

WVCSD EdTalk: August 10, 2022
Dr. David Leach, Superintendent of Schools

The Warwick Valley Central School District is committed to providing a safe and welcoming learning environment for all of our students, faculty, and staff. One critical aspect of this commitment is addressing the risks associated with substance use.

On Thursday, August 4, there was a presentation at the Board of Education meeting titled “Drug & Alcohol Awareness & Prevention.” We discussed the many programs and resources the district currently employs to combat drug and alcohol use at the school-age level and some new plans for the upcoming school year.

While drug and alcohol use is a national problem, our very own students are working through making appropriate choices, according to the Pride Survey, which is conducted every other year. The next one will be conducted this school year. The 2020-21 Pride Survey shows us that the problem grows as students get older:

- Students who used alcohol in the last 30 days: Eighth-graders 9%, 10th-graders 21% and 12th-graders 34%
- Students who used marijuana in the last 30 days: Eighth-graders 1.5%, 10th-graders 10% and 12th-graders 23%
- Students who used E-cigarettes in the last 30 days: Eighth-graders 6%, 10th-graders 9% and 12th-graders 20.5%

Since students spend such a large portion of their time in school, it is crucial that educators provide them with the resources they need to avoid/reduce their exposure to and use of drugs and alcohol. This summer, members of our administration, faculty, and staff are continuing to develop a variety of drug awareness, prevention, and treatment programs designed for students and teachers. We want to ensure that our entire school community receives positive, useful messages about alcohol and drug avoidance so we can foster that environment where everyone is set up to prosper.

The district’s awareness and prevention plan includes the following actions:

- **School Resource Officers (SRO).** The district now has five full-time Warwick Police officers, along with 14 security guards on staff, more than double the number employed by the district in 2018. We have enhanced the security level in our schools overall. Our fifth SRO will work a flexible schedule, providing more oversight of after-school events. We are also considering revising our DARE program curriculum for SROs to use to complement elementary education. And, this summer, in partnership with the police department, we hosted the inaugural Warwick Police Department Junior Police Academy to teach the junior cadets the leadership, collaborative and communication skills, as well as citizenship and problem-solving – that are outlined by our district’s Portrait of a Graduate.
- **Professional Development.** District faculty and staff receive regular training around recognition and prevention related to drug use and children at risk.
- **Crisis Teams.** Each of our school buildings has its own team of district staff members trained in

crisis management who are prepared to be utilized in the event of a crisis. The teams include psychologists, counselors, nurses, and guidance staff. The teams also have access to county-level members who can assist, as needed, in crisis intervention/stress management.

- **Health Classes.** In middle school and again as part of required coursework in high school, students take a health class that includes a critical unit on the dangers of drugs. The unit also addresses peer pressure and its role in decision making.
- **Technology Monitoring.** The district pays close attention to inappropriate student activity on all district-owned technology. Alerts are generated for anything related to drugs, self-harm, or other dangerous behaviors. If they see something, students and families are also encouraged to say something to a school administrator.
- **Breathalyzer Checks.** At high school dances, students undergo a breathalyzer check to help deter underage drinking.
- **Anonymous Alerts.** Through the Anonymous Alerts tip line, students or parents in the school community can anonymously submit any suspicious activity, bullying or other student-related issues, such as drug or alcohol use, to a school administrator.
- **WVMS & WVHS Prevention Coalition.** In 2009, the Warwick Valley Community Center and the school district partnered to form this group to help Warwick youth, families, and community members understand how substance abuse develops and to take an active role in preventing substance use disorders. Both WVMS and WVHS have active school-level coalitions made up of administrators, teachers, and students, that meet internally to develop strategies to promote drug prevention within our school buildings. They also meet monthly with the larger organization to plan community forums and other awareness events.
- **Marijuana Forum.** In partnership with the Coalition and the Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Council of Orange County, the district hosts an annual informational forum for the local community. The district discusses the increased accessibility our school-aged children have to cannabis and cannabis products, as well as the growing presence of cannabis marketing.
- **Hidden Mischief.** Prevention educators from the Alcoholism & Drug Abuse Council of Orange County give parents the opportunity to search a teen bedroom – “scavenger hunt style” – to look for items that may indicate substance use or other self-harming behaviors. After all participants have had a chance to search the mock bedroom, all items in the room are revealed, including those that were overlooked.
- **Red Ribbon Week.** A catalyst in mobilizing communities to educate youth and encourage participation in drug prevention activities. Warwick has participated in Red Ribbon Week since its inception and we are looking forward to being the host for an inter-district launch event during Red Ribbon Week in the 2023-2024 school year.
- **Trunk or Treat.** The culminating event of Red Ribbon Week is a safe trick-or-treating event hosted in the high school parking lot. Trunk-or-treat receives enthusiastic participation and appreciation from local organizations and community members, and serves as another opportunity to educate youth about drug prevention.
- **Students Against Destructive Decisions (SADD).** A club at the high school and middle school level. Students have developed an Instagram page, and use it to highlight events such as Red Ribbon Week, the American Heart Association’s Quit Lying Campaign, and pledge signings involving the choice to live a healthy lifestyle. Student members have held a door decorating contest to bring awareness to wiping out distracted driving in the hopes of spreading the message

to greater numbers of students. For Valentine's Day, the students send “flower grams” to continue to spread positive messages about safety throughout the school. Every three to four years, our chapter of SADD collaborates with numerous local law enforcement agencies and emergency responders to stage a mock crash involving distracted and/or impaired driving.

- **Driver Awareness.** Juniors and seniors must attend a 90-minute driver awareness forum in order to receive a permit to drive to school. School administrators and SROs bring close attention to the dangers of distracted driving and driving under the influence of alcohol and drugs.
- **Student Leadership.** Every year, student leaders and scholar-athletes from our high school visit the seventh and eighth grade students to discuss the fun and opportunities that come with being a scholar-athlete. Students hear firsthand what it means to count on your teammates and what it takes to be counted on. Part of the discussion includes how to use your role as a Wildcat player to help you navigate or avoid situations where bad decisions can be made.
- **Pride Survey.** We conduct a survey of students across the district every other year to learn more about their behaviors in relation to drug and alcohol usage.

Additional strategies either in place or in development for the 2022-2023 school year include:

- **Educator Training.** Our professional development will continue at this summer’s Superintendent’s conference day, when local organizations will present to middle and high school teachers with information about teen issues and accessibility as it relates to drugs and alcohol. The focus will be on noticing the warning signs, and what to look for and listen for when it comes to recognizing drug and alcohol-related logos, symbolism, packaging, and commonly used language.
- **Canine Searches.** In collaboration with the Town of Warwick Police Department, canine units will resume bag and locker searches at the high school, a program that was paused during the pandemic.
- **DARE Curriculum.** The district is considering incorporating a DARE program into its elementary program. The new curriculum would be utilized by our SROs in elementary school lessons.
- **Substance-Free Pledge.** The district is looking to offer a pledge that can be signed by families to indicate that their home is a drug and alcohol-free environment in the community. We are also considering a drug and alcohol-free pledge for individual students. These would be similar to the WVHS “Contract for Life,” which we promote annually at different SADD sponsored events.
- **Quarterly Assemblies.** Special programs each marking period to address social-emotional and drug prevention topics at the high school level.
- **Peer-to-Peer Recruitment.** We are always identifying more opportunities to have student coalition representatives present at meetings for extracurricular clubs and athletics teams, to share their messages about drugs and alcohol with their classmates.

Both the high school and middle school are also looking at the individual Codes of Conduct for each school to see if there are areas that may be improved to help address issues around drug and alcohol use, accessibility, and awareness. This includes strengthening and enforcing the penalty for drinking or drug use.

It is unfortunate that even with a plethora of prevention strategies in place, school students across the

nation are still facing these challenges. Be assured that our district will continue to be vigilant, and get even tougher, in our stance to keep our students safe. Drugs and alcohol are not tolerated in our schools.

We appreciate your partnership in this important endeavor. We know that these messages take greater hold and have a greater effect when they are reinforced both at home and in school, so we continue to encourage you to have conversations about these difficult topics at home. We thank you for your continued assistance in helping our district confront this troubling issue.

As our drug and alcohol prevention plans and initiatives evolve, we will continue to keep you informed. We are looking forward to welcoming your children back for the start of the 2022-2023 school year on September 6. And when they arrive, we want them – and you – to know that Warwick Valley schools are, and always will be, a safe place for learning.

Here are some highlights from our schools this week:

Park Avenue Elementary School

Park Avenue teachers have been preparing welcome letters for parents and students alike, which will accompany the general mailing families will receive soon. Some general themes include:

Making certain that students begin to acclimate to a regular sleep schedule well before the night before school begins. Understand how teachers prefer to communicate with families. Be sure to have their email address handy, as well as any codes for their Google Classroom if they use one. A general understanding of the school supply list is required for the school year. A specific and comprehensive list can be found on the website.

Additionally, please begin to speak to your children about what they can expect during the first day and first week of school. This small step can go a long way in alleviating anxiety. This can be especially true for our incoming kindergarteners, who do not have past experiences to use as reference points.

Remember, you can always reach out to your child's teacher with any questions.

Sanfordville Elementary School

Besides focusing on academics this summer, the Summer Academy and Extended School Year students at Sanfordville are fortunate to have a physical education experience four out of five days a week! Our physical education classes are taught by certified physical education teachers, and students see each teacher once a week in addition to "Fun Friday." Ms. Brittany Anderson's class targets skill development in the area of team sports. Students learn and practice skills in sports such as soccer, kickball, volleyball, and football. Mr. Shawn Myers' class focuses on dance and fitness. Students learn fun dances such as the Macarena and the Chicken Dance, as well as participate in speed training, jump training, and circuit training. Students also love it when Mr. Myers times their running speed with the laser machine. Ms. Kristen Schulze gathers her classes together in the Action Based Learning Lab and Sensory Hallway, where students practice balance beam, tossing and twisting, cutting with scissors, tying shoes, and other eye-hand coordination activities. On Fridays, all classes come together to practice their newly acquired skills by participating in competitive team games such as soccer, kickball, and volleyball.

Warwick Valley Middle School

The Friends of Hathorn House, a historical society honoring the legacy of Warwick's Revolutionary War militia leader John Hathorne and his regiment, visited our Summer Academy students last week. The visitors shared many interesting facts about the Revolutionary War battles that occurred in our area. It was an educational experience that the students enjoyed.

Warwick Valley High School

Nearly two dozen students, ages 10 to 15, began the second session of the Junior Police Academy last Monday, which is headquartered in the criminal justice room at Warwick Valley High School. The Academy is a collaborative effort between the Town of Warwick PD and WVCSD. The 10-day program includes classroom learning and hands-on, real-world experiences. Cadets perform activities and participate in lectures led by members of the WVPD and New York State Troopers. Cadets also learn CPR and take part in presentations, workshops, and field trips put on by professionals in the area.

The guidance staff spearheaded a college application workshop to familiarize students with the common application process, including creating an account and completing the app. The common application includes the following sections:

Profile: where colleges notify students of their acceptance or scholarships. Family: where colleges look at family information of who the student is, including their background, and what brought the student to that point of applying to the school. Testing: where a student may submit official scores to the college of their interest. Activities: where students highlight their life outside of school. Writing: where students submit their personal essays.

During the training, students were provided with common app dictionaries, including pertinent terminology, answers to frequently asked questions, and checklists to help guide them through this exciting process.