

Just say 'Know': Drug education programs changing with the times to help young generation avoid pain of addiction

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It's been 30 years since first lady Nancy Reagan uttered three words that became a national slogan in drug prevention.

But while "Just Say No" was hailed as a marketing masterpiece, the simplistic anti-drug campaign itself often fell far short of its goal, local prevention officials say.

Textbook-driven lectures and fear tactics often didn't resonate with a generation of American youths now in their late 20s through 40s, studies and side effects have shown.



"We saw how that didn't work," said Ingrid Kloss, director of development for The Learning Lamp, which delivers several prevention programs to area youth.

"It's not one-size fits all. You can't just sit in front of them and recite information about the dangers and horrors of drug use," added Megan Bursky, a prevention specialist with the anti-drug nonprofit Remembering Adam.

"You have to be innovative," Bursky said. "If it's a core group of kids you're talking to, you have to tailor it to them ... use personal examples from their lives and get them involved."

Even at the elementary school level, local children know drugs are bad.

"But getting them to understand why they shouldn't do it – and that their actions have consequences – is what we're trying to get through to them now," Bursky said.

In recent years – and as the drug epidemic has become all too real in the region – groups such as Remembering Adam have begun implementing programs that have switched from saying "No" to saying "Know" – taking a broader approach through evidence-based programs to better prepare young people to make smarter and safer decisions.

'Grow and develop'

More than a half-dozen prevention-related programs are now offered in the region by partners such as The Learning Lamp, Remembering Adam and the Alternative Community Resource Program.

Often funded by state grants and supported by nonprofits such as the United Way and the 1889 Foundation, many of those programs were developed and tested for specific age groups.

Botvin *LifeSkills Training* has become the area's most visible example since it was implemented in 2011-12. The Learning Lamp, ACRP and district teachers in some schools deliver Botvin to the sixth through eighth grades, focusing on ways to build self-esteem and self-confidence, how to cope with anxiety and how to better comprehend the wide-reaching consequences of substance abuse, Cambria County Drug and Alcohol Case Manager Fred Oliveros said.

The middle school years can be difficult with or without the lure of drugs, he said.

Botvin LifeSkills builds traits that help students form a positive self-image and make sound decisions, Shanksville-Stonycreek Superintendent Samuel Romesberg said.

"The structure of the program is 'hands-on' and experimental," he said, noting that rather than listening to lectures, students actively participate in role-playing activities and strategy sessions to navigate potentially stressful situations.

"It is a multi-tiered program that addresses many aspects of a student's life as they grow and develop into an adult," he said.

All 11 Somerset County schools participate in the Botvin program for one or more grades, along with Blacklick Valley, Cambria Heights, Central Cambria, Conemaugh Valley, Ferndale Area, Forest Hills, Glendale Area, Greater Johnstown, Holy Name school, Penn Cambria, Portage Area, Richland and Westmont Hilltop in Cambria County.