

NWI.LIFE

Something incredible is happening in schools throughout La Porte County, thanks to the Healthcare Foundation of La Porte

By: Stacey Kellogg Last Updated: March 13, 2020



The Healthcare Foundation of La Porte Partners in Prevention training event in September 2019 brought 11 schools/school systems together and marked the beginning of a fundamental shift in the way La Porte County approaches substance abuse prevention today, and in the future.

When the Healthcare Foundation of La Porte initiated Partners in Prevention in 2019 to influence our younger generation to live healthier lives and make better choices for the rest of their lives, they had no idea the impact would be almost immediate. And while it's still too early to measure any significant results, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence that something incredible is happening in schools throughout La Porte County.

"I just got all the bad out."

"It refreshes me and calms me down."

“It takes the anger out of me.”

“It helps me move from this activity to the next one and stay focused.”

These statements are out of the mouths of babes – elementary school students whose curriculum has been infused with an evidence-based program to help them manage not just the stresses of daily life, but life itself.

Partners in Prevention is a signature initiative by the Healthcare Foundation of La Porte to strategically address one of the most important health issues identified in the La Porte County Opioid Study: substance abuse prevention. It is the first initiative within the county that aims to influence the root cause of substance abuse behaviors and intervene with proven programs before children become inclined to turn down that fateful path.

In September 2019, HFL awarded grant funding to 11 school or school corporations, totaling more than \$2.8 million over the next three years, to implement an evidence-based curriculum to help develop, identify, implement, and sustain substance abuse prevention programs. More than 13,000 La Porte County students will be affected as they learn to help foster positive relationships and social competencies; address addictive behavior, bullying, and violence; and increase school attendance and self-esteem, among other factors.

The grant funding connects participating schools with experts from the Educational Development Center (EDC) to offer technical assistance and RTI International for the evaluation of the three-year initiative.

Queen of All Saints School has chosen the program Conscious Discipline to incorporate into their curriculum.

“Dr. Becky Bailey, the creator and founder of Conscious Discipline, has said that discipline is not something we do to children, but something we develop within them. I love that because we want our children to be lifelong learners, and there’s not always going to be something or someone there to direct them. They have to have that internal voice to keep them on the right track,” said Marie Arter, Principal at Queen of All Saints.

After several months of learning and planning, teachers and staff have spent the last six months building resilient classrooms that provide tools for students to manage behaviors and create environments where they feel welcome to share their feelings or implement actions they need to implement to stay disciplined and focused.

Some of the lessons and tools they use are simple and cost-effective, like breathing exercises to manage crisis or even minor stressful situations.

The comments above are just a few that students have made about their program so far.

“That kind of feedback is significant because a lot of kids throughout all of La Porte County are dealing with challenges that are adult in nature. If we can help them regulate how they react to them now, it will help them be better decision-makers later,” she said.

One teacher opted to end the school day with a hug or a high five.

“Everyone on the way out does one of those things because she wants them to understand that maybe the day wasn’t easy, but it’s ending on a positive note no matter what,” Arter said.

Some teachers are planning to attend a six-day workshop in June on Conscious Discipline, and bring back that knowledge to cross-train staff as part of the next steps of implementation.

One of the top indicators that Arter and her staff will be measuring is attendance.

“When kids miss a lot of days, many times it’s not because they’re sick, but because they have stress in their lives that they don’t know how to process,” she said. “We have students that struggle with the structure of school – structure is hard on some children – so we need to make sure they can all cope to be successful.”

Arter and her team also will survey teachers and parents to track changes as time goes on and will track discipline referrals to look for a decrease.

The program, Arter said, directly aligns with the Roman Catholic values and servant culture at Queen of All Saints. As students learn more conscious discipline, they regulate themselves, but they can help also each other.

“We are called to do to more than educate a child. Students can’t excel academically unless they can love their neighbor and make a positive difference in their community. If they can’t do that, we haven’t done our job.”

Every class at Queen of All Saints participates in a monthly service project – things like volunteering at the humane society or delivering books at the local hospital.

“Service is why we are put on this earth. You can live your life and not be great at math, but you can’t really live your life and not be able to get along with people,” Arter said.

Ray Silvas, a social worker by trade, is now the HFL program coordinator for the Michigan City Area Schools. By the time the schools fully roll out their evidence-based programming, 5,600 students will be involved. (About 1,300 are in it now).

In some elementary schools, they're using a program called Second Step, and in the middle schools, they're using Botvin LifeSkills.

"With Second Step in the elementary schools, we're trying to lay down a foundation of life skills that we believe will benefit kids later in life, if they learn them early," he said. "We're talking about empathy, conflict resolution - basically trying to build each other up instead of tear each other down. We're really hoping that we're laying down a foundation and positive habits that will carry over to adolescence and adulthood which in turn will help them make better choices as it relates to substance abuse later."

Silvas said it is necessary to connect with children at the critical age when drugs could be introduced and addictive behaviors can sprout and flourish.

"The best part about Botvin is the discussion portion. During the lessons, kids are able to discuss topics that aren't normally discussed, and it allows them to realize that other kids are facing the same difficulties in their lives," Silvas said. "There are a lot of kids who are in quiet desperation for help, and they don't speak up. This program gives them a voice so they know that they aren't alone."

Silvas said it's too early to report hard numbers, but they are seeing a decline in disciplinary issues and truancy, and he has personally seen an improvement in the way children and teens are disciplining themselves and taking care of each other.

"I had a discussion with one elementary school teacher, and she mentioned that she decided to pair a boy and girl for one of the Second Step activities. They had a history of not getting along, so she paired them up to have them work through those activities together," Silvas said. "Then, at recess time, they were playing together non-stop. She overheard the girl saying to him, 'I really feel bad for you that someone in your family has been picking on you.' The empathy there - it was just amazing. Those moments are hard to measure by statistics, but those are the moments that really matter."

Silvas said the programs are just as effective for the staff as well. Teachers need these wins.

"Across the board, we do need to recognize that we have to provide more opportunities for self-care and more support for programs that work for our teachers. They are literally at the front line every single day. I think all districts need to do a better job of recognizing them and praising them for the efforts they make that have a

positive impact. That's why we are so grateful for this HFL grant. It is giving us the resources to support our teachers and our students to be better citizens more than we've ever had before."

As Arter, Silvas, and all the other program coordinators across La Porte County continue to implement their programs, the HFL will continue to connect them with the professional support they need from the facilitators during periodic check-ins and education sessions when needed. The first year will be a learning year for everyone. The second and third years will allow the schools to solidify their program implementation so they can sustain success beyond the grant cycle. Success will be measured, key indicators will be tracked, and celebrations will take place when the wins happen.

"Of course, at the end of the day, it's about helping our children become better people and putting them on a better path in life," Silvas said.

For more information about Partners in Prevention, visit the HFL website here <https://hflaporte.org/partnersinprevention/>.

The full list of schools/school systems that received the three-year planning and implementation grants is:

La Lumiere
La Porte Community School Corporation

Michigan City Area Schools
MSD of New Durham
New Prairie United School Corporation
Notre Dame Catholic School
Queen of All Saints
Renaissance Academy
Saint John's Lutheran School
South Central Community School Corporation

Tri-Township Community School Corporation