

## **Behavior solutions listed at Woodland Hills board meeting**

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By Deborah M. Todd, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Parents who attended the Dec. 5 Woodland Hills school board meeting to discuss discipline problems in schools were presented with possible solutions.

Lisa Freeman of the prevention initiative Tri Boro Communities That Care delivered a PowerPoint presentation outlining targeted solutions for at-risk children in the district.

The presentation included suggestions to apply the Pennsylvania Youth Survey in schools; to allow TRI Boro to help contact hard-to-reach parents; to sustain and expand CASASTART and student assistance programs; to identify a neutral facilitator to resolve conflicts within the district; and to provide cultural competency and diversity training to teachers and staff. The survey is conducted by the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency, which also funds Tri Boro.

Ms. Freeman noted that many children served by Tri- Boro in Braddock, North Braddock and Rankin come from environments of extreme poverty and violence, and joint efforts must be made by communities and schools to keep them from repeating that cycle.

“When you combine extreme economic deprivation with a lack of community resources and/or responsiveness, you increase the risk of these children developing behavior problems,” wrote Ms. Freeman in a new release. “There are many providers and parents in the community [who] are doing everything possible to prevent these youth from heading into trouble by keeping them pointed in the right direction.”

Although the presentation identified at-risk children from low-income neighborhoods, many of the recommendations could affect all students.

Pennsylvania Student Assistance Programs, for instance, allow students to refer peers for help with academic, behavioral or personal issues that may interfere with the overall classroom environment.

Lawrence F. Murray, vice president and director of youth programs for the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, said when 7 percent of a school’s student population is enrolled in the center’s CASASTART program for at least one year, marks on standardized tests go up and disciplinary incidents go down for the entire school. CASASTART seeks to reduce exposure of youths 11 to 13 years old to drugs and criminal activity. It was formerly called the Children at Risk program.

Woodland Hills Superintendent Dr. Roslynne Wilson, who invited Ms. Freeman to make the presentation, said the district would send Tri Boro a response to its recommendations after further review.

Dr. Wilson said she was receptive to some recommendations, but surprised by how many the district had already implemented. She said Ben Fairless, Rankin and Dickson intermediate schools were enrolled in CASASTART.

Bernie Galanko, of Turtle Creek Valley Mental Health/Mental Retardation, the lead agency for CASASTART in the Woodland Hills district, said the schools implemented in CASASTART did not have full referrals until January 2007. He also said a maximum of 15 students were enrolled in each school and the program could be expanded only through additional funding.

Dr. Wilson said the Student Assistance Program was in place throughout the district and teachers and staff have training in cultural competency. She also noted the district participation in the national Gottfredson Study of delinquency prevention in schools.

Dr. Wilson said implementing the Youth Survey would be a “board decision” due to the personal nature of some questions.

She is open to discussing behavioral problems, but does not believe the district has an excess of behavioral problems.

District Attorney Steven Zappala recently sent a letter to the district that no criminal investigation is necessary for concerns raised by Swissvale Police Chief James Ohrman that schools failed to report crimes that occurred on campuses. Dr. Wilson said that outcome was because “there was nothing to look into.”

She said there may have been communication issues between the police and schools, but they were resolved in a Nov. 2 meeting among her, the district attorney and municipal police chiefs.

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