Some local educators wise up about students’ use of drugs

Some Lafayette area teachers and school administrators are getting into drugs and alcohol. The effort to become “street-wise” like their students isn’t a brash condonement of youngsters using mood-altering chemicals. It’s a step toward understanding and helping control one of modern society’s greatest problems.

About 70 educators convened at Chemical Dependancy Unit of Acadiana for three breakfast meetings recently. The teachers, nurses, counselors and administrators represent 30 schools and the Lafayette and Vermillion Parish School Boards.

Through the three-part program, the learned about the disease of alcoholism/chemical dependency and its symptoms. They were introduced to the variety of drugs teens and younger children have available to them. They found out how the disease affects the family and the classroom, as well as what to do when they are concerned a student may be in trouble.

“The for many of the teachers, the breakfast series has been a realization. They now know some of the things they thought were not just their imaginations,” said Mary Ann Hofstad of CDU of Baton Rouge after she spoke about symptoms at one of the sessions. “I could see a lot of them finally putting a lot of pieces of the puzzle together.”

Hofstad presented a list of behaviors commonly exhibited by students under the influence of drugs or alcohol – apathy, sleeping in class, sudden drop in grades, depression, among others.

“Normal adolescence is horrible,” Hofstad explained, “but when you add chemical dependency, it becomes a nightmare.”

They found out how the disease affects the family and the classroom, as well as what to do when they are concerned a student may be in trouble.

This is why, when you see two or three symptoms in a student, determine if drugs or alcohol is the problem first. Then, if abuse or addiction is present, the teen can be referred to a treatment center.”

Sylvia Kennedy, substance abuse coordinator for the Lafayette Parish School Board, also spoke to the group at one of the meetings. The former teacher talked about the impact that alcohol and drug use has on a student’s ability to learn, and also the impact that the student’s behavior has on the teacher and the classroom environment.

“You need to approach the student in a caring way and tell him that you are worried about what is happening,” she said.

Kennedy explained how the SAPE (Substance Abuse Prevention Education) program works in Lafayette public schools: Teachers refer names of students who are exhibiting behavior that might indicate alcohol/drug involvement to the SAPE team on the school campus. (All referrals are confidential).

The team then determines if the behavior warrants asking the parents to come to the school for a parent conference. During the conference, parents are made aware of the student’s behavior and recommendations, which would include an alcohol/drug evaluation with a professional.

As educators become more street-wise about the disease of alcoholism/chemical dependency and its repercussions on home and school life, they gain more confidence to do something when a situation presents itself.

“They feel comfortable caring for the kids again,” Hofstad said.

“If you can maintain an objective perspective with a teen, adolescence is a growing, constructive, progressive experience,” she added. “When you as the teacher also get caught up in the disease of addiction, you lose your objectivity and your ability to effectively help the situation.”