

Summary of the 2009 PHSO and Prevention Coalition Parent Information Night
February 24, 2009 7:00 – 9:15 p.m. at PHS

Approximately 100 people attended and were treated to a dynamic and informative evening concerning alcohol and drug use and prevention by students. The evening began with a power point describing current statistics concerning use in our community. Mr. Michael Monahan, Director of Student Support Services at PHS, welcomed everyone and described the night's agenda. He described the mood for prevention as very different this year. Many positive factors are converging for change. There are new policies at the high school and in surrounding communities. The colleges are expanding rules to reduce alcohol poisoning and misbehavior as a result of drinking. Middletown and Newport have grant money to expand advertising aimed at preventing underage drinking. They have provided funding to their police departments to triple patrols concerning substance use. Portsmouth is examining new consumption laws and can also step up their efforts to change the cultural norms and help our students. All of these activities are geared to supporting good parenting and making underage use of alcohol and substance use not worth it for our kids.

He then announced approval of the new Portsmouth Community Center at 402 Park Avenue: Savior's Light Community Center. A frequent concern has been that kids have no where to go. One of the goals of the new center is to provide such a place. Thank you to Paula and Mike Ramos who have made this possible! Paula and Mike welcome support and donations to support the necessary renovations.

Kate Mahoney, Student Assistance Counselor at PMS, introduced the new student assistance counselor at the high school and spoke about services at school. Kate described the various services that the student assistance counselors can provide. She stressed the problems are very visible here. All you have to do is look at the number of empty alcohol containers lining Union Street. The community can help by changing cultural norms and working towards a supportive and safe atmosphere for all students.

Mr. Littlefield, PHS Principal, described his efforts to keep drugs and alcohol off school property and what the policies and consequences are. He explained how he came to view these issues differently and now is committed to publicizing what is happening so we can all work together to protect our kids. He also described the measures he takes with his own teenagers and what to say when making those dreaded calls to other parents to be sure there is supervision and the kids are where they said they were going to be. Throughout the evening, Mr. Littlefield conveyed that he is doing everything he can to protect kids, hold them accountable and get them on the right path. He continues to contact parents of 18 year old students "as long as the parent claims the student on their income tax return".

Donna Darmody, Health Education Director at RWU, gave a clear and straightforward message of zero tolerance for students under 21. She provided statistics indicating that Northeastern Colleges are particularly dangerous places for alcohol poisoning. Simply having a policy of not driving after drinking isn't enough to be safe. She reminded parents that they are the experts on their own children and their job doesn't stop at 18. The hard work begun in the delivery room continues and parents have the power and the influence to protect their children.

Claire Harmon, freshman at RWU, described her decision to avoid alcohol and drugs and how her parents encouraged her choices. She is working to establish a substance free dorm for living and learning at RWU.

Lance Hebert, Portsmouth Police Chief, reminded us that the problems with underage drinking have decreased. He asked parents to support the police and tell their kids to cooperate with the officers. He encouraged everyone to trust that the police are supporting the job of parents by providing consequences when necessary.

Attorney Cort Chappell discussed the consequences of drinking and drugs as the rungs of a ladder. When students are under 18, they can be dealt with by the Juvenile Hearing Board and avoid consequences that will follow them and interfere with college and future plans. This is only possible when everyone, including parents, cooperates and tells the truth. He encouraged parents to enforce strict consequences and take away the driver's license and never pay your child's fine for them. He recommended community service such as at a homeless shelter for alcoholics, as a learning experience.

Over 18, the consequences increase. It is not necessary for kids to be holding a drink to be charged. They only have to be in reasonable proximity of a drink. Holding a beer for a friend is never a believable excuse. During the question period, he indicated that for a first offense of flunking a Breathalyzer, the person might be allowed to plead guilty to refusing the Breathalyzer (even though they technically didn't refuse) because it is a civil issue rather than criminal. The law provides the same punishment for refusing a Breathalyzer as recording a .08 alcohol level. The punishments are much harsher for greater alcohol concentrations. He indicated his agreement with the other speakers and stressed that parents have to be home, awake and vigilant.

The night concluded with a panel for questions, including Alan Minkin, Director of Outpatient Services at Caritas. Options for drug testing through your pediatrician and using a drug test that can be purchased at CVS for prevention were discussed. The purchased test gives your child a reason to refuse drugs. The lab test has safeguards that make it hard for kids to use fake urine or someone else's urine, and provides measurable drug levels. The panel spoke of the 10-fold increase in the strength of today's marijuana and the high cost. Kids purchase grams not ounces. Parents were cautioned to lock up their prescription medications as well as their liquor cabinets. College students often open prescription medication capsules and snort the powder. Panel members described the high from smoking salvia as reportedly very unpleasant. It is still legal. Methamphetamines are starting to be seen locally but are often disguised as ecstasy pills.

Both attendees and speakers remained after the evening was formally ended to network and continue the discussion. Parents received a number of handouts and brochures, including a newspaper insert donated by the Middletown and Newport Substance Abuse Task Forces, to read and share what they learned. I would like to extend my sincere thanks to the wonderful speakers, the PHSO, the Prevention Coalition and the concerned parents who attended.

Respectfully Submitted,
Liz Morley
Portsmouth Prevention Coalition