

Team Teaching and Use of School Resource Officers

Kansas School Uses Team Approach to Teach Project ALERT

By Andrea Warren

The students in Amy Hey's sixth grade class at Northview School are ready when police officer Tanya Gambrill steps into their classroom. Perfectly groomed in her gray and black uniform, she is both authority figure and protective presence. The students know her well, for she is a daily visitor to this elementary school in a working class neighborhood near downtown Olathe, KS.

She smiles at the 18 students, addressing them by name and asking how they're doing. They smile back, expectant, excited. Gambrill begins by reviewing material presented to the students the previous week.

"Where does pressure to use drugs come from?" she asks.

"Friends, family, yourself, the media," the students respond.

"What's one way friends pressure you?" she questions.

"By telling you it's harmless," a student replies.

"And is it?" she asks.

"No!" the students reply in unison.

"Will it help you relax?" Gambrill wonders aloud.

"Maybe for a little while," says a boy, "but then you feel worse."

She nods thoughtfully, then asks, "What if a friend says, 'I got this just for us.'"

"That's pressure," replies a girl. "That's not a real friend."

Gambrill and the students discuss why individuals should decide for themselves what they want to do. "You may see your friends or your parents smoking and drinking. They make their own choices, but people are allowed to do that," says Gambrill.

Teaching students to make informed choices is part of what happens in Project ALERT lessons, which are presented in sixth grade classrooms across Olathe one hour a week for eleven weeks during either the fall or spring semester. But it is not one teacher taking responsibility for teaching them. Here, it is a team of adults.

Northview's team includes Gambrill, each of the three sixth grade teachers, counselor Pat Head, and nurse Carol Helm. Gambrill's presence as a School Resource Officer is possible because of a partnership between the Olathe (pronounced O-lay-tha) Police Department and the Olathe District Schools. She is assigned to a total of eight schools. Today it is her turn to lead the class discussion in Amy Hey's class, and the topic is how advertising influences consumers to use tobacco and alcohol.

Gambrill segues her presentation into this topic, discussing the ways advertising makes alcohol and tobacco usage look appealing. She has collected ads from magazines, and so have the students. They discuss the images and the messages the ads deliver. The students divide into groups of four or five each to change the slogans on the ads so they tell the truth. Officer Gambrill, Mrs. Hey, and the nurse and counselor, who are also in the classroom, join the groups. Conversation is lively. The adults offer suggestions, listen to ideas, and add their own.

When everyone is finished, the students regroup to share their work. “Paradise Found,” an ad featuring a bottle of liquor, has become “Paradise Lost.” A cigarette ad stating “Why have the usual?” is now “Why would you smoke?” “The length you go for pleasure” is transformed into “The length you go for lung cancer.” “Distinctly smooth” has become “Distinctly harmful,” and so on.

Gambrill tells them how expensive these ads are, but that companies spend so much because the ads work. For the following week, she asks them to keep a list of all the cigarette and liquor slogans they see. She gives them examples so they know what she means. “Ask your parents to help you,” she says.

When class ends, students wave their goodbyes as Gambrill leaves. They have had a good time. And they have learned a lot. “I have a whole new perspective on the ads,” one boy says. “Now I know a bunch of new stuff.”

Hey thinks the team approach to teaching Project ALERT is one reason why. “I appreciate having three other adults in my classroom to help present the lessons,” she says. “It makes a strong impact on my students. The counselor is a trusted adult they can talk to if they have a problem. And from the nurse the kids get more technical knowledge, including up-to-date statistics, which is the kind of information they like. My students are always eager for this class. Teaching it as a team definitely works.”

District-Wide Implementation

Three years ago, the Olathe District Schools adopted Project ALERT as part of its mission to create drug free schools. The district implemented the program district-wide in the sixth grade, and added three booster lessons to the seventh grade curriculum. This was a major undertaking, given that the district has over 22,000 students, including 1,700 sixth graders, and that district officials wanted to use a team approach, convinced they could make it work. “In addition to the School Resource Officer, we know that the classroom teacher, the school nurse, and the school counselor are the influential adults in a sixth grader’s life at school,” says Carolyn Fitzsimons, Facilitator of Safe and Drug Free Schools for the Olathe District Schools. “So they were our choices to form a team. We felt they would have more impact than someone the students didn’t know—and could not go back to if they had further questions or just wanted talk.

“Classroom teachers are critical to the success of this program. They are the ones who can process bits of information and dialogue on drugs that will occur throughout the year. Whatever students are doing in class, it’s the teacher who often has the opportunity to relate it back to making responsible choices based on accurate information, which is at the heart of Project ALERT.”

The nurse, says Fitzsimons, is a nurturing adult who sees the kids at vulnerable times, when they don't feel well and might disclose something they wouldn't tell a teacher. As for the guidance counselor, "he or she already comes into the classroom on a regular basis to teach life skills, including problem solving and decision making, and that fits right in with Project ALERT."

The fourth person became a police officer. Officers taught the D.A.R.E program that Project ALERT replaced, "so we already knew that some students are enamored with them. They can carry weight with the kids."

Parents appreciate this dedicated four-directional approach. "I'm very pleased each of them is involved," says Eileen Koczan, whose daughter Briana is in Mrs. Hey's class. "Kids need to know that there are health, emotional, and legal issues that go along with drugs. Briana's involvement in this class has given us the opportunity at home to talk about these issues. Her assignments have opened up dialogue on lots of topics and allowed us to share our feelings and values. We think it's a wonderful program."

Setting Up Teams

Team members meet at the beginning of the semester to decide who will teach which parts of which lesson. "No one is the leader. We're all equal," says Pat Head, Northview's counselor. "While all of us try to be in the classroom for each session, one of us may get called away, particularly Officer Gambrill. If that happens, another team member takes over. We're all familiar with each lesson. Who does which part of which lesson breaks down into natural areas of expertise. So, Carol, our nurse, might discuss medical questions related to inhalants, and Officer Gambrill talks about the law and what's legal, while I discuss how these issues make you feel."

Nurse Carol Helm finds her role on the team gives her the opportunity to broach subjects that can be awkward with sixth graders who come to see her for health issues. "If a student is feeling bad, I often have to do a little searching to find out the cause," she says. "Because they know me from the classroom, I can bring up things. Sometimes they'll ask me questions they didn't feel comfortable asking in class. For example, if I smell smoke on a student, and especially if that student has asthma, we can discuss whether this is secondhand smoke from home or whether the student has started to smoke. Either way, I'll answer whatever questions come up."

In class, if a student asks Helm a medical question she can't answer off the top of her head, she checks on it and returns the following week with accurate information.

Amy Hercules, principal at Northview, is a strong proponent of Project ALERT's team approach. "Having four adults involved impresses upon the children how important the topic is. Students see them working together as a team and that serves as a model for them." She adds that it's just by chance that the team assigned to Amy Hey's class is all women. "We also have male sixth grade teachers, counselors, and officers who participate in Project ALERT," she says.

Choosing Project ALERT

Whether or not to commit valuable resources to teaching drug education was never an issue for the school district. Olathe borders the southwest side of the Kansas City metropolitan area. In the past decade it has grown rapidly, metamorphosing from a small city to Kansas' fifth largest, with a population of 106,000 and growing. It was partly because of location and growth that school administrators began looking for a program to replace D.A.R.E., which had been used in the Olathe schools for over a decade.

“One of our concerns was that we were seeing increases in drug use,” said Fitzsimons. “Usage here was higher than state and national averages. Alcohol consumption, measured by the collection of the alcohol tax, was above national norms. We know that our prosperous county has a large tolerance for alcohol, tobacco, and even illegal drugs. Just the other day we met with a parent whose son was doing poorly in school. When asked about possible drug use, the father said, ‘Well, he smokes a little pot, but what’s the big deal?’ Many of our students come from homes where adults use both legal and illegal substances.”

Another concern is that Olathe sits along I-35, a major north-south corridor. “Drug enforcement agencies tell us there is a lot of drug trafficking in and out of Kansas City, so drugs are readily available here,” says Fitzsimons. Add to the availability the factor of affluent teens who have cars, spending money, and, in many instances, too little supervision, and, says Fitzsimons, “you have definite risk factors for our kids.”

She also cites lack of parental involvement as contributing to the problem. “When we used D.A.R.E., parents did not get involved. We wanted a way to help them realize the schools need them as partners in helping their children make informed choices. D.A.R.E. wasn’t doing it. Student drug usage was increasing. So we started looking for something more effective.”

When Fitzsimons learned about Project ALERT, she attended a training program. What first attracted her was the level of parental involvement with homework assignments and the opportunity for parents to collaborate with their children. She also appreciated that students learned about the consequences of drug use, without learning how to use the drugs—a problem the schools had encountered with D.A.R.E. “I also liked that the user-friendly materials left us plenty of room to supplement lessons with our own activities,” Fitzsimons says.

Back in Olathe, she pulled together a committee of colleagues, including curriculum directors from the elementary, junior high, and senior high levels. They looked at several programs, then settled on Project ALERT. In formulating a plan for implementation, they decided they wanted drug information to come from four adults with different perspectives. Once the decision was made to include a police officer on the Project ALERT team, an assistant superintendent became the school district’s liaison with a willing and cooperative Olathe Police Department. Olathe chose the option of training presenters through ALERT’s on-line course. The district paid presenters a stipend for their time.

“We decided to fit the program into our health curriculum and also absorb some of the classroom time from the hour each week our guidance counselors spend in the sixth grade classes discussing life issues. When students complete the eleven lessons, that hour of the week reverts back to the time the guidance counselor

spends in the classroom. We chose sixth and seventh grades for the program because we know those are the critical transition years for our students,” says Fitzsimons.

Booster Lessons in Seventh Grade

Patty Wallace, the seventh grade health instructor at Santa Fe Trail Junior High School in Olathe, is one of the teachers who presents the three Project ALERT booster lessons to students who the year before went through the Project ALERT classes at Northview Elementary School. “I’m very impressed with how well the students retain information from the year before,” she says, “and I think that’s directly related to the team approach. Information coming to them from several angles really helps. Sometimes they’ll remember a specific member of the team telling them something in class during the previous year. And when I put up the posters that come with the Project ALERT teaching materials, they get excited because they remember them.”

Wallace team-teaches the booster lessons with the School Resource Officer assigned to Santa Fe Trail. As with other Project ALERT teams in the district, the two of them decide together what each of them will teach. “Getting the information from more than one source gives it more authority with the kids,” says Wallace.

She also makes parents part of her team by sending students home with an assignment to interview their parents on drug use consequences. “This gives students the parents’ perspective on all of this as well, and it opens up communication between them. Which is wonderful,” she says. “I just don’t think there can be enough people who care about kids telling them these things. The more people involved, the better. It’s absolutely a plus.”

Northview’s counselor, Pat Head, thinks offering the booster classes in seventh grade is wise. “Junior High is when many students are going to run into temptation, so it’s good to follow up with them then,” she says.

Though Olathe has committed staff time to the team approach, schools unable to do this might explore other ways to create a team of presenters. “One way is to call on community health experts,” suggests Hercules. For a team approach to succeed, you must bring together experts who are committed to working together to present the concepts and activities as they were designed.”

Adds Fitzsimons, “We’ve found it’s important for students to hear the information from several adults who care about them. They could certainly be community volunteers or experts from agencies who have similar missions.”

What matters, according to Hercules, is that a connection takes place between the students and the adult presenters. “Kids who are connected to their schools and community are more successful and make better choices for themselves. Our approach to Project ALERT encourages team work and collaboration among multiple resources. And that can only be beneficial for our kids.”