

Mitchell County Pilots a Tobacco Free Schools Program



Process of creating CHANGE

In the summer of 2002, the State Board of Education officially recommended that all counties adopt a 100% Tobacco Free Schools (TFS) policy. This provided a critical opportunity for the lead county health educator in Mitchell County, a rural county in the Western mountains of North Carolina, to create momentum for a tobacco free school campaign.

The health educator started by networking with the school nurse and principal on how to encourage a TFS. The principal recommended talking with the superintendent, who supported the effort under the condition that funding and structure be put into place to move towards a TFS policy. The group then brainstormed an action plan and decided to begin with a pilot program in one county elementary school (K-8th grade). The group planned to conduct the pilot 100% TFS policy in spring 2003, then approach the School Board for full adoption the following fall. One selling point for the pilot project was to help overcome some recent negative press coverage.

To tap the strength of youth empowerment, the health educator enlisted the help of ?Y through a mini-grant for tobacco free signage and educational materials, along with training and incentives. Adults prepared by attending trainings on working with “generation Y”, secondhand smoke advocacy, TFS and cessation. ?Y and the health educator recognized that peer education through school wide promotions was needed to develop critical awareness among youth. The mini-grant funded training for 23 high school students to build their skills to conduct peer education for elementary students. The student group developed out of the Health Occupations Student Association, whose teacher was supportive.

The overall plan was to build “readiness” by offering a several TFS components, including school wide promotions, school policy and cessation programs: *School wide promotions.* The youth and their adult supporters provided school wide promotions for grades four through eight at two elementary schools, including “Tar Wars” and “Skip the Dip” programs and a poster contest. Winning posters were displayed in the school halls and first place winners submitted posters to the state-level competition. During the week of the Great American Smokeout, high school students took the opportunity to visit five schools and speak to 550 elementary students about tobacco use prevention.

Type of Change:	Environmental Policy
Location of Change:	Elementary school Mitchell Cty
Reach of Change:	Youth, families, & staff
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School Policy. To prepare the school for the policy change in January 2003, 15 signs informing visitors, staff, and parents of the new TFS policy were placed around the school campus in the fall of 2002.

Announcements of the policy change were made at all home games, and the team conducted a policy change awareness campaign by distributing stickers, balloons, and mints. The Mitchell County Parks and Recreation Department was notified, and in November, the health educator spoke at a teacher’s meeting to describe the 100% TFS policy. A Tobacco Committee, formed as an outgrowth of the Healthy Carolinian and school partnership, drafted a formal written policy to institute at the school. Letters were mailed to all parents informing them of the pending policy change.

Cessation. After being trained in the ALA “Freedom from Smoking”, the nurse offered cessation for adults in the Fall of 2002. Only one person signed up, but the team plans to repeat the class in the Spring of 2003.

Importance of the CHANGE

According to research from the Oregon state TFS initiative, implementing more of the recommended components of TFS -- *no use policies, cessation, school curriculum, family/community involvement and staff training* -- increases the effectiveness of a program in reducing or preventing youth smoking. (Research published by CDC in the *MMWR*, August 10, 2001, Vol.50, No.31 p. 663). The pilot program at Mitchell has the elements of such a successful approach, and was specifically designed to move the school district to a higher readiness to adopt a full TFS policy and program.

What we learned about CHANGE

- Institutionalize the project. Create a foundation to continue TFS efforts even if the key player (in this case, a county health educator) leaves.
- Build together. Partnering & coordinating activities with groups such as Healthy Carolinians or Healthy Active Children (increasing physical activity for students) adds powerful voices to your campaign.
- Use school insiders as champions! Key people such as the school nurse, principal, teachers and youth groups need to raise awareness & strategize within their own school.
- Draw on resources in the region, such as training, mini-grant funding, and health organizations.