

October 24, 2011

Dear Parents and Community Members,

This is Red Ribbon Week, the oldest initiative in the country focused on drug and alcohol prevention. Red Ribbons are worn by students and staff as a reminder of their commitment to live free of drug and alcohol. At school, students learn about the significant damage drugs and drinking can do on the development of an adolescent brain. They learn how it impairs physical, emotional and mental functioning. They learn about the legal ramifications for themselves and their parents, who continue to be responsible for their actions by law. Yet, I am concerned about the consistent number of parties in homes, remote areas of Westbrook, and local parks where alcohol is served or consumed and where intoxicated youth are placing themselves and others at tremendous risk. The police and ambulance association have responded to several events over the last few months to find teenagers inebriated to the point of vomiting, incontinence, or unresponsiveness. As a community, we need to redouble our efforts to help our teenagers stand up to peer pressure and choose better and safer ways to socialize.

Our schools will continue to educate students and parents about the increased danger of drugs and alcohol, especially when consumed by youth. In the past year, the district added a health teacher at the high school who addresses substance abuse as part of the curriculum. Last month the parent teacher organization agreed to sponsor a high-impact parent and student program, Save a Life Tour, to our high school and middle school. We sent a student leadership team to a summer training program focused on developing positive assets in our youth. We have active SADD chapters at the middle and high schools, and many special programs throughout the year to help students resist negative peer pressure and promote positive decision making. However, my concerns continue when I hear that these high risk behaviors persist. These strategies alone are ineffective in keeping Westbrook children safe.


Please join me in combating this problem in Westbrook. Educating students at school is only part of the answer. All adults in Westbrook have an opportunity to be positive role models. Parents, talk to your adolescent children before they start drinking. Multiple studies show that parents have enormous influence on their child's behavior, even during the teenage years. Ask your child where they are going and call the host-parents to be certain no alcohol will be served and that an adult will be home. Clearly express your expectations about your child's drinking; your values and attitudes matter. Talk to your child about how to handle peer pressure. Your child listens when you speak and learns from your message and your actions.

Businesses also play an important role in reducing underage drinking and the benefits to a workplace climate that is proactive can be considerable. Business owners know that lost productivity, accidents, attendance, and employee turnover are costly consequences of alcohol use within the workforce. Consider the high school student who enters your business environment. Your job offers the first opportunity for discretionary money. Your young employee is exposed to and influenced by the adults with whom he/she works. Guard against inviting underage employees to gather after work where drinking is a focus, never

allow an employee to purchase or provide alcohol for a minor, and model positive stress management and entertainment. Use your influence as an employer to positively affect the lives of your youngest employees.

We know that underage drinking is an on-going issue that will not be easily resolved. It will take effort on the part of all segments of our community to change the status quo. Please join me this week, Red Ribbon Week, in committing to the reduction of the use of alcohol and drugs in our teenage residents. Only by addressing the issue together will we be able to make such a life-saving change in our youth.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Patricia Charles".

Patricia Charles
Superintendent
Westbrook Public Schools