

## Palm Springs Unified aims to give students life skills

Written by Brett Kelman *The Desert Sun*

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**RANCHO MIRAGE** — After a moment of thought, the students rattled off their dreams: a future architect, a budding geologist, an Olympian-in-training and a wrestler with plans to go pro.

Those were all good dreams, but they wouldn't be easy, said Julie Reynolds, a school counselor leading her first lesson in a new class at Rancho Mirage Elementary.

This was Sept. 25, the first class in a special eight-week program in all elementary schools in Palm Springs Unified. About 1,700 fifth-graders will attend a weekly class designed to build self-esteem and steer them away from alcohol and tobacco.

At the end of the class, Reynolds asked the students what mistakes could push their dreams beyond their reach.

Hands shot into the air. One student said you could fall short of your goals if you gave up too early. Another said you might get hurt in an accident. The class clown said you could be eaten by a shark, prompting a fit of giggles.

When the laughter ended, a soft voice came from the back row of desks.

"Drinking and smoking," said Alexandra Gavuel.

Reynolds said she was right. Alcohol and tobacco could lead the students astray, she said.

"The point is, the decisions you make now, when you are a kid, could affect your dream to go to college," Reynolds said, pointing to one student. "Or to be an architect," she said, pointing to another.

Reynolds said the class is a pre-emptive strike, intended to steel students' defenses before they move on to middle school, where many will encounter drinking and smoking for the first time.

"We are basically preparing them to deal with peer pressure, because now they are going into middle school, where peers become the biggest, strongest force in their life," Reynolds said. "Maybe nobody has pressured them yet, but next year it is likely to happen, so we give them the tools to make the right decision."

The KidsFirst Health Life Project is being taught by Jewish Family Services and funded by a \$75,000 grant from the city of Palm Springs, the Desert Healthcare Foundation and the Clinton Health Matters Initiative.

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