

Drug prevention education expanding in Ashland County schools



By [Courtney McNaull, Staff Reporter](#) Aug 21, 2018

Alcohol and Drug Prevention educator Kris Hickey of Ashland County Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse speaks about drug prevention efforts in Ashland County Schools.

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ASHLAND - Five years ago, some students in Ashland County were receiving repeated, school-based universal drug and alcohol prevention education, but many were not.

"When I talk to people in the community, I think a lot of parents just assume this is part of their kids' curriculum, that they get alcohol and drug education," said Kris Hickey, the Alcohol and Drug Prevention educator of Ashland County Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse. "I think a lot of them would be surprised to find out it's kind of sporadic."

In the past couple years, ACCADA has made a significant push to get into all K-6 classrooms in the county's public schools, Hickey said. As the drug crisis has gained attention, educators are becoming more receptive.

"There's not a person out there who works with kids or families or business who doesn't see we've got to do something," she said. "Maybe we can't do a whole lot with those that are getting Narcan every weekend, but if we can start in kindergarten, maybe we can change that perception of drug use."

Last year, ACCADA prevention educators were in about two thirds of the K-6 classrooms at Ashland City, Mapleton, Hillsdale, Loudonville and Crestview schools. This year, Hickey said, they are on track to be in about 90 percent of public K-6 classrooms countywide.

Hickey's presentation Monday was one in a series of events planned by a new community group to combat illegal drug use. The group was formed out of a community conversation led by the Center For Civic Life at Ashland University and the Mental Health and Recovery Board of Ashland County in February.

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ACCADA uses an evidence-based prevention program from the Mendez Foundation called Too Good For Drugs. The program discusses drugs in age-appropriate ways while focusing on social and emotional learning skills like goal setting, decision making, bonding with others, identifying and managing emotions and communicating effectively.

Hickey said her access to schools and classrooms differs from district to district and from school to school.

For example, she said, while she or another prevention educator is in nearly 100 percent of Crestview and Hillsdale classes, Ashland City and Loudonville school districts historically have been more difficult to access.

"I know we've struggled in the past at Edison school or Reagan or Taft, when you go there and do two classes in the fourth grade but there's five fourth grade classes. You're hitting and missing," Hickey said.

But Hickey said she doesn't blame the teachers or administrators. Scheduling special programs amid state testing requirements and important academic instruction is undeniably difficult.

"There's a 4-H person that comes in, there's sex education, there's a recycling lady who comes in," Hickey said. "You're all competing to get that extra 20 minutes once a week, and if a teacher lets everybody in, it takes away from their teaching time."

These days, Hickey said, all county districts say they are willing to let the program in, but it can still be tough to fit the program into school schedules.

At some schools, scheduling of Too Good For Drugs is done at the building level, while at other schools, scheduling is done at the classroom level.

In the past, Hickey recalls, each school had state funding to designate a drug prevention coordinator. Guidance counselors also had time to help.

But as guidance counselors have gotten busier with state testing and other requirements, Hickey said, "I've heard from several guidance counselors that have a hard time just seeing kids that are in crisis because they have so much of their time delivering tests and collecting tests."

So what would ACCADA need to improve drug prevention education county-wide?

Hickey would like to see each school designate a coordinator to help schedule Too Good For Drugs in each K-6 classroom. Though ACCADA might have to add staff, Hickey said, finding the funding to expand prevention efforts is not an issue.

Down the road, Hickey would like to have more prevention education in middle and high school as well, but Hickey said the program works best if it begins in elementary school and grows with the kids. Coming into classes cold in seventh or eighth grade has less

impact because students are less likely to engage and open up to the educators, she said.

Hickey would also like to help facilitate more parent education through schools. The Too Good for Drugs program has a parental component, but Hickey admits her agency has stopped giving kids parental literature to take home because most of it ends up in the trash. Hickey would like to access parents directly, through events at school or through districts' electronic communication systems.

Another thing that would help, Hickey said, would be to make sure all drug-related school programming is consistent and coordinated with ACCADA. Hickey described one instance in which law enforcement officers giving a presentation in one of the county schools showed students ways to hide drugs.

Hickey said she would have liked to weigh in on what she felt was a misguided prevention tactic.

Hickey said she would encourage all parents to ask educators at their kids' schools about the drug prevention programs they offer. And regardless of what is happening in the schools, Hickey said, parents can talk to their kids about drugs using resources from starttalking.ohio.gov.