



Substance Abuse and Violence Prevention Inside the 21st Century School House

The Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.) program, the pioneer prevention effort founded in Los Angeles in 1983, is going high-tech, interactive, and decision-model-based. Gleaming with the latest in prevention science and teaching techniques, D.A.R.E. is reinventing itself as part of a major national research study that promises to help teachers and administrators cope with ever-evolving federal prevention program requirements and the thorny issues of school violence, budget cuts, and terrorism.

Gone is the old-style approach to prevention in which an officer stands behind a podium and lectures students in straight rows. New D.A.R.E. officers are trained as “coaches” to support kids who are using research-based refusal strategies in high-stakes peer-pressure environments. New D.A.R.E. students of 2004 are getting to see for themselves -- via stunning brain imagery -- tangible proof of how substances diminish mental activity, emotions, coordination and movement. Mock courtroom exercises are bringing home the social and legal consequences of drug use and violence.

“New D.A.R.E. is setting the gold standard for the future,” says Charlie Parsons, Executive Director of D.A.R.E. America, “Prevention inside the 21st century school house will need to be effective, diverse, accountable, and mean more things to more people, particularly with the safety issues that have emerged since Columbine and terrorist alerts. That’s one reason why every New D.A.R.E. officer is also being trained as a certified School Resource Officer (SRO).”

The New D.A.R.E. curriculum is in its third year of a massive five-year national research effort funded by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Under the direction of principal investigator, Dr. Zili Sloboda, the University of Akron’s Adolescent Substance Abuse Prevention Study is a rigorous scientific evaluation of the New D.A.R.E. curricula designed to blend the latest in effective prevention science with the nation’s largest prevention delivery network—D.A.R.E.

Dr. Herb Kleber, internationally recognized substance abuse expert and Chairman of D.A.R.E. America’s Scientific Advisory Board, praises the ambitious scope of the New D.A.R.E. curriculum study, “D.A.R.E. has had the highest dissemination for decades of any school-based drug prevention program. It reaches 26 million children a year in 75 percent of all school districts and is admired by children and parents alike,” says Kleber, “The generous support of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the talent of the University of Akron group have made it possible to combine this acceptance with state-of-the-art- teaching and content to make D.A.R.E. not only the most popular, but the best.”

With research showing that adolescents, in particular, need to be involved in the learning process, experts shifted the focus in the new D.A.R.E. curriculum to include officer-facilitated work, discussion groups, and role-playing sessions. “The resulting ‘group dynamic’ of New D.A.R.E. encourages kids to work together on assignments and think for themselves,” says Dr. Sloboda, “New D.A.R.E. is about giving kids the skills and information they need to make good life choices.”

Now underway in six U.S. cities -- Detroit, Houston, Los Angeles, New Orleans, Newark, and St. Louis -- the University of Akron’s New D.A.R.E. study is the largest substance abuse prevention research effort ever conducted. To develop and test the next generation of middle and high school prevention programs, the study involves a total of 88 high schools and their 137 feeder middle schools. High school and middle school “clusters” are randomly assigned to receive the New D.A.R.E. 7th and 9th grade curricula. Approximately 9,500 New D.A.R.E. students and approximately an equal number of control group students will be followed for five years to determine the program’s impact. “Because statistics show that the greatest increase in substance abuse occurs between the 8th and 10th grades, New D.A.R.E. intentionally targets the 7th and 9th grade “peak-at-risk” times with increased prevention programming,” says Dr. Sloboda.

The results of the New D.A.R.E. 7th grade curriculum showed improvements in the students’ decision-making skills, refusal skills, and beliefs that substance abuse is not the norm for adolescents. Eighth grade results became available in late fall of 2003. “The seventh grade results were encouraging,” says Dr. Sloboda. “And this recent data helped us to confirm that we are on the right path in preparing children for the ‘at-risk’ years.”

D.A.R.E.’s elementary school program has also been updated with the latest in prevention science and will dovetail with New D.A.R.E. middle and high school programming. “The entire D.A.R.E. program, top to bottom, is benefiting from researched-based messages to an extent never before possible,” says Parsons of D.A.R.E. America, “That’s just how fast the prevention field is evolving.”

According to Joe Villani, Deputy Executive Director of the National School Boards Association and member of D.A.R.E. America’s Education Advisory Board, the New D.A.R.E. study at the University of Akron has the potential to transform the entire substance abuse and violence prevention field. “With the study’s solid emphasis on what works in prevention, plus the D.A.R.E. network’s ability to reach millions of kids every year, the possibilities to create a positive and sustained impact are very real, says Villani, “Plus, when all is said and done,” he adds, “New D.A.R.E. is cutting-edge prevention delivered in the context of what kids think is ‘cool’.”

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