



# The Berkshire Eagle

## Ruth LeCompte: Life Skills program deserves DA funding

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By Ruth LeCompte

LEE — Life Skills is an international evidence-based substance abuse and violence prevention program developed by Dr. Gilbert J. Botvin that is utilized in early education to build a solid character foundation for youngsters. According to Botvin, "The main goals of the Life Skills Program are to give students prevention-related information, promote anti-drug norms, teach drug refusal skills, and foster the development of personal self-management skills and general social skills."

Unfortunately, the money allocated for this early intervention program through the Berkshire County district attorney's office is now being funneled toward the Juvenile Diversion Program. Therefore, Life Skills will no longer be available to the many schools in Berkshire County after June.

Educators in the Lee Public Schools feel it is imperative to continue Life Skills as a preventative program in our school because youngsters that complete this program learn to make healthy choices and ultimately do not need a diversion program. According to the [www.lifeskillstraining.com](http://www.lifeskillstraining.com) website, "The program has been proven to cut tobacco, alcohol, and illicit drug use in half and shown to produce prevention effects that can last 12 years or more. It can also prevent aggression and violence, delinquency, risky driving, and HIV/AIDS risk behaviors. In addition, independent researchers have demonstrated Life Skills Training can also shield adolescents from the misuse of opioid and other prescription drugs. This is accomplished by offering an eight week program for Grades 3-5 and a 15-18 week program for Grade 6. The trainers actively involve and elicit meaningful conversation and role play in an age appropriate manner for and with the students.

The valuable additional hands-on activities, games and educational materials that the educators from the Berkshire County DA's office have developed support this effective and engaging program. They understand that reaching all students requires a multifaceted teaching approach. It is also imperative for the students to have additional members of their community taking an active interest in them and in teaching these concepts so that the students do not clump the message with their academics.

### EXAMPLES OF SUCCESS

Recently, a third grade student at Lee Elementary School shared that Life Skills Training will help him make wise and healthy choices because he learned facts to support why he should not smoke and strategies to socialize with his classmates and relax if he is stressed. He further explained that the trainer described how smoking can cause a person's fingers and nails to discolor. He connected this knowledge to an ad on TV showing similar distasteful effects. The ad informed people that Juul Pods, a form of e-cigarettes, will lead to a person who tries them to become four times more likely to start smoking. Furthermore, this student described the third hand smoke concept learned in Life Skills by telling us that if someone smokes a Juul Pod near a desk or other surface, the nicotine will sit on the surface and if a person touches the surface, the nicotine will enter the body of that person! He said, "Life Skills made me think stronger about not smoking or using Juul Pods.

Another student convinced his mother to stop smoking, while a third student recognized that a family member was an alcoholic. The student was able to reach out through the Life Skills team to get the support he and his family needed.

As you can see, Life Skills is a program that is valuable to our youngsters in helping them develop a healthy character foundation. If Life Skills continues to be taught in elementary and middle schools, it will cut the need for the Diversion Program by at least 50%, if we follow the supportable statistics regarding its success.

According to Alan Chartock in his Eagle commentary, "With bail reform, Berkshire DA holds true to progressive platform" on March 1, "Of course, criminal justice reform is not the same thing as the reform of society in general, and we have a long way to go in that department." Doesn't it make sense to focus on early intervention in order to prevent the need for diversion for juveniles? If we are to attempt to reform society, our youngest members are our best hope. Why take away a program meant to help children make healthier choices before they reach an age when risky behavior is a temptation?

We have seen first hand just how valuable this program is at supporting the youth in our community. Please help us to save the needed funds for this program.

*Ruth LeCompte, a Grade 3 English/Science teacher at Lee Elementary School, writes on behalf of the school's Grade 3-6 team.*