

YOUR VOICE

Children need help to avoid drugs and alcohol

By Adam Brickner

Greenville is a community that places a high value on its children and families. We believe that children deserve a fair shot, that parents should take responsibility for the well-being of the family, and that our community will be stronger as a result.

The threat of drug and alcohol use among our children has always been present to some degree, but a recent report from The Partnership for a Drug-Free America has raised an important red flag for community leaders and parents alike. The health of our children, families and community are all at stake.

After a decade of consistent declines in drug and alcohol abuse by teenagers, the 2009 Partnership/MetLife Foundation Attitude Tracking Study (PATS) has found that the declines have now reversed. More of our teenage children are using the kinds of drugs and alcohol they are likely to encounter at parties and other social

GUEST COLUMN



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situations.

The number of high school students using alcohol in the past 30 days has grown 11 per-

cent in the last year. Nineteen percent more of our teens have used marijuana in the past 12 months as compared to the previous year. At the root of these alarming numbers is a shift in our children's attitudes. Specifically, the PATS study found that teens increasingly believe there are benefits and acceptability in the use of drugs and alcohol.

The percentage of teens who agree that "being high feels good" has grown 6 percent since 2008 and matched with that attitude shift is a 5 percent decline in the number of teens who say "they don't want to hang around drug users." More acceptability brings more use, and more use brings more acceptability. Without effective action, this cycle will become a death spiral for more of our community's children.

Effective action begins in the home, with the family. The PATS study found that nearly half of the parents who were aware of their teen's

substance abuse either waited to take action or took no action at all. Parents can sometimes feel powerless against the constant pressures of media culture and their child's need for acceptance among friends. Research confirms the power of parental action, however, and there is an urgent need for parents to take immediate action as soon as they suspect their child might be using drugs or alcohol.

Beyond the family, the community simply must act to prevent and intervene in these harmful behaviors. Friends, neighbors, retailers and Greenville County schools all have important roles to play in identifying teens with a problem, and referring them to effective treatment. The Phoenix Center of Greenville is our County's designated substance abuse authority, and provides prevention and treatment services to more than 4,500 people every year, including our community's youth.

Our Certified Preven-

tion Specialists interact with more than 20,000 students every year, in an effort to stop the problems before they start. In addition, our prevention team has worked with Greenville County law enforcement to bring about a 63 percent reduction in the number of local retailers selling alcohol and tobacco to minors.

The Phoenix Center also works hard to treat those children already suffering from the effects of drugs and alcohol. Our program has two levels of effective outpatient care for adolescents, and we never turn away a child because of the family's inability to pay for services. We accept all who need us.

In May of this year, we will open the doors of The Phoenix Academy. This facility is currently under construction near Furman University, and will house a holistic, residential program for teenagers who need a 360-degree environment of care and addiction treatment. The Academy

will be only the second program of its kind in the state of South Carolina, and we should all be proud that it will be in Greenville.

It is important to note that while our efforts against teen alcohol and drug abuse continue, the resources to help our children are shifting. Federal prevention programs have been losing funding for several years and The Phoenix Center has lost more than \$900,000 in government funding for treatment services since July 2008.

These shifts in government funding provide an opportunity for the citizens of Greenville to invest personally in their own community. Local parents must do everything in their power to educate their children and influence their choices. In addition, local philanthropy and community engagement will be a critical foundation for Greenville's ability to provide prevention and addiction treatment services to the children and families who need help.