Student Leadership Services Inc.

Changing thoughts. Challenging behaviors.

Student Leadership Services, Inc. & Youth-Led Prevention 101

Originally written in 1993 by SLS Student Advisory Board Member, Mike McMahon, to explain the strategy of SLS coordinating Michigan high school chapters. Edited in 2012 by Pamela Voss-Page, Executive Director.

We believe in many things. Our strongest beliefs are what direct our program. Our values are what guided us in creating the "philosophy" you see before you today. Those values are SLS at the core, as basic as you can get. We value people! We value life!

There are three promises a person must make to be a member of SLS & youth-led chapters: ***I will not participate in self-defeating behaviors that could damage who I am and who I want to be. I will make appropriate decisions when driving or riding in a car. I will help and support my friends to do the same.*** These promises are ones that any high school student could make. Membership in SLS chapters is open to anyone who will make those promises. We require this commitment of members because it is rooted in our beliefs.

The toughest issue to deal with is "underage drinking." SLS takes a clear stand on this issue. We believe that the use of alcohol and other drugs by teenagers is self-defeating. We also recognize the fact that according to the National High School Student Survey by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, two thirds of all high school students drink on a somewhat regular basis. "Under –age drinking" is a behavior, a behavior that is considered by those who drink as being enjoyable, socially acceptable among their peers, and beneficial.

Drinking, for the students who do so on a regular basis, becomes a valued part of their life. Since drinking is perceived as being beneficial or socially useful to them, no amount of information on the dangers of using alcohol or other drugs will change the beliefs of the student who drinks. Therefore, it is naïve and unrealistic of us to believe that by simply informing young people of what we consider dangerous about drinking, or telling them not to do it, that they will change their behavior. We feel that doing that may even be counterproductive in some cases, since the students may resent us for attempting to tell them what to do. Those students would not join our chapters and would work against us by influencing others to follow their example. It must be recognized by both local chapters and by adults who have authority in both schools and other prevention programs that they are not accomplishing anything by simply providing factual information on what they believe is dangerous about a certain behavior.

Prevention programs that focus on providing information as their primary strategy have virtually no effect in changing the attitudes and behavior of students. It is extremely unlikely that there is a high school student in this state or even this country who does not know that the use of alcohol and other drugs is harmful. The problem is that drinking students either feel that the information is inaccurate or that the risks of drinking are worth perceived benefits.

The first step necessary in an attempt to create a change in the student behavior is to start referring to the behavior as "self-defeating" instead of as "harmful, bad, wrong, stupid, etc." Since the use of alcohol and other drugs is considered "beneficial" by many students, the realization by them that they are doing something "self-defeating," that they are working against themselves in attempting to achieve what they want in life, is the first step in creating a change in behavior. We feel that the best approach that can be taken to change self-defeating behavior into self-promoting behavior is empowering students to create an atmosphere in which students may learn certain key skills: critical thinking, decision making, and communication. They also must be able to develop a process in which the formation of values and beliefs may occur.

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Essentially an empowerment program is a program that enables students to realize that they are responsible for their own behavior; are able to create positive change, and facilitates them in the development of the skills necessary to do so. We believe that this process of empowerment is the most effective way to touch the lives of underage drinkers. And this is the Students Leading Students strategy.

There are several things that we recommend local chapters do in order to facilitate student empowerment and awareness. First of all, the nature of this approach requires local chapters to take a non-judgmental stance regarding the behaviors of its members. Membership is open to anyone so long as they agree to the three promises. It is not necessary for students to sign a contract, pledge card, attend so many meetings a year, participate in so many activities, etc. In each school there will be a group of students who organize activities, attend meetings, plan awareness weeks, etc., but to be a member of the group all you have to do is be able to make the three promises. Secondly, the local chapter's activities should focus in several areas: providing opportunities for positive social interaction between teenagers, advocating for and participating in activities that will encourage or enhance student empowerment in our schools, and find adult support for this process.

A chapter's ability to provide opportunities for social interaction between teenagers is critical to the success of this program. High School students are in an incredible position to directly affect the choices of their peers. The use of positive peer pressure must be included in any program that is attempting to create a change in behavior. The phrase "Kids Talk To Kids First" is often used in counseling and educational communities to reiterate this point. Students trust other students more than they do adults. This reality must be accepted and recognized by both local chapters and adults. Any program that wishes to be successful in creating a change in student behavior must be initiated and carried out by the students. The potential benefit of mixing both teenagers that do not drink with teenagers that do drink is tremendous. Non-drinking students who are respected by their peers will set a positive example for others to follow. Life skills are developed by both groups of students in the group.

The possibilities for student empowerment activities are endless. Working with STAND chapters, presenting the Peer Resistance Skills lesson and participating in safe driving campaigns are just a few examples. The thing to do in this area is to be creative; any activity that has the potential for building leadership or life skills for the participants is encouraged.

Appropriate adult support is critical for the success of the group. A balance of behind the scenes leadership, mentoring, cheerleading, fun and securing support from school administration is all that is needed.

We ask you to talk about SLS in your schools. We ask you to tell people who we are and what we stand for. We ask you to help people understand the beliefs and purpose of SLS. There will be people who will disagree with what we are doing, either because they don't understand, or they believe that their way is better. We expect this to happen and we ask you to be ready. Remember also that if you have questions about this philosophy or are having trouble with it in you school, help is just a phone call or email away. These are student created beliefs! The people at Student Leadership Services, Inc. will be more than happy to have a Student Advisory Board member help you understand the philosophy. Join us now. Let us work, learn, and play together.

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