

Upper Bucks Receives Drug-Free Communities Grant— Survey shows local teens making healthy choices

by BRENDA OELSCHLAGER

Students, parents, and community leaders had many reasons to celebrate at the October 23rd Upper Bucks Healthy Communities/Healthy Youth (HCHY) coalition's meeting. Results of the 2005-06 survey taken by nearly 3,000 Pennridge, Quakertown, and Palisades teens in grades eight, ten and twelve showed marked decreases in alcohol, drug, and tobacco use and a significant increase in the sense of support being received by adolescents since the first survey results were recorded in 2002-2004.

Because the area has been able to document improvements and success with the HCHY initiatives, the organization was awarded a \$75,000 mentoring grant from the national Drug-Free Communities Program, one of only 17 such grants awarded in the country. Jack Claypoole, administrator of the national Drug-Free Communities Program, was excited about the results of the recent survey and the on-going work of the Upper Bucks HCHY group. "What you are doing in Bucks County is working," he said. "You need to take pride in that and get the message out. We all need to let folks know that we are proud our kids are making good decisions. That's what community is about."

Claypoole added that the work being done by HCHY is something his organization hopes can be replicated in other communities. Through the mentoring grant, Upper Bucks will be working with Lower Merion to provide guidance for their drug-free efforts. "You are leading by example in Bucks County, saving people's lives," said Claypoole. With the federal grant, he remarked, "we want to provide you with funding to support your infrastructure to develop local solutions to local problems."

Claypoole thanked the student representatives from all three school districts for their efforts in helping to get the drug-free message out to their peers. "As adults, we need to listen to young people and help them chart a path to making sound decisions," he said.

Community Mobilizer, Lee Rush, shared highlights from the 2006 Student Support Card that details the level of Developmental Assets possessed by the students surveyed. Assets include a sense of support, values, educational commitment, expectations and more which students perceive in their lives. According to Rush, the 2005-06 survey shows that out of the 40 Developmental Assets, the number possessed by area youth has increased from 17.5 to 18.5 and the total percentage of youth experiencing more than half of the 40 Assets has increased from 34% to 39%. Of the 40 Assets, 31 have shown an increase from baseline figures.

According to research by the Search Institute, children with more of the 40 Developmental Assets present in their lives exhibit less risk behaviors such as using drugs, alcohol, or tobacco, demonstrating suicidal tendencies, or participating in sexual activities. With more assets, students tend to succeed in school, value diversity, maintain good health, and resist danger. The new survey showed decreases in risk behaviors by youth since 2004: 15% decrease in the 30-day prevalence of tobacco use among 12th graders; 5% decrease in the 30-day prevalence of alcohol use among 10th graders; 44% decrease in the 30-day prevalence of tobacco use among 8th graders. Results showed 65% of Upper Bucks teenagers do not drink on a regular basis and 74% of youth remain optimistic about their future, an increase of 4%.

While Rush is pleased with the recent survey results, he cautioned that there is still much to be done to strengthen community relationships and continue to build assets. "We know that two out of three students are not drinking. But there are still 33% that do," he said. He explained the role of HCHY as being a group of community leaders focused on organizing support, developing strategies, and leveraging funds to allow the local professionals to do their work and create a healthy community for all children to develop into healthy young adults.

U. S. Congressman Michael Fitzpatrick was on hand to congratulate the Upper Bucks community for its success and encourage the students and leaders to continue working together. He thanked the students for being part of the solution. "These are healthy school districts, healthy communities, and you are healthy kids making good decisions," he said.

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