

Altoona Mirror

Student survey: Alcohol use down

Youth report experimenting with prescription drugs in home

CRESSON — Survey results of 4,100 Cambria County students indicate students aren't drinking alcohol as much as they were in 2013, but on the other hand, they indicate parent disapproval of alcohol and drug use erodes from sixth grade to 12th grade.

"This is what kids are telling us. The trend is they aren't drinking as much, but for seniors in high school all bets are off," Cambria County President Commissioner Tom Chernisky said Tuesday during a presentation at the Cresson American Legion.

Chernisky chairs the Cambria County Prevention Coalition, which has been analyzing results of the 2015 Pennsylvania Youth Survey, or PAYS.

The analysis presented Tuesday suggests parents should safely dispose of prescription pills because they are not perceived as risky by some students. A majority of students who said they experimented with prescription pills said they found them at home.

Every two years the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency conducts a survey of students in sixth, eighth, 10th and 12th grades statewide to learn about their behavior, attitudes and knowledge concerning alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. The 2015 Pennsylvania Youth Survey, or PAYS, was taken by about 4,100 students from all 14 school districts in Cambria County.

Encouraged by a decline in alcohol and tobacco use, coalition members credited an evidence-based prevention program implemented in Cambria schools.

Sean Simler, research and data analyst for the United Way Laurel Highlands, said the Botvin life skills program has been implemented in all middle school curriculum across Cambria and Somerset counties.

However, Bethany Winters, coalition coordinator, said the coalition chose a couple points of emphasis from the survey — responses on depression symptoms and parental disapproval — that will guide future educational programming and prevention efforts.

“Depression reports are going up every year,” Winters said.

Students may be using alcohol and drugs to self medicate for depression. Aiming more programs like the Botvin life skills program at underlying causes of depression could prevent drug and alcohol use, she said.

“Parental attitudes” is another focal point for Winters.

Winters said she conducts follow-up visits at schools and said students are honest on the survey.

“When students become seniors fewer of them say their parents disapprove of alcohol use or will punish them for it,” she said.

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