

Use of Prevention Specialists

Ft. Worth School Uses Project ALERT and Prevention Specialist to Immunize Students Against Drug Abuse

By Andrea Warren

When Roy Griffin went to work for the Ft. Worth Independent School District in 1991, he was handed a Texas-sized responsibility.

“We had a drug problem on our hands,” he says. “I was hired to combat it, to figure out the best way to teach students about drug abuse, while also teaching other areas of social skills development.”

The D.A.R.E. program was in use in the schools, but had little impact. While school counselors tried to help students who were drug abusers, this according to Griffin, was too little too late. So was any variation on holding an assembly in the gym where someone gives a motivational speech about ‘How-I got-off-drugs-and-you-can-do-the-same.’

“You can’t be reactive to a problem like this,” Griffin says. “You’ve got to be proactive, stopping drug usage before it starts. You must drug proof children. Their welfare and health depends on it.”

Health, he stresses, is not just physical health. “It’s social, psychological, emotional and spiritual. It’s all of those tied together to make a whole person. That’s health. That’s the health of a nation, the health of a world. All of that impacts academics.”

Griffin had learned through long experience working in the fields of juvenile justice, drug abuse treatment and counseling that an ounce of prevention was worth a pound of cure. With the right people teaching the right curriculum, he knew you could teach children strategies to say “no” to things that could harm them.

In his opinion, relying on classroom teachers to do this was not practical. “Teachers have their own agendas,” he says. “Social skills ends up competing with academics for time, and academics win because that’s what teachers and principals are held accountable for.”

So Griffin, who serves as Ft. Worth Coordinator for Safe and Drug-Free Schools & Communities, went another route. Today, a team of 45 prevention specialists, whose varied backgrounds are in teaching, counseling, social work, and/or criminal justice, report to Griffin. They have a variety of responsibilities, including training teachers to address such issues as bullying and conflict resolution.

And in the classrooms of the Ft. Worth Independent School District, which serves 80,000 students, these prevention specialists are teaching students strategies to be drug-free.

The Right Curriculum for Each School

Each specialist is assigned to several schools, which may include elementary, middle, or even private and parochial schools, if these schools request this service from Ft. Worth school district. Typically, the specialists' lessons are incorporated into a schools health, science, or social studies classes, encouraging students to see them as part of the academic curriculum.

Because each school has its own needs and personality, prevention specialists work with the principals to select the program they feel will be right, for that school's population. They can choose from a number of research-based curricula. Griffin's favorite is Project ALERT.

"This is an across-the-board prevention program, not just a drug prevention program," he says. "The most important word is prevention. If we teach children to refuse drugs, then we can also teach girls to refuse getting pregnant and boys to refuse getting them pregnant. We can teach character education and stop bullying. We can take the core program of Project ALERT and adapt it to violence, or guns in the schools, or anger management and conflict resolution. This program gives students decision-making skills."

According to Sharon Whitfield, principal of McClean Middle School, this is exactly what her students need. "Middle school students are impulsive and don't consider consequences," she says. "We've got to equip them with ways to get out of situations when they face temptation, and still save face with their peers, because peers are more important than parents at this age. If they abuse any kind of drug, they can't give their full attention to academics. What we call 'social skills development' is vitally important if children are going to achieve academically. You can't count on parents to teach it."

Instead, the schools rely on Griffin's prevention specialists to do this, and with good results.

"In schools where we can fully incorporate a program, we've seen a real change in drug use," says Griffin. "We have data going back ten years, and currently tobacco use is the lowest it's ever been. Alcohol usage is down, but not far enough. Still, we know from our annual surveys of students, that children in those schools believe using drugs is wrong."

Drug Availability in the Ft. Worth Area

That's saying a lot. Historically, drugs are readily accessible to residents of the Dallas – Ft. Worth area, arriving at area airports in shipments from Mexico and South America. When the Dallas – Ft. Worth International Airport was built, dealers established a corridor around it, and affluent young people knew that all they had to do was go to malls and shopping centers or to dealers' apartments near the airport to score anything they wanted.

"At one point, we had the highest incident of youth-related deaths in the country from drug overdoses," says Griffin. "This area also has more rural amphetamine labs than anywhere else in the United States. Interstates 35 and 45 are major corridors for moving drugs up from Mexico and into the rest of the country."

Today, even with prevention specialists at work in the schools there's a new threat: inhalants.

"To simulate a chemical high, some children will inhale anything they can think of," Griffin says. "Glue, turpentine, gasoline, spray paint, even colored markers and correction fluids. For many of our students, these are entry-level drugs. They are cheap, easy to get and they have the greatest potential for damaging the brain."

Three years ago at McClean Middle School, Principal Whitfield realized inhalant usage was on the rise among her students when she analyzed the results of the annual student survey.

"We have a high risk student body here, 330 seventh graders and 316 eighth graders, 51 percent of whom are Hispanic, while 43 percent are Anglo, with a sprinkling of African and Asian. We have lots of kids who move around, and some latchkey kids. We knew we had to address this problem immediately."

Teaching Kids to Say "No"

McLean's prevention specialist, Melissa Siu, a licensed chemical dependency counselor who has been with the school district since 1995, is at McClean Middle School every week. She selected Project ALERT to teach to the schools seventh graders-with booster lessons in the eighth grade-precisely because it has a lesson on inhalants.

"I like the high level of student participation. Some homework assignments have students interacting with adults at home," says Siu. "I appreciate all the help available on Project ALERT's website, and that the newsletter has ideas I can try in the classroom."

"Most importantly, I wanted to see if teaching Project ALERT would make a difference in usage of inhalants among our students. I'm certain it has. We don't have hard data yet, but we will soon, and I'm confident of the results."

Siu keeps the atmosphere informal and fun when she's in the classroom presenting the Project ALERT lessons. She encourages students to work as partners or in small groups to share ideas with each other, and gives them opportunities to move around the room.

On an early day in April, she was in Jo MacConnell's seventh grade science class, presenting Lesson Seven on "Practicing Resistance Skills." While she guided students through a discussion in peer pressure and finding face-saving ways to say "no" when offered something bad for them, MacConnell quietly assisted, helping students whenever needed.

"Remember," Siu tells the class, "it's your right to say 'no'." That's one of the most important skills you'll ever learn."

To illustrate how they can be affected by peer pressure, she holds up a large glass jar filled with colorful Fruit Loops and asks them to write down their guess as to how many are there. Then she tells them to work with a partner and decide together on a number. Finally she divides students into several groups and tells each group to come up with a number-a process that generates considerable chatter and negotiation.

She announces that the jar contains 1857 Fruit Loops, surprising most of the students who had guessed lower numbers. She asks them how their guesses changed by working with one partner and then with a group. “Are your answers different?” she questions. Most hands go up.

“When you were in your groups, what influenced you to change your number?” she asks.

“We picked a number in the middle,” a student replies.

“You compromised,” Siu responds.

“I went along with students who are smarter than me,” a shy girl confesses.

“So you let others influence you,” Siu says. “Sometimes peer pressure is easier to handle if there are just one or two others, but it can be a lot harder when it’s a whole group of people trying to get you to do something. Group decisions may not be in your best interest.”

“Practicing How to Say ‘No’”

To reinforce this, Siu shows the students a Project ALERT video in which two friends are at a party and are offered a joint by several older, popular teens. The students watch in absorbed silence. Afterwards, they divide into groups again, this time to create a short skit in which they play the parts of the teens in the video, helping the two friends say “no”, while saving face with their peers.

Students work hard on the skits. The rising noise level in the classroom attests to their excitement. Then, each group presents its skits to the entire class. Amid good natured teasing, some goofing off, and a lot of laughing, a serious message comes through as each group finds an effective way to say “no”.

Students then watch the next installment of the video and see how the actors resolve their dilemma. One says, “No thanks. I don’t need drugs to have a good time.”

“I think that’s one of the best lines that I ever heard,” Siu says afterward, as she segues class discussion into the realities that marijuana is illegal and there are consequences for getting caught with it. She tells students that next week the lesson will be on inhalants and how they can protect themselves against toxic substances. Students nod appreciatively. They’ll be ready.

When the bell rings and students file out, Jo MacConnell, the seventh grade science teacher, compliments Siu on the class. The two of them coordinate the lessons and each reinforces what the other teaches.

“So much of science is decision-making,” MacConnell says. “This is a behavior issue, but the connection to science is strong. When decision-making comes up in class, I’ll be able to relate it to this lesson. I always try to do carryover discussions, and afterwards, students will sometimes come to me in private to talk about things related to the lessons that they don’t want to share with their friends.”

Drugs and the Real World

MacConnell knows how readily available drugs are to her students—especially legal ones like tobacco and inhalants. She relates that her husband and 19-year old grandson had gone to the stock car races several days earlier. Cans of Skoal Chewing tobacco were being handed out, and her grandson came home with several cans. “He promised me he wasn’t going to use them, that he just wanted to show them to his friends, but I worry about him,” MacConnell says.

“He hasn’t started smoking, but his daddy’s a smoker, and it’s out there and available. I wish he’d had Project ALERT. I think it’s a wonderful program. Kids need all the help they can get in resisting drugs. When cans of Skoal are simply handed to them...the fact that they know how to say no, that they’ve practiced it with their peers, may get them through.”

Griffin comments that Skoal used to sell gum in little Skoal containers, “giving children the idea that it was all right to have these kinds of things. In Project ALERT, especially in the section on advertising, we help young people say ‘Wait a minute! These people are trying to get me to take stuff that’s good for me. I’m going to say that what you’re giving is not something I want, and you shouldn’t be handing it to me in the first place.’ Our goal is to teach children to be assertive enough to say “no” to their peers and to adults. That’s no easy thing.”

To achieve that goal, Griffin needs more prevention specialists. Melissa Siu teaches hundreds of children every week in her three assigned schools, and her schedule is grueling. Griffin would like to see a full time prevention specialist in every school district like Ft. Worth that is already deeply in debt, it isn’t likely to happen. Griffin’s immediate hope is that he doesn’t lose any of his current staff because of budget cuts.

“In the best of all worlds, prevention specialists would be on each campus all day, every day, for children,” Griffin says. “We would incorporate prevention instruction into our overall program. Every child would get Project ALERT’s fourteen lessons. The closer we could stick to them, the greater the impact we’d have on prevention.

“We need more money, time and staff. Not treatment, not intervention, but prevention. My dream is to see prevention in every school in this country. The day that happens, we will have immunized our young people behaviorally, sending generations of drug-free children into high school and then into adulthood.”