

Two weeks ago in this column, I noted that the country, our community included, seems to be in the midst of a maelstrom of methamphetamines and other drugs—opioids, marijuana, and every variety of prescription medications known to patient-kind. A community task force recently gathered to address this concern and wondered, along with other ideas, just what the schools could teach to prevent young people from falling down this particularly malevolent rabbit hole.

Not all that much, unfortunately.

Schools do teach affective objectives, basically how to feel or believe about something (as opposed to cognitive objectives, which are intellectual skills like reading, addition, or writing a formal paper) but the results are rarely positive. Even when they are positive, they aren't very strong. While there is certainly merit in stating clearly and unequivocally that students should avoid drugs and that drugs are frequently incredibly bad for you, beyond taking that stance, there is little evidence for teaching much beyond that point. Free will or upbringing or genetic inheritance or some concoction of all three seems much stronger than any prolonged recitation by a teacher or facilitator or police officer of 'don't do drugs' to students. It just doesn't seem to make much, if any, difference in terms of the learner's eventual likelihood that they will or won't do so.

Having said that, there is another way, a way that has proven promising both in research and in practice, including practice here in the Mitchell School District. It is typically known as the Search Institute's '40 Developmental Assets' and it was borne out of and exposed relentlessly to research. Specifically, it is a program, underwritten by Lutheran Brotherhood, that identified 40 'assets' which, when students have them are correlated with a tendency not to engage in destructive behavior like the use of tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs.

Admittedly, the research in this area is not perfect. The assets were identified as the result of a process of correlation rather than causation. Researchers looked at students who did not use drugs and students who did use drugs and then compared the groups for what characteristics seemed to differ between the two. They arrived at 40 and range from such things as having 'family support,' living in a 'community that values youth,' spending significant 'time at home,' valuing 'honesty' and 'integrity,' and enjoying 'personal power.' Now notice that these characteristics cannot necessarily be said to prevent student drug use. Perhaps there is some larger underlying factor that leads to both non-drug use and many of these other factors, that they have some other enormous personal 'treasure' such as a genetic inheritance that causes both. Unfortunately, though, most research in education and the social sciences in general is correlational and so we can only go with the best information available. Additionally, the results do have what is known as 'face validity,' i.e. they at least make sense. While a supportive family won't head off drug abuse in every case, it does seem that a student with it will be less likely to abuse drugs than one without it, in general.

Having arrived at these 40 assets, then, the approach better than straight, ongoing instruction about the perils of drug use is to find ways to give students more of these 40 assets than they currently enjoy.

And my experience with this has been positive. It does seem to work.

When the Mitchell School District launched ‘Unfiltered Reality,’ a group dedicated to helping students resist the cancerous siren song of tobacco and led by Traci Moore, Karen Allen, and Samantha Olson, they didn’t do so through lessons. Instead, they did so by asking students to commit to a course of action which helped their peers resist tobacco. In doing so, they engaged students in a school activity (asset #22), asked them to commit to social justice (#27), gave them a sense of personal power (#37) and of purpose (#39). Students came together to conduct ‘street marketing,’ channeling youthful needs to speak out and even challenge authority in positive directions. The result? Student tobacco use rates in Mitchell are significantly lower than in South Dakota in general.

When Jean Haley, a parent saddened by the many children in our community who lacked positive relationships with adults, started ‘Big Friends/Little Friends,’ a program devoted to pairing adult role models with children who would then spend positive time with them, she nailed assets #3 and #4. While we (well, I anyway) don’t have any data which purports to prove that this program works, I have spoken with dozens of young people and their big friends over the past 10+ years since its initiation in Mitchell and the anecdotal evidence appears very strong. The students seem to have benefited enormously from the program. (Somewhat unexpectedly, so did the adults.)

Erin Fowkes, MHS guidance counselor, brought her idea for a SPOOFED group to Mitchell from the last district she served in Iowa. SPOOFED (I have no idea where she came up with that name) is a form of quasi-improvisational theatre in which students develop short plays that address social issues relevant to young people. I actually find it hard to watch their performances, not because the students aren’t wonderful in their acting and their creativity—they, in fact, are-- but because the issues they bring to life are not things I enjoy watching. SPOOFED performs for Mitchell High School but also for service groups in our community and to other schools in our state, including schools in pretty much every corner of our state, and even beyond. I have no idea if their performances helped the thousands of students in their audience over the years but I have become completely convinced they have been of enormous help to the student *within the troupe*. This is not surprising since the activity achieves assets #15, #17, #18, #32, and #35, at a minimum.

What conclusion do I draw from all of this? If you want to help students resist drugs (or tobacco, or alcohol, or whatever poison you pick), offer a simple, clear message that the school believes they are a really bad idea. But don’t bother with endless lecturing or lengthy harangues filled with data and argument and hyperbole (even accurate hyperbole). Instead, energetically engage students and in so doing, actively work with them to build the kinds of assets which will embolden them to resist drugs and be and become people of character.