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DHS Principal Ellen Dunn on Drugs, Drinking, Disciplining Students and What Parents Can Do

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Date : February 12, 2017

Even when Darien High School administrators are dropping the proverbial hammer down on your child in high school, the hammer is only proverbial, Principal Ellen Dunn told parents at a recent meeting — administrators are trying to help, and discipline can be a turning point for your kid.

Or, as she put it: "The lucky ones get caught."

That was among the observations and advice Dunn had for parents at the ["Truth and Consequences" panel presentation](#) last Tuesday night in Darien High School Auditorium.

Dunn, in fact, had so much to say from a perspective that few people in town have, that Darienite.com is

publishing a near transcript of what she said.

Among the points she made:

- "We do not report disciplinary actions to schools."
- "[I]t's really important for us to be connected to the parents of their friends and to understand what the expectations are among their group of friends."
- "[W]e do see an increase [in risky behaviors, including drinking and taking drugs], in periods of time during the year around big events, around big games. [...] It's important to be vigilant around those times."
- In the past 5 to 10 years, she's noticed that marijuana use seems to be up.
- There's less of a stigma about teenagers talking casually to adults about alcohol at parties, "and that's a sign of real tolerance for the use of alcohol on the weekends in our community."
- "If you haven't already done over your basement, don't do it. [...] [On a related point:] [W]e need to work together to stop providing the place where bad decisions can be made."
- "Slumber parties are for little kids, not for high school students."
- "They listen to what you're saying to them. Say it over and over and over again. [...] They need to know how much it will disappoint you."

Here's nearly everything that Dunn said in her segment of the panel presentation (we haven't used quotation marks, but what follows is a long quote; you can see and hear her for yourself in [this video of the meeting](#), from the 48- to 61-minute marks):

As I'm listening to all of the speakers tonight, I feel my own anxiety levels going up, and the fears that we have as parents. I have my own 18-year-old, [and] I'm here as the principal — the proud principal — of this school in this community where I have done the work of my life for 30 years, and these are just as much my children.

I want you to understand that we are here out of love and that is the motivation that we have as a school in terms of wrapping around this problem, supporting you, partnering with you.

Too often, I think, some of the group here at the table are seen as adversaries in this process, and that could not be farther from the truth. The police, our health care [providers] in the community — our priority is always, always the safety of our children here.

Who the Lucky Ones Are

And so some of the questions that have come to me about the consequences around the school I think are important questions, however I would rather focus on the value of the consequences.

Yes, there are suspensions. Yes, there are removals that occur from our athletic events and from our teams for periods of time. What I want you to understand is that those consequences are really love. Those consequences are discipline, and they are responses to behaviors that help our children learn to discipline

themselves.

We bring them into a high school setting as these boys and girls who have just left the middle school, and we send them out in four short years as young men and women who are going to be responsible for themselves in a setting that will be very challenging for some of them.

So it really is important that we not see these consequences that emerge as a point of conflict but as a point of coming together. I can say in my 10 years in administration in the roles that I've played, the lucky ones get caught: Because something happens, there are responses, and a whole team of people come together, and sometimes they've just experimented for the first time, sometimes they are really emerging with a real substance problem.

But in spite of the fact these events, these incidents, may cause conflict between administrators and parents, and some of that conflict can be heated in situations where discipline is being applied and parents disagree with that discipline, I will tell you that in almost every situation that I can reflect upon over these years, after the event, and after the discipline has taken place, and this child has received the help that they need, and this child has built new relationships with the adults in the building and the adults professionally with whom they are connected, I have been thanked many, many times after those days have passed.

And some of the best relationships we've had as assistant principals and principals in our schools, some of the strongest relationships we have are with the students who have struggled through some of these processes, because those days that are spent in discussions are really important days.

So, yes, there will be some missing class time and there may be a test missed, but we may have a child who's going to live and who's going to go off to college, having learned something in a very safe setting.

Reporting Discipline to Colleges

One of the other questions that came up before this evening is the question about reporting to colleges. Obviously, this is something that people are concerned about. We do not report disciplinary actions to schools.

That being said, students are asked on their applications to self report. We always encourage our students, obviously, to tell the truth. I have had many students over the years who have written about this [incidents involving discipline that they described in their college applications] who have come out of something and seen great learning, and struggled through some very difficult times, and who have been able to share that.

See also:

- [Panelists: High Rate of Teen Drinking in Darien Comes with High Stress, Lax Attitudes](#) (Feb. 8)

- [Commentary: Parents Need to Make Clear to Teens That Drinking Is Unacceptable](#) (Feb. 7)
- [‘Truth & Consequences’ Panel Discussion on Teen Drinking at DHS Auditorium](#) (Feb. 7)
- [VIDEO: Stories from Connecticut, Struggles with the Opioid Epidemic](#) (Feb. 4)
- [Group Launches Campaign to Counter Darien’s ‘Troubling Rate of Teenage Binge Drinking’](#) (Feb. 2)
- [DRINKING IN DARIEN: Worse than Elsewhere for Both Teens and Adults — and the Problem is Growing](#) (Jan. 30)
- [Police Detective: We Can’t Arrest Our Way Out of Drug Addiction in Darien](#) (Feb. 7)

I have written letters for them supporting that experience and the maturity that I've seen in them. I can also say very proudly that the great, great, great majority of our students are very honest and share with us when they've made a mistake, and that is perhaps one of the most important parts of the process — that we encourage them, that we support them as the adults in their lives, that we build those relationships.

I think it's important for us as parents to have relationships with each other, to talk with other parents. I think as we go through these high school years — I've seen this in my own circles as well, we sometimes become a little less involved with what's going on in their lives, and in many ways that's very normal, but it's really important for us to be connected to the parents of their friends and to understand what the expectations are among their group of friends.

Changes Dunn Sees

I wanted to talk a little bit about what we're seeing. I was asked to give you some feedback on if we've seen changes over the last five or 10 years.

I think this has been a problem and continues to be a problem, as many people on the panel have said, not just in our community, but across many communities: We have seen an increase, we do see an increase, in periods of time during the year around big events, around big games, when our teams are so wonderfully successful, we can have extended post-season games and we do see students who experiment at times in those settings. It's important to be vigilant around those times.

Marijuana Use Up, Stigma Down

We do see an increase in the use of marijuana. I believe that the stigma that was once associated with the use of marijuana has slipped away. It is easily accessible and it is easy to carry. It doesn't require planning for some of the parties that the police officers have talked about. A hundred cans of beer are difficult to move around, and marijuana is not.

Students are comfortable now — this is a big change — talking about drinking and talking about being at parties in general, and especially the older students, as if it is completely acceptable.

That is one of the most surprising things to me in recent years. There is a sense of — you know, I've often felt

like Poor Mrs. Dunn, just delusional, you know — why wouldn't she think that there wouldn't be any drinking going on at the parties.

I mean, it's very common for them to feel comfortable discussing this — and that's a sign of real tolerance for the use of alcohol on the weekends in our community.

We have seen an increase in e-cigarette use and afterwards [after the meeting] I've brought some examples of what e-cigarettes look like for those of you who may not have seen them. We show them to our teachers occasionally.

They are very much like a flash drive, in some cases — and it can be very easy to have them around the house and in school, in fact, and have people not detect that e-cigarettes are being used.

Some of the e-cigarettes can be modified — and we are seeing some of that as well — to use marijuana.

What She Wishes More Parents Knew

The last question that was posed to me was what do I wish parents would know — and, you know, I sit here as a parent, and I feel guilty giving you advice because I know how hard this is [...] Some of the points I gave to our group is we need to remember that they have friends and that we're their parents.

We love them so much, and we are very involved in their lives. We're probably more involved in their lives than our parents were in our lives. I think we have to be careful to not be able to tolerate their angst and their anger with us.

It is difficult, and they are going to say that they hate us, and that we're the only crazy ones, and "How can you say you're picking me up at 1 o'clock and bringing me home — everyone is sleeping over." That's my favorite one.

And, you know, my other piece of advice is: Slumber parties are for little kids, not for high school students.

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You need to put your eyes on them. You need to talk to them, and you need to know that when they come home to your home, what situation, what condition are they in, and what kinds of decisions have they made.

We were talking earlier about the parties, and, you know: If you haven't already done over your basement, don't do it. That would be a really important piece of advice.

And this is a really difficult thing. Parents are coming together and making decisions to hold a party after a prom, after a dance, after a football game, and unless you're really ready to be vigilant, we need to work together to stop providing the place where bad decisions can be made.

Tell Them You'd Be Disappointed

That's a difficult thing, and it gets back to our relationships with one another. They listen to what you're saying to them. Say it over and over and over again. They will hate to hear it again and again, but you need to keep saying it.

They need to know how much it will disappoint you.

And you will hear it in the conversations in the back seat of the car with friends when they don't think you're listening to them — they are listening to you. They may roll their eyes, but it's getting into those brains, [into the myelin](#), and it will be there in the moment when they're making a decision.

They will hear your voice. They may not make the right decision — we all know that. And related to that, when they make the mistake, love them through that mistake, because you don't want them to start to hide it from you the next time.

So I want you to know that we're here. We have a wonderful team at the high school, and I want to work with you and our community — continue to work to keep our children safe and do everything we can to never have another tragedy in our community. So thank you very much.