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## Northern Berkshire schools, DA's office team up to educate kids on drug prevention



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**Berkshire District Attorney David Capeless speaks on Monday about the LifeSkills youth substance abuse prevention curriculum, which his office is helping to implement in Northern Berkshire County schools.**

ADAM SHANKS - THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

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**NORTH ADAMS** — A 12th-grade student in Northern Berkshire County is twice as likely to binge drink than the average United State teenager.

Facing similar data across a variety of age groups and substances, institutions across the region are teaming up to focus on prevention at an early age.

Each school district in Northern Berkshire County has begun to implement the Botvin LifeSkills prevention curriculum, which sheds the old "just say no" model in favor of an approach that builds students' decision-making abilities.

"It is a program that really does work. It's far from being 'just say no,'" said Berkshire District Attorney David Capeless. "It does not simply explain to students about the kinds of choices they should be making or should not be making."

The program is implemented by the Berkshire District Attorney's Office, but superintendents of the Northern Berkshire school districts have been meeting since 2015. It covers more than 500 students in the towns of Adams, Florida, Cheshire, Clarksburg, North Adams and Williamstown, mostly between the sixth and ninth grades.

"The pattern that we usually see is that by eighth grade, youth are already beginning to experiment with substances. So it's really important that we think about prevention efforts that target youth before eighth grade," said Wendy Penner, the coalition's director of prevention and wellness.

Examples of LifeSkills lessons include "Coping with Anxiety," "Assertiveness," and "Resolving Conflicts."

Training in the curriculum began in November and 17 educators, ranging from physical education teachers to nurses, have signed on.

Community leaders, including Berkshire District Attorney David Capeless and school representatives, gathered at the Northern Berkshire Community Coalition offices on Monday to discuss the newly released substance abuse data and prevention plan.

The data, gathered in a student survey thanks to funding from the Department of Public Health, indicates that 10th and 12th grade students in Northern Berkshire County perceive parents as having a lower perception of risk than the national average when it comes to substance use.

The data was taken from students in the eighth grade, 10th grade, and 12th grade.

Between 2002 and 2017, the area saw noteworthy declines in alcohol use in all three grades, but it remains above the national average. During that same span, cigarette use has dropped across the board and rates have approached national averages.

With marijuana, rates have remained steady over the past 15 years, with a notable uptick in the past two years among 12th-graders and eighth-graders. Marijuana can be a challenge due to the low perception of risk among students, according to Penner.

"Typically what we see is that alcohol is the most commonly used substance by our youth, but what we're starting to see is that marijuana is catching up to that in prevalence," Penner said.

A key part of the youth prevention effort actually targets adults.

Citing data that indicates teenagers can base their substance choices on those of their parents, the coalition is issuing a parent engagement survey and plans to hold focus groups in June.

Local doctors are also on board with the prevention effort.

Northern Berkshire Pediatrics, the main healthcare provider for young people in North County, has begun a partnership with the community coalition and is beginning to provide children and parents with information regarding substance abuse at the age of 9.

"We are really trying to put out there that [marijuana] is not a benign substance for the developing brain," said Dr. Jennifer S. DeGrenier of Northern Berkshire Pediatrics.

On Thursday, the coalition is sponsoring a discussion on the impact marijuana has on kids at the North Adams Holiday Inn. The event starts at 6:00 p.m. and is hosted by Rick Cresta, a clinical social worker.

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