

Long Beach to Use Project ALERT

Program Research and Flexibility Influence Decision

By Andrea Warren

Welcome to Long Beach, one of Southern California's great coastal cities, where residents and visitors alike bask in mild temperatures while enjoying the stunning Pacific beaches. For many, this is paradise.

But even paradise can have problems. Once a quiet seaside community affectionately known as "Iowa by the Sea" because so many aging Midwesterners settled here to retire, today Long Beach is better known as America's most diverse city.

"At our peak we had over 50 languages and dialects represented in our schools," said Robin Sinks, Long Beach Unified School District's Health Education Curriculum Leader. "Immigrants come to Southern California because of our climate and because of the hope for employment. We had a huge influx from Southeast Asia in the late 1970s and early 1980s, including families who lived in the hill country in Laos and had no written language when they arrived. We also have the largest Cambodian population outside Cambodia itself. Now we have people coming from South and Central America, many fleeing the conflict there."

Alcohol and drug use among Long Beach students has decreased in recent years as a result of district and community prevention and intervention efforts, but school officials are taking no chances. They decided two years ago to add a research-validated drug education program to the elementary, middle, and high school curriculum to supplement information already in students' health education textbooks. Sinks, as the district's Title IV Coordinator, was given the task of selecting programs and having them in place by the 2003-04 school year.

The Long Beach schools hold themselves to high standards of excellence in every facet of education. Sinks wanted research-validated drug education programs that would meet or exceed those standards and would also satisfy federal, state, and local requirements. They had to be research-validated to ensure that the district could utilize Title IV funding. And they had to be flexible enough that teachers could easily adapt them to meet the language and learning needs of their diverse student populations.

"It was also very important that teachers buy into whatever research-validated program was selected – that they both like it and feel comfortable presenting it in the classroom," she said. "I needed them to feel committed to it so they will teach it with fidelity, even as they might make minor adaptations."

Right off, she knew Project ALERT was a strong contender for the middle school program. She first learned about the program in 1999 when she attended California's Health Education Conference and picked up materials on it. She liked what she learned, and the following year the District initiated a pilot program to test it - standard District procedure before adopting a district-wide program. "Once it was in place in several of our middle schools, we found that the teachers we trained to use Project ALERT loved it and felt their students benefited from it," Sinks said. "They advocated strongly for its adoption after learning that the research had validated its effectiveness."

Advisory Council Played Active Role

Sinks' next step was to seek input from the district's Health Advisory Council, a group of staff, students, parents, and community representatives who look at objective data and provide input to the District on everything from how to spend health-related grant money to addressing special health concerns.

"Lots of thinking and talking together went into our study of several possible programs," Sinks said. "By the time we finished, I was confident Project ALERT could meet the needs of our community."

Sinks was impressed with Project ALERT's content, especially the up-to-date videos, which she knew would appeal to students. But what impressed her was the additional support offered by the Project ALERT staff. "Not only have they helped us with training our staff," she said, "but they regularly update the curricula to keep it current, and have a great website full of support materials and current information. They offer all this at a very reasonable charge. Most companies send you a catalog and you have to pay for updated or additional materials."

Once the decision was made to go with Project ALERT, Sinks began discussing the program's implementation with middle school principals, other district curriculum coordinators, and the state's Title IV administrator. They decided to divide up the Project ALERT lessons, incorporating the first six into sixth grade science, the last five into seventh grade health education, and the three booster lessons into eighth grade science.

While most districts present the eleven lessons in one grade and the booster lessons in the following grade, Long Beach educators wanted to ensure that middle school students received drug prevention information in all three grades. "Our reasoning was that things change rapidly in adolescents' lives," Sinks said, "and what they hear from one year to the next can take on an entirely new meaning, depending on their personal experience. But we'll keep watch on this to see how it's going and whether our teachers have to backtrack too much. This adaptation is a learning process for us."

According to Sinks, another reason for dividing the lessons between three grades had to do with the pressure on today's teachers to ensure that their students do well in the academic subjects stressed on standardized tests. "They need their classroom time for subjects they will be tested on. In California, that does not currently include health, even though we know that students with health issues are at greater risk for academic failure. But students can practice academic skills while learning about health. For example, in science class a teacher might ask how smoking impacts the respiratory or cardiovascular system. As students work through such a question, reading, writing, and speaking about it, they increase their academic skills and also learn more about a subject that can impact their personal health."

Training a Special Challenge

Although she knew some teachers would oppose the idea, Sinks felt all middle school science teachers should receive the entire Project ALERT training even though they would teach only part of the curriculum. "To effectively teach any of it, you need to have a full understanding of the whole," she said. "You can't reinforce a

point with students if you don't know what else they've learned. Besides, you might be moved to a different grade level, and this way, you're already trained."

But providing training for 114 teachers during the 2003-04 school year was no easy task. Long Beach has both regular and year-round schools. Consequently, every week of the year there are some teachers who are on break and not in their classrooms. Sinks set up multiple training sessions, giving teachers several dates to choose from. They attended a day-long training at the district's Teacher Resource Center while substitutes handled their regular classroom duties. Several teachers also used Project ALERT's online training option.

Project ALERT staff provided the training. "We got very positive feedback from teachers in all the training sessions," Sinks said. "Teachers can be a little critical if the pacing is off. They don't want things too long or too short. They told us they appreciated the interactive nature of the training and the opportunity to do some role playing, just like students do. They also felt a strong connection with the Project ALERT trainers, who had been classroom teachers and understood their special challenges."

Once teachers had completed training, they received their classroom kits. Because they needed to see Sinks or one of her staff to get them, "we connected with each of them. I want to stay in regular contact with the teachers, and I do this via e-mail or mailed reminders. In addition to the support teachers receive from Project ALERT, I let them know that if they need something, they can get in touch with me. This is labor intensive, but we want this program to get off to a good start. We also want to see substance use continue to decline."

An Unexpected Benefit to Teachers

One side benefit to bringing Project ALERT into the schools, according to Sinks, is that teachers are learning along with their students. "We have a sizeable number of young teachers, and many of them came of age when drug use was prevalent," she said. "They may not have gotten the drug information their students are getting with Project ALERT. So an unintended outcome, our teachers tell us, is that we're educating them, too." Sinks says that Project ALERT holds promise for Long Beach students because it gives them hands-on skills. "Students say, in effect, 'Don't tell me that marijuana is going to kill me. I know it won't. But when you help me understand how it influences me and that it may cause me to make poor decisions, then I have the information I need to make good decisions. And if you've helped me set goals for myself, then I'll measure my actions against my goals.' Project ALERT does impact students. It helps them to set goals and make good decisions."

"If we can send kids into the community after graduation who are prepared academically and who are productive citizens, then we've done what education was designed to do. I want every student who goes through our schools and our health education program to be the kind of person I'd feel comfortable having live next door to me. Someone I'd like for a neighbor."

"I would say to school personnel starting out on this venture that it's worth all the effort you put into it. Project ALERT has provided Long Beach with a broad spectrum of services to meet our needs."

The City of Long Beach and Its School District

Although the city of Long Beach has a population nearing 500,000 and is one of the world's busiest commercial seaports, it retains its community feel with diverse neighborhoods and a network of parks, libraries, and recreation areas. Visitors come to enjoy the beaches, the aquarium, and the permanently docked Queen Mary ocean liner.

With 97,000 students, Long Beach Unified School district is California's third largest district. Only Los Angeles and San Francisco are larger. The district has long been known as one of the nation's best and most innovative public school systems. It has the highest ranked Head Start program in the country. It was one of the first districts to require uniforms in elementary and middle school (black or navy bottoms and white tops, depending on the school). Two of its high schools now have uniforms as well (khaki bottoms, white tops). Long Beach has been repeatedly recognized for its educational excellence, most recently with the prestigious Broad Prize for Urban Education.

The Long Beach Approach to Helping Students Achieve Their Personal Best and Stay Drug-Free

In Long Beach, the community and its schools join forces to help students achieve their greatest potential.

"The school district and the city work hard to meet the needs of every student, whatever that student's language, educational, family income, and social needs are," said Sinks. "We are narrowing the gap between high and low achievers and help each student become his or her best self. We have intervention programs to help both students and their families. There is a great deal of support around our students."

In addition to offering Project ALERT in the middle schools, Long Beach also provides health education, including research validated drug and violence prevention, in its elementary and high schools. The district has school nurses and counselors in every school who collaborate with staff to help each student achieve and to create a post-graduation plan.

Listening to Students and Teachers

Several Long Beach teachers who taught Project ALERT for the first time last year, and several students who took the class, shared some of their reactions to the course.

When asked the biggest challenge in teaching Project ALERT, one educator said it was teaching from a script. "Eventually I got used to it, and then I liked it," the teacher said. Most rewarding, according to another teacher, was creating a caring environment in the classroom so students could share their personal experiences. "I think they've gotten more out of this program than any other they've taken," she said. "They were more actively involved in it and found it more interesting."

One teacher had a student who realized during the class that he might be at risk to develop a drinking problem because other family members have drinking problems. According to the teacher, "He learned he can make better choices."

Another teacher added, "One thing they've learned is that not everybody is doing drugs. For example, my students thought at least half the kids in their class smoked. They were surprised to learn it's only 20 percent. And that means 80 percent don't."

Students said they liked creating posters and doing the skits. "They were fun and they taught us how to resist peer pressure," said one student. "Other courses tell you not to do something. This one tells you why."

Delivering Educational Services to an Island School

We've all heard about storied Catalina Island, a mere "26 miles across the sea," according to the popular song. Catalina is very much a place - all 76 square miles of it - and while it's a popular tourist destination off the coast of Long Beach, the little city of Avalon (permanent population 3,000) is also a working community with public schools, and those schools are part of the Long Beach Unified School District. This year, Avalon Middle School, with an enrollment of 200 students, is using Project ALERT for the first time.

According to Sinks, during the last couple of years parents, school, and community members have banded together to explore some of the challenges facing children who grow up in Avalon. As a result, additional counseling services are now available to help students make healthy choices.

"Living on an island looks idyllic from the outside, but young people growing up there may feel stuck or isolated," she said. "Also, because so many people come to Catalina to vacation and many of them engage in drinking, impressionable children are often exposed to risky behaviors. They start thinking that this is the norm."

Long Beach teachers who accept assignments in the Avalon schools have the option of living on the island or commuting from the mainland. Some stay during the week and return to the mainland for weekends.

"Some Avalon teachers have been there many years," Sinks said, "and wouldn't consider living anywhere else."

Meet Robin Sinks

Robin Sinks did not become a health educator by design. She started her career as an RN working as a psychiatric nurse on a children's ward. When she and her husband moved to the Long Beach area, she learned of an opening for a school nurse and held that job for five years before becoming coordinator of the school district's child abuse prevention program. She then joined the health education staff and eventually landed in

her current job. Along the way she had two children and earned her master's degree in educational management.

"I love the field of health education," she said. "I get to use my nursing background in an educational setting. Students' health is the key to their ability to succeed. They can't learn if they're not in the classroom or able to focus on the instruction. My task as the Health Curriculum Leader is to support the teachers who provide health education so they in turn can positively affect the lives of a whole lot of kids. I think I've got the best job in the world."

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