

CCPS drug prevention program focuses on social skills

Posted: Friday, October 9, 2015 10:00 am

By Jessica Iannetta jiannetta@cecilwhig.com

RISING SUN — Matt Feeney looked out over the room of standing seventh graders and started calling out numbers.



“Let’s see how many healthy social activities you guys have written down. Sit down if you only have one. Two. Three,” he said. Feeney made it all the way to seven before only one student was left standing. He asked the student to read out his list, which included activities such as “riding four-wheelers” and “building things out of wood.”

The lesson progressed from there as Feeney discussed the best way to invite someone to do a social activity, going over tips such as “get to the point” and “have an alternative in mind.”

Feeney’s class is part of Botvin LifeSkills Training, a new drug and alcohol prevention curriculum that all Cecil County Public Schools grades 3 through 10 have started learning this year. As one of two dedicated LifeSkills teachers in the school system, Feeney will spend time at each of school teaching the curriculum to students.

Down the hall, Lauren Dixon, the system’s other LifeSkills teacher, was also discussing social interaction and communication with her seventh graders. To learn about non-verbal cues, students strutted, stomped and jumped across the front of the room as the class tried to guess the student’s mood based on his or her mannerisms.



Lauren Dixon, a CCPS LifeSkills teacher, talks about verbal and non-verbal cues with seventh grade students at Rising Sun Middle School.

“You can tell how someone is feeling just by how they walk down the hallway at school,” she reminded the class.

Though LifeSkills is billed as a drug and alcohol prevention curriculum, in practice the lessons are about much more than the dangers of drug and alcohol abuse. On a recent day at Rising Sun Middle School, Dixon was 40 minutes into the class’ one-hour lesson before drugs, alcohol or tobacco were even mentioned.

“The program is more than just a preventative means for tobacco, alcohol and drug use,” she said. “It’s also really giving them a lot of skills for coping and making good decisions and building lasting and meaningful relationships with people, and being assertive and standing up for what’s right.”

While social skills and life lessons make up a large chunk of the curriculum, LifeSkills still provides students with plenty of factual information about drugs, alcohol and tobacco while dispelling many common myths about these substances, said Joanna Seiberling, CCPS coordinator of guidance services. The main goal though, is to help students develop the skill set they need to resist drugs and make good choices, she added.

The curriculum has been on the school system’s wish list for the past three years and, after twice being cut from budget proposals, was finally approved for this school year, Seiberling noted. Middle school students will receive the curriculum first, getting 16 lessons over eight days. Starting in February, elementary school students will get eight lessons over two days.

Developed by a Cornell University professor, the Botvin LifeSkills Training curriculum has been used by more than 10,000 schools in all 50 states and in 38 countries. According to its website, the curriculum can decrease tobacco, alcohol and drug use by as much as 80 percent.

CCPS plans to collect data about the effectiveness of the curriculum by administering pre- and post-LifeSkills program screenings, said Sean Cannon, CCPS director of student services. The school system also hopes the curriculum will improve county data from the Maryland Youth Risk Behavior Survey, which is administered every two years.

The most recent survey, from 2013, found that 41.9 percent of Cecil County high school students have used marijuana at least once, 67.1 percent have had at least one drink and 15.7 percent have taken prescription pills without their doctor's permission. Those percentages are all higher than the state average, which were 35.9, 60.9 and 15.2 percent on those questions, respectively.

One of LifeSkills' biggest draws for CCPS was the way it brought many lessons the district was already teaching into one comprehensive curriculum, Cannon said. Previously students might get factual information about drugs from health class and then learn about self-esteem from guidance counselors, he said.

"Everyone in the system has wanted to have more of a structured drug and alcohol prevention program," he said. "Everybody sees the need for a program like this. It has the greatest potential to impact the drug issues that Cecil County has because we're reaching such a large group of students."

Feeney and Dixon are both Cecil County natives and taught in other schools in the system before taking the LifeSkills jobs this year. While they've only been teaching the curriculum for about two months, Feeney said he's been surprised by how many things his students have been exposed to already, certainly much more than when he was a kid. Feeney isn't sure he would have needed these types of lessons back when he was a seventh grader, but now this type of education is crucial.

"Having lived here all my life, I've seen the quality of life change," he said. "I just feel like there's a lot of power in a program like this to impact that change."