

Parents and students get their marching orders

By TIM SMITH
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When Farmington Public Schools Director Gary Goss saw a television news report about the 16-year-old Royal Oak girl arrested for armed robbery to support a heroin habit, he was shocked.

"What really struck me about that is, when they showed her picture on TV ... I thought, 'My God, that could be my daughter,'" said Goss, during last week's Call to Action coalition-building summit, designed to kick-start community efforts thwarting the use of substances by children. "It could be your daughter ... This issue can touch any one of us."

Goss — who noted that virtually every violent crime committed in 1998 in Farmington in one way or another stemmed from drugs or alcohol — then zeroed in on the evening's ultimate message.

"I believe we need to nurture in them (youth) an attitude of intolerance," Goss said. "This goes beyond 'Just Say No.' It means, 'I won't stand for it.'"

Throughout the second annual summit, an audience of about 120 school and community leaders, parents and students at Farmington Training Center received the same marching orders:

- Unite as a community to take a tough, but caring stance against the use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs;

- Communicate in non-judgmental fashion about what behavior is or isn't expected of kids;

- Be positive role models, both regarding actions and words around young people.

Setting an example

"Do you joke about your partying? About your weekend recoveries?" asked Estralee Michaelson, director of Safe & Drug-Free Schools for the Farmington district. "Watch your attitude because humor is never appropriate when describing any drunken episode."

Michaelson implored the audience to use accurate information for the basis of talks with children about the perils of substances, talk to them at as early an age as possible; and to enforce rules clearly and logically.

"The bottom line is alcohol, tobacco and other drug use by minors is illegal, dangerous and wrong," Michaelson emphasized. "If we do our job right we can change attitudes and we can change behavior."

Farmington Hills Police Chief William Dwyer began the summit by listing a number of so-far effective initiatives by the department in curtailing the problem of alcohol and drug use among youths.

Get in tune

These include: T.H.I.N.K. (Teaching, Helping, Involving, Notifying Kids); locker drug searches in schools; the stationing of police liaison officers at Harrison and North high schools; an "open house party" ordinance, with 43 homeowners cited over the past three years for hosting parties where alcohol was consumed; random alcohol and tobacco sting operations, targeting retailers for sales to minors.

Dwyer then called on those in the audience to start a ripple

effect of community dialogue.

"My message tonight may be interpreted by some as a minister preaching to the choir," Dwyer said. "But it's my hope (that) if we all sing the message of zero tolerance tonight, promoting it to other members of the community, it will expand and become stronger ..."

"Please ask yourself, 'What can I do to promote zero tolerance in Farmington and Farmington Hills?'"

Also during the summit, school officials reported key survey findings on use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs among youths. The Co-Operation Health survey (of students in grades five-nine) was a collaborative effort of the Farmington district and Betsford Health Care Continuum.

Some of the findings: about 69 percent of ninth-graders report not having had a first drink before age 15; about 28 percent said they used marijuana at least once; about 21 percent of ninth-graders who answered the survey reported they smoke cigarettes.

"We are no different than other communities," Michaelson said. "And the numbers, in actuality, do not matter. What matters is that our kids are using as are other kids nationally." The audience then broke off into small discussion groups, to talk about four key questions about zero tolerance and coalition building.

Where are they?

Following the program, parents expressed hope that the summit could be the catalyst for

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STAFF PHOTO BY SHARON LAMBERT

Involved: Estralee Michaelson, Safe & Drug-Free Schools director for Farmington Public Schools, and Betty Nicolay of Farmington Families in Action applaud speakers at the Call to Action summit.

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needs to be drawn up to embarrass parents and merchants who supply or sell substances to minors.

"I think embarrassment stops a lot of stuff," said Harrison High School student Loreal Burns. "What if parents who give their kids stuff are put ... on TV? I don't think they'll do it again."

During the breakout portion of the program at Farmington Training Center, students made up one of numerous groups, who discussed what is and isn't being done to contribute to zero tolerance.

Time to talk

The moderator for their group was Estralee Michaelson, director of Safe & Drug-Free Schools for the district. All of the groups later summarized those discussions before the entire audience, comprised of about 120 community leaders, students and parents.

"I think zero tolerance needs to really be enforced in our schools because I don't think it's ever been mentioned," said Power Middle School student Amanda Mergener. "Nobody ever talks about it. None of the kids even knows what it means. I did-

n't know any of this stuff until I came to this summit."

Amanda and other students concurred that the student code of conduct needs to be rewritten in their jargon, in order to help them better know what behavior is acceptable. Michaelson asked them if they would consider being part of a "youth summit" to do just that, beginning in March.

"It's dumb that we're getting consequences and we don't even know what they are," Amanda said.

According to student Michael Zakalik, "kids make a big joke out of it because they don't understand what it's saying."

"The student code of conduct, I've never held one in my hand," added Aaron Cole, who attends East Middle School.

Even parents think rewriting the student code of conduct would be a positive step.

"I open that book I get every year and it's yada, yada," said Cindi Helisek, who brought son Aaron to the summit. "It's full of words that I don't understand, I don't want to understand."

"To write the book in a language that kids understand, to sit with them and go through that book and literally have them sign it as a contract ... is a wonderful idea."

Another view

Brandon Brown, a Harrison student, said regular open

forums during school on subjects such as zero tolerance and the student code of conduct couldn't hurt.

"It'd be interesting to have open forum discussions like tonight, maybe once a month in the classroom," Brandon said.

Several students said zero tolerance efforts are short-circuited by some parents, who aren't the kind of positive role models they need to be.

"We need to promote stronger standards for our parents," Brandon said.

Use of substances by teens "does have to do with peer pressure," said Rana Zaya. "But it also has to do with parents."

Aaron Cole said cigarettes are "far too accessible in the community ... and to get from parents. (Cigarettes) shouldn't be out in the open" so kids can take them.

Meanwhile, tougher enforcement of the student code of conduct would be a good start to solving what Harrison sophomore Dave Kinchen called a "scary" problem.

"Zero tolerance, we need to have that enforced," even through measures such as in-school drug searches, Dave said. "... This problem has to be stopped."

What to say to your children:

Adults must "send intolerant, but caring messages" to children when they joke about things such as partying, said Estralee Michaelson, Farmington Public Schools' director of Safe & Drug-

Free Schools, during the Call to Action summit.

Some ways to deliver such messages are listed here: ■ I am concerned about what I am hearing.

- "If (use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs) is illegal and dangerous."

- "That offends me."

- "That scares me."

- "I'd like to talk further with you."

Michaelson also suggested parents hug or kiss their children more frequently — but not just to show affection. "Watch for odors. We need to be more attuned."

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