

Los Angeles School District

Home of D.A.R.E. Switches to Project ALERT Los Angeles District Undertakes “All At Once” Implementation

By Andrea Warren

Rona Cole has a dream. She wants all seventh graders in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) to study Project ALERT this academic year — all 50,000 of them. To make her dream reality, the hundreds of seventh grade science and health teachers in the district’s 84 middle schools must go through training before they can begin teaching Project ALERT as part of their health curriculum. To accomplish this, Cole must employ some wizardry to offset shortages of time and money. And just to keep things interesting, she has to make all this happen in the birthplace of D.A.R.E.

“Some folks are touchy about this,” said Cole, who is Coordinator for Health Education Programs for the LAUSD. “D.A.R.E. started out as a program written for LAUSD students. We had no idea it would become a national - much less an international - program. Our district owned it for a long time and sold the materials out of what we called our D.A.R.E. warehouse. My predecessor, Ruth Rich, wrote the first D.A.R.E. curriculum in 1983 after the Los Angeles Police Department’s (LAPD) Chief of Police, Darryl Gates, came to the district saying he wanted to bring officers into the schools to help teach drug prevention.

“But D.A.R.E. is gone now. The LAPD had its budget cut by the city, thereby eliminating the D.A.R.E. office and putting those officers back on patrol. Also, we wanted a program that is research-based and proven effective. Project ALERT is both of those, and we’re very excited about bringing it to our students.”

As Cole will tell you, she just has to get all those teachers trained.

Fall Semester is the Target

Because most schools teach their one-semester health course in the spring, Cole’s goal is to get teachers trained this fall. Working with Ginger Schwam, Teacher Advisor for Health Education Programs, she has set up multiple training sessions for September and November. Teachers who work in year-round schools are being scheduled first. Since a portion of them are always off, it’s hardest to get all of them to a day of training. Once that’s accomplished, teachers from traditional schools will be scheduled. Sixty teachers in the district have already been trained and are already using Project ALERT, which helps with the logistics. “We know we won’t get everyone, but we’ll do our best,” Cole said.

“We’re also giving teachers the option of completing training online on their own time, but we’re finding that most of them want to do it with a trainer. Teachers who can’t come to the in-person sessions or who transfer into the district later can complete online training.”

Project ALERT is supplying professional trainers for the in-person sessions, which will be held at various Los Angeles-area conference centers on weekdays, with the district paying for substitutes in the teachers’ classrooms. Cole said they have also received some requests for Saturday training’s and will be setting up several for administrators and teachers who prefer them to weekdays.

It's not yet been determined which eighth grade teachers will be responsible for presenting the three booster lessons and how those teachers will be trained. "Our first task is to train the seventh grade teachers so our seventh graders get Project ALERT this year. We still have some time to figure out what happens next year with the booster lessons," Cole said.

Winning Over Reluctant Teachers

Schwam knows some teachers will make the switch to Project ALERT with reluctance. "It's not only because of the attachment some teachers have to D.A.R.E.," she said. Some of them have developed their own lessons on drug resistance and want to use those.

"When you require teachers to attend training, there are always a few who aren't in the best frame of mind when they come. Once we get them into a workshop, I believe they'll be won over. The Project ALERT trainers are excellent. They're very knowledgeable about classroom management and they make it an enjoyable and interesting day."

Schwam and Cole have concerns about teachers using the materials with fidelity. In such a large district, monitoring will be difficult. Title IV coordinators in the schools will assist. Cole and Schwam also plan to prepare a survey that will offer insight into how teachers use Project ALERT, and they may do some spot checking as well.

Support from principals can ease the way, but it's often difficult to bring them on board, Cole said. "Everyone is struggling. Several elective programs have already been reduced. Some administrators, including building principals, feel all resources possible should be devoted to core subjects that are part of academic testing. You can't really blame them."

Patching Together Funding

Even with Project ALERT's national staff assisting with training, Cole must worry about paying for materials and other costs, just as she must for all the K-12 health programs. While the LAUSD has a budget of \$6.8 billion, it isn't nearly enough. Schools are gradually expanding kindergartens from half day to full day to provide children with more learning opportunities at an earlier age. The district is currently building more schools to ease overcrowding. In the meantime, about half the schools operate on a year-round schedule, with either two-thirds or three-fourths of their students in attendance at any given time.

"If you think about it, we are like a small country," said Cole. "We have over 750,000 K-12 students spread over 700 square miles. We have the second largest school police force in the United States. It's also the fourth largest police department in the county of Los Angeles. Money is a problem. Our state has an ongoing budget crisis and funding to schools has been slashed."

Health programs receive state monies from tax on cigarettes, along with federal funding from Title IV's No Child Left Behind. Federal monies are a source of contention for Cole.

"By law, our district can, and does, take half the funding we receive from Title IV and moves it into other categorical programs. LAUSD is working very hard to provide the best education for our students so they are

able to achieve their highest academic potential. In any district, lots of things depend on the superintendent and the board of education, and our district is no different. Although the board is very supportive of health education, politically the emphasis has been on the core subjects, so our Title IV money becomes vulnerable. Our goal is to educate the board and the superintendent about the connection between health-related behaviors and academic achievement.

Cole and her staff are currently exploring private funding possibilities, something they haven't had to do before. According to Cole, "We're also applying for federal grants. We already have a grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for our HIV/AIDS prevention program. We're going to do whatever we can to make sure all our K-12 students have access to health programs."

Giving Project ALERT the Green Light

That Project ALERT is so affordable is only one reason Cole says it was selected for her district. "We heard about Project ALERT from other schools and from several police groups," she said. "It's an Exemplary Model Program for Safe and Drug Free Schools. But there's more to it than that. We get wonderful support from the national office. They keep the materials up to date, and they have an excellent website and newsletter. They do our training for us, and they use quality training materials. We've seen how positively teachers respond during the training. We also like the option of having online training. I could go on and on."

"One of the most important things is that the program resonates with our students, almost 75 percent of whom are Hispanic. We're finding that Project ALERT is very culturally relevant to them."

"And to us, that's impressive."