

Guest Opinion

Houghton Lake schools need more prevention



By
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According to MiPHY reports, Crawford, Ogemaw, Oscoda and Roscommon County high school students reported using marijuana (38.9%), alcohol (68.8%) and cigarettes (46%).

As an alumnus of the Houghton Lake Community School system, I am concerned about the steady increase in substance abuse among youth of school and college age over the past four years.

The use of drugs and alcohol has gone up and are widely available to our young people. In fact, according to the Michigan Profile for Healthy Youth, 71.3% of high school students from these four counties reported that it was "sort of easy" or "very easy" to get alcohol in 2009.

Considering these statistics, it is easy to see how the state of youth in Roscommon County is fragile. The use of prevention programs to address these problems, however, does not adequately reflect these statistics. I called Houghton Lake Community Schools recently to inquire about the types of prevention programs they offer to help educate students regarding alcohol and drug use. They directed me to the Michigan Department of Community Health.

Since 2006, the state-funded MDCH school-based clinic has been given the task of providing prevention and intervention for youth using alcohol and drugs, outside of the school health curriculum. There are 57 state-funded school-based health centers operating in 24 Michigan counties. The centers target uninsured and underinsured children ages 5-10 and all youth ages 10 to 21, to increase access to quality primary care and behavioral health services. The only preven-

tion activity they reported hosting for Houghton Lake Schools consists of 8-10 sessions over a two week period during 7th grade, discussing the negative effects of drugs and alcohol and healthy alternatives to using these substances. Most of the work done by the MDCH school-based health clinic is intervention toward positive health outcomes.

We can't continue to expect the Department of Community Mental Health to deal with these issues until we get our hands dirty in prevention first. Moreover, youth at Houghton Lake are dealing with a variety of other issues that should be of concern to the entire community. Kids Count Data brings to light the 42.1% of children ages 0-17 who were living in poverty in Roscommon County in 2009, which was twice the average for the state of Michigan. An astounding 43.3% of children ages 0-17 were confirmed to have been abused and/or neglected in our county in 2010, which was over three times the state average. Also, teen births in 2010 increased by 4% from 2006 to 15.3%, higher than the state average by 5%.

My concern is this: If we know that our youth are using drugs and alcohol, why aren't we trying to prevent them from doing so? Nurse, community member and parent of a future Houghton Lake Community Schools student, Chrissy Abel, says, "This community needs to be realistic and know that teen drug and alcohol use exists, and we need to do something more than turn a blind eye". The average reported age of first time use of drugs and alcohol, according to MiPHY data, was between ages 12 and 14. This is where we need to target prevention strategies. "Programs that are comprehensive, include varied teaching methods, provide sufficient dosage, are theory driven, provide opportunities for positive relationships, are appropriately timed, are socioculturally relevant, include outcome evaluation, and involve well-trained staff" are ingredients for

successful prevention (Nation, M et al., What works in prevention: Principles of effective prevention programs, 2003).

What about other areas of prevention you might ask? Bullying, academic failure, low sense of connection to community and family are all risk factors that lead to greater instances of drug and alcohol use, sexual behaviors and suicidal ideation among youth (Michigan Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2012). Another community member and parent, suggests providing at risk youth with mentors as a way to "get them (youth) focused on something positive that keeps them moving forward". Prevention programs should be holistic and address these issues in the school setting while promoting parent and community involvement. Stakeholders affecting and/or benefitting from the implementation of prevention programs for substance abuse and other issues affecting youth are state representatives, school officials, teachers, parents, health centers, substance abuse centers, alternative education institutions and community members.

Although the implementation of a school based health program has addressed many medical issues affecting youth, risk factors and prevalence of substance use among youth in Roscommon County have increased. The Department of Community Mental Health can't be responsible for addressing our children's medical issues as well as the factors contributing to at-risk behaviors alone. School based prevention programs that are comprehensive, consistent and present at every level of school transition must be implemented to decrease drug and alcohol use among youth in Roscommon County.

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