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## Life skills training aims to boost self-image, bust substance abuse

Economic development tax tapped for initiative in Valparaiso

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By Brian Williams - brian.williams@nwi.com, (219) 548-4348 | Posted: Tuesday, February 2, 2010 12:05 am | (3) Comments




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[Buy this photo](#) Jon L. Hendricks | The Times Sixth-grade students at Thomas Jefferson Middle School sit in a circle Monday as Porter-Starke therapist Natalie Muskin-Press, top center, introduces them to the Life Skills Program. The program is part of a city-wide initiative to curb chemical dependency at an earlier age.

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VALPARAISO | Helping early teens stay away from dangerous substances and make healthy life choices is the focus of a new program kicked off Monday at Thomas Jefferson Middle School.

Natalie Muskin-Press, a chemical dependency and addiction therapist with Porter-Starke Services, had sixth-grade students trace their hands, then jot down positive words to describe themselves along each finger.

In the palm, students then listed two or three things about themselves they'd like to improve.

Discussion during the activity was about self-image. We act like the person we think we are, Muskin-Press said, but sometimes it's easier to listen to the negatives than to the positives.

The 12-week life choices program at the Valparaiso schools -- administered by Porter-Starke and funded through an initial grant from the city -- will also start up at St. Paul Catholic School, Immanuel Lutheran School and Benjamin Franklin Middle School this week and next.

While the primary focus is early prevention of substance abuse, the program also is meant to help students with situations such as depression and anxiety, said Elliott Miller, Porter-Starke program director.

The program uses a national curriculum -- studies of which have shown up to an 87 percent reduction in substance abuse among targeted students, Miller said.

The city will fund the program through the end of the school year with \$13,500 from its share of the county economic development income tax. Valparaiso will also tap CEDIT funds, hoping to expand the program to seventh grade next year, while long-term funding sources are sought, Miller said.

During Monday's discussion, one student said he wanted to improve his basketball, while another wanted to work on her relationship with a sister. Another girl said she wanted to be nicer to her family.

Students started a chart in their workbook to track their progress. Evaluations at the end of the program will assess students' growth, acquisition of new skills and level of substance abuse.

By letting parents know about the new program, the hope is to keep the discussion going at home, Muskin-Press said.

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