

Youth advisory committee says DARE ineffective and inadequate

THE West Vancouver Youth Advisory Committee has expressed serious concerns about the DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) program.

In a report copied to West Vancouver council, school board and police, the Youth Advisory Committee said the program was inadequate and lacks realistic information for students.

DARE teaches students in Grades 5, 7 and 8 how to recognize and resist peer pressure to try alcohol, tobacco, and illegal drugs. The program advocates zero tolerance for substance abuse.

DARE began in Los Angeles in 1983 and is now used in 47 countries worldwide. It came to West Vancouver in 1995. RCMP members in North Vancouver also recently began teaching the program.

The Youth Advisory Committee feedback was compiled after members had read a November 1999 review of the Drug Abuse Resistance Program (DARE) in West Vancouver Schools, was compiled by local researcher Dr. Charles Curtis.

The committee's comments include the following:

DARE is" not taken seriously because the content is far too juvenile and doesn't get to the reality of the issues (e.g. cartoon characters telling students not to take drugs). 'Just say no' may work for young children but is ineffective as students get older. Students need to be given the facts to make their own decisions"

Drug and alcohol education programs should be backed by counseling facilities and a recognition that some substance abuse is not mere experimentation but is linked to other problems (the DARE program works on the assumption that drug and alcohol use in linked to peer pressure);

Programs should deal with hard drugs, which are easily accessible to students—not just on marijuana and alcohol;

The high rate of drug and alcohol use and experimentation among older students is a clear indication of the need for an additional secondary drug education program.

"Obviously we're concerned (by the report)," said West Vancouver mayor and police board chairman Ron Wood. "The youth are the most directly involved in this. If the youth are saying it's not effective and it's not working properly for them, somebody's got to come up with a revised program, whatever that is."

Wood said the police board had been aware of Youth Advisory Committee concerns prior to the publication of its report.

The Curtis review suggests a strong short-term success rate for the DARE program within the municipality, with positive responses from the DARE graduates and parents polled. Parents felt their children possessed the skills to say no to drugs and were able to approach police officers with questions or if they were in trouble.

However, some parents also shared many of the youth group's concerns: the need for a drug education program at higher grade levels, a more realistic portrayal of drug usage (including photographs of or exposure to addicts) and a need for a less repetitious program using Canadian, not American, materials.

Some parents suggested that DARE instruction should consist less of direct teaching and more of open discussions in which children are encouraged to express opinions. These parents "contended that DARE was presented in too restrictive a manner and students were not motivated to think for themselves."

Curtis' review noted that many students "justified their decision not to use DARE strategies with the explanation that they had believed that these strategies would not have worked."

Regional results from a 1998 McCreary Centre Society survey of teen behaviors and attitudes show that substance use and experimentation is generally 1% to 7% higher in the West Vancouver-Garibaldi region than the provincial average.

"By the time a kid has gone through a West Vancouver secondary school and graduated they have every single one of them experimented with some kind of drug," said Youth Advisory Committee chairman Derek Muller, a Grade 12 student at Sentinel.

Muller said there is "big-time negativity" whenever the DARE program is brought up among his peers: "People enjoy mocking it. I don't know one person who thinks DARE serves its purpose."

WVPD Const. Scott Findlay, a DARE instructor who trained in a Los Angeles high school, said the perception of the advisory committee that DARE's approach was "juvenile" could be due in large part to the fact that many of them were taught the Grade 7 program because the high school curriculum was not available at the time. He said the new program, to be introduced at the Grade 9 level in West Vancouver secondary schools this fall, did not feature cartoon characters and was far more detailed about types of drugs and their effects. Findlay said the DARE team was disappointed that the Youth Advisory Committee did not contact them to ask any questions before writing its report.

Muller and his peers would prefer to see a more hard-hitting approach to drug education. They were impressed with a National Film Board documentary, *Through a Blue Lens*, which follows police officers in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside interacting with long-term drug addicts.

West Vancouver councilors suggested Monday that perhaps a combination of realism and DARE should be considered.

"Parents have to take responsibility as well," added Coun. Victor Durman, who has already driven his young son through the Downtown Eastside to witness the horrors of drug abuse first-hand. "You can't just say, 'my kid's taken DARE so they know not to take drugs.'"

But the Youth Advisory Committee wants DARE replaced entirely.

"I'm convinced," said Muller, "that the DARE program simply isn't the way to go and should be abolished completely. If it was removed, things wouldn't change."