



In a dark time the eye begins to see.
- Theodore Roethke

THE RIGHT TO NOT INFORM

BY MARY HYDE

The move to a drug free America is on in our schools and in the past couple of weeks I have seen some reactions to the program from my children and our friends that have made me get involved in finding out exactly what this program consists of and how to help my children deal with any part of it that they having trouble with.

These are some of the things I have found out about the program in general and how it is carried out in the schools, specifically pertaining to a survey that was given the 5th, 6th, middle and high school students on October 14 in School District 10 (Cannon Beach, Seaside and Gearhart).

The survey was in two parts: Part 1 asked ten questions pertaining to the level of personal drug use; Part 2 asked six questions about drug use of the people in the students' environment — such questions as: "Are you aware of someone close to you who has a drinking or drug problem?" "Of your close friends, how many use alcohol once a month or more often?" "How difficult do you think it would be for you to get marijuana (grass, pot, hash)?" "Is there drinking or drug use at most parties you attend?" etc. The last question asked how honestly the student had answered the survey.

The first part of the survey is in wide use around the state of Oregon. The second part came from a subcommittee of what is now called The Student Assistance Task Force, but was formerly called The Drug Abuse Task Force. The members of this group picked the questions from numerous surveys of vague origins.

The survey is part of the Positive Action Program in school. This program is trying to teach our children constructive ways to deal with problems they come across and it emphasizes good behavior. One grade school friend said about the Positive Action Program, "It's nothing. I mean, like they tell you this story and you pick out the negative things in it and tell how you would change the story to make it positive. It isn't really about drugs except sometimes they give us a paper and it says stuff like, 'If you do dope you will be a dope,' and it's really pretty fun."

Starting in the 5th grade, after every Positive Action unit there is a drug awareness class.

The purpose of the two-part survey is to give the Task Force an idea of how well the existing program is doing, to see how much drug use/drug abuse there is, and also how willing the children are to admit what they know about drugs.

The children were told that they were not to sign their names on the survey but to write down what grade and school they were in, and the name of their teacher. When I asked students how they felt about their anonymity they said they were sure their teachers would know who they were by their handwriting.

I asked the principal of Cannon Beach elementary if the children who took the survey were told that they had the right under the Constitution to refuse to answer any or all of the questions — this is something I would expect to be



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made especially clear when dealing with children. I also called the school district office, and I asked the same question of a school psychologist. I gathered from these conversations that there were no set or written instructions; the school principals were told at a Task Force meeting that the students did not have to answer any or all of the questions, and this was handed down to the teachers by each principal in a staff meeting the day before the survey was given to the children. No one is able to certify that this was carried out because the survey sessions were not monitored.

The children I talked to did not get the message. One child said, "I had to fill it out because the teacher would give it back to me to finish."

From my conversations with various school officials I have the impression that they seemed to think that because the children knew they did not have to put their names on the papers that they were also aware they did not have to answer any questions they did not want to. As evidence are several papers that are not completed.

However, I feel there is a vast difference in the feelings that are invoked in a child who does not answer a question because s/he knows that s/he has that right under the Constitution, and the feeling a child has from knowing that s/he can lie or sneak out of answering questions because of anonymity. There is also a feeling of guilt and conflict of interest that must be considered when you are dealing with children who have been taught from kindergarten to do all the papers their teachers give them (even if they concern personal matters that they have been taught are no one else's business) if they do not have a full understanding of their rights.

The school administration feels that the issues have been made clear to the students. By not having students sign their names they insist that they are not asking the students to inform on their parents, neighbors or friends. They also say the children are not made to feel responsible for their parents' habits or problems.

Yet, though I know children who have no trouble with this program, I also know several children, my own and others who are having a lot of problems coping with it. They are coming home from school afraid that they have informed

on family and friends. Some think a parent who has a beer or a glass of wine will become a raving maniac and jump into a car and run over people. Others are feeling personal responsibility to stop a parent or loved one from smoking, fearful that if they don't there will be dire consequences.

I feel that these emotions are very unhealthy and the children who are having these problems need extra emphasis on their rights and that they are not to blame for or are responsible for the habits of other people. Emphasis should also be made that these programs are to assist them in making personal choices for their own lives and are not to be used to judge other people.

It is hard to get involved in a program that you know nothing about. There was no forewarning of this survey, and though it occurred two months ago, I have yet to read any announcement or comment about it. After hearing about the survey from my children I contacted the principal of the Cannon Beach school and she was very open about the survey and the Positive Action Program and the 2000 Program for the 2nd grade. She discussed the programs with me, showed me the materials that are being used in the class and made it clear that I was welcome to be in the classroom anytime I wished to be and to feel free to discuss anything.

I feel that if these programs are to be effective and positive learning experiences we parents must become as informed and involved as possible. The people who put together and administer these programs cannot know their effect if parents do not keep in touch. I would like to see two things happen: a very explicit set of instructions accompanying any survey of this sort emphasizing the children's right to quietly and with no fuss not answer; and possibly a survey given to the parents asking what they think of these programs and what effect they have on the children. I believe that feedback from parents is vitally important to keeping these programs in line with what they are intended to accomplish.

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