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Panelists: High Rate of Teen Drinking in Darien Comes with High Stress, Lax Attitudes

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With only two days on the assignment as school resource officer at Darien High School, Officer Bryan Wallman said at a panel discussion Tuesday night that one of his first impressions is how competitive students are with their academics, and that it may be making them more stressful.

DHS Principal Ellen Dunn, who's been working at the school for years and was also on the panel, said she's been noticing how students seem more open and unembarrassed to talk with adults about drinking at parties

and about marijuana. Don't renovate that basement if you've got teenagers who might want to host a party, she advised parents.

Those were some of the observations from the panel at the "Truth and Consequences" public discussion about teenage drinking and binge drinking.

Other panelists talked about what parents can do between the time they call an ambulance for an unconscious person found at or after a party, how they should think about legal risks if some teen gets injured at a party at their home where drinking is taking place, or how to approach communicating with a teenager.

The 90-minute public meeting, which attracted about 150 people to Darien High School Auditorium, was organized by the Community Fund of Darien and its Thriving Youth Task Force, which is trying to get more information to parents and teenagers about teenage drinking, and binge drinking among both adults and teens.

Organizers say the goal is to reduce unsafe drinking eventually in Darien, where surveys have shown it's higher than elsewhere, even higher than similar communities, like Westport, Wilton and Weston.

Teenagers driving after binge drinking have gotten into some horrific accidents — although not many in recent years in Darien, Detective Mark Cappelli said.

Some of the problems with teenage drinking parties aren't always obvious: "It's sometimes not just the alcohol," he said. "It turns into sexual assault, sometimes."

He said he's investigated two cases in the past year in which young women came to police saying they were sexually assaulted in Darien after they'd become intoxicated.

In both cases, the women dropped the matter, deciding it was too difficult to go through. In at least one case, the victim seemed to not want to pursue the matter because she thought she wouldn't be taken seriously, since she'd been drinking.

Attorney Matthew Maddox of New Canaan said he's represented the family of a child who ran out of a teen drinking party and into the woods a few years ago when it was broken up by police.

The child "fell into a culvert and suffered an injury — a terrible, terrible injury — brain injury."

He said that with attitudes becoming stricter against parents who are in a house when teenage drinking is going on at a party, it may not be sufficient to tell police (or, later, judges and juries) "I was up in our master bedroom, which is a quarter of a mile away, and I didn't know, I couldn't hear anything. That simply isn't going to work any more."

Aaron Krasner of Silver Hill Hospital said that parents need to both make it clear to their children that they

will be very disappointed if their teens drink alcohol and keep lines of communication open so that the parents can become a better influence in advocating safe behavior.

"When you as parents work with your children, it is incredibly difficult to listen to them without hearing mostly your own voice, and what I ask of you is to listen to your children not as an extension of you and ask that they accomplish what you couldn't, or for what they ought to do, but to listen to your kid for who they are," Krasner said.

"And it might not be what you want. in many cases it's not. But I'm asking you to listen to them as people. [...] To be able to listen to them as young peers will give you the ability to open up a dialogue that is potentially less judgmental, less bossy pants and more — more of a coming together."

Coming up:

- A video of Tuesday night's meeting is expected to be available on the website of the Darien High School Parents Association within a couple of days.
- The Thriving Youth Task Force is about to start a social marketing campaign to get word out about teenage drinking and its impact on the adolescent brain.
- One of the next planned events takes place Monday, March 6 at Darien Library with the showing of a documentary, *Haze*, about a student from Greenwich who dies after binge drinking at college, and how that devastates his family and others he left behind.