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**Ninth grade program uses assets to achieve success**

By Dr. Debra Bowers

When I came to St. Louis Park almost a year ago, I heard a lot about Children First and asset building. People talked to me passionately about the initiative as if it were new. In fact, Children First, which takes Search Institute's 40 developmental assets and turns them into community action, has been changing lives in St. Louis Park since its inception in 1992.

I saw its effects last week in the faces of the graduating class of 2005. They are the first class to be encircled by the Children First philosophy every single year of their St. Louis Park educational experience.

Nowhere is the power of intentional use of asset-building activities to produce a meaningful and measurable difference more apparent than in the Ninth Grade Asset Builders Program.

The program was developed five years ago by 9<sup>th</sup> grade counselor Angela Jerabek, with the support of principal Bob Laney, in response to a trend that was emerging among high school freshmen. During the 1998-1999 school year, 44 percent of 9<sup>th</sup> graders had received one or more Fs and 20 percent had received two or more, and truancy was on the rise. Ninth graders' use of cigarettes, alcohol and tobacco was higher than state averages.

The program has proven to have a lasting impact, as evidenced by the Minnesota Student Survey on School Climate.

Program goals are to decrease alcohol, tobacco and other drug use, reduce academic failure, improve attendance rates and decrease discipline referrals among 9<sup>th</sup> graders. Jerabek identified the specific assets that would help young people succeed in these areas and developed these strategies:

- Reduce class size in the core classes of English, social studies and science to 25-28 students. Students take these classes in blocks, and teachers meet weekly to discuss students' progress.
- Foster social competency and teacher-student relationships through "I Time" sessions, a weekly class period devoted to social and emotional issues such as chemical awareness, self-respect and grief.
- Build an understanding and mutual respect through a daylong, off-site, all-class Respect Retreat.
- Enforce school boundaries by making sure kids are in school and in class.
- Identify high-risk students and intervene as necessary.

The results are dramatic. The number of 9<sup>th</sup> grade students with failing grades has been cut in half.

Cigarette smoking dropped from 19 to 7 percent for boys and 26 to 18 percent for girls. Alcohol use declined from 32 to 25 percent for boys and remained the same (24 percent) for girls in SLP while the state average has risen to 29 percent for girls. Marijuana use dropped from 21 to 13 percent for boys and from 17 to 15 percent for girls since the program began.

The first class of students to go through the 9<sup>th</sup> grade program graduated last year. The lasting impact of positive asset building is evidenced by the way 12<sup>th</sup> graders answered the question, “Have students in your school made fun of or threatened students of different races or backgrounds?” One third fewer boys and half as many girls answered “yes.”

Thoughts of suicide and attempted suicide also decreased dramatically while positive feelings about school, and students’ opinions that teachers are interested in them as people and respect all students are higher now than pre-program responses indicated.

Congratulations to Jerabek, Laney, counselor Barb Nelson, social worker Marlee Nirenstein, dean Stacy Collins, and the 9<sup>th</sup> grade teaching staff for the outstanding work in implementing the 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Asset Builders Program. With these results, it’s no wonder that we remain passionate and enthusiastic about the power of asset building!