

LTUSD students not feeling safe or healthy



By Kathryn Reed

South Lake Tahoe's kids aren't so healthy. And they don't feel safe.

Results from a statewide survey taken last fall show an increase in tobacco, alcohol and marijuana use by some Lake Tahoe Unified students.

Students in grades five, seven, nine and 11 take the survey every other year. It's a way for districts to know what problems students are facing and identify what programs might need to be put in place to address those concerns.

Lisa Huard, who was the safe schools coordinator until her position was eliminated this school year, believes students are honest with their responses based on information the schools have, as well as the number of suspensions, expulsions and arrests.

In 2004, 5 percent of the seventh-graders said they regularly smoke tobacco, in 2006 the ninth-graders (so the same class) had 14 percent say they were users, while in 2008 as 11th-graders 22 percent were lighting up.

More members of the class of 2010 are drinking alcohol and smoking pot as they get older. As seventh-graders, about 10 percent were imbibing, 32 percent at ninth-graders and 44 percent this school year.

When it comes to marijuana, 7 percent of next year's graduating class took a hit as seventh-graders, a quarter of them did as ninth-graders and 36 percent do today.

"Those same children report a decrease in caring relationships with a teacher or other adults at the schools over the years, a decrease in high expectation from a teacher or other adult at their school, and a decrease of opportunities in meaningful participation at their school," Huard said.

Huard says the way to stop the escalation in drug use and risky behavior is to start the education at an earlier grade level. She would like to see schools be less test oriented and more student oriented.

"Schools in general are focusing on the test scores and not focusing on the life scores of our youth," Huard said.

South Lake Tahoe Police Chief Terry Daniels also believes teaching kids sooner rather than later is important. "Energy needs to go to preventive programs," he said, adding that he supports efforts being made in the schools.

From the 2008 survey:

51 percent feel safe at school all of the time;

40 percent of seventh-graders, 31 percent of ninth-graders and 22 percent of 11th-graders are afraid of being beaten up;

79 percent of fifth-graders, 68 percent of seventh, 53 percent ninth and 55 percent 11th-graders ate breakfast on test day.

According to the report, "Students who attend school hungry or malnourished may experience compromised health, well-being, and school performance."

Huard believes it takes the entire community to set an example and be responsible for youth. Why didn't you call the cops when the kids down the street had a party? Why didn't you talk

to the parents? Why did you give a dirty look to the kids congregated on the corner smoking cigarettes instead of telling them about lung and throat cancer? Why did you buy a six-pack for your kid brother? Those are questions Huard is asking. When she doesn't have to ask them anymore, the survey results