

'Don't drink' messages don't work, teens say
New tactics needed to keep young people from drinking, experts say

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Team Delta Max members at Upper Arlington High School plan a field trip. Teacher Erin Mayne, holding signup sheets, formed the group after a survey showed nearly 50 percent of juniors and seniors drank once a month.



The group supports teens who don't want to drink by providing members with activities, such as dances. From left, Allie Herrington, Allison DeRoberts and Will Fulwider discuss ideas for their field trip.

Nearly half of high-school students said they'd used alcohol during the past 30 days, according to a survey conducted last year by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Teen drinking remains popular. So do efforts to deal with it: Just say no. Zero tolerance. Drug Abuse Resistance Education. Prom Promise. Red Ribbon Week. Mothers Against Drunk Driving. Students Against Destructive Decisions.

But central Ohio teenagers, like their counterparts nationally, are often skeptical about such efforts, say school officials, experts on abuse and the students themselves.

"I think young people are extremely cynical," said Paul Coleman, president and chief executive of Maryhaven, a drug- and alcohol-treatment center on Columbus' South Side.

That growing cynicism, he said, is one reason that the average age at which kids first try alcohol has dropped from almost 13 in 1980 to younger than 10 now.

Students interviewed at Grandview Heights and Upper Arlington high schools said it's not difficult to find drinking parties in their communities. And students often go to parties in the Ohio State University campus area.

Lawyer Brad Koffel said he's counseled hundreds of teens and their families after drunken-driving arrests.

"People would be shocked by the underground binge drinking high-school kids do," he said. "Kids take garbage bags and a bunch of beer to someone's house. Through text messaging, the party grows. They pound beer, throw the trash in the garbage bags and leave."

Grandview seniors Taylor Van Deusen, Elise Hooley, Laura Modlich, Bryan Riggs, Louis Guida, Shawn Rine and Garrison Graves said they're too busy with sports, academics and work for the party scene, but they agreed there is little student support for zero tolerance.

"Zero tolerance doesn't work," said Modlich, adding that she doesn't drink or feel pressure to. "People (who drink) don't care if there's a penalty."

Bexley High School Principal John Kellogg said students have become more immune to the anti-drinking message.

"Kids have devised ways of thinking about it that buffer the impact: 'We have designated drivers.' They think self-policing reduces the risk," he said.

Upper Arlington High School Principal Kip Greenhill sent 125 students home from the 2007 prom after vodka and cases of beer were found in limousines students arrived in.

What's the solution to a decades-old problem -- witness James Dean's drunken-teen scene in 1955's *Rebel Without a Cause* -- that's only grown bigger?

Greenhill responded by moving the prom from a location that sells alcohol, the Lifestyle Communities Pavilion in the Arena District, to COSI Columbus. He also moved prom time up 2 1/2 hours to eliminate drinking with dinner.

"Attendance dropped more than 200 for prom for 2008 but we've taken the stance to have a drug-free, fun event," Greenhill said. "We're not going to compromise on our vigilance."

Schools are increasingly asked to curb teen drinking, Kellogg said. "It's not going to happen because schools address it. It's a societal issue."

In addition, the national focus on zero tolerance is misguided, Koffel said.

"Your household policy needs to be realistic," he said. "That requires an honest conversation with your teen and their friends about what they're doing when they're away from you."

Parents should tell their children that if they're going to drink, they should do it at home under their supervision, Koffel said. If they drink outside the home, they cannot drive, and their parents will pick them up and grant them amnesty, he said.

"I'm not sanctioning it, but it's not illegal to serve your own (child) in Ohio," Koffel said.

Rather than zero tolerance, he said, "Parents and schools need to be focused on drunk driving, alcohol poisoning, sexual assaults, unprotected sex, choking on vomit, the big problems associated with surreptitious binge drinking."

But members of Upper Arlington High School's Team Delta Max, a group for students who don't drink, see parents' roles differently.

"The thinking is kids are going to drink, that it's part of growing up," junior Meaghan Novi said. " 'You're safe in my house, so why not have it in a safe environment?' I think that influences their kids a lot."

Added senior Abbey Ginn: "Definitely some parents won't tolerate it, like ours, but some parents are oblivious to it. They might do something about it if they knew. It's hard to find parents who want to stand up against societal norms. I think parents experience pressure."

Teacher Erin Mayne formed Team Delta Max in 2006 after a survey showed nearly 50 percent of juniors and seniors drank once a month, she said.

"Anecdotally, a decent number of us knew kids going through some tough times with drinking," she said.

The club now has about 50 members, meets regularly and sponsors dances that draw more than 500 students.

Chase Pitman, Mark Crawford and Ginn, all seniors, and Novi said that even though they don't feel pressure from other students to drink, Team Delta Max offers a support system for their lifestyle.

Coleman, Koffel, Mayne and Kellogg said a deeper level of conversation with teens is needed. Greenhill said students need to take responsibility and leadership roles to fight teen alcohol abuse.

"It's time to roll up your sleeves and have a nitty-gritty conversation," Koffel said. "It worked for smoking. It worked for sex. It will work for alcohol."