



Independent, locally owned and operated!

www.lamorindaweekly.com 925-377-0977

Published October 8th, 2014

Teen Suicide Ideation Rises Again

By Nick Marnell

The number of 11th graders in the Acalanes Union High School District who have seriously considered attempting suicide is on a steady increase, according to statistics released in the 2013 California Healthy Kids Survey. The statistics not only trend upward, they exceed the CHKS 2011 state average.

"It's the stress. There is too much pressure to succeed here," said Campolindo High School psychologist Bonnie Willax, who has seen her case load double over the past five years. "Cut back on the three hours of homework," she said. "More homework does not create a smarter kid." Willax said she recently counseled a young girl who had written a suicide note.

The CHKS 2011 state average for suicide ideation is 17 percent among 11th graders. The rate among AUHSD 11th graders has steadily grown from 14 percent in 2005 to 18 percent in 2013.

"We are not sure to what to attribute the slight increase," said John Nickerson, AUHSD superintendent. "That said, we have begun a process to evaluate and potentially redesign our mental health services as well as examine other aspects to the school environment and general support structures."

WestEd, a San Francisco-based education research firm, developed the CHKS for the California Department of Education and has administered the survey at all four AUHSD high schools every other year since 1999. The survey measures key student behavior areas including resilience, alcohol and drug use, violence and suicide-related behaviors and school safety. Students are tested anonymously. In general, the 2013 reported averages for the risky behavior for AUHSD students fell well below 2011 state averages for 9th graders and closer to 2011 state averages for 11th graders.

The survey reported declining use of marijuana, ecstasy and painkillers over the past four years. Corroborating evidence on the behavior of teens, age 14-18 years old, was mixed. Dr. Joseph Barger, medical director of Contra Costa County Emergency Medical Services, noted that ambulance transports of patients from Lamorinda with suspected drug or alcohol issues increased from eight in 2011 to 12 in 2013. Mark Nagel, Orinda's police chief, saw a 50 percent drop in pot and drug arrests over the same period, and Moraga police chief Robert Priebe reported a 30 percent drop. Yet Lawrence Seliga, youth services officer of the Lafayette Police Department, offered this formidable observation on local high school drug usage: "You could get anything you want, or meet the person to get what you want, right on campus."

While the kids reported that painkiller medication usage dropped to below 10 percent, the three Lamorinda police chiefs offered harsher evidence. "Prescription drugs are the biggest problem in our community," said Lafayette chief Eric Christensen. "The drugs are easily accessible, and the stigma of using is not as bad as with heroin." Priebe reported two prescription drug fatalities over the past four years. And Nagel's comments matched Christensen's nearly word for word, naming oxycontin usage as the community's biggest drug problem.

The kids said that overall drinking and binge drinking have declined. "Drinking may be down slightly," said Jaime Rich, Lamorinda Alcohol Policy Coordinator for the Center for Human Development. "But it's still a big problem. Alcohol and drugs supply the coping mechanisms for dealing with the stress of needing to achieve in high school." Though the trend may be down, 34 percent of AUHSD 11th graders reported drinking in the past 30 days, and more than 20 percent of the 11th graders said they had either driven, or had been in a car driven by a friend, after drinking. "If any kid gets suspended for alcohol, that's one too many," said Nickerson. "If you hear about a party with drug and alcohol use, that's one party too many."

No one high school stood out in the CHKS averages, with no glaring differences among the schools in any one category, confirmed the superintendent, who said that his principals did not disagree with the survey data.

"When you are looking at the same questions every two years I think there is a great deal of

validity, at least when you are looking at trends," said Nickerson, speaking to the value of anonymous testing of teenagers. "The trend is in the right direction, but there are still too many kids participating in risky behaviors."

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA