth can thrive.”

Meet Leslie Koomler

As Prevention Project Coordinator for the Indiana Division of Mental Health and Addiction, Leslie Koomler is a liaison with “Afternoons R.O.C.K. in Indiana.” Though she initially used her business degree from Indiana University to work in banking, she soon realized she wanted a career where she could positively impact people’s lives. In her free time she helped start an after-school program in a middle school. When she interviewed for her current position and learned she would work in drug and alcohol prevention with middle school youth, she said, “my heart started beating faster because that was exactly what I was doing through my volunteer work. I was very excited and moved right into the position.”

Meet David Bozell

In his position as Bureau Chief of the Indiana Division of Mental Health and Addiction, David Bozell oversees Mental Health Promotion and Addiction Prevention for the Office of Addiction Services, Drug Prevention and Disaster Management. He has his master's degree from Indiana State University and worked for many years for elected officials, then moved into the area of prevention. "I enjoy my work on prevention issues and I feel that Indiana is ahead of the curve in its prevention efforts," he says. "I'm very upbeat about what we've done and what we hope to continue to do."

Y Teacher Excited About Project ALERT

Molly Mackey taught Project ALERT for the first time last fall to a group of 25 middle school students as part of "Afternoons R.O.C.K. in Indiana." She met with them in Warrick County, near Evansville.

"It's a rural area and smoking is more accepted there," she says. "Most of the kids were not yet smokers, but they were at a crossroads. I'm certain at least a few of them are now convinced not to start."

Mackey, Program Coordinator for the YMCA of Southwestern Indiana in Evansville, said that these days most students have been exposed to drugs by the time they reach middle school. "They probably know someone who's already doing them. I found the kids very responsive to the information I presented to them in Project ALERT. They want to know how to resist pressure. We talked in class about other examples that can come up in addition to drugs, like cheating on a test. One thing I like about Project ALERT is that the skills transfer to other behaviors."

After going through the training last summer, Mackey was eager to teach her first group last fall. "I wanted to see how the kids would react," she says. "The videos were especially popular and they helped break up our sessions so it wasn't just me talking all the time. Middle school students like a lot of interaction and they especially enjoyed doing the skits.

"By the end of the course they had learned all the resistance skills. I like Project ALERT better than other drug prevention courses we've tried. It's good for this age group and I'm eager to teach it again."
