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Accentuate the positive

Social norms approach to drug- and alcohol- abuse prevention emphasizes the conduct of the majority. Focusing on those who don't drink or do drugs gets mixed reviews, and results.

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LANCASTER COUNTY, PA -
Psssst. Guess who was caught drinking beer and smoking weed before the school dance? That's the kind of juicy

gossip that gets people talking.

"Kids don't say 'Blah-Blah-Blah didn't do drugs today'," observed 14-year-old Jen Anderton, an eighth-grader at Elizabethtown Area Middle School.

Anderton is a member of the new EAMS Social Norms Club, which is working to encourage fellow students to emulate the majority, based on facts; and, that is, 93 percent of their schoolmates have never used alcohol; 93.5 percent have never smoked a cigarette; and 97 percent have never used marijuana.

The club's reality-based campaign, under the guidance of faculty adviser Terry Bupp-Petersheim, is tied to the "misperception theory and social-norms approach" to drug- and alcohol-abuse prevention strategies, as presented by Dr. H. Wesley Perkins.

"The reality is the vast majority of middle-school students are not engaged in high-risk behaviors," said Perkins, chairman of the department of anthropology and sociology at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, N.Y., during a recent telephone interview. In fact, the reality is that the vast majority of high school and college-age students are not either, he noted.

"But, of course, they think the majority are; and that can encourage some of them to engage in those high-risk behaviors when they wouldn't otherwise."

Choices, he explained, are often based on illusion versus truth.

According to Perkins, misperceptions can fuel problem behavior.

Talk too much about the dangers of binge drinking, for example, and you might just give someone the notion that it is more rampant, and more condoned by peers, than it really is.

"(It) might be more helpful to report data a bit differently, by focusing on the majority and creating a more positive mindset about acceptable social norms ...," he wrote in a report for the U.S. Department of Education's Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse and Violence Prevention.

Perkins is also editor of "The Social Norms Approach to Preventing School and

College Age Substance Abuse: A Handbook for Educators, Counselors and Clinicians" (Jossey-Bass, 2003). His research has focused largely on the college level.

"Theoretically," however, he said, "it should work in high schools and middle schools. Even better, perhaps."

It's a rare adolescent, after all, who is content to be perceived as "different" from his or her peers.

The goal is to close the gap between what students believe about rates of consumption among their peers and the actual rates. According to Perkins, when the gap closes, the incidents of risky behaviors are more likely to be reduced.

"The norms are always healthy norms and that's always something to celebrate," said Perkins, who has traveled to Lancaster County in the past to present his research to local educators.

"We've tried scaring students with health 'terrorism' methods," and those haven't worked, he said.

Carolyn J. Olivett, director of Lancaster County's Elementary and Youth Support Program of The Council on Drug and Alcohol Abuse, said she has followed Perkins' research and believes social-norms marketing can change behavior.

Middle school, she said, is a good place to start. "There's that curiosity factor," she said. "It's a big transition time. These kids, they are very peer-influenced; and the numbers in the middle schools are wonderful for (supporting) the right behavior ...

"One of the things that has to happen for this to work," she said, "is to keep it ongoing."

Olivett, who formerly worked at Elizabethtown College, attended a conference in 1994 in Washington, D.C., where Perkins presented his research. She and Sandy Spayd, director of the college's Health and Counseling Services Center for Student Success, decided that they'd like to incorporate his approach on their campus.

Studies show social norms projects at the college level have markedly cut high-risk drinking cases. Hobart and William Smith, for example, saw a 32 percent reduction over four years; Northern Illinois University saw a 44 percent reduction over nine years.

Locally, however, neither Elizabethtown College nor Franklin & Marshall College saw that kind of success after introducing the misperception theory/social norms marketing campaigns. (See related story.) Officials at those institutions do not completely dismiss the approach; they do caution, however, that it needs to be a component of a comprehensive drug- and alcohol-abuse campaign, not the sole strategy.

For the campaign to work, the school and community environments need to be saturated with the positive messages, according to proponents. The message should be on computer screen-savers, posted on walls, and folded into classroom subjects for discussion, for example.

No place is out-of-bounds for eye-catching posters that show off a school's positive-majority behavior choices, said Keith Floyd.

Not even bathroom stalls.

Floyd, principal at Hans Herr Intermediate School in the Lampeter-Strasburg

School District since November 2002, said he had introduced the social-norming concept to Cedar Crest Middle School, Lebanon, when he was assistant principal there a few years ago.

"What jumped out at me, early on," Floyd said, "was a survey that was done in New Jersey in 2000 or 2001 of sixth- and seventh-grade students in regards to consumption of alcohol.

"They asked how many of them drank monthly or in the past year. Seventy-five percent of the students thought their friends had at least one drink that year; 32 percent thought their friends were drinking monthly.

"In fact, they found that only 6 percent had a drink that year and 73 percent never had a drink of alcohol in their lives. That's pretty dramatic and that spoke volumes to me."

One of the first projects Floyd implemented at Cedar Crest Middle School, he said, was the "Stall Stories" flier. "We placed it in every stall, in every bathroom, and above every urinal in the middle school," he said.

The paper listed the monthly sports schedules, as well as a prominently-placed factoid based on up-to-date statistics about the students at that school. One block on a flier said, for example, "99.5% of all CCMS 6th grade students have never smoked marijuana."

He added humor and appealed to the students' senses of curiosity and competition with his "Goose in Boots" illustrations; those posters encouraged positive behavior based on action and reward.

"I'll be honest," Floyd said, "this was a lot of work. Gathering the data to make sure it's accurate, and then getting it all out there ..."

According to Perkins, the data must be current, and it must reflect the choices and behavior of the specific institution for which the social norms campaign is directed. For now, Elizabethtown Area Middle School is basing its program on statistics gathered by the Elizabethtown Communities That Care Youth Survey Report of October 2002.

Already, some students have challenged the information on the posters, Bupp-Petersheim said, expressing a desire for more up-to-date numbers.

That is a project that will need to be tackled by the school, according to Perkins' research, for the social norms marketing campaign to proceed there with success.

Members of the Social Norms Club — Anderton and Mandi Shearer, Abby Fuhrman, Jessica Crater, Andrea Crater and Jessica Durante — said they are excited to be promoting a positive message to their classmates.

But they're not naive.

"I think it's a good start for making kids understand," said Anderton, the EAMS eighth-grader. "But I think it's going to take a lot more work than just putting posters around the school."

"I think social norms marketing will have a lot of effect," though, said seventh-grader Jessica Crater, 12, "because most of the usage is peers trying to get peers to do it. So, if it's peers trying to get them NOT to do it, that will have a bigger effect."

Psssst ... Did you hear the good news?