

The Herald News

Fall River middle schools' see new health curricula incorporating opioid prevention

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FALL RIVER — Students in grades 6 through 8 will see a standard health curriculum across all schools, beginning this fall. That curriculum will include substance abuse prevention education.

The School Committee last week voted to approve the change, which had been proposed by school officials.

In the past school year, only two schools serving middle school grades, Kuss and Morton, had health curricula that were taught. John J. Doran Community School, Henry Lord Community School, Talbot Innovation Middle School and Resiliency Middle School did not.

Now all schools will have health taught during physical education periods at least once a week, during the second and third terms of the school year, according to the curriculum.

The district's push to bring health back into middle schools dovetails with the state's action plan to combat the ongoing opioid abuse epidemic.

The health curriculum the School Committee adopted incorporates a substance abuse prevention program called "Botvin LifeSkills." It's based on teaching students about self-esteem, decision-making skills, stress, peer pressure and assertiveness.

As students get older, the subjects in that curriculum grow gradually more intense, taking on issues like coping with anxiety, drug abuse and violence, media influences and more.

The curriculum will also incorporate other resources, including the Herren Project Purple and videos showing the harms of substance abuse. Morton Middle School this school year will pilot a substance abuse screening program called Screening Brief Intervention Referral to Treatment, or SBIRT.

Prior to the School Committee's vote to adopt, at least board members had questions over whether the changes to the health curriculum went far enough.

Committee member Edward Costar based his concerns on a state statute that requires school districts to develop a full kindergarten through grade 12 substance abuse prevention curriculum.

Chief Academic Officer Fran Roy in response said the district hadn't yet developed a curriculum that was appropriate for students in kindergarten through grade 5.

Superintendent Matthew Malone added, "What we're asking for tonight (is for) middle and high school so we can begin implementation."

School officials would be back with more curricula "that makes sense developmentally," Malone said.

Committee Vice Chairman Mark Costa said the school district "shouldn't have to go at this alone," adding, "The issue is prominent enough that some of the best resources are in our backyard, like SSTAR (Stanley Street Treatment & Resources)."

"I think we're on the right path," Costa said.