

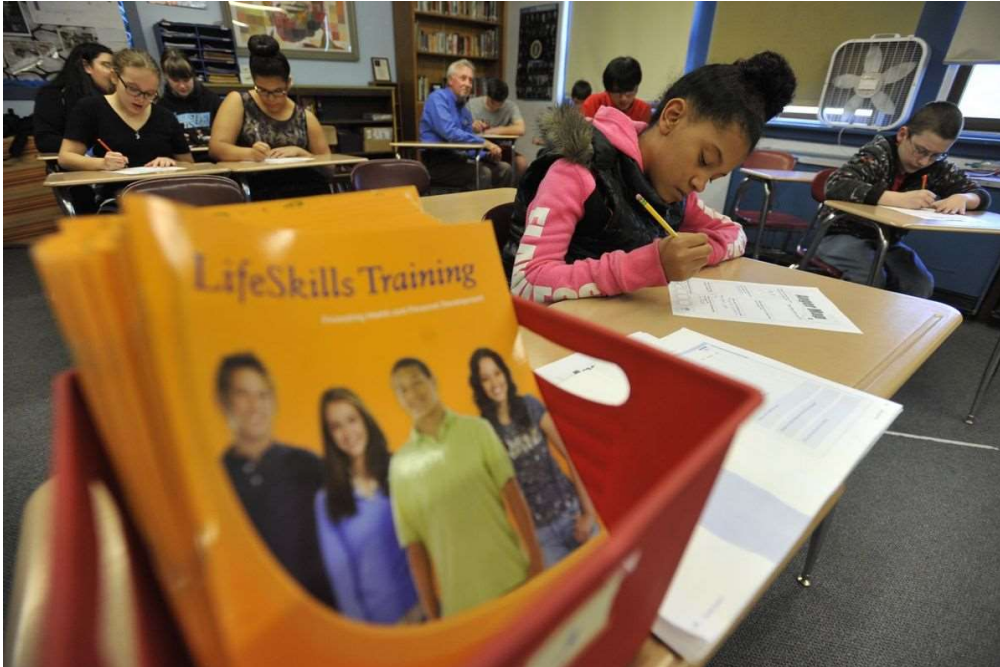
Get your local daily news, special offers & more delivered right to your inbox!
SIGN UP NOW >

http://www.tribdem.com/news/course-teaches-th-graders-the-right-skills-to-say-no/article_5fbe2866-3535-11e7-87bd-eb17f137cf27.html

FEATURED

Course teaches 8th-graders the right skills to say 'no'

By David Hurst
dhurst@tribdem.com 5 hrs ago



By Todd Berkey
tberkey@tribdem.com

Johnstown Middle School 8th grader Jaden Gordon works on her drawing of her 'angry face' during a Botvin LifeSkills lesson on Tuesday, May 9, 2017.



When Greater Johnstown middle school social studies teacher Christian Wrabley told his eighth-grade students they'd be taking an anti-drug course earlier this year, the response was a collective groan, he said.

"A lot of them said, 'We already know drugs are bad,' " he said.

"You could tell they were disinterested."

Wrabley said he took it as a personal challenge – and members of the Cambria County Drug Coalition who joined him in his homeroom Tuesday said he was working with the right program to open their minds.

During one 45-minute Botvin LifeSkills course, Wrabley used personal stories, impactful and illustrative video clips – and even greeting cards – to deliver a lesson about making smart decisions to his class of eighth-graders.

And he never mentioned the word "drugs."

"At this point in their lives, eighth-graders think they have everything figured out," Wrabley said. "But there are teachable moments every day."

Research shows the middle school years are more than just the "difficult" ones. Without the right support, teens can quickly end up on a path toward a life of bad decisions – whether it's drug and alcohol abuse, violent tendencies or other self-destructive patterns, the program's organizers say.

Botvin's emphasis on developing the right "life skills" – good self-esteem, self-confidence and problem-solving prowess – has shown itself to be a difference-maker, United Way of the Laurel Highlands' CEO William McKinney said.

On Tuesday afternoon, Wrabley focused his lessons on anger – one of several potential challenges to "self-management" that can otherwise lead to those destructive patterns.

He asked students to indicate if they've felt angry over the past 24 hours, and then pointed out to each of them that many classmates also struggle with the emotion, after more than half of the class raised their hands.

"See you're not alone," Wrabley said after one student, Noelle Smith, said she often used "mean words" to vent.

Another student said she felt "like a ticking time bomb" when her frustration begins to build up.

He encouraged students to share their thoughts about anger – and what makes them angry – at one point during class, and stressed the importance of "opening up" instead of bottling up stress.

Wrabley also reminded the class to think of how each other might be feeling in similar situations.

After student Shantia Jordan-Bradley noted that she didn't get offended when other students "tease" her, Wrabley noted that other classmates might not react the same way.

He told a story commonly recalled by one of his relatives who was humiliated by fellow classmates while walking down the street 35 years ago.

"Sometimes things you think are a joke can stick with someone 35 years," Wrabley said.

McKinney is hopeful the skills taught in Botvin courses across Cambria and Somerset counties will also stick with a generation of young people in the coming years.

Over the last six years, the research-based program has been implemented in classrooms across the region.

Lessons that reached 160 students in 2011 are now being taught to 7,500 in all 11 of Somerset County's middle schools and 13 Cambria County ones. Blacklick Valley, Cambria Heights, Central Cambria, Conemaugh Valley, Ferndale Area, Forest Hills, Glendale Area, Greater Johnstown, Holy Name, Penn Cambria, Portage Area, Richland and Westmont Hilltop offer the course to at least one grade level and many offer it to several.

"We know this program works. We've seen the results," he said, pointing to Pennsylvania Youth Survey data tracked in the years since that showed improved numbers about the awareness and the dangers of substances like marijuana, alcohol and pills.

As one example, a survey of 936 eighth-graders showed 53 percent fewer Cambria County students reported they "binged" on alcohol in 2015 compared to 2011.

In Somerset County, the willingness to try alcohol before age 21 dropped nearly 30 percent over the same span, while inhalant use dropped 86 percent.

McKinney and Cambria County Drug Coalition Executive Director Ronna Yablonski said the region will see the real benefits of Botvin's results in the years and decades to come as a wave of young adults become adults who make better decisions than past generations.

She said she wants to see a day when area students begin taking the courses from third grade through eighth so that they have a solid foundation – and a belief in themselves – to make brave decisions even when life's pressures to make bad choices become great.

Wrabley said he's found himself adapting Botvin's lessons to reach his Greater Johnstown classrooms – today's urban youth – but said he believes in the program.

"Botvin (LifeSkills) reminds me why I'm here," he said. "It reminds me that before I'm teaching civics, I'm teaching eighth-graders ... and that there's a whole foundation to lay before they trust you and feel comfortable."

The 11-week course might disrupt curriculum "but it's in a positive way," he told McKinney after his class ended.

Pointing to the problems and pressures students face each day, Wrabley said he can only hope it makes a difference.

But McKinney pointed to one student's response to an assignment Wrabley gave the class earlier that day as a sign of hope.

Wrabley handed the class thank-you cards and envelopes, asking each student to write a letter of gratitude to someone who deserved it.

One student handed the card to Wrabley, thanking him for sticking by him, even though their relationship had been tumultuous much of the year.

Wrabley said he called the boy's mother about his behavior on at least one occasion.

And the student had gotten in trouble outside school recently as well.

"He said he got mad at me ... but realized I'm staying after school and doing these kinds of things because I care," Wrabley said.

"To hear him recognize that, it's rewarding."

McKinney said the Botvin class provided the student a platform to listen and "open up" that he might not have received.

"We can see something positive is happening," he said.

McKinney said he wants to see stories like that become common.

"Things are moving a lot faster for middle school students today than they were when we were in school," he said. "That's why it's so important we have this program sustained for a long period of time. We're looking five years, 10 years, 20 years out ... to make sure we're able to see the long-term benefits."

David Hurst is a reporter for The Tribune-Democrat. He can be reached at (814) 532-5053. Follow him on Twitter @TDDavidHurst and Instagram @TDDavidHurst.

We have recently upgraded our commenting system. If you wish to comment please login using your social ID or create a new account.

0 comments

Sign in

4 people listening

+ Follow

Share

Post comment as...

Newest | Oldest

This Week's Circulars

