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Petaluma schools to launch opioid prevention program across classrooms



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The Petaluma school district will be the first in Northern California to roll out a Drug Enforcement Administration opioid prevention program, in response to rising concerns over a nationwide opioid epidemic.

Operation Prevention, developed by the DEA and textbook and curriculum provider Discovery Education, will launch this spring in the district of over 7,400 students. The program teaches students as young as 8 years old about the dangers of prescription opioid abuse, providing resources such as lesson plans, videos, PowerPoint presentations and parent toolkits in English and Spanish.

“Traditionally, we’re not drug prevention, we’re enforcement,” said Ryan Sibbald, the resident agent in charge at the DEA Santa Rosa office. “But we’re also getting more involved in bringing tools to the community.”

Petaluma City Schools already has in an array of drug prevention programs, but in recent community conversations facilitated by the Petaluma Health Care District, the increase of opioid abuse became a topic of concern. So Sibbald proposed the free opioid prevention program, which so far has reached 2 million students nationwide.

“Health and education are interconnected. A healthy community is a well-educated community,” said Ramona Faith, Petaluma Health Care District CEO.

Third- through fifth-graders will learn about how to read a prescription label — medicine name, dosage, side effects — and why it’s harmful taking someone else’s medication. Middle and high school students will watch videos about how addiction starts and be eligible to submit self-made public service announcement videos about opioid abuse for scholarship funds.

“Kids don’t like to be told what to do, but if you throw the facts and info and allow them to make the choice for themselves, the hope is that they will ultimately make the right decision,” Sibbald said.

Kathleen Stafford and Heather Elliott-Hudson, co-founders of Petaluma Parents Against Drugs, were main proponents of bringing Operation Prevention to the district.

They raised the issue of opioid abuse with the health care district, as well as police and school district officials.

Stafford considers herself a cautious parent. But a few years ago, when her kids were in high school, she learned about “skittles parties” taking place where teens gather to abuse prescription pills they share with one another. She’d heard about the parties on TV but never expected to come across them in her own community. “I couldn’t sit back and close the curtains on this,” Stafford said.

She felt it was important to speak openly about substance abuse issues among teens for the betterment of the community.

“We have to stop saying, ‘It’s not my kid.’ Because if it’s not my kid, it may be my kid’s friends,” Stafford said. About 44 people die annually in Sonoma County from accidental drug overdoses, county records show. One in 4 people prescribed opioids struggles with dependence issues.

In 2016, 2,012 Californians died in opioid-related overdoses, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse. Operation Prevention started in 2016 on the East Coast, Sibbald said. The program hasn’t picked up as much in California, but Sibbald hopes it will grow to reach more students.

“Petaluma seems to be a very forward-thinking community,” said Sibbald, a Sonoma County native.

“We’re really excited that Petaluma is at the forefront of this.”

After listening to parent concerns, the district also launched a peer-to-peer prevention program aimed at decreasing students’ use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs.

The prevention program is training as many as 60 students and 14 staff members to provide outreach at Casa Grande and Petaluma High School.

“The amount of vaping is skyrocketing. It’s an issue not just in our schools but across the country,” said Dave Rose, Petaluma City Schools’ assistant superintendent of student services.

“They’re easy to hide. They’re difficult to detect; they’re easy to use”

The peer-to-peer program was funded by a \$10,000 grant from the Petaluma Health Care District.

“Kids listen to kids. Peer-to-peer is more impactful than a teacher telling you not to do something,” Faith said.

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