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EDITOR'S PICK

Senate to vote on school substance abuse bill

Four County recently instituted training to address drug, alcohol abuse

by Ben Middelkamp Staff reporter 16 hrs ago



INDIANAPOLIS — A bill that could provide money to schools for substance abuse prevention will soon go to the Senate floor, a local legislator said.

Sen. Randy Head, R-Logansport, authored Senate Bill 62, which, if passed and signed into law, would create a pilot program and fund for substance abuse prevention programs for state schools, administered by the Indiana Department of Education.

According to the most recent National Kids Count Data Book data, 32,000 Indiana teenagers ages 12 to 17 abused alcohol or drugs in 2013 — and Head said the opioid and heroin epidemic has continually gotten worse throughout the state.

He said that programs that could start via the pilot program can help students get the early drug prevention that they need.

"If you can diagnose it earlier, if you can solve it earlier, then that person has a better school experience," Head said. "They're better prepared for life after school and the chances are much greater that they'll be a productive member of society."

Head is chairman of a task force on substance abuse and child safety, which voted on the creation of the bill. They wanted to duplicate substance abuse prevention programs in two Indiana counties — Hamilton and Vanderburgh.

The Senate Committee on Appropriations recommended an appropriation to the pilot program fund of \$300,000 for the biennium, July 1, 2017, to June 30, 2019. Head said the bill currently doesn't stipulate a certain number of schools for the program, adding the more the better.

Schools and their health providers, Head said, will determine the type of program for the pilot program; the bill just makes the money available to the schools and providers through grants.

It states that the program, however, has to be "evidence based substance abuse prevention programming," mental health personnel have to be present in schools and the corporations and charter schools in the pilot program should develop a substance abuse prevention policy.

Head said when counselors and specialists go into schools, educators should refer them to students who are in need of a program in order to address their substance issues, and many times, he said, those lingering habits trace back to an unfit home environment.

"They're trying to figure out every single barrier to success for this child in school and then deal with them all so that child will be successful," Head said.

In Cass County, all Four County Counseling Center school-based case managers are trained to determine if students are at risk for substance abuse, said Elizabeth Avery, director of school based services.

That's part of a recently implemented training called Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment, or SBIRT, that began in January.

Through that, Avery said case managers in schools conduct a screening process when they meet with students. They ask them questions about substance abuse that can show whether a student is at risk of substance abuse, and it provides them a way to refer students to more treatment.

"If a minor is using any kind of illicit drugs or drinking at all, then that case manager is really charged with getting some treatment and support around the student," Avery said.

Additionally, Avery said that in May 2016, about 25 school-based case managers within Four County — eight to 10 in Cass County — underwent a life skills training, which is an evidence-based substance abuse and violence prevention program that services students in grades three through 10.

Pioneer Regional School Corp. has two groups for life skills training, Avery said, and she hopes for some of the other Cass County schools to start groups after more training this summer.

Avery said the earlier a case worker, educator or parent can intervene with a students' substance abuse, the better outcome such intervention can have.

She said research for the life skills training backs up the program, proving it decreases substance abuse and risk behavior in general for students.

"If we're not working to prevent these problems from ever occurring," Avery said, "then we're going to have this ongoing substance abuse issue."

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