

Surveys refute kids' beliefs

HWS program educates students on peer use of drugs, alcohol

By KEVIN DEVALK
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Within the next year, school officials believe 100 percent of students in the higher grades of Seneca County's public schools will learn more about how many of their peers don't drink or do drugs.

Seven months ago, educators met with Hobart and William Smith College professors Wesley Perkins and David Craig to learn more about the award-winning alcohol education project that they developed. Now each of the school districts is on a separate path to implement its own version.

The approach, which Perkins and Craig developed at the local colleges in the 1980s, is based on the idea that students think their peers drink and abuse drugs more than they actually do. These false perceptions create a "reign of error" that leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Their solution is to survey students on their perceptions about how much their peers drink and abuse drugs, survey their own personal behavior and announce the findings. On the Hobart and William Smith campus, the education campaign involves disseminating "factoids" — what the program defines as small pieces of information — through computer messages and ads in the student newspaper.

A sample "factoid" might read: "Among athletes, 87 percent never miss or perform poorly in an athletic contest due to drinking." It would include the source of information, which in this case was a 1995 survey of Hobart and William Smith students.

During the meeting with school administrators, Perkins and Craig heralded the results of the "factoids" at the local colleges and other institutions. The follow-up surveys they discussed showed decreases in reported binge drinking and other areas.

While the approach has been used at other colleges and universities, the Seneca County schools, along with Geneva and Ithaca city schools, are the first to attempt

it on a high school and middle school level.

Shortly after the meeting last fall, middle and high school students in Waterloo, Romulus, and South Seneca completed a survey on their behavior in these areas, off the colleges' Web site. Seneca Falls, which planned to poll a selection of middle and high school students last fall, has been delayed by technological problems, Superintendent Gerald Macaluso said.

So far, Romulus is the only district out of the starting gate. In Romulus, "factoids" about students are up on screen savers on every computer and on posters hanging up around the school. In a different twist, the screen savers also include information about community events and good news about student achievements.

Because the whole district is one building, the elementary school students are being exposed to the "factoids" as well.

Students in the school's computer club recently demonstrated the project during the Retrotech Computer Fair last month at Finger Lakes Community College. Using Power Point software, they made a slide presentation, said Romulus computer teacher Ann Heizman, who implemented the screen savers.

Some of the 22 students in the club also used the "factoids" to make posters, which were put up all over school. The club's members are for the most part younger than the middle and high school students who took the survey — most are in grades three to six, and there's even one first-grader, Heizman said.

In Romulus, Heizman said the results confirmed that misconceptions are out there. She gave as one example a question that asked the middle school students about drinking at the high school level.

"They assume, basically, all seniors and juniors are out drinking and smoking, and basically two-thirds of them aren't."

In Romulus, the results on student alcohol and drug abuse weren't too surprising — they were similar to the results of a county-wide survey taken last year, said David Hubman, Romulus guidance counselor.

"This survey was really more on perception than actual use," he said.

At some point, the students will take the survey again, he said.

In South Seneca, the district has the survey results, and the program will be implemented this fall, said Superintendent Douglas Chappell. South Seneca also will be spreading the results via computer screen savers and posters. The posters will be de-

signed to capture students with phrasing such as "3/4 don't," requiring students to read more for explanation, Chappell said.

All middle school students were to begin taking the survey on May 3. Getting all the middle school students to do this would take about five to eight days, he said. Macaluso said he's hesitant to poll the high school students until results from the middle school students' surveys are in, so the high school students might take it sometime this month or at the beginning of the next school year.

"The question is, now that we have this research, how do we turn it into a positive?" Macaluso said, of what happens after the surveys are taken.

Waterloo schools also have delayed implementing the program because of technological problems. Middle School Principal Kenneth Foster was unable to say how long it will take until the program can be implemented.

Craig said Ithaca city schools administered the survey by paper, not the Internet. There was a workshop for representatives of Geneva city schools, but so far, Craig said they haven't followed through.

Craig said there's a state-wide alcohol education project in Montana that is currently looking for schools in that state to be possible test sites.

In Western New York, Craig said he made a presentation before the Erie County Public Health Department, which is looking for Erie County schools to be used as a test site.

Research shows that students, particularly in their middle school years, think students their age and older are drinking and doing drugs much more than they actually are, Craig said.

Referring to the results from Romulus, he said, "The majority of eighth-graders think their peers smoke at least once a week, and it goes on up and up through the ages."

Based on what students reported about their own behavior, however, Craig said most Romulus students who were interviewed don't smoke.

Hubman said the Romulus students seemed to be taking the questions they were being asked on the Internet seriously.

"The vast majority of kids do make good decisions," Chappell said.

Chappell said South Seneca students compete every year in the Eckerd Drugs drug quiz, and the district is looking into forming a local chapter of Students Against Destructive Decisions.