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A Collaborative Solution: Online Safety and Adolescent Trends

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Abstract

This professional action project focused on addressing the risks and needs facing local adolescents in my community. I partnered with several professionals and community members to host a parent night presentation at Timberlake High School. The presentation included an overview of risks and trends affecting our local youth, as well as statewide statistics on social media, mental health, vaping, substance use, and other risky behaviors. At the conclusion of the presentation, attendees were invited to ask questions, network with professionals, peruse the “paraphernalia” table, and collect resource handouts from several different supporting agencies in the local area. The presentation was also recorded by the school to disseminate to parents at a later date.

Keywords: adolescents, youth, online safety, social media, mental health, substance use, vaping, community resources, Timberlake High School.

Introduction to my Capstone Project

While brainstorming ideas for my capstone project in BAS492, I was approached by two different school administrators, as well as a school resource officer asking if I would facilitate a parent presentation for the local school district. I attend several community meetings in the role of a juvenile probation officer, which has given me the opportunity to be well-connected with the schools and law enforcement officers in my community. These individuals were specifically requesting a presentation which focused on online safety, human trafficking, grooming, vaping, and substance use. Due to my training and experience, I felt this would be the perfect opportunity to serve my community and use this event as the focal point of my capstone project.

The first step I took in launching this project was securing a location, as well as a date and time for the presentation. After some email communication with the principal of Timberlake High School, Ryne Eberlin, we decided on March 9th, from 7-8pm. This also happened to be the same day as parent teacher conferences and Mr. Eberlin thought we may have better attendance if we hosted it consecutively to conference appointment times.

Once we scheduled a date, I reached out to several of my professional colleagues including members of law enforcement and the local health district. We all collaborated to create the main points we wanted to cover in the presentation based on what we were all seeing at a local level, in addition to statewide adolescent trends. I then created a PowerPoint presentation covering the topics we identified. In the meantime, Timberlake High School announced the event on their social media platforms, email distribution, and Tiger TV channel to spread the word and invite parents and community members. On the night of the event, my team and I presented to a group of parents, teens, school staff, and community members. We also provided additional

visual aids including photos of recent cases and real examples of paraphernalia and vape items parents should be aware of. We also had an additional table set-up full of handouts and resources available to attendees to take home for further reading and support.

Elements Coming Together

The community partners involved in this event included Panhandle Health, Lakeland School District, Timberlake High School, Kootenai County Juvenile Probation, Spirit Lake Police Department, Rathdrum Police Department, and Post Falls Police Department. Each stakeholder brought a unique perspective and included fields such as education, law enforcement, and public health to ensure a diverse perspective in problem-solving.

The parents and families that attended the event were able to ask questions and add to the discussion at the end of the presentation. This allowed their perspective to be heard and helped me understand other concerns they have that can be addressed through future presentations or other avenues. Teachers and other school staff also attended the presentation, and I am hopeful they were able to take away new information to help them better understand and support their students.

This approach was innovative because it addressed the issues parents and students are facing at a local level. It also gave parents and community members the opportunity to engage with professionals in the field during a real time, in person event where they asked questions and were provided resources on other supports in the community. The presentation was also recorded so those who were not able to attend can still view the presentation via YouTube.

I spoke with two different school resource officers and one school principal to understand the issues and concerns they are seeing with students in the local community. One of whom was

School Resource Officer (SRO) Kevin Ward. SRO Ward is the assigned officer for all of the Timberlake Schools located in Spirit Lake, Idaho. SRO Ward expressed concern over the amount of vapes that were being confiscated at the middle school and high school level. He was also concerned about the level of nicotine addiction that was occurring in the adolescent community due to the high nicotine level in vapes (Kevin Ward, personal communication, February 2023).

Timberlake High School Principal Ryne Eberlin specifically requested our presentation address online grooming tactics and human trafficking. Mr. Eberlin reported he had dealt with several students this year that had experienced online grooming and was concerned for their safety, specifically being potential victims of human trafficking (Ryne Eberlin, personal communication, February 2023).

In addition to interviewing local law enforcement and school administration, I studied the 2021 Idaho Youth Risk Behavior Survey (odp.idaho.gov) to get a broader understanding of risks related to students state-wide. I gathered further information from a local digital forensics' detective, Neil Uhrig, who also spoke at the event. A representative from Panhandle Health District spoke about local vaping trends and resources currently available at their agency to help students quit or abstain from vaping. All my resources were timely, up to date, relevant to the local community, and cutting edge in terms of the trends we are currently seeing in our area.

The work I completed for this Capstone project considered how parents, school staff, law enforcement and students may be feeling, specifically towards the current online culture and how it affects the mental health and behavior of young people. My research indicated many parents feel lost and confused regarding how to address this issue with their children and are overwhelmed by the constant, ever changing online landscape their children are exposed to

(Nadeem, 2020). Through my work as a juvenile probation officer, I have been able to talk to many teens who express the challenges they have experienced navigating social media and the impact it has had on them overall.

I am self-aware and know that I don't have all the answers. Technology is ever changing, and I also realize I am biased when I approach the topic of mental health and social media. This is largely because many of the teens I come into contact with through juvenile probation have additional challenges in their life which also may contribute to mental health struggles. They also tend to have fewer supportive interventions (parental oversight, positive influences) to help combat negative influences in their life.

I included several different stakeholders and experts in my presentation to ensure varying perspectives on the issue to deliver a well-rounded presentation. I specifically took into consideration the emotional intelligence of the parents who attended the event. I am also a mother to two teenage boys and understand the challenge of raising teens in the era of high technology and social media. I connected with my audience on this level and shared a few personal experiences I have encountered as a parent. I think this helped them view me as credible, knowing I am in the same boat as they are. My sons also attended the event and interacted with the attendees during the resource portion of the evening. This helped the teens who attended connect with someone in their peer group as well, instead of just listening to a group of adults presenting information.

This project was valuable to others because it helped connect the dots between online interactions, screen time, and mental health. It promoted awareness to assist parents and teens to better manage their own online safety and mental health with the tools and tips provided. They

were able to take the information and craft their own personal boundaries and safeguards around their use of technology to ensure well balanced and healthy interactions online to promote their mental health.

Integrating several different perspectives is paramount in supporting creativity and drawing from different disciplines to think outside of the box. As such, several different professionals joined me in my work, each with a unique perspective regarding teen trends, risks, mental health, etc. I was able to partner with public health officials, school officials, law enforcement and families. Each stakeholder addressed different views regarding teens and offered several ways we could support them as a community of professionals and caregivers. Utilizing a multi-pronged approach in supporting youth is important to help facilitate a holistic response in addressing the needs of a child. It takes a multitude of individuals to understand and address the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual needs of youth.

This approach was unique in that it gleaned information from several different professionals in diverse fields to come together for the common goal of educating and supporting youth and their families. By facilitating a parent night at the local high school, parents, youth, and community members were invited to learn and participate in relevant discussions regarding their concerns. The event also opened the opportunity to learn from each other and network with several individuals and agencies to help become a stronger support system for our local youth. This approach highlighted the areas where we are strong as a community and also identified the areas in which we can come together in the future to help improve systems so youth don't fall through the cracks.

The event was innovative in that in addition to the presentation, I had several examples of vapes, cartridges, and other paraphernalia the audience could view after the presentation. I also included case study photos of local cases regarding substance use and popular trending brands that could alert parents to potential substance use. Additionally, I provided free drug test kits, social media awareness handouts, stress balls from the local health district, and other printed resources that included information of local organizations and clinics for mental health support. Many attendees took handouts and other “swag” items home. I think all these different aspects and added touches made for a much more innovative, “hands on,” and creative experience.

Results

A quantitative measurement of the impact of this project was based on the number of attendees to the live event. Approximately 25 people were in attendance and included parents, students, and school staff. The event was also recorded and published on YouTube and has had a total of 19 views as of April 20, 2023. I am hopeful the recorded version will continue to be viewed by many more in the days to come.

Anecdotally, I have measured the qualitative impact of this project based on a couple of factors. I received several compliments and many thanks from the attendees of the event. We had great discussions after the event regarding phone monitoring applications, recent drug trends, and the efforts the school is making to support students. Through these conversations, I was able to interact with attendees at a deeper, more personal level.

Additionally, I was invited to do another presentation in the community for a 4-H group and their parents as a result of my original presentation. I am hopeful the word continues to

spread throughout the community, and I can have the opportunity to do additional presentations and network with others in the future.

One of the benefits of my project was educating parents regarding the issues teens face today. Knowledge is power and I really think I helped the parents who attended the presentation better understand how to prevent and navigate issues as they parent their children through the tumultuous teenage years. I also think it has the potential to benefit many others in the community as the recorded version gets shared with others in the local school district, which would increase the reach of the information to a broader audience. Additionally, in regard to the teenage/student stakeholders, a benefit is understanding they are not alone and have individuals and resources in the community that care about them and can support them.

The direct impact of my capstone project was educating and promoting awareness regarding youth risks, mental health, online safety, and other concerns facing teens today. The attendees were able to directly learn about specific risks and how to mitigate them and support the teens in their community. An indirect impact was demonstrating to the community that there are professionals and others that love and want to support the youth in whatever way possible. This creates stronger connections with many different entities in the local community and those they serve.

Conclusion

My goal for this project was to have at least 50 people attend the live event. Even though only half this number attended, I feel the presentation was still successful in that we were able to connect with the community on a deeper and more intimate level than if a larger crowd had

attended. I was thrilled with the feedback and discussion the “paraphernalia” table evoked. A lot of parents were very surprised by what they saw and had questions for me and the rest of the team.

One thing I could have added or done differently was include a teenager in my presentation. I think it would have been interesting to have a local teen share their experience with social media, mental health, and/or exposure to substance use at a local level. I could have interviewed a local teen or had them join us in presenting if they were comfortable. I also could have had a local parent share their experience in navigating these trends with their child. These additions would have added another perspective or two to my presentation, making it more innovative.

To better measure the impact of the event, I could have had each participant complete a feedback survey at the end of the presentation. If I present in the future, I could distribute a paper survey or utilize an online QR code survey for participants to complete.

Overall, I think my capstone project was a success. Although there were less in attendance than I had hoped, I was still able to accomplish the main goals of the project and learn several new skills along the way. I connected with my community in a meaningful way, and I am hopeful I will have many more opportunities in the future to continue the work I have started.

Appendix

[Timberlake High School Safety Presentation \(Part 1\)](#)

[Timberlake High School Safety Presentation \(Part 2\)](#)

[TLHS Powerpoint](#)

[TLHS Presentation Additional Documents](#)

[TLHS Presentation Survey](#)

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