

Hospital and School District Partner to Deliver Project ALERT

by Andrea Warren

The Lake Washington School District in suburban Seattle is one of the country's most affluent--and understandably, for it is home to Microsoft. In this area of plenty, drugs can be plentiful too, and school administrators recognize the need for Project ALERT. But while they may have fewer financial constraints than many districts, their teachers have the same work overload and time crunches created by required state and federal testing.

That's where Evergreen Healthcare comes in. One of the largest public hospitals in the area, it has partnered with the school district to deliver Project ALERT to 400 sixth graders in six Title I schools. The program is taught by four part-time health educators and counselors through the hospital's health education division.

According to Lauren Bolen, Evergreen's Health Education Coordinator, "We're finding that students respond well to experts coming in to work with them. And when we're there, it gives busy teachers a bit of a breather, which they appreciate."

It also fits well with the hospital's outreach mission of promoting wellness. "We are interested in the health of our community's children," Bolen said. "By taking this program into the schools, we are fostering a partnership with teachers, administrators, and the community to keep our young people drug free. We're recognizing that we all must work together on this."

Bob Conroy, a prevention and intervention consultant with the Seattle Public Schools and a chemical dependency counselor, handles contractual arrangements between the hospital and the school district. He began his association with Evergreen when he facilitated a sixth grade tobacco education program for them. "I had taught Project ALERT in a previous job, and when the hospital became interested in expanding its drug education outreach to adolescents, I thought it would be a good fit. I knew the fact that it is evidence based would help us get funding. But in addition, it's an excellent program."

Conroy assisted in securing tobacco settlement funds issued to the state of Washington. In the year 2000 the first Evergreen staff members received Project ALERT training and began delivering the program. Conroy agrees with Bolen that students like someone coming in from the outside to work with them. "Teachers also appreciate the expertise we can bring to this because many of them don't have a lot of background in drug education."

Drug Use in Suburbia

Conroy noted that in the Lake Washington district the first incidence drug use by students occurs on average two years later than in urban Seattle. He said tobacco use is down "because we've done a lot of education around it, but marijuana and alcohol usage is "huge." According to Conroy, while methamphetamine is more a problem in the city, prescription drugs are popular in the suburbs.

“We’ve also had issues around Ritalin, and we’ve learned of younger kids huffing, using everything from gasoline to whipping cream containers,” he said. “The summer after sixth grade is the starting point for many of them. The reality is that kids experiment. We must give them the education they need to keep them safe.”

Funding is always an issue, Conroy said. “We’ve had some cuts and we may be moving more toward the traditional model of teachers delivering Project ALERT. One way or another, we’ll continue to offer it. It’s been really valuable.”

According to Bolen, school personnel report that students not only enjoy the lessons, but “get” the message. “Instead of adults just telling them to not do something, they learn the skills they need to resist drugs. Because the class is interactive, it’s a lot of fun for them,” she said.

“During the last lesson they have a party and make posters on how they’ll stay drug free. They always comment that the program has taught them the truth about drugs. They’ve had the opportunity to practice saying ‘no’ in a variety of ways. Many of them have no interest in using drugs, and through the course they’ve learned how to resist peer pressure.

“They aren’t just mouthing the words they think we want to hear. The great thing is how many of them tell us that they appreciate having this skill and intend to use it.”