

'Risky behavior' survey finds smoking, depression on the rise

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Smoking's sweet for middle and high school-age students, according to the results of a local survey of risky youth behavior.

Jane Fiore, the town health administrator, and Marc Alterio, retiring school wellness director, presented the survey results to the School Committee Monday night. The survey was given to high school students, and in modified form to middle schoolers a year and a half ago in December, 2000, after controversy about some of the survey topics and the credibility of the responses.

The Substance Abuse Prevention Advisory Council recommended in December 1999 that the two separate surveys — one for middle school students and one for high school students — be given in Reading, as they were in 1998, with modifications to the younger students' questions. A number of parents, and one member of the advisory council, strongly objected to the wording of the survey questions and their content, particularly sexuality. The advisory council, after meeting with school administrators, eliminated sixth graders from the survey and cut questions about sexuality from the survey for seventh and eighth graders. School administrators further modified the survey format.

"These are not necessarily [just] school issues," Alterio said as he began Monday's presentation.

Smoking increase among teens

Cigarette use for eighth grade students, male and female, has increased "considerably" since 1998, according to the middle school survey summary. Tobacco use is also up by high school students, according to the high school summary.

Reading Memorial High School Principal Frank Orlando said he sees an increase in cigarette smoking everywhere. But not in town schools, said

Coolidge Middle School Principal John Doherty.

"Our tobacco use is high," Fiore said, "And tobacco is a gateway drug."

All 14 year-old peer leaders who tried to buy cigarettes as part of a compliance check by the Board of Health this past Saturday night got their smokes, Fiore said. After three sales of tobacco to a minor, a store can lose its license to sell tobacco, Fiore said.

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JANE FIORE, HEALTH
ADMINISTRATOR

Members of the School Committee questioned Fiore and Alterio about what the survey numbers mean. We could be making progress against the tide, suggested School Committee member Harvey "Pete" Dahl.

But, "What you do doesn't work," School Committee member Carl McFadden told Alterio and Fiore. Between 1998 and 2000, we were so busy answering questions about the 1998 survey we did little parent education or peer leadership, Fiore replied. The summaries of the two surveys, middle and high school, list how and in what grade students are taught how to avoid each risky behavior.

Fiore was concerned about the responses on another survey topic: suicide. "It's overwhelmingly inconceivable that our children are so sad," Fiore said. "We need to talk about suicide more" so people know where to go for help. School Committee Chairman Timothy Twomey questioned the responses to two suicide-related ques-

tions. More students made a suicide plan, he said, than considered harming themselves.

'Ecstasy' is here

On a related issue, the drug Ecstasy is in town, Fiore reported in response to a question from McFadden. But she described the drug as a police and public health issue, because it is not taken at school.

In other survey findings:

- More than a third of middle school students, 35 percent, had a drink of alcohol without their parents' permission, according to students who responded to the question.

- Fewer high school students in Reading, 32 percent, compared to the state average of 51 percent in 1999, reported riding in a car in the past 30 days with a peer who was drinking alcohol and driving. "Something is getting through," Fiore said. Kids say designated drivers are drinking less, according to Alterio.

- Local students' use of marijuana is down, compared with the state average, Fiore said.

- Steroid use is up among high school students to 7 percent; the state average was 4.6 percent in 1999.

- 16 percent of high school students said a date or someone they were going out with had physically hurt them. The state average was 10 percent.

Condom use up

In the category of sexual behavior, Dahl said responses indicate that condom use increases with students' age. He said he was told that students were told they had to be a certain age to buy condoms. He asked Fiore to check into that issue. The Department of Health has its limits, she replied.

If the Youth Risk Behavior Survey is to be administered again, it will be up to the middle and high school administrators. Alterio's position has been eliminated by a cut in state funds, school Superintendent Dr. Harry Harutunian said.

Grant applications request this kind of information, which comes directly from students, Fiore said.

Beyond the survey, in the category of violence-related behavior, Harutunian told the committee that Reading police said 9,000 guns — not including rifles — are registered in Reading. That's 1,000 more guns than households, he said.