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EDITOR'S PICK

FEATURED

## Officials try new approach to curb student drug use

DEAN-PAUL STEPHENS

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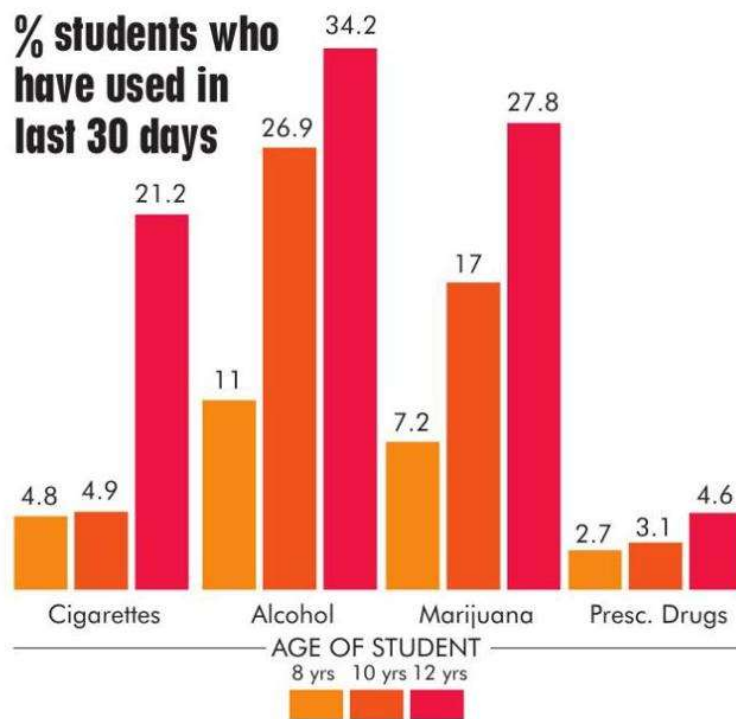
A school resource officer parked Friday at Croatan High School, where a workshop on school safety took place. (Chery Burke photo)

**CARTERET COUNTY** — For decades, public and private schools have played a role in the national effort to combat drug abuse.

In the midst of the ongoing opioid epidemic, however, a few schools are opting for programs that depart from the traditional direction of DARE, Just Say No and other anti-drug campaigns of the previous few decades.

In Carteret County Schools, administrators, led by Dr. Sue Kreuser, are hoping the Life Skills Training curriculum will have short- and long-term impacts on drug-use trends.

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“This is the first (school) year we’ve implemented it,” Dr. Kreuser said about the Life Skills Training curriculum, which came with a \$35,000 price tag.

A veteran educator who came to Carteret County by way of Minnesota, Dr. Kreuser works as the school system’s director of healthful living and student support services. It’s a role she and others believe makes her the ideal point-person for introducing the Life Skills Training curriculum to county schools.

“I taught health and physical education in Minnesota,” Dr. Kreuser said. “From there, I worked on a master’s in health science education and later went into administration. Both teaching and (administrative work) prepared me for this.”

On its surface, the curriculum is an anti-drug program designed to give educators the chance to warn students in grades three through nine and 11 about the dangers of drug, alcohol and tobacco use.

Dr. Kreuser and the various educators who participate in the curriculum believe it’s much more than that, however.

“This program was intriguing for two reasons,” Dr. Kreuser said. “It’s very comprehensive. If you were to look at the student workbooks ... you would see a common theme on the skills, the life skills that are taught.”

While similar programs focus directly on substance use, the Life Skills Training curriculum places an emphasis on lifestyle choices and encouraging good habits.

“At the fourth- and fifth-grade level, we’re teaching kids about self-esteem,” Dr. Kreuser said. “We’re teaching students about decision making, advertising, dealing with stress, communication skills, social skills.”

Dr. Kreuser and other administrators believe tackling the root causes of addiction will result in a generational reduction in drug use in the county.

It’s still too early to call the curriculum a success or failure, but Dr. Kreuser said the school system is committed to finding out. For years, the system has administered surveys in which students can anonymously self-report their drug, tobacco and alcohol use. School officials then compile the data into a report known as the Pride Survey.

The most recent report, released Aug. 23, 2018, came before the school system enacted the Life Skills Training curriculum. Its findings surprised county commissioners when Dr. Kreuser presented it to them around this time last year.



Among county students as young as 8 years old, the Pride Survey found 4.8% have used tobacco products and 11% have used alcohol, while 7.2% and 2.7% have used cannabis and prescription drugs, respectively.

Among 10-year-olds, the report found tobacco use is largely unchanged, while alcohol, cannabis and prescription drug use more than doubles to 26.9%, 17% and 3.1%, respectively.

Those figures are higher among the county's 12-year-olds who self-report having used tobacco, alcohol, cannabis and prescription drugs at rates of 21%, 34%, 27% and 4.6%.

"We didn't see much attention being given to keeping someone from stepping on the path to start with and heading in that direction," County Commissioner Robin Comer said last year to convince his fellow board members to move forward with implementing the Life Skills Training curriculum.

At the time, Mr. Comer was spearheading Carteret Cares, a think tank of county officials and residents wanting to curb opioid use in the county.

Dr. Kreuser helped convey to the group that a school-based program was needed. When researching different programs, she said she wanted one that wasn't just grounded in data but took into account students' grade levels. She wanted to avoid giving students the same lessons year after year, as well.

"It's not as though the topic is identical from grade to grade," Dr. Kreuser said of the new curriculum. "It grows as the students grow, throughout our program. Just as an example, this would be for seventh grade, in that it talks about drug abuse, it talks about decision-making, advertising and tobacco. It talks about coping with anxiety, coping with anger, communication skills, (being) assertive, resolving conflicts, resisting peer pressure. The idea behind it is, after students experience this for several years, they are going to see a connection to those skills that will support them in making good choices when it comes to drugs, alcohol or mental illness challenges they may face. They would know how to help themselves."

Dr. Kreuser said the emphasis on life skills and mental health is why counselors and healthful living teachers administer the curriculum.

"It's sort of just a natural fit," said East Carteret Councilor Beverly Jones, "As counselors, we're sort of at the forefront, the health and P.E. teachers are part of it because it fits very nicely in their curriculum. But we were also chosen because we deal with the social and emotional well-being of our students. That does put you on the forefront of substance awareness and drug abuse."

Ms. Jones served as the proverbial canary in the coalmine, as the first instructor in the county to teach the curriculum to students.

"We actually were trained in workshops," Ms. Jones said about preparing to teach the curriculum. "We got our materials and books...and worked out the logistics."

She is a firm believer in what the curriculum has to offer.

"There were a lot of good lessons because when students start setting up goals, they are focusing on their future and not just caught in a quagmire of 'Oh, well, let me just go and have fun,'" Ms. Jones said. "You are helping them establish a pattern of healthy choices, having future goals."

Ms. Jones believes the curriculum's effectiveness lies in the fact the lessons learned go beyond drug abuse awareness.

"How to be successful, how to know the difference between formal and informal communications, how to speak and write effectively, managing stress and learning how to be resilient," Ms. Jones said. "What I like about the program is that it's engaging. It isn't just me

doing all the talking. There was a lot of involvement.”

Dr. Kreuser hopes, as the years pass, more students and teachers will grow to be more comfortable with the curriculum.

#### MORE INFORMATION

