

## As opioid epidemic rages, fight comes to the classroom

By Jessica Iannetta [jiannetta@cecilwhig.com](mailto:jiannetta@cecilwhig.com) 15 hrs ago



Lauren Dixon, a CCPS LifeSkills teacher, talks with seventh-grade students at Rising Sun Middle School during a session in 2015. The program will include specific information on opioids for the first time this year.

CECIL WHIG FILE PHOTO

**CECIL COUNTY** — With Cecil County averaging more than an overdose a day, the fight against the opioid epidemic is now entering new territory: the classroom.

While drug education has long been a staple of school curriculum, this school year both Cecil College and Cecil County Public Schools will introduce new lessons and new resources specifically aimed at addressing the opioid epidemic. Both entities have also expanded the availability of naloxone — an opioid overdose reversal drug better known by its brand name, Narcan — at their facilities.

These new initiatives in many cases build on longstanding existing partnerships that both entities have with local organizations, including the Cecil County Sheriff's Office, the Cecil County Health Department, Voices of Hope for Cecil County and the Cecil County Drug Free Communities Coalition. This collaboration among county organizations is essential as CCPS and Cecil College look to reach students in a variety of ways in many different settings, CCPS Superintendent D'Ette Devine said.

"There isn't one single strategy that you can use," she said. "You have to come at students over a period of years through a multitude of venues to make the case."

These local efforts mirror efforts on the state level to teach students across Maryland about the dangers of opioids and other powerful drugs. The Start Talking Maryland Act, which went into effect in July, requires public schools to incorporate information about the dangers of heroin and other opioids into their curriculum as well as have Narcan — and staff trained to use it — in schools. Public colleges and universities are also required to have a heroin and opioid prevention plan that includes education for incoming full-time students and Narcan training for public safety officers.

That law takes effect several months after Gov. Larry Hogan declared a state of emergency and announced \$10 million in new funding to fight the epidemic, which officials believe led to some 2,000 deaths statewide last year.

At the local level, the statistics are equally grim. As of Sept. 1, 299 people had overdosed in Cecil County, 41 of them fatally, an average of more than one heroin-related overdose a day. Ten of those fatal overdoses occurred in August alone, the deadliest month so far this year, according to CCSO statistics.

To turn those number around, information is key, said Sgt. Todd Creek, who supervises CCSO's school resource officers (SROs) unit. Cigarettes, he noted, have never been outlawed and yet, thanks in a large part to information campaigns about the dangers of smoking, it's now much less socially acceptable to smoke than it was decades ago.

"Like the sheriff always says, you're not going to arrest your way out of this heroin problem," Creek said. "It's information and prevention, that's what we have to do."

That prevention and information campaign will now start with the county's youngest students thanks to changes that were made to the school system's drug prevention curriculum over the summer, said Sean Cannon, CCPS director of student services.

CCPS is now entering its third year of using the Botvin LifeSkills Training program in grades three through 10. The program, which is administered by three dedicated teachers who travel to all county schools, focuses on teaching students the skills needed to resist drugs and alcohol; teaching social skills and life lessons alongside factual information about these substances.

Opioids aren't specifically part of the original LifeSkills curriculum, but in recent years it was becoming clear that it needed to be, Cannon said.

"Before the state passed the law, our LifeSkills teachers were saying that kids in the elementary school level were asking questions about this," he said. "This was something that when it came up in class they would address it but it's not something that's part of the program."

After working with the health department over the summer, students will now learn about opioids, heroins and prescription drugs in an age-appropriate way as part of LifeSkills. For third graders, this might involve a discussion about prescription pills and how to use them safely while older students will talk about heroin and fentanyl, Cannon said.

The county's SROs — which include four CCSO members and one Elkton Police Department officer — will also be giving a presentation to all freshman health classes that addresses heroin, opioids and prescription drugs.

The presentation given by the CCSO SROs will start with a short video from [drugfreeworld.org](http://drugfreeworld.org) that shows recovering addicts telling their story. The SROs will then discuss how heroin affects the body, what it is exactly, where it comes from and share some statistics about heroin in the county, said Creek, the CCSO SRO coordinator.

Officers will also touch on the opioid epidemic while administering the D.A.R.E. program to county sixth graders, Creek said, noting that the officers typically let the class dictate how in depth that discussion becomes.

Beyond the classroom, CCPS is also holding drug prevention community nights at all five high schools. The events will consist of a dinner at 5:30 p.m. followed by a presentation at 6 p.m. The presentation will include a brief description of the LifeSkills program, a presentation from the county health department on current trends, two members from Voices of Hope talking about their experiences with drug use and recovery, and a parent sharing his story about having a child become addicted, Cannon said.

The events will take place at Rising Sun on Sept. 26, Bohemia Manor on Oct. 10, North East on Nov. 7, Elkton on Nov. 9 and Perryville on Dec. 5. For those who can't make the events or are just looking for more information, CCPS has also compiled a list of resources available on the main page of its website, [ccps.org](http://ccps.org).

CCPS is also working with the health department and other organizations on some initiatives that are "youth-lead, adult-guided," said Mike Massuli, the health department's deputy director for addiction services.

These initiatives include the annual Youth Leadership Summit, now in its third year, which brings together students from all five high schools for a two-day summit at NorthBay Adventure Camp where they develop plans to address drug and alcohol issues at their schools. This year, the summit will specifically focus on making PSA videos.

Two high school students, who are also members of the Drug Free Communities Coalition, also underwent over-the-counter medication safety training through the Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America (CADCA) in July. The training covers identifying OTC medications, how to read labels and the dangers of mixing or sharing these drugs, among other items. The plan is for them to both teach their fellow students and train other students, Massuli

said.

"It's kind of a novel idea. It's not just us adults talking about this, it's their peers," he said.

The health department is also expanding its partnership with Cecil College this year and once a week a peer recovery specialist from the department will be on campus to talk to students and provide resources. These peer recovery specialists are in recovery themselves and are also specially trained to help others find recovery, Massuli said.

Also new this year, the college has created an opioid awareness card that lists facts about opioids and available resources and was handed out to all new students during orientation in August as well as at other welcome events, said Cathy Skelley, director of college life.

The college is also hoping to establish a Narcotics Anonymous group on campus with both Skelley and Massuli noting that more students are in recovery than many people realize.

Much of the college's increased push to address the opioid epidemic started last spring after it partnered with the health department for a screening of "The Anonymous People," a documentary about the many Americans living in recovery. The screening was followed by a roundtable discussion, with the event drawing about 75 people, Skelley said.

"I think people are finally realizing that this is something that touches every family and people want to know what's happening," she said.

Both the college and CCPS have also worked with the health department to expand the number of staff members who are trained to administer Narcan. Secondary nurses were trained two years ago and starting this year, all elementary school nurses will have the drug on hand as well, Cannon said.

At Cecil College, the full-time public safety officers have all carried the drug for about three years, but in June, the entire department along with members of the college life office were also trained, said John Capozzoli, the college's chief of public safety. The health department also plans to return to campus twice more this fall to hold training sessions for any interested students or faculty members.

Neither CCPS staff nor Cecil College officers have had to administer Narcan so far, according to Cannon and Capozzoli.

But even as both the college and the public schools work to expand their drug prevention initiatives, Superintendent Devine said the most important prevention step may be something both organizations have been doing all along: helping students earn degrees.

"Prevention is the best strategy and the way that's achieved is through education," she said. "And not just drug education, which is of course exceptionally important, but also through helping students get a quality education that gives them hope for their future and that they can go out and be successful members of the community. And that prevents this kind of thing."