

Brandywine Heights Area School District

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Andrew M. Potteiger
Superintendent

Attn.: The Center for Rural Pennsylvania

From: Andrew Potteiger, Superintendent of the Brandywine Heights Area School District

Re: Heroin: Combating this Growing Epidemic in Rural Pennsylvania

Dear Center members,

I would like to first take this moment to thank you for your interest and willingness to investigate and understand the various perspectives of the major issue of addiction, specifically heroin abuse in our Nation but specifically Pennsylvania. Below are my specific thoughts in which I will address during the hearing on July 22nd at Schmidt Training and Technology Center, Reading Area Community College.

During today's hearing I hope to provide you with a unique education and community perspective to the battle we are facing in the Nation, Pennsylvania and our local communities. I have recently concluded my first year as the Superintendent in the Brandywine Heights Area School District which is located in Topton, Pennsylvania; located about 10 minutes south of Kutztown and almost exactly between the cities of Reading and Allentown. The District and community is primarily rural and because of the location, it has alluded a lot of the major drug and criminal activities. As I transitioned through my first year as Superintendent, an alarming trend began to occur; community members, post-graduates of our School District were passing away at an alarming rate from drug overdoses, specifically heroin. In an article written on the issue, a perfect illustration was developed that behind the rolling farm land and barns adorned with hex signs, an enemy is infiltrating the lives of our youth. Five (5) deaths occurred in our small community of 2000 residents and in a span of a few weeks at the end of the winter of 2014, three (3) deaths ensued. The Student Assistance Program (SAP) which focuses on support processes for our high school students was seeing an increase in referrals overall. There also was a rise in percent of referrals as students progressed through their education with 31% of the overall referrals coming from the senior class. Action was necessary.

On April 1st, a meeting was held to address the issue with our community. Partnering with Caron Foundation as well as the honorable Senator Schwank, a presentation of awareness and education was developed. This was followed by 15 simultaneously run breakout sessions focused on specific questions to elicit feedback and suggestions for action. The night was a huge success with over 500 community members participating. The information gathered was evaluated by community leaders, parents, clergy and school officials and five unique subgroups were established based on the feedback. A subsequent meeting was held in partnership with the Berks County District Attorney's Office and the Council on Chemical Abuse. The night also introduced the five subgroups and the community members who volunteered to shepherd this task of leading the group. Numerous meetings have ensued with continued community support. The group officially became named the Brandywine Community Task Force and a non-profit organization was established. A board now exists

and monthly activities are planned to generate a more positive community environment as well as create opportunities and events to educate our community, parents and students.

The background described is our journey to combating this issue. It is encouraging to be part of this process and to work collaboratively with other leaders who are embracing this approach. I have worked closely with fellow local school district superintendents to create similar models of community engagement in hopes to join forces, collaborate, share resources and eradicate excuses comparing communities. Dr. Metrick, Superintendent of Kutztown Area School District has been a wonderful partner in this process. We have met and continue to form strong bonds between our Districts and with the support of Senator Schwank. She has been an ally and presented at both our initiatives. Providing the support locally has been a tremendous asset but it has been elevated to an ongoing broader discussion connecting local leaders together to share resources.

Dealing with the effects of heroin in the educational community is a concern which raises with four unique issues which can glean legislative support; 1. identifying the illegal drug abuse in the community and schools, 2. connecting with the resources available to help users, 3. organizing and creating awareness of all the support mechanisms which are currently available and finally 4. educating our youth to provide skills to avoid dependency on drugs.

The use of illegal drugs during the school hours is not as prevalent as reports of use prior to and after school during time when students are not engaged in an activity. Engaging students through activities associated with school and in the community is key to keeping our students positively involved. Providing a safe environment is paramount to the educational process. Maintaining that level of safety during school hours is first and foremost but can be difficult to track and manage with limited resources and staff. The larger issue of use is identifying the users, deals and use outside of school. A strong collaborative partnership with law enforcement is critical in addressing the actual use.

The second issue is connecting our students with the help necessary when they have been identified as using drugs. There have been instances this year where I had to deal with expulsion hearings of students having paraphernalia on them during the school day. The sad truth is that as a school district we cannot afford the cost implications to place students in rehabilitation programs. I had to rely on parents and their insurance coverage to seek out rehabilitation programs to get help for the student prior to allowing them to assimilate back into the school environment. Creating opportunities to help parents and users have easier access to rehabilitation supports is a necessity.

The third item of noteworthiness is the resources which are currently available. A huge step in helping the education community as well as small business owners deal with drug use by employees is creating a bank or resource guide. In conversations with a sawmill owner in our District who is experiencing an issue with an employee and drug use, it became quickly apparent that information is not prevalent for business owners on how to handle this growing problem when it enters the workforce. During the initial phases of developing the Brandywine Community Task Force I was inundated with support from a plethora of different groups. I was naïve to the supports and structure in the world of supportive health care and rehabilitation services. Having these resources organized and readily available is a huge task but one which can reap many immediate rewards.

Finally, the above issues are reactive approaches. The foundation to helping solve this problem is preventative measures through meaningful education. Studies have shown that students of

all ages benefit from research based effective programs but in particular, students in the formative years of middle school are most impressionable. Creating support and allocations for programs is critical to averting the problem. It becomes a time issue with the rigorous educational tempo required to meet the demands of the standards and the testing requirements of our students. There is not a lot of additional time in a student's schedule for education outside the core academics. The time issue is also reflective in our students as they are having increased issues with stress and anxiety which is ultimately leading to a reliance on drug use. If we are to create healthy, responsible citizens, part of the educational process must be finding that balance in instructional time to provide the necessary programs in preventive education including stress and anxiety management and character building. Allocating resources and sponsoring programs would be extremely helpful from a financial aspect for school districts.

The heroin issues which present themselves for the local and education community can be daunting. A cooperation with local and State Police is critical. Another key asset is the District Attorney's Office. In Berks County, this partnership and support has been tremendous. District Attorney Adams has mentioned several times that we cannot arrest our way out of this problem. Similarly, legislative work cannot solve the crisis either. It truly is a partnership between law enforcement, legislatures and the local community leaders and educators to attack this issue. It is this three pronged approach of education, law enforcement and legislative action which will create a safer, more promising future for our community and our young children.

I hope this provides a unique education and community perspective. If you would require any additional information, please contact me at (610) 682-5100. Again, I thank you for your vested interest.

Sincerely,



Andrew M. Potteiger
Superintendent