

## 'Project Hope' aims to help district

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Recently, I was part of a small group of local leaders who gathered to discuss how we could collectively work together to make Indiana County a stronger, healthier, happier and more productive community through an initiative called “Project Hope.”

This collaborative effort is designed to help in the fight against drugs in our area. While there is a great deal to be completed, I am proud of the work being done in this area as well as the interagency cooperation that is occurring throughout Indiana County.

There are many great things happening in our district through our partnerships with critical friends that play a role in the collective vision for Project Hope. For example, IASD is working with Dr. Mark McGowan and Dr. Tim Runge from Indiana University of Pennsylvania on building a variety of interventions for our students, both academically and behaviorally, that align to our multi-tiered systems of support efforts.

The Open Door drug and alcohol treatment center, IUP and the Armstrong, Clarion and Indiana Drug Coalition are just some of the organizations in attendance at the Project Hope meeting, and it was amazing to hear the incredible tactics and strategies that each organization is utilizing in this battle. There are many other agencies taking part in this effort, including law enforcement, who work every day to make our area a safe place for us to raise our families. It is exciting to consider the endless possibilities this group can achieve through our collaborative efforts.

IASD is doing our part by prioritizing the “whole child” approach to our programming with positive and healthy relationships being at the heart of our vision.

Starting in the 2020-21 school year, IASD will offer a social-emotional curriculum titled Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (P.A.T.H.S.) in grades kindergarten through fifth. Ben Franklin Elementary has been implementing the program this year. The curriculum is a comprehensive program for promoting emotional and social competencies and reducing aggression and behavior problems in elementary school-aged children while simultaneously enhancing the educational process in the classroom.

Furthermore, all of our elementary schools are implementing schoolwide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports. This is a framework for creating safe and orderly learning environments in schools while improving the social-emotional outcomes for students. It is a proactive approach that relies on research-based practices, including developing clear behavioral expectations, teaching these expectations, acknowledging appropriate behavior, consistently correcting inappropriate behavior and using behavioral data to systematically solve problems. Within the next two or three years, all schools in IASD will be utilizing the PBIS model.

At the junior high school, we have implemented an evidence-based program called Botvin Lifeskills Training in our health and physical education courses. Botvin LifeSkills Training (LST) is an evidence-based substance abuse and violence prevention program used in schools and communities throughout the U.S. and in 39 countries around the world. LST has been extensively tested and proven to reduce tobacco, alcohol, and illicit drug use by as much as 80 percent. The main goals of the LST program are to teach prevention-related information, promote anti-drug norms, teach drug refusal skills and foster the development of personal self-management skills and general social skills.

IASD is an amazing place to be a part of, and I am proud of the work we have accomplished, but there is more to be done in order to sustain the beauty our area has to offer our families, friends and neighbors. During this meeting, I was overwhelmed with the level of care that exists in all of the organizations in attendance, and want to thank Mike Donnelly, president of Indiana Printing and Publishing, which owns The Indiana Gazette, for his work in bringing the agencies together.

I am confident that this collective group can help in the battle against drugs by focusing on the implementation of evidence-based strategies, strategic alliances and interagency cooperation focused on getting “all ships” sailing in the same direction. I am confident that our work will have a

positive impact on our community, and I am proud to have a small part in this initiative.

*Michael J. Vuckovich is the superintendent for the Indiana Area School District.*