

Chippewa Valley board hires principals, hears drug survey results

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The Chippewa Valley Board of Education approved Kevin Koskos as the next principal of Dakota High School's Ninth Grade Center on June 2. (Photo by NICOLE TUTTLE)

The Chippewa Valley Board of Education approved the appointment of two new principals in the Macomb Township area of the district on June 2, and heard a recent study on student drug and alcohol perceptions.

The board approved Kevin Koskos as the next principal of Dakota High School's Ninth Grade Center, with the effective date of July 1.

"Mr. Koskos is being appointed to fill a vacancy created by the conclusion of a contractual agreement and he meets all of the qualifications specified in the posting," Chippewa Valley Superintendent Ron Roberts said.

Koskos said he went into administration in 2006.

"I have often said in interviews I am a K-to-career Chippewa Valley guy," Koskos said.

Chris Gardner, who is currently the principal of Mohawk Elementary School, was approved as the next principal of Iroquois Middle School with the effective start date of July 1. Current Iroquois Principal James Capoferi recently announced his retirement.

"I am extremely humbled to be chosen to replace Mr. Capoferi after such a long and distinguished career," Gardner said. "I'm excited to work with staff at Iroquois."

The principal position at Mohawk will soon be posted, according to Roberts.

In addition to the appointments, the board also read a resolution regarding the retirement of Fox Elementary School Principal Darlene Wade.

"I just want to recognize Darlene Wade, who retired as principal this evening after being with our school district for

nine years ... It's difficult being a principal these days. There are so many demands, so many expectations from everyone, and to balance all those things and being successful is not always an easy task," Roberts said.

Survey measures perceptions of drugs, alcohol

The board also heard a report from the Chippewa Valley Coalition for Youth and Families.

Executive Director of the Chippewa Valley Coalition for Youth and Families Dr. Charlene McGunn said that the Chippewa Valley Coalition for Youth and Families has been in existence for 18 years and now has 67 adult members and over 100 youth members. The group's goal is to connect with the community to work on preventing and reducing student use of alcohol and other drugs, as well as suicide prevention, according to McGunn.

"Our focus is bringing services in to our students by linking with community agencies," McGunn said. "We link with all of the major agencies in Macomb County. We also conduct broad-based community education campaigns and create best practice programs. Some of our programs are used throughout the county, the state and one is now being used throughout the nation ... But we serve as a resource for local government, for county government. We are the largest coalition in Macomb County, the third largest in the tri-county area."

McGunn said that student surveys are done every two years, and survey results will be mailed out to district parents of middle and high school students.

"We conduct the Michigan Profile for Healthy Youth, which is a Michigan Department of Education survey," she said.

This year's survey was conducted last February. Seventh-, ninth- and 11th-grade students in the district took the computer-based, anonymous survey with parental permission. The coalition also conducts focus groups every two years and conducted the last one in February, McGunn said. Nine focus groups were conducted between Dakota, Chippewa Valley and Mohegan high schools.

"We are showing a declining trend in alcohol use ... This is data of our seventh-graders, and you can see the past 30 day use has declined from 2008 to 2014," McGunn said. "We look at around 4 to 5 percent as significant."

One issue that the coalition examines besides 30 day use is perceptions of harm from the use of drugs or alcohol that students have, according to McGunn.

"Typically use is much lower, of course, in seventh grade," she said.

According to the coalition's focus groups, however, this changes by the next year.

"What our students tell us is that use jumps in eighth grade, fairly substantially jumps between eighth and ninth grade," McGunn said.

In spite of this, the coalition has seen a decline in alcohol use at the ninth-grade level, according to McGunn.

"In ninth grade if we could look at that, we see a decline in 2008 from 21 to 12 percent in 2014. That is a very substantial decline and we're really pleased. We would like to think it is the result of a lot of parent education on the part of the coalition and peer perception of harm," she said. "It kind of remains at about three-fourths of the students seeing alcohol use as harmful ... Alcohol in 11th grade declined, from 2008 to 2014 to 33 percent of our 11th-graders reporting past 30 day alcohol use. Alcohol is still the primary drug of choice for adolescents ... We want to take a look when we have the access to more county and state data, but it is similar to data in all areas except for a few areas of decline in the county and in the state."

Of great concern to the coalition were the findings on marijuana, which illustrated a reduced perception of risk among students, according to McGunn. In states like Michigan in which medical marijuana has been approved, students see it as less harmful than cigarettes, according to McGunn.

“When we conducted the focus groups, we heard from our students a substantial normalization of marijuana use, which is no surprise to school administration and school staff,” McGunn said. “It is true here; it is true across the state and across the country.”

In states like Michigan in which medical marijuana has been approved, students at all grade levels surveyed see it as less harmful than tobacco use, according to McGunn.

“Now marijuana use at ninth grade, these are our ninth-graders at Chippewa Valley and Dakota high schools, past 30 day use is 9 percent. But what we want to particularly highlight is that similar to other areas, our students are increasingly seeing marijuana as safe. So only 64 percent of our ninth-graders believe that marijuana use is harmful. The concern is that once the perception of harm declines, increase in use and youth use usually follows. But marijuana did remain stable in this 2014 data,” McGunn said. “Eleventh grade we had a slight uptake but did not show statistically significant changes in marijuana use.”

At 11th grade, about one-fourth of the district’s students reported past 30 day marijuana use, a number that the coalition had anticipated would be higher, given other reports across the state and nation, according to McGunn.

“Here we see very concerning statistics and that is 42 percent of our 11th-graders, only 42 percent, believe marijuana is harmful. And if someone does not think something is harmful, that really disposes them to use,” she said.

Tobacco use among the district’s juniors declined to 12 percent from 18 percent, and other grade levels show lower numbers, she added.

“Those students that report use of any drug, alcohol, marijuana, any drug at all, and report regular use, they are also generally reporting D, E and F grades. There is a real correlation between regular use and academic underachievement or failure,” McGunn said.

In the area of prescription drugs, seventh-graders reported a low incidence of use of Ritalin or painkillers, she said.

“Much of the coalition efforts have, besides alcohol and marijuana, focused on prescription drugs,” McGunn said. “Ninth grade, we see a stabilization of prescription drug use. Four percent of our district ninth-graders reported abuse of Ritalin and Adderall and Xanax, the stimulants and the tranquilizer, and 4 percent, which is a bit of a decline since 2008, report abuse of painkillers ... Perception of harm here is about the same as it is for other drugs. And then eleventh grade remains stable, a little bit of decline in prescription drug abuse.”

In addition to providing the data, McGunn also listed some of the many projects and other initiatives that the coalition is doing to combat drug and alcohol use among students, including launching the Mobilize Michigan program in April of 2013 to protect kids from marijuana and developing a Spanish language PSA.

“We operate with federal funds and donations. Five years ago we got a \$125,000 federal grant each year for five years. Our fifth year ends the end of September. We have reapplied for that grant ... If we are granted, and it is highly competitive, we will get another five years in which to operate,” McGunn said.

Another report that the board heard on June 2 was regarding the work of the K-12 curricular evaluation committee. Chippewa Valley Assistant Superintendent for Secondary Education Ed Skiba said that some committee proposals include restructuring high school music in some areas, adopting new fifth-grade social studies textbooks, a mechatronics class, a higher level ceramic arts course at the high school level, a robotics class at the middle school level, and an ACT/MME preparation class. The board has already approved elementary level handwriting textbooks and textbooks for a new elementary math program, Skiba said.

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