

Cape Schools Embrace Substance Abuse Prevention Program

By LANNAN M. O'BRIEN | Posted: Thursday, October 15, 2015 2:52 pm

A training program designed to prevent substance abuse will be implemented at the Lawrence School this year, per an initiative to introduce the curriculum to all public school districts on Cape Cod.

The Botvin LifeSkills Training is a research-validated training program for students in elementary, middle and high schools that is proven to reduce the risks of substance abuse and violence. LifeSkills has been used at the 6th-grade level in Sandwich for the past three years but is not currently offered at any other district on Cape Cod.

Since beginning her position as the executive director of Cape Cod Healthcare's Cape Cod Regional Substance Prevention Initiative, Cheryl A. Bartlett has been working with a number of town leaders, departments and other organizations throughout the Cape to address substance abuse. One of those organizations is Caron Treatment Centers, which has provided the LifeSkills training in Sandwich.

Upon Ms. Bartlett's request, Trudy B. Avery, national development officer for Caron, wrote a proposal for Cape Cod Healthcare to implement the program in every 6th grade on-Cape. In addition to Cape Cod Healthcare, the Kelley Foundation and the Palmer and Jane D. Davenport Foundation are contributing to funding for the initiative. Ms. Bartlett said that the Christopher D. Smithers Foundation is also donating funds.

In addition to Sandwich, she said the Falmouth School District and Dennis-Yarmouth Regional School District have agreed to use the program this school year. Ms. Bartlett said that Barnstable administrators may observe the training in Sandwich before making a decision.

"We're working on a fast timeline to get this into schools," she said Wednesday.

Ideally, she would like the program to be offered to 6th graders, but understands challenges of integrating the program into busy class schedules. At the very least, she hopes that the program can be implemented at the 7th grade level, as will be done in Falmouth. Dennis-Yarmouth administrators have not yet decided on a grade level.

"We're trying to adapt and adopt it to be the least burdensome to the schools," Ms. Bartlett said.

Because of its relevance, she said, some schools choose to integrate the training into a health or science class. Program sessions are currently offered during the school day by individuals who are trained in LifeSkills, but school staff members could eventually be trained to teach it themselves.

Unlike programs such as Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.), LifeSkills employs no “scare” tactics, Ms. Bartlett said. Rather than instructing students not to do drugs, she said the training teaches students healthy eating, exercise and other skills that help shape their choices in life.

The first level is designed to improve personal self-management skills linked with self-esteem, problem-solving abilities and managing stress and anger; general social skills to overcome shyness, communicate clearly and build relationships; and drug resistance skills to defend against pressures to use substances.

A sample lesson available on the LifeSkills website (www.lifeskillstraining.com) challenges students to explain how they make decisions and the ways in which their choices are influenced by others. Students are asked to brainstorm possible solutions to peer pressure situations they might face.

While many substance abuse initiatives are treatment-focused, the school-based training is rooted in prevention, Ms. Bartlett said. She and Ms. Avery, as well as Caron’s regional director of student assistance programs Traci Wojciechowski, have been meeting and communicating with school superintendents in hopes that they will join the effort. Ms. Bartlett said that as they move forward, they will try to conduct surveying in as many schools as possible to measure the program’s success.

“We have a generation of kids that we’re losing and we really need to have this aggressive approach,” she said, to a widespread heroin addiction caused by the prescription of opiate pain medications. “Not everyone wins their battle, so we think that prevention is the best medicine.”