

# Pennridge Board agrees to conduct community youth survey

By CHARLES W. BAUM

With some hesitation, the Pennridge School Board Monday night agreed to assist in conducting a voluntary youth survey that deals with students' use of drugs, alcohol, involvement with violence and family relationships.

The potentially controversial survey is being conducted for the fledgling community-based organization "Communities That Care," a local organization still in the formation stages and similar to one established earlier this year in the Quakertown area.

The local group will be part of the Bucks County Consortium for Health Youth and Communities, led by TODAY Inc. of Bensalem.

Pennridge Superintendent Dr. Robert S. Kish explained the survey is slated to be conducted in class for students in grades 8, 10 and 12 in early October.

Local results of the anonymous survey will be sent to the school district to be shared only with the local community prevention board, according to Maggie Marcopul, prevention coordinator for the Bucks consortium.

She emphasized in a letter to

Pennridge officials that the only survey information to be released publicly will be the countywide data.

The "Communities That Care/American's Promise" is a national pilot project that has completed the initial training cycle and now moves into the next phase of data gathering in order to prioritize risks within communities, explained Marcopul.

Kish told board members that he, Central Middle School Principal Dr. Thomas Rutter, and several faculty members and students have been involved in recent discus-

sions with the community organization.

The local group is being chaired by Rev. Thomas M. Lang, pastor of St. Michael's Lutheran Church in Sellersville. A number of other clergy leaders, Chamber of Commerce, YMCA, and other youth support organizations also sit on the committee which has been meeting in recent months.

Marcopul explained that there is no cost to the district other than the 45-minute class period needed for students who are willing to take the survey. Preparation of the surveys and resulting reports will be free to the district, with partial funding through grants. Once completed, the nameless surveys will be forwarded in a sealed envelope, with results to be reported within two months.

"The data in your local report can be used along with the archival data that will also be collected in identifying risks and to make local plans," said Marcopul.

She noted the survey is not mandatory for continued participation in the county-wide project and students' participation is voluntary. Even school staff members will not know how any individual responded to the survey. Marked

answers will be read by a computer.

The survey will ask a student's age, grade, sex and ethnic heritage. Students will also be asked about their grades in general, attitudes toward school and homework.

Questions then ask the teens' feelings and uses of tobacco, drugs, alcohol and firearms and how regularly they may have used them.

How easy would it be to obtain beer, liquor, marijuana, other drugs or firearms will be asked, and whether their families have clear rules about such uses.

The Pennsylvania Youth Survey is a blended questionnaire comprised of questions from both the Communities That Care and Generation at Risk surveys. Marcopul explained this is the model being used by the Pennsylvania Department of Education,

and that several school districts participated in a pilot survey this past spring.

Kish said information concerning the survey will be sent home to parents and provided at back-to-school nights in September so parents can decide whether their children should participate.

"It's risky, but I think there's

value in it," Kish told school board members. "This can deal with negativity, but there can be a positive outcome from the results through a community prevention effort."

Director Linda Gaito agreed, noting, "I believe it can be a positive tool."

"I believe the kids, for the most part, will take the questions seriously," added Karen Sterling, after concerns over whether students might put down false answers.

Director Terri Yates was a bit skeptical about the questionnaire and fellow Board Member Steve Chadwick added, "I'm not convinced it's a valid survey," and that some of the questions may not be applicable.

"I think the results will reflect more on the community than the school district," added Kish. He said the results would be used as base-line data for possible future funding requests for various prevention programs within the community. This is a local effort with a lot of support in the community from the clergy and various other groups," said Kish. "But I think parents need to be made aware of what's in the survey and what types of questions their kids may be asked."