

NEWS HERALD

PERKASIE, PA. March 10 - 16, 2004

Pennridge adds drug awareness program

By Ryan Phillips
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A new drug awareness program piloted in three Pennridge elementary schools two years ago and implemented in all sixth grade classes last year will become part of the district's curriculum.

Project ALERT (Adolescent Learning Experience in Resistance Training) was chosen as an alternate to the DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) after area police departments couldn't continue the DARE program because of different demands on their manpower and time, said Dr. Arlene Zielinski, the district's director of curriculum. She said area police officers remain an approachable presence in Pennridge schools, but could not further stretch their resources to keep teaching DARE.

Project ALERT was piloted in Bedminster, Grasse and Sellersville elementary schools.

"We liked Project ALERT because it was supported by research and seemed to be one of the more effective programs," said Zielinski. She explained that instead of police officers teaching students about staying away from drugs and alcohol, classroom teachers instruct the new program in 11 sessions to sixth graders. "It was something that covered the general territory of the DARE program."

Participating teachers were given a full day of on-site training by Project Alert representatives and ongoing research and information is available on the program's Website, www.projectalert.com. The program's goal is to "reduce the use of dangerous substances by keeping non-users from trying them and by preventing non-users and experimenters from becoming regular users." Teaching middle school children about the dangers of substance abuse is more effective than waiting until they are older, said a school release.

Each session focuses on a learning strategy and encourages good decision-making skills in dealing with peer pressure. Students watch videos with dramatized scenarios that suburban children may likely encounter. At the point of the character making the decision, the video is stopped and students are asked how they would deal with the situation, Zielinski said. After discussion, the students watch how the choices of the actors play out and then assess their decisions.

"They're the kinds of situations that could happen here," said Zielinski. "They get into different kinds of drugs, but it's mostly entry level things like

tobacco, alcohol and inhalants."

Now that all sixth grade classes have been in Project ALERT for a full year, they will have three follow-up sessions, called booster lessons, as seventh graders to strengthen what was learned in the previous year. Health and physical education teachers will teach the follow-up lessons.

"They are messages you can't get out too much or too often," said Sellersville Elementary Principal Dr. Donald Muenker. "Students need to hear these messages all the time, that they have alternate things to consider to have fun."