

In-house suspensions at STHS a possibility

By Kathryn Reed

Students at South Tahoe High School who are caught with or under the influence of drugs, including alcohol, get what amounts to a three-day vacation from school. That could change.

In the past the school had a diversion program where students would get counseling as part of the process. With cutbacks in recent years, the school has lost two counselors, a community outreach person who was bilingual, a clerk who made calls to see why kids weren't at school and a full-time person for the high school who handled the School Attendance Review Board.

To date for this school year, there have been 27 alcohol or drug offenses at the school. Nine of those were committed by the same three people. Five were alcohol related and committed at the same time.



South Tahoe police Officer Aaron Crawford, left, and South Tahoe High Vice Principal Dennis Sarosik talk Dec. 9 about student drug use. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Freshmen or sophomores usually commit the infractions. After a while the kids figure out it's not a good idea to be bringing drugs to school.

"Alcohol is not the drug of choice, it's marijuana," Dennis Sarosik, STHS vice principal, said.

South Tahoe police Officer Aaron Crawford is the school resource officer. He patrols the grounds along with a probation officer.

"It's easy access here at the lake. It's easier to get than alcohol," Crawford said of marijuana.

It's so pervasive that South Lake Tahoe is known as a "green community" and that has nothing to do with the environment.

Sarosik and Crawford were at the Dec. 9 South Tahoe Drug Free Coalition meeting to talk about what happens to students who are caught with drugs and listen to ideas from coalition members.

The first infraction a student is suspended for three days; the second comes with a five-day suspension. Alternative education is the next course of action. Referrals to Tahoe Youth & Family Services are also given, but are not mandatory.

Athletes face other consequences per NIAA regulations.

The coalition is working on devising a program where students will serve suspensions at the school.

STHS used to have a diversion program. It is part counseling – which could be individual, group and/or family; criminal justice (this piece is all that exists today); and school support.

The latter is important because so many of the multiple offenders are also failing more than one subject.

“There is a need for academic support. We need someone there to manage it,” Sarosik said.

Sarosik said the school would be open to resurrecting the diversion program, but it does not have the manpower to make it happen.

Hector Reyes, supervising health education coordinator with El Dorado County, said his department and others in the community could provide the counseling piece. Tahoe Turning Point and TY&FS also have drug and alcohol counselors on staff.

Lake Tahoe Unified School District does not have a drug-testing program, unlike its neighbor Douglas County School District. DCSD started the program in 2009-10 for students who participate in athletics and other extra curricular activities.

Sarosik said cost is a prohibiting factor to drug testing, as well as that it is hard to test for synthetics. However, it was pointed out that Tahoe Turning Point tests for drugs onsite at a cost of \$15.

STHS does use a breathalyzer at dances on everyone coming and going.

“It’s changed the character of dances. There’s no more projectile vomit or people passing out,” Sarosik said.

But it’s not just high school students using. Crawford said the number of marijuana infractions this year is increasing at South Tahoe Middle School. Every year there are a couple elementary students who are high or are possessing drugs.

Here are some stats from 2011-12 regarding drug use at STMS, STHS and Mt. Tallac high.

The goal is for coalition members to research other diversion programs, for drug counselors to devise a way to provide STHS help, and for the school to figure out what it would need to

make it all work.