



DEER ISLE - STONINGTON HIGH SCHOOL MARINER MOMENT

A Different Picture of Teen Substance Abuse

by (Todd West, Principal)

11/27/2008

The November 20th edition of *Island Advantages* featured a front-page story about the LOFT group at DISHS. The LOFT (Looking Out For Teens) group was formed last year to address substance abuse by their peers, both in the school and in the community. Students have joined LOFT because they would like to reverse what they see as a growing trend of adolescent substance abuse. The 14 student members of LOFT should be admired and rightly praised for being willing to stand up and courageously address such a significant issue in our community.

Certainly, the issue of teen substance abuse is one of the most pressing social issues we face as a community. One student quoted in the article said that “Seventy-five percent--easily--of our school is using drugs, drinking, or smoking.” But what are the actual statistics about substance abuse amongst teens in our community? Coincidentally, the results of the 2008 Maine Youth Drug and Alcohol Use Survey (MYDAUS) were recently released. Last February, 78% of DISHS took the MYDAUS, which is widely used by schools across the state as the most accurate report of substance use and abuse by students. While students self-report substance use and abuse on the survey, it has been designed to report accurate results and has questions built in to identify students who provide untruthful answers to the survey and toss out those results.

The 2008 MYDAUS results showed both positive and negative trends for our students. On the positive side, DISHS students reported statistically significantly lower rates of using alcohol over the last 30 days (26% to 35%), binge drinking in the last two weeks (12% to 18%), inhalant use (8% to 11%), and stimulant use (2.2% to 3.5%) when compared with the rest of the state. The use of cigarettes and prescription drugs by DISHS students is statistically similar to that of their peers around the state. However, the use of marijuana in the past 30 days by DISHS students is significantly higher than that reported by other students in the state, (30% to 19%), and the use of prescription drugs by DISHS is increasing at a rate much faster than that of other students across the state.

The MYDAUS survey does not offer an aggregate “% of students who use and abuse substances” statistic, but it does report that 45% of our students have *never* used alcohol and 74% of our students report *not* having used alcohol in the last 30 days while 54% have *never* used marijuana and 70% report *not* having used marijuana in the last 30 days. Unfortunately, only the 30-day alcohol use rate is not significantly higher than the state average.

Please don't get me wrong- teen substance use and abuse is a major problem in our community, and the LOFT group points out several reasons why, including parents who allow substance abuse to happen in their presence and increasingly easy access to powerful prescription drugs. When 30% of the the high school aged children in our community report using marijuana in the last month, we clearly have a problem. But, we must also make sure not to isolate those students who choose not to use substances and make them feel like they are the only ones who are abstaining from using drugs,

alcohol, and cigarettes. Based on the MYDAUS data, the fact is that a majority of students in our community have never used illegal substances, albeit a very slim majority. If we are to help turn the tide against substance abuse by our young adults, we need to make sure that the teens who are already making good decisions know that they have plenty of company amongst their peers and that continuing to abstain from using drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes will not put them in the minority.

While DISHS already offers several programs to address teen substance abuse, we stand ready to do more especially in conjunction with other community organizations. I plan to present and discuss in greater detail more results from the MYDAUS survey at December 2nd school board meeting and invite you to attend. If you would like a copy of MYDAUS results please call the high school at 348-2303.