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**Drug education workshop reveals majority of teens have used illegal drugs in past year**

A special drug education workshop at regional headquarters last week had one clear objective: solidify ways that police, educators and parents can support each other so they in turn can provide support for children and youth.

Given the often startling statistics about illegal drug use among young people, this concerted effort was well received for a number of reasons by those taking part.

"This is an issue that touches all of us in our professional lives and on a personal level," said Halton Regional Police Insp. Signy Pittman, who was clear it's imperative that everyone involved understand their roles considering the high stakes.

For example, said Pittman, from Sept. 2001 to Feb. 2002 there were 500 drug-related incidents in Halton— 24 per cent of these within half a kilometre of a high school and half of those involving marijuana. According to public health nurse Lorraine Gold, 70 per cent of students from Grade 7 to OAC used an illegal drug in the 12 months prior to a recent survey.

Gold said the survey also revealed that students are showing a decreased perception of risk about drugs and are morally and socially less disapproving about their use. When asked about availability, the number of youths who said drugs were easy or very easy to obtain also increased. Self-esteem is also a vital factor.

"People who said they felt good about themselves are less likely to take drugs," said Gold.

Halton Regional Police Sgt. Al Albano then gave attendees an eye-opening crash course in youth drug culture, from the proliferation of information about the growing of marijuana to



**SIGNY PITTMAN**

tell-tale signs that your children may be indulging their addictions.

For example, said Albano, parents should watch for changes in their children's behaviour (moody, secretive, difficulty sleeping, needing money, stealing, skipping class, changing friends or interests) plus physical clues (red eyes, weight loss, dilated pupils, trouble walking or talking, avoiding eye contact).

Albano then showcased an assortment of drugs and drug paraphernalia and said many youths have access to ecstasy or what they believe is ecstasy. In actuality, the pills they're swallowing may be polluted with a manner of adulterants or be a more dangerous drug passed off as something it's not.

Albano then broached the topic of trust, namely whether parents should search a child's room if drug use is believed. "If you're suspicious, do it," he said.

In light of all this information, Halton District School Board superintendent Gary Sadler said while there are programs in place to keep offenders out of court, the Education Act makes it clear drugs on school property will not be tolerated.

Selling drugs at school or obtaining alcohol for minors carries with it a mandatory expulsion from a minimum 20 days to "forever," said Sadler. Students can be expelled up to 20 days for being in possession of drugs or being under the influence.

Even if no charges are laid by police, Sadler said, school principals "can and are expected" to expel students even if they only have a "reason to believe" illegal activity has transpired.

—By Howard Mozel, special

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