



Lexington Public Schools

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Our Schools

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In the Lexington Public Schools, we believe that caring for our students requires caring about their well-being both in and outside the classroom. At the last School Committee meeting, Northeastern University researchers Jack McDevitt and Amy Farrell shared the results of a recent survey of Lexington youth on risky behaviors (<http://lps.lexingtonma.org/YouthRiskSurvey2007.pdf>). Since 1995, Lexington has administered the Youth Risk Behavior Survey in compliance with the requirements of the Department of Education. The survey is designed to focus on the major risk behaviors that threaten the health and safety of our young people, including tobacco use, alcohol and other drug use, sexual behavior that leads to unintended pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases, dietary behavior, physical activity, and behaviors associated with intentional injury. From the inception of this survey, Lexington's school system has been working with researchers from Northeastern University to administer a more comprehensive survey than that which is mandated. We have added some specific questions related to high-risk behaviors, including stress, academic competition, and sexual activity, that the school system is attempting to address through current programs. We thoroughly acknowledge, however, that these problems persist beyond the limits of the school day and exist in students' lives outside the confines of our classroom walls in their everyday lives.

One thousand five hundred thirty-three Lexington High School students participated in the survey, with an even distribution across the four grades. While cigarette smoking has dropped every year since 1995, stress, drinking, and certain sexual behaviors were reported at levels that demand our collective attention as a community. Students at the high school continue to report feeling some level of stress, with 12% reporting being under "extreme stress." Drinking continues to be a concern because students who had more than one drink in the previous 30 days were more likely to have engaged in other risky behavior. Although the number of students reporting having had at least one drink during the prior 30 days dropped to 43% in 2007 from 48.5% in 2004, 25% of the students reported having had more than five drinks in a row in the prior 30 days. The state average is 26.5%.

Some of the most startling aspects of the results are those dealing with oral sex. Questions on this topic were included for the first time in 2004 because of growing concerns surrounding this issue. While the proportion of students engaging in this behavior has declined slightly since then, 20% of students who have had oral sex report having had more than four partners.

So what do we do with this information? The Lexington Public Schools will continue to use this data to improve our health education curriculum and reduce risky behaviors. We are encouraged that sixty percent of the students told us that they receive the most accurate information about sex from health teachers. We also know parents and peers figure most prominently in influencing them when it comes to decisions about sex and other risky behavior.

In order to provide for the well-being of our students and continue to reduce student risky behaviors, we must all work together—teachers, parents, and community members. It is my hope that we all review the detailed results of this survey and keep our lines of communication open. Currently, a variety of groups in town are analyzing the types of intervention services and programs that are available, or should be available to support our children. The Human Services Committee of the Town of Lexington, the Lexington Chapter of the League of Women Voters, Temple Isaiah and the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization, and Stand for Children, among other groups, are all actively investigating ways to improve support systems for our kids. Please consider becoming involved in these initiatives so that we may partner together in teaching our children to make wise decisions about their health and safety.