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Drug-prevention plan trains sixth-graders in basic social skills

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When sixth-grade students at Valparaiso middle schools return after the winter break, they'll be introduced to a new drug-prevention program.

The difference from this program versus other ones, though, is that it works, officials say.

Valparaiso Mayor Jon Costas announced last week that as part of an overall effort to fight drug usage, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin middle schools would start teaching their students the Life Skills Training program, hailed by Porter-Starke Services for its effectiveness.

Rocco Schiralli, executive director for Porter-Starke, pointed to the program's statistics, which include an 87 percent drop in cigarette use, a 75 percent drop in marijuana use and a 60 percent drop in alcohol use.

Part of the reason for its success, Elliott Miller, program director at Porter-Starke, said, is that it doesn't just focus on drugs. The program focuses on teaching assertiveness, decision-making, communicating and other social skills.

"The logic behind that is (the students) then feel better about themselves," Miller said, and better able to stand up to peer pressure.

The program will get started on Jan. 16 when it's introduced to all Valparaiso sixth-graders. The program normally takes 15 class periods over a year, although in the interest of not waiting, the schools will do all 15 in one semester. If the schools continue the program, Miller said, those same students will then receive 10 more classes as seventh graders and five more as eighth graders.

Current seventh- and eighth-graders won't go through the program, he said, because the later classes build on the first ones.

Robert Rarick, associate superintendent for curriculum and instruction and who has been heading up the program for Valparaiso schools, could not be reached for comment.

Although teachers can be trained in the program, Miller said Porter-Starke employees would be the ones to teach it because several study groups of Porter County students said they prefer to hear the information from people trained in drug usage -- they're more creditable.

Valparaiso is also planning on expanding the program to younger students through groups such as the Boys & Girls Club, the Valparaiso Family YMCA and the Valparaiso Parks Department. However, the structure of that program is still being worked out, so a start date has not been set yet, Miller said, although officials want to have everything going by next fall.

Drug-prevention programs are familiar at most schools, but usually in the incarnation of D.A.R.E. or similar programs. However, studies on those programs have only recently started, and the results have not been good. About 30 published studies support Life Skills to some degree, though.

Valparaiso schools have been teaching Gang Resistance Education And Training, G.R.E.A.T., which has been shown to work, Fire Chief David Nondorf said, but it doesn't focus on drug usage.

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The mayor said the program was a good fit because it teaches kids responsibility and communication skills, both of which they'll need for jobs. He added that while these messages should be taught at home, that's not true for everyone.

"We all understand ... that there are some children that aren't getting this," he said.

At the end of the day, though, whether the program lasts will be subject to how it performs. The schools will survey students before and after to see if their attitudes toward drugs -- especially how they perceive the risk and consequence of drugs -- has changed at all, Miller said. If it hasn't, Schiralli said, officials can look at how to tweak the program -- or perhaps give it up.

Perhaps the biggest change in going to Life Skills versus other programs is the attitude of the people running it, Schiralli said. Instead of continuing with the program if it isn't working, officials will change it or stop throwing money at something that doesn't work.

"It's that letting go," Schiralli said. "The ability to change."

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