

Universal addiction prevention education vital



BY SHARON KING
Special to the Herald

As the opioid epidemic sweeps over the nation killing thousands in its wake, parents and families should be concerned about their children's ability to avoid substance use. Are we doing our best to provide the next generation with the resources they need to avoid addiction and make healthy decisions at critical moments in their lives?

Drug Free Manatee recognizes that one strategy to address the opioid epidemic is to introduce universal prevention education into schools. While the nation is understandably funding intervention and treatment options for those who are suffering addiction, prevention education has dwindled over the last decade. Although materials still exist in the classroom, the curriculum is varied, inconsistent and fluctuating, often only reaching a portion of students.

This year, the School District of Manatee County recognized this shortcoming and is in the process of bringing researched-based, universal prevention curriculum back into community schools.

During the 2016/2017 school year, the district will introduce Botvin's Life Skills Training (LST) to its entire sixth grade. LST has been proven to reduce the risk of alcohol, tobacco, drug abuse and violence by helping to identify risky behaviors that often lead to substance misuse and providing teens with the skills they need to handle challenging situations. The district is planning to expand the program to seventh and eighth grade in the upcoming school year.

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However, the lack of prevention education is still an issue in other counties across the state. Drug Free Manatee is currently encouraging Florida legislators to fund and mandate a universal prevention platform that would not only include prevention education, but also promote positive youth development while addressing behavioral issues and fundamental life skills. Programs such as these have fallen to the wayside due to the state's focus

on testing, under-funded state mandates, time-management issues and budget cuts.

Today, many of those programs are optional for students or available for them to take online. Drug Free Manatee feels that online courses rob students of conversations and lessons that dig deeper into critical topic areas like healthy lifestyle choices, bullying prevention etc.

The coalition believes the best way to provide children with a balanced education is to ensure that every child receive prevention and character courses. The coalition posits that prevention and character development should be mandated for all students, just as academic courses are required.

The coalition would like to take this opportunity, during National Drug and Alcohol Facts Week, to invite citizens to help us accomplish our goals. Residents who would like to be involved in our platform can reach us by calling 941-749-3030 or emailing info@drugfreemanatee.org .

Sharon Kramer is the executive director of Drug Free Manatee.



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