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Darien High School Fighting Substance Abuse in a New Way: With Student/Parent Info Sessions on the Dangers

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All but 226 Darien High School students (less than one in seven) has participated in a presentation in which a Silver Hill Hospital, a lawyer and police officers talk about the problems teens have when they take alcohol, marijuana or other illegal drugs or alcohol.

The students must attend the 90-minute session with a parent or guardian. Both student and adult must attend in order for the student to participate in sports or other extra-curricular activities.

Schools Superintendent Dan Brenner reported the attendance information to the Board of Education on Tuesday. The sessions began over the summer, and the last one (until winter) was held Sept. 18, he said in an interview.

"Every single athlete has been through it [the program]," Brenner told the board. "We had two people who were sick on the very last day [session] so we're working at a work-around for them."

The information sessions must be attended by any student who wants to participate in sports or other extracurricular activities, and must be attended by one of that student's parents or guardians at some point during each school year.

During the winter, school district officials expect to run two more sessions "and take a look at how many students are left, and make a determination as to how many more [sessions] we need," he said.

The 90-minute program has three parts, Brenner said in the interview: In one, a Silver Hill Hospital expert goes over medical information on the dangers of substance abuse — including alcohol, marijuana and other illegal drugs.

See also:

- [Learn About the Opioid Epidemic with These Four Events in Darien in October](#) (Sept. 29)
- [Op Ed: Community Fund of Darien's Teen Binge Drinking Campaign Gets National Recognition](#) (Sept. 28)

In another, the participants watch a video that shows teenagers in an emergency room, "based on tragic events," and features a 23-year-old addict who tells the story of her addiction and recovery. A third part involves legal aspects of underage driving delivered by New Canaan Attorney Matthew Maddox, Darien Youth Officer James Palmieri and DHS School Resource Officer Bryan Wallman.

Brenner said the program is a replacement for the former "commitment" policy in which students were barred from participation in those extracurricular activities for a time if they were caught violating a commitment made earlier to avoid substance abuse.

That old program "wasn't working," Brenner said. The school district had done surveys of students showing they weren't responding well enough to the threat of sanctions.

The purpose of the new policy "is to take a look and say, 'Can we be more effective,'" Brenner said. "We knew that what we were doing in the past was not effective, based on our data.

"So it continues to be our intention to survey our kids on a yearly basis so we can measure whether or not this is making a difference."

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School district officials plan to conduct the program every year, with variations so that students aren't seeing the same program year after year.