

Tobacco Education Program helps students to have second thoughts

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A hairy tongue. Phlegm. Missing voice box. Stoma. Amputation. Emphysema. Cancer. Death.

Images of the ravages of the human body by tobacco use are not easy to look at. They're also not easily forgotten. And they are shared in living color with participants of the Tobacco Education Group in Quakertown.

The intensive TEG is a positive alternative to punishment for students in the Pennridge, Quakertown and Palisades school districts who have been caught smoking or in possession of tobacco on school grounds. Instead of paying a hefty fine, the students may opt to attend a day-long TEG session, in which they are taught about the consequences of smoking in a vivid, interactive way.

The goal of TEG is to move students, who are in the group against their will and still want to smoke, from the precontemplation and contemplation stages of

quitting cigarette smoking to the preparation and action phases.

During precontemplation, the student hasn't identified smoking as a problem, while during contemplation he or she recognizes that a problem exists, but has not made a commitment to take action.

The preparation phase is the turning point at which the student decides to quit, and during the action phase the student begins to take steps to quit.

TEG attendees aren't expected to quit upon leaving a session, but rather TEG is designed to plant a seed that could eventually lead young smokers to the voluntary Tobacco Awareness Program that meets in eight week sessions after school at Quakertown High School.

At TEG students discuss their smoking history, and what it is like to try to stop. And the harmful effects of smoking are driven home hard.

"This is the first group like this in Bucks County, which is significant," said Lee Rush, executive

director of justCommunity, who leads the group. justCommunity is the coordinating agency of the Quakertown Area Healthy Communities-Healthy Youth Coalition, a positive youth development group.

So far one session, attended by Pennridge and Quakertown students, was held in March. A second, with increased attendance, is planned for June in Quakertown.

Rush said in order for TEG to continue to grow, three legs of a triangle - the school districts, the court system and the parents - must be in agreement.

Once a student is caught with tobacco on school grounds, a citation is issued. District court justices then give students the option of attending TEG (a note is given to the parents stating the availability of the program), that is funded by the Bucks County Tobacco Control Project.

Kay Dubree, district justice for a wide area that includes Plumstead, Bedminster, Haycock and Springfield townships and

Dublin Borough, said students can make a significant savings by opting for TEG. The maximum fine for smoking or being in possession of tobacco on school property is \$50 plus court costs. If you are under 18 years old the costs are \$97.50 in addition to an extra \$10 fee.

Dubree said she has "no problem" referring students to TEG as long as it's their first offense.

"If it's the second or third offense, no," she said.

Bridget O'Connell, assistant principal at Palisades High School, acknowledged students try to leave the school to smoke. When they do, they get a citation and wind up before Dubree, who gives them the option of attending TEG. Students are also nabbed if they step off school property onto neighboring land, and the neighbors report them.

"Everything is pretty visible here because we're in the country," O'Connell said. "Open fields and soccer fields surround our school. But if students are truly addicted, they will try to

find places to smoke."

Dr. James Scanlon, superintendent of the Quakertown Community School District, said there's no doubt teen smoking is at an all-time high, and he feels all the area districts are comparable in the problem. While supportive of TEG, he stressed the importance of positive parental role models when it comes to smoking.

Scanlon said smoking inside the high school seems to have decreased since an extra set of eyes was added with the hiring of a security officer, but Quakertown High School is located in town, and students tend to step off the property and smoke outside.

One day, Scanlon took a walk and approached the students, asking them why they smoke.

"Everyone does it," they replied.

TEG's goal is to erode that mindset by making an impact on young smokers, rather than just punishing them.