

Talk It Up! Column

Collecting Data to Affect the Future

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Data collection. Hit the snooze button, right? But let's take a moment to consider how we make decisions. Is it based on feelings? Perceptions? If we want to have real insight, to make the best possible decisions, we must turn to facts and real evidence. That's what data is. So, knowing that, and knowing we all want only the best for our youth, we must especially turn to data when making decisions that affect them and their futures. That is why the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) is so important.

The YRBS is a well vetted survey, used nationwide to gather concrete information on the health behaviors and attitudes of adolescents that can then be used to guide instruction, services and programs. Orange Partnership for Alcohol and Drug Free Youth is partnering with the Orange County Health Department to support Orange County Schools through the YRBS process this Spring. OCS plans to administer the survey to 7th, 9th and 11th graders in March. As part of this support, OCHD has offered to assist with analysis and reporting of the YRBS data. This service, *offered without charge*, is valued at about \$7,000. In cooperation, OP is working to help spread information to the parents and guardians of OCS students about the YRBS, what it means for your child and their health and safety, and what you, as a parent/guardian can do to help us.

To begin, let's look at the background of the YRBS. It was developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in 1990 as a means of monitoring the health risk behaviors that have the greatest impact on, and possible lifelong negative consequences for, adolescents. To this end, questions are asked about topics such as nutrition, physical activity, injuries, tobacco, alcohol and other drug use, school safety and mental health.

The data collected from this survey provides comprehensive information to community-serving organizations that is *specific* to the community they are in. **The most significant reason for conducting the YRBS is to gain a better understanding of our students' attitudes and behaviors on important health related issues allowing the district to better utilize staff and program resources.** Orange County's community-serving organizations use this information to develop and modify programs, policies and/or services that meet the needs of Orange County's students. For example, the schools and other groups can work to improve health and wellness programs, health or physical education curricula, anti-bullying initiatives, drug and alcohol social norms campaigns and mental health supports. In addition, the data is necessary as measures for potential funding applications that, again, would benefit our local youth and community.

The YRBS has been verified and used successfully nation-wide for decades and, in 2015-16, OCHD and OP supported OCS in participating for the first time. For consistency, the survey was given to the same grades, 7th, 9th and 11th, that we plan to survey this year. Information from that YRBS has been used in a variety of ways. For example, youth members of the Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention Team (ADAPT), a club based at Cedar Ridge and Orange High Schools, use the percentages of middle and high school OCS students who report drinking to reinforce positive social norms when they do peer education presentations for 8th graders and their high school peers. According to the 2015 YRBS, only about 20% of

OCS students report drinking alcohol...a much lower percentage than most students think. Sharing this information, about how the majority of students are making healthy decisions, helps create a social norm of positive and safe decision-making. In addition, OCS realized there was a greater need for school-based mental health services based on 2015 YRBS data, which helped support the decision to partner with Renaissance Wellness to bring mental health services to the schools in a more widely-available and consistent way. Administering this survey again in 2019 would allow us to compare the data now to that of the original, seeing where these uses/services have had a positive impact and what areas still need our focus for improvement.

The reason it's so important for parents/guardians to know about and understand the YRBS is because, due to the sensitive nature of some of the questions asked, OCS requires consent from parents/guardians before students can participate in the survey. Since data quality improves as the number of responses increases, OCHD needs as many students to take the survey as possible. This will only happen if parents/guardians understand what is being asked of their youth and give permission for their participation. So, to that end, we ask that parents/guardians *please keep an eye out for this permission letter, which will be sent out by OCS to parents both digitally and in physical form, and complete/return the form as soon as possible.*

The link to the digital consent form can also be found on the Orange Partnership Facebook Page: *Safe Homes Network of Orange County*. OCS, OCHD and OP all thank you for your support on behalf of the youth of Orange County!