

NK School Committee considers tough new substance abuse policy

By Eileen M. Daly

The North Kingstown School Committee held a one agenda meeting this past Tuesday to consider tough new policy changes governing substance abuse by students.

The current policy prohibits students from using alcohol or other substances on school grounds or at school-sponsored events. The new policy changes, directed primarily at student athletes, students involved in school-sponsored extracurricular activities, and student leaders, would hold students accountable year round, whether in school, at school sponsored events or not.

According to these policy changes, "Students who decide to hold a leadership position or be part of an athletic team must make the commitment to refrain from the use of alcohol, drugs or steroids. Students are considered to be in violation of this policy if they use or are in the presence of, possess, consume (including being under the influence of) and or distribute, other than as prescribed by a physician for personal use, any controlled drug and/or intoxicant or steroid at any time (see Year Round Expectations,) whether during school, or at any school-sponsored activity, on school property, or at locations off school

property."

Another policy change involves cyber images and states, "Any identifiable image, photo, or video which implicates a student to have been in possession or in the presence of alcohol and/or drugs, or portrays actual use, or crime shall be confirmation of a violation of the code of conduct. Since there is no way to establish a time frame for when or the location of where the image was taken, it shall be a responsibility that the student must assume."

A presentation by John Underwood, a former NCAA All American International-Level distance runner, World Masters Champion and Olympic coach, underscored the importance of abstinence for all students, but emphasized athletics and high-level performance.

According to Underwood, current research indicates that one night of social drinking undoes 14 days of training. Underwood

highlighted recent scientific brain studies that confirm the extremely deleterious effects that drugs and alcohol abuse have on brain function. These negative consequences are even greater for young people whose brains are still forming, Underwood said.

A Chemical Health and Safety Program, designed by Underwood, was introduced in New York State five years ago and continues to be utilized in that state with good effect. One of the fundamental components of this program is the code of conduct clause, which specifically addresses the issue of substance use and abuse by athletes and/or students participating in school-run programs. "Participation in these programs is a privilege," Underwood said. He stressed the fact that the commonly held belief that involvement in sports serves as a deterrent to substance abuse is a myth. Instead, Underwood said, consequence be-

liefs are what deter students from using and/or abusing substances. The chemical health and safety program Underwood advocates is designed to increase these consequence beliefs, he said.

An impassioned presentation by Robin Monica, a North Kingstown parent whose son Jeff was killed in a car accident involving alcohol in 2003, followed Underwood's presentation. Monica pleaded for the council to adopt more stringent methods of preventing substance abuse by teenagers. She reiterated Underwood's point that teenagers often make bad decisions due to immature brain development. "We need to do everything we can to make sure kids don't make decisions they can't take back," Monica said.

North Kingstown High School Principal, Gerald Foley, who facilitated the program, agreed with Monica's assessment, "Enough is enough," Foley said. "We have to do more to protect our kids." He pointed out that in the years he has been with the school department there have been 14 tragic and unnecessary student deaths. One of those deaths occurred over this past holiday weekend, he said, though he declined to mention any specific names or circumstances.

The school committee's response to the presentations was overall quite positive although some concerns were raised regarding both the "In the presence of," clause and the cyber image changes.

Committee Member Doug Roth raised concerns regarding innocent kids getting swept up due to the "In the presence of," clause. Both Underwood and members of the public responded that they felt that this would be a highly unlikely event.

Committee Members Mel-

See "Drug Policy" on page 16

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