

Pittsburgh Public Schools to offer drug, alcohol counseling

New program seen as alternative to suspensions

August 29, 2018 3:50 PM

By Elizabeth Behrman / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

It used to be that when a student was busted for pot possession on school property, they would be suspended for up to 10 days and then return for classes at the Student Achievement Center, the district's alternative school.

But in an effort to reduce a rising number of marijuana incidents and resultant suspensions, Pittsburgh Public Schools is trying something different starting this year.

Now, if a student is found with fewer than 5 grams of marijuana and it's their first time violating the drug section of the student conduct code, they will have the option of receiving drug and alcohol counseling during a 10-day program at the Student Achievement Center before they are allowed to return to class at their regular school.

The change is meant to combine the consequence with additional services to prevent the violation from happening again, as well as a push to limit the amount of time the student is removed from his or her classroom, said David May-Stein, the district's chief of school performance.

"We're very optimistic that this will provide an additional level of support to students that we weren't providing in the past," Mr. May-Stein said. "We hope that students and families will take advantage of this opportunity and learn. We're very optimistic that this is going to be a solid strategy to keep kids in school, to keep them in class in front of their teachers."

The school district is partnering with Three Rivers Youth to install a full-time drug and alcohol counselor at the SAC in Homewood, as well as a part-time "parent specialist" to work as a liaison between the district, Three Rivers Youth and the families of students in the program. The district recently formalized the arrangement in the form of \$113,000 contract for this school year.

"They're excited about it, we're excited about it," said Peggy Harris, executive director of Three

Rivers Youth. “I will say that the work that we do will certainly go much deeper with parents. We believe that is one of the critical components to sustaining whatever we do with young people.”

Ms. Harris said the new partnership with PPS is an expansion of her organization’s footprint in Pittsburgh schools. Three Rivers Youth has been working with Pittsburgh’s at-risk young people and their families for more than a century, and added a focus on drug and alcohol counseling about five years ago, Ms. Harris said. The group obtained a drug and alcohol treatment license for its site in East Liberty, and has been working with students from Pittsburgh and Wilkinsburg for several years.

The program will be centered around an evidence-based, 10-day curriculum that includes both group and individualized components, Ms. Harris said. The program will also include outreach and inclusion of parents and families as much as they are able.

Conversations about an on-site presence in PPS began about a year ago, Ms. Harris said, and Mr. May-Stein added that reducing overall out-of-school suspensions is part of the district’s long-term strategic plan.

District spokeswoman Ebony Pugh said that during the 2017-18 school year, the district recorded 161 cases of students in possession of marijuana, one case of possession of a prescription drug, two cases of alcohol possession and two cases of heroin possession. There were 151 cases of marijuana possession and two cases of heroin possession the year before that. State data show that there were 104 cases of possession of a controlled substance in 2015-16.

District officials say opiate abuse — which has reached epidemic status in Western Pennsylvania and beyond — have not been as big an issue among Pittsburgh students.

Still, Ms. Harris said, expanding drug and alcohol counseling should help keep opioids out of the schools, and the new drug counselors at the Student Achievement Center will be able to assess whether students there need access to additional services or further treatment. They don’t want the marijuana offenses to be the “tip of the iceberg.”

“That’s part of the problem. Sometimes we wait too long to intervene and head something off,” she said.

Elizabeth Behrman: Lbehrman@post-gazette.com, 412-263-1590 or @Ebehrman on Twitter.