

Project ALERT in the Washington, DC Area

Two Districts Use Different Approaches to Mutual Problem

By Andrea Warren

At first glance, Ron Brown Middle School in northeast Washington, DC and Gaithersburg Middle School in neighboring Montgomery County, Maryland seem to have little in common.

Many of the students attending Ron Brown Middle School live in poverty. Some are at risk for homelessness, violence, child abuse, early pregnancy, HIV and AIDS. Their school, not to mention most houses and businesses in the area, has protective bars across windows and doors. The school district has too little money to provide its students with more than a basic education.

Many Ron Brown students, almost 100 percent of whom are African American, come from single parent homes or live with another relative, usually a grandmother. They talk about family members who are in prison and drug dealers who sell openly on their streets.

Only a few miles away, Gaithersburg Middle School is surrounded by beautiful homes and manicured lawns. Nearby specialty shops and fine restaurants cater to the well-to-do. The communities of Montgomery County, Maryland form the suburbs of Washington, DC and comprise one of the nation's wealthiest areas. Yet, the student body at Gaithersburg Middle School has its share of poor students. Some are children of immigrants who are able to live here because of subsidized housing.

Whether rich or poor, Montgomery County parents tend to work long hours, often leaving their children to their own devices. Like their counterparts in urban Washington, these kids are constantly exposed to the temptations of tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs—temptations that come in many forms, from beer parties or a joint offered by a schoolmate to cigarettes and alcohol belonging to a parent or older sibling.

In both districts, Project ALERT is helping to address the continuing concern of drug usage among middle school students. But the approaches used are strikingly different. One district has the financial resources to sponsor the program, and the other relies on outside help. Here's how each is striving toward the mutual goal of drug-free schools.

Finding a Way in Washington, DC

In a stark classroom at Ron Brown Middle School, 30 eighth graders are attending a Project ALERT class. In compliance with the school's dress code, both boys and girls are clad in white tops and black slacks. Interaction is part of this course. Students are encouraged to think, to react, and to respond, and the room reverberates with noise as they shout out answers and talk among themselves.

But they are also focused on the teacher, Martin Taylor, who is casually dressed in jeans and a sweater. Well spoken, a graduate of the University of Tennessee, and a three-year teaching veteran of Project ALERT, Taylor is upset. When he walked into the classroom, he had noticed a student clowning around, pretending to shoot

drugs into his vein in an effort to make his friends laugh. Taylor asks the group what the consequences are when they choose to do drugs.

They shout out answers that some of them know too well from the experiences of neighbors and family members: jail, addiction, loss of friends, homelessness, feeling bad about themselves.

“Are these things funny?” Taylor asks.

The students grow quiet.

“Then why do you pretend to tighten up your veins to do drugs?”

“What’s funny about that? Why do you pretend to do that?”

The students are serious now, considering.

“We watch movies and stuff. We see it on TV,” ventures one.

“If you pretend to do something without thinking about the consequences, when it comes time for reality, you may consider doing it,” Taylor says intently. “You may actually do it. After all, you know how, because you’ve play-acted it.”

For a moment, the room buzzes with chatter, then Taylor interrupts. “Unfortunately, we can walk outside and see the results of people shooting drugs into their veins. You know these people, and you know it’s not funny. All of you have talked about your goals, your dreams about careers and your futures. Not one of you said that ‘doing drugs will get me there.’ We are here to take personal responsibility for the things we do. If we know something is harmful to us and we value ourselves, why then would we do it?”

Taylor’s teaching partner, Cheryl Johnson, a mother of three with a degree in psychology, begins an exercise to elicit information about alcohol and its harmful effects as it builds up in the body. Students nod knowingly and join in. Many have talked openly about the problems that alcohol, in addition to drugs, has caused in their own families.

In a visit after class, a girl explains how readily marijuana is available in her neighborhood. “You can’t legally buy cigarettes or alcohol if you’re my age, but it’s easy to get marijuana,” she says. “There’s a 14-year-old who lives on my street and sells it in the alley.”

Taylor and Johnson know that drugs are a daily reality for the students in their Project ALERT classes. “Some of these kids are from families whose financial support comes from selling drugs,” Taylor says. “They see Mom or Dad get high. We’re dealing with a community where it’s socially acceptable to smoke marijuana. So when kids imitate drug use, they’re getting in place to do them.”

Johnson cites another problem. “They see their black heroes – athletes and rappers– endorsing beer on television,” she says. “It’s tough to counteract that. But by the time we finish with Project ALERT, the kids have a sense of how they can negotiate, how they can get out of risky situations. And in learning how to say no to drugs, they learn how to resist other temptations as well.”

“We know we’re making a difference,” Taylor says. “The kids come back and tell us so.” Richard McCree, one of two counselors serving the school’s 460 students, confirms that. “Teachers have their work cut out for them, he says.” The District of Columbia Public Schools’ 76,000 students rank as the worst readers in the country, and the dropout rate exceeds 35 percent.

“But we know that along with academics, we’ve got to teach these children to be responsible for their own actions. Many of these kids don’t have adults in their lives who will teach them that. They’re at risk for drug usage because they see it all around them. A lot of our students aren’t being taken care of properly,” McCree says. “Our eighth graders have the option of signing up for Project ALERT, and most do. In spite of all the problems they’re facing, they still want to learn. They’re still curious. They want to be productive citizens. Project ALERT teaches them how to be that.”

McCree is aware that the classroom atmosphere can seem unorthodox to a visitor. “I know it looks chaotic,” he chuckles. “You may think the students aren’t paying attention, but they really are, and they’re learning many important things. I wish we had more programs like it, but our district can’t do it. We’ve got to have outside help.”

Concerned Black Men to the Rescue

That help has come from the National Organization of Concerned Black Men, Inc. (CBM), founded in 1975 as a male service organization with a mission of offering positive role models to at-risk children and youth. Today, its 22 chapters also sponsor programs to support them and strengthen their families. Its national headquarters is only a few miles from Ron Brown Middle School, housed in the historic 12th Street YMCA, now known as the Thurgood Marshall Center for Service and Heritage, near downtown Washington, DC. In 1907, President Theodore Roosevelt laid the cornerstone of this building, which was home to America’s first YMCA for African American men and boys.

From the CBM offices on the second floor, Esther Kaggwa, Director of National Programs, oversees several CBM projects, among them the substance abuse prevention program for middle and high school students that includes Project ALERT.

A native of Uganda, Kaggwa has a master’s degree in social work from Washington University in St. Louis. So that CBM could offer drug education to students in some of the city’s neediest middle and high schools, she wrote a grant request that was funded by the federal government’s Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP), a division of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

“Project ALERT was the best fit with the DC district’s needs,” says Kaggwa. “I liked the interactive activities and appreciated that the lessons keep children’s psychological development in mind. Our teachers can adapt the lessons to the specific culture these children come from.”

CBM has sponsored Project ALERT for three years. Currently, the program is in twelve of the district’s 72 middle schools, all in low income areas with high rates of substance abuse. In the beginning, Kaggwa contacted schools to offer the program to them. Now principals call her. Increasingly, the conflict for

administrators is that schools are under greater pressure to emphasize academics, leaving scant time to offer courses like Project ALERT, even when there's no cost to the school.

Still, almost everyone in the schools recognizes the importance of such programs. While substance abuse is a growing issue nationally among young people, poverty presents special risks. "With poverty can come hopelessness," Kaggwa says. "Also, you have a culture of drugs in many of these neighborhoods. Drug use and abuse is considered normal if parents are addicts or a member of the family deals drugs in order to support the rest of the family. We try to work with the parents, to make them our partners in drug-proofing their children, but often we battle a specific mentality. You might expect a mother to say, 'I don't want my child to use drugs.' But I recently heard one mother say, 'My boy is strong enough to use drugs and still be okay.' Because many of the parents of the kids we work with use drugs, they don't necessarily see it as a bad thing."

Still, Kaggwa knows through strong anecdotal evidence that Project ALERT is helping to change perceptions about drug use. "Students come into Project ALERT seeing nothing wrong with smoking marijuana, which is the drug of choice here, though everything else you can think of is also available. They leave the course questioning it, understanding how harmful this and all drugs can be to their health and their lives, and understanding, too, that they can make the choice to be drug free."

Kaggwa currently has five full time and four part time instructors teaching Project ALERT in a program that also teaches HIV/AIDS prevention. She looks for presenters who are passionate about the subject matter and can connect with the kids. Full-timers are on salary. Part-timers receive \$15 to \$20 an hour for teaching and preparation, based on experience. "We have plenty of applicants, but we look for people who can identify with what these kids are going through. Some of our teachers grew up in the inner city, so they are familiar with the issues," she says.

While the overall problems these kids face can seem overwhelming, Kaggwa sees strong reason to press forward with programs like Project ALERT. "Even if they have parents who are addicts, and even if they're homeless or have a parent in prison, we have students who are doing well in school and want to succeed in life," she says. "They're trying so hard. If you just look for it, within the poverty and hopelessness you will find beautiful and talented boys and girls."

The Right Program for Montgomery Co., Maryland: Reaching Both Affluent and Poor Students

To many, Montgomery County, Maryland, epitomizes the American dream: low unemployment, high standard of living, one of the wealthiest counties in America. The average cost of a new home is \$436,000, and average household incomes exceed \$125,000.

What's not readily apparent is that Montgomery County is also home to increasing numbers of minorities and immigrants who often choose to settle here because they want their children to attend schools that are consistently ranked as some of the nation's best – schools where 77 percent of the teachers have a Masters degree or equivalent, and 90 percent of the students graduate.

They are willing to work multiple jobs and live in subsidized housing or to share housing with other families just to be here. The standard of living people enjoy is subsidized by high property taxes and the taxes paid by multinational corporations and government subcontractors who also call Montgomery County home.

These newcomers pouring into the area are the changing face of America. A district that 30 years ago was 94 percent white is now 45 percent white. Within the school system, 12,000 students speaking 161 different languages are currently enrolled in the ESL program.

Project ALERT in the Classroom

When you visit Frieda Cooney's seventh grade health education classroom at Gaithersburg Middle School, you see this cross section. Her classes are racially mixed, culturally mixed, and economically mixed. Some of her students barely speak English.

Whether students come from rich homes or poor, Cooney knows they all feel the same pressure from society and their peers to smoke, drink alcohol, or try drugs. The school district has responded by making Project ALERT part of the seventh grade health education curriculum. The booster lessons are presented in eighth grade. Cooney, a classroom teacher since 1973, does her best to make sure the lessons stick. Her instructional budget allows her to fill her inviting classroom with informational posters and teaching aids, and to create notebooks for each student. She frequently refers back to previous lessons, constantly reinforcing what the students have learned. She also supplements the Project ALERT lessons with materials she has created, such as a vocabulary crossword puzzle, and a hidden vocabulary grid, which she devised to make sure students understand the terms being used in the course.

While she knows what dissimilar backgrounds many of her students come from, if she asks them to reflect on what they have learned from Project ALERT, she gets similar responses. "I learned when someone in your family does drugs, it's not your fault," a girl in the back of the room says. "I thought my big brother did drugs because I got better grades than he did and our parents made a big deal out of it. I learned he would have done drugs no matter what grades I got."

Another student says he liked the videos and the role playing activities best because he saw kids just like him getting tempted by drugs and saw how they handled it. "Then we practiced what we could say if we got in those situations," he says.

"Learning resistance skills helped me so I can say 'no' to someone without them thinking that I think they're stupid," a girl adds.

Cooney and her students recall the day a homeless man visited their classroom and shared his life story, of how he began drinking beer and smoking marijuana in sixth grade and then went on to hard drugs and has been in and out of rehab ever since. "When I listened to him, I knew I never wanted to be like that," a student volunteers.

"You have to make your own decisions as to whether this will happen to you," Cooney reminds them. "Our visitor didn't know at your age what drugs can do to your body. But you do."

The subject turns to smoking and a shy student shares that he brought home what he learned about nicotine's effect on the lungs, how it fills them with tar and makes it difficult to breathe. "My parents both smoke, and after I told them, my dad decided to quit and my mom wants to," he says with a smile.

They discuss alcohol and the consequences of driving drunk. "Sometimes people drink when they're feeling under stress. But you can do other things for stress," a girl says, then adds, "if someone in your family is an alcoholic, there's more of a chance you will be too, so you'd better be careful."

Throughout the discussion, students stay focused and involved. They raise their hands and respond politely when called upon. Cooney has the Project ALERT posters on the front wall of the classroom and frequently refers to them. She also prepares packets of materials for each student to share with parents.

"I love the lesson where the kids go home and give oral reports to their parents," she says. "We go over everything carefully first so they know exactly what they're going to say. The sheet where parents give their reflection of the report is revealing. I always get comments like, 'We didn't know anything about inhalants,' or 'We didn't know secondhand smoke is a problem.'"

Cooney has taught Project ALERT for three years. "I know this program has impact," she says. "The girl who thought she was responsible for her brother's drug use because she got attention from their parents for her good grades didn't mention that she also had an eating disorder. She realized during this course that she could make the decision to control it, and she's been able to do that. The skills students learn in this class can expand into all other areas of their lives. They learn personal values and self worth. They learn to negotiate. They learn how to say 'no.'"

The Montgomery County curriculum requires health education in grades six, seven, and eight and includes drug education all three years. Project ALERT is supplemented. In grade six, students complete a tobacco education program and in grade eight, in addition to the Project ALERT booster lessons, they do another tobacco, alcohol, and drug unit.

Maryland Survey Reports Project ALERT Success

"Every two years, the state of Maryland conducts the Maryland Adolescent Survey, which provides us with statistics regarding drug use," says Russell Henke, Coordinator of Health Education for the Montgomery County Public Schools. "The survey confirmed that tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana were the drugs used the most by our students. In spite of our efforts, those statistics weren't improving. In 1996 I saw a presentation about Project ALERT at a state meeting and was impressed. It addressed these three drugs, it had been evaluated and found to be effective, and we liked the emphasis on personal and social skills."

Subsequently, Project ALERT trainers presented a summer teacher training institute for 20 Montgomery County teachers, and the program was field tested in several middle schools. By the 1999- 2000 school year, Project ALERT was being offered in all 35 middle schools.

“We’re fortunate, because we get financial assistance from Maryland’s tobacco tax and do not have to use local funds to support this program,” Henke says. “Our school system is committed to the program, so we’re confident the program will continue to be taught even if something happens to the state dollars.”

As for the difference the program has made in terms of drug usage by Montgomery County students, the latest Maryland Adolescent Survey shows that they are lowest in the state for tobacco usage in sixth grade, while eighth grade tobacco use has experienced a dramatic reduction. “I know Project ALERT had a lot to do with that,” comments Rita Rumbaugh, Montgomery County’s Coordinator for Safe and Drug-Free Schools, and county coordinator for the Maryland Adolescent Survey.

“We’re working with the American Lung Association to pilot a smoking cessation program at the high school level for addicted students. We’re very clear with students that we have zero tolerance throughout the schools regarding tobacco use,” notes Barbara Pearlman, Tobacco Prevention Specialist for the school district, “and we suspend students who repeatedly disregard this rule”. Now they have the option of trying the cessation program as an alternative to suspension.

“But we have problems with all kinds of drugs here,” she continues. “Everything you can think of is available. This area has a high incidence of HIV as well. We start talking with students about drugs in the lower elementary grades because we know that the use of gateway drugs like tobacco and inhalants can start early.”

Educating Parents

Pearlman says that some students get cigarettes and alcohol at home, often from parents who don’t consider them to be drugs. “We have to convince the adults that such behavior is illegal and unacceptable,” she says.

“Many parents are clueless about kids and their use of drugs,” adds Henke. “They don’t know what to look for. Some of them are in denial, thinking that if they’re good role models, their kids won’t do drugs. They don’t realize the extent of the problem and what they need to do to keep their kids from using drugs.”

Both Henke and Pearlman note that a major problem is that kids are on their own so much. “Many families need a dual income to live here,” Henke says, “and both parents are working long hours, whether they’re in professional or blue collar jobs. We also have a significant number of single parents, and many of them barely see their children. Unsupervised, some kids get into trouble. The drugs are present, they consider them cool, and they have the money, so they buy them.”

“We also know,” Pearlman says, “that Project ALERT is working. We recently had a student who was approached by a classmate selling marijuana. She said, ‘I remembered what I’d learned in class.’ She told him no, and also told the teacher what had happened. The boy was arrested. This is a practical example of a program that helps students feel strong enough to do that, and gives them the tools to do it.”

But the Montgomery County Public Schools have the same problems the District of Columbia Public Schools and others across the country have when it comes to finding time to present courses like Project ALERT. “We have to compete with academics,” Henke says. “Eventually the district may decide that students need more

time for core subjects and we lose health education. I really hope that day never comes. If it does, we will be doing our kids and our communities a great disservice.”

Back in Washington, DC, a thirteen-year-old at Ron Brown Middle School who has completed Project ALERT explains why such a course is so important. “I learned how to get out of situations that are bad,” she says. “Walk away, go sit down, go tell somebody else. If we want to say ‘no’, now we know some ways to do it. We can call it up in our minds. It’ll be right there to help us.”

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