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Opinions differ on the benefits of DARE program



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Students at St. Gregory Barbarigo School in Houma are among thousands of local children who participate in the DARE program.

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THIBODAUX — Each year, thousands of students in Terrebonne and Lafourche learn about the dangers of drugs through DARE, an international program that reaches millions of children.

DARE PROS AND CONS

The DARE program has been the subject of so many conflicting studies that a nonprofit research group last week decided to collect them all in one place so you can use them to make up your own mind.

ProCon.org's latest Web offering, at <http://dare.procon.org>, explores this core question: "Is the DARE program good for America's kids?"

"Although we have limited resources, we invested our researchers' time into exploring DARE because with millions of kids enrolled in the program and few, if any, neutral organizations investigating its effectiveness, we felt that ProCon.org needed to shed some light on DARE," ProCon.org Managing Editor Kamy Akhavan said in a news release.

ProCon.org is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that promotes critical thinking and informed citizenship. The broader Web site presents documented pro and con

Local administrators say students leave the classes with more knowledge about the dangers of drugs.

Proponents say DARE provides other benefits, like a chance for police to connect with students in a positive way.

"In the lower grades, from kindergarten through fourth grade, the focus is mainly just on general safety, for them to have the base of knowledge and the education for what they need to be safe and healthy," said Lt. Jeff Landry, a 20-year veteran of the program in Lafourche. "The importance is to be drug-free."

arguments, with extensive references to their sources, on more than 30 of today's most-controversial issues.

Key Documents:

- [State drug-use survey: Lafourche students' responses \(PDF - 1510kb\)](#)
- [State drug-use survey: Terrebonne students' responses \(PDF - 1510kb\)](#)

But nationally, researchers have long debated the program's merits, and critics cite numerous studies that conclude DARE is ineffective.

What began in 1983 as a project to prevent drug use and gang involvement in Los Angeles has grown into an internationally taught program that some studies say costs more than \$1 billion per year in tax

money and donations.

DARE, which stands for Drug Abuse Resistance Education, is handled by local law-enforcement agencies. In Louisiana, parish sheriff's deputies teach the lessons. Local resources are supplemented by federal tax money, according to the DARE Web site, including dollars from the Defense, Justice and State departments.

Lafourche's DARE program, which reaches about 10,000 students between kindergarten and eighth grade, costs about \$140,000 per year. In Terrebonne, where the program focuses only on the sixth grade, the price tag is about \$20,000. But both parishes receive grants through the state that help defray the costs, up to \$100,000 in Lafourche.

Critics say this money — and time in the classroom — could be better spent on programs that are backed by research.

Dennis Rosenbaum, a longtime DARE critic, is a criminal-justice professor and director of the Center for Research in Law and Criminal Justice at the University of Illinois in Chicago. In 2007, he reviewed more than 30 studies and used his own research to conclude the program “does not prevent drug use” in students. Moreover, he reported, drug use of DARE graduates is “indistinguishable from students who do not participate in the program.”

But John Lindsay, the DARE regional director who oversees Louisiana, said most criticism is based on older studies and that the program has changed to include research-proven methods.

Lindsay cited the new middle-school curriculum, called “Keepin' it REAL,” developed by Arizona State University. It is listed on the National Registry of Evidence-base Programs and Practices, run by branch of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

However, David Hanson, a sociology professor at the State University of New York in Potsdam who researches alcohol and drinking, points to numerous federal studies that label DARE ineffective.

Hanson has not seen evidence about the effectiveness of the “Keepin' it REAL” program but said that DARE has changed its curriculum many times in an effort to discredit studies critical of the program.

Hanson emphasized that he is not against drug education but does not support a program with little proof of its impact.

“If independent research ever demonstrates that DARE is effective in reducing alcohol or drug consumption,” he said, “I would enthusiastically support it.”

LESSONS LEARNED

Louisiana has been recognized as a leader for some of the DARE strategies used in the state, including testing to measure how much students learn from the program. The test is given to fifth- and sixth-graders before and after they go through the program's core anti-drug lessons, painting a picture of what is learned through DARE.

Those tests have been given for nine years, said Thomas Kelley, academic dean of Hinds Community College in Mississippi, who compiles and analyzes the results.

“The study is designed to do two things: Is the material being taught, and are the students learning it?” Kelley said. “The answer is yes to both.”

Several students at Caldwell Middle School in Schriever agreed that they were learning new things from the program.

“They have over 200 poisons in a cigarette,” said sixth-grader Lukas Shackelford.

Another student added that most of those aren't listed on the warning labels.

“If you knew what they could do to you and learned how they could harm you, why would you smoke them?” said 13-year-old seventh-grader Matthew Thomas.

SURVEY SAYS

Studies done by the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals indicate a decline in drug use among children. The Louisiana Caring Communities Youth Survey has been given every even-numbered year for more than a decade to Louisiana students in grades six, eight, 10 and 12.

Results show a downward trend in the use of almost every drug children were asked about, including the three substances they reported using the most: alcohol, cigarettes and marijuana.

In both Terrebonne and Lafourche between 1998 and 2008, students reported less drug and alcohol consumption across the board. In some cases, use dropped to one-third or even one-tenth of 1998 levels.

But in other measures, such as the use of alcohol among Terrebonne's 12th-graders, the change during that 10-year period was less than one percentage point. And though the overall 10-year trend was downward, much of the drug and alcohol use reported in 2008 was greater than the rates reported in 2006 and 2004.

Not all of DARE's lessons stay with the students, according to a group of teens at Thibodaux High.

Michael Labat, an 11th-grader, said he remembers the main message — “Just say not to drugs” — but not the details. Yet the 16-year-old said the program had influenced him to make better decisions even in situations unrelated to drugs.

Two schoolmates, Paige Adams and Colby Gilcrease, both 16-year-old sophomores, said they didn't remember much from their childhood DARE lessons.

Labat suggested that DARE should offer more follow-up with older students, who are more likely to encounter situations involving drugs, alcohol and violence.

“They reach you in fifth grade, but they lose track of you in high school,” he said. “In fifth grade, I didn't see it happening. Now do I see it happening? Yeah.”

CHANGES

DARE programs in both Terrebonne and Lafourche are in a time of change. Last year, after two decades leading Lafourche's program, Landry passed it on to sheriff's Lt. Nolan Smith Jr. And in Terrebonne, a recent tragedy robbed the community of a deputy who worked with multiple generations of students.

Maj. Timothy Bergeron, the face of DARE's program in Terrebonne, was killed Feb. 7 in a traffic collision while escorting a Mardi Gras float on his motorcycle. Bergeron, who pioneered a number of statewide changes in the program, was immensely popular with students.

“He always brought joy to the class,” said Madeline Baudoin, a 12-year-old Caldwell Middle seventh-grader who was taught by Bergeron last year. “He made the program cool because

he did so much for it.”

Lt. Dale White, now the senior officer of Terrebonne's DARE program, said he plans to continue in Bergeron's footsteps, keeping the program

“We're very committed to the program. We're interested in making it really interesting,” said White, a 14-year DARE veteran who has heard from former students who are now parents themselves. “We get through to the kids.”

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