

# Helping Students Make Good Decisions - BJC School Outreach and Youth Development Focuses on Substance Abuse

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If you think high school students have heard it all about substance abuse prevention and aren't that interested in discussing it, think again.

It's all about getting the students engaged in the conversation, and Emily Mortland is a pro in that regard. Mortland is one of the health educators with BJC School Outreach and Youth Development, a program in several Illinois public school districts as well as private schools thanks to an annual \$35,000 grant from the Alton Memorial Health Services Foundation.

Mortland taught the "Power of Choice" program about substance abuse prevention to health classes at Alton High School this year, and it's been an eye-opener for everyone.

"I don't expect to change their lives today but I want them to start thinking about their future and realize they are in control of it," Mortland said. "One day when they are faced with a tough decision or going through something difficult, I hope they realize there are other options out there rather than just the negative ones that are in front of them. When they start to think about better ways to deal with those situations, then the seed starts to grow -- and I know I have done my job.

"But the idea is to get them thinking that there are better things to do out there. And we talk about the real health dangers of using tobacco, alcohol and marijuana."

Cindy Pollard, a health teacher at AHS, has been impressed with the style used by Mortland and other BJC health educators in getting their message across.

"They develop a real rapport with the students, which goes a long way with the students," Pollard said. "They're teaching them in a way where sometimes they don't even realize they're being taught. It's more of a conversation, but that ends up having more of an impact on them."

Mortland is aware that high school students get a lot of information from their peers -- and that only a very small percentage of that information is 100 percent accurate.

"We talk about how use of these drugs can have health implications even decades later," she said. "That's what we hope makes them think about what they want to do, and that they can have the power of choice in these matters."

And it often has lasting effects.

"Students come up to me in the hall after they have been through the program and tell me about something that happened -- like a death in the family, for example -- and they thought about drinking but realized that really wouldn't solve anything because of our

conversation,” Mortland said. “Kids these days have a lot going on and I like that they remember me in the hallway and tell me I helped them realize their own strength. It is inspiring.”

The Power of Choice is taught in four sessions with each class. All BJC School Outreach and Youth Development programs are designed to meet Illinois Learning Standards (ILS). Pre- and post-tests and evaluations are analyzed with statistical software.

BJC School Outreach and Youth Development was formed in 1991 to help area school districts address high-risk behaviors such as substance abuse, tobacco use, poor nutrition, lack of physical activity, risky sexual behaviors and safety- violence prevention. The program also helps students explore careers in health care.

“What we do nicely integrates into each school’s goals for educating the students,” said Diana Wilhold, director of BJC School Outreach and Youth Development. “We tailor our programs to meet the need of each school by filling the health educational gaps within the schools’ curricula.

“The school faculty and administrators have seen health behavior changes within their schools and are always impressed with the level of knowledge and manner in which my staff connects with the youth. That ability to connect and engage youth is what allows my department to deliver these programs on behalf of BJC HealthCare and its hospitals. The services we offer not only meet educational needs but also provide health information that is needed for a lifetime.”