



Cranford High School students to take part in social norms survey

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By **Cranford Chronicle**

The following is from Rui Dionisio, principal of Cranford High School

Research has consistently shown peer relationships to be one of the strongest influences on the behavior of others. This is especially true among our youth. What we know for sure is that peers have the ability to influence each other either positively or negatively. For years schools have been educating youth about the consequences of alcohol, tobacco and drug use and exercising abstinence. Harnessing the power of positive peer influence has proven to be a significant factor in shifting behavior as evidenced in our classroom on a daily basis.

Peer pressure can be positive. It can encourage us to fundraise for a specific cause, clean up an area in our community, or stick to an exercise program as a new year's resolution. How else might peer pressure act as a positive force?

We often think of peer influence in negative terms. Research in the past 20 years tells us to look at peer influence in a different way. Very often, people base their behavior on what they believe others are doing. This fact is not only true for adults, but for teens as well. In essence, teens will themselves behave in a manner that they believe their peers are behaving. For example, teens may be more likely to drink alcohol because they believe everyone is doing it. But what if their perception of what their peers are doing is wrong?

The social norms approach is different from other prevention programs because it highlights the positive decisions that students are already making. The social norm theory assumes that teen behavior is influenced by how other members of a social group behave and that our beliefs about what others are actually doing is usually incorrect. In the next several weeks, we will be asking our students at Cranford High School to participate in a social norms survey. The primary purpose of this comprehensive and confidential survey, based on the social norms approach, is to learn about youth knowledge of, attitudes toward, and behaviors regarding alcohol, tobacco and other drug use. The survey was originated by Wesley Perkins, Ph.D., a founder of the social norms approach used throughout the world. Social Norms projects are supported by the New Jersey Department of Education and aid school districts in fulfilling their obligation for Comprehensive Alcohol, Tobacco and other Drug Abuse Programs (N.J.A.C. 6A:16-3). The information obtained from the survey will assist our school in developing and sustaining a social norms program, with the goal of decreasing alcohol, tobacco and other drug use.

Parents will have an opportunity to review details regarding the project and grant permission for their child to participate in the social norms survey. All student responses will remain anonymous and confidential. Over the next several months, we will review and analyze survey data to identify positive statistics for our school messages and develop a media campaign to dispel misperceptions in coordination with all members of our community.

We know that parents have an enormous effect on the decisions their child makes and serve as positive role models and reliable sources of information. We look forward to working together with parents and the entire community to support our students. A social norms approach will allow us to better understand peer and personal attitudes and

behaviors, shifting behavior away from any misperceptions. Our goal is to connect the gap between perception and reality and harness the power of positive peer influence.

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