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Not on Our Watch!

A zero-tolerance policy and a watchful eye ensure that student drinking at football games is a thing of the past.

As I said goodbye to a contractor who had been doing some work on my house, we both confirmed that we were tired. It was the end of the week: he was moonlighting doing some work for me, and the night before, I had been at our first home Friday night football game. When I mentioned this to the contractor, his unsolicited response was, “Oh, so you were taking care of the drunks.”

I immediately began to wonder whether student drinking at football games is a socially accepted and expected norm. It has not been accepted at Yorktown High School in Yorktown Heights, NY, since fall 2006, when the school administrators became aware of a drinking problem at the night games. A zero-tolerance policy was immediately put into place with great success. Here is the story.

High, Mom, I'm Home

All parents of high school students wait for the return of their children when they have been out with friends for the evening. But how closely do parents look at their kids when they come home? *Have their children been drinking or using drugs?* Such questions are the dark side of parenting an adolescent.

In some cases, the student may have gone to a school function, such as a football game. The night games are well attended: lifelong fans in the community, parents, students, and friends see them as fun, festive occasions. In some communities, as so well described by John Grisham in his novel *Bleachers*, these games are the epicenter of community activity.

How closely are students monitored at these games? In many districts, unless there is a serious incident, the students are not watched closely at all. I have gone to many evening sporting events at which student drinking was obvious but overlooked—a 400-pound gorilla

in the corner of the stands that no school official wanted to take on.

During a building-level administrative cabinet meeting in the fall, the athletic director expressed his concern about students who appeared to be intoxicated at the football games. Once the issue was in the open, Principal John Sullivan, Assistant Principal Wallace Maher, and I decided to go face-to-face with the beast. We left the meeting with a comprehensive plan: a letter would be sent home to the parents of every high school student, a schoolwide announcement would be made, and informal conferences would be held with students over the next several days.

Talking to Students

All of the administrators at Yorktown are extremely student centered and fully understand the importance of fostering positive, supportive relationships with staff members and students. Sullivan, in his warm, honest, Irish style, went on the public address system and made a schoolwide appeal to the student body. He explained that the administrators had a serious concern regarding the choices some students were making, one of which was to drink before attending football games. He told the students that the administrators, the school resource officer, and the Yorktown Police Department would be monitoring the students as they entered the football stadium. He explained that the school was implementing zero tolerance for such behavior. In addition, all travel coffee cups and other open containers that students wanted to bring into the stadium would be inspected.

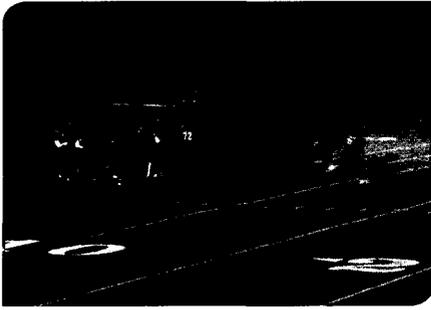
After the announcement, Sullivan, Maher, the school resource officer, and I reached out to the students on a personal level through informal conversations. We approached several

By Randall Glading

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student leaders and had extremely productive conversations. The word that we wanted them to make good decisions and that our concern for them was genuine spread rather quickly throughout the student body and the school community. The students were aware that they would be watched closely upon their arrival to the game. They also understood that there would be severe consequences for drinking at games.

The First Day

It was a cold, raw October evening. As the spectators arrived, Sullivan, Maher, and I greeted them. The parents were quite surprised by our level of involvement. As the students entered, we had casual conversations with them. The school resource officer stood alongside us, prepared to conduct a breathalyzer test upon our request. The students were quite entertained by our vigilance and made some expected adolescent comments, but none of them left when they noticed the screening. It was obvious that they had heard our message and were prepared to see us follow through. Many students dumped their open water and Gatorade bottles in the garbage, but others were able to bring sealed bottles into the game.

Students fail to realize how easy it is to detect whether they have been drinking. We call these kids the “gum crackers.” As the students approach, their glazed and slightly bloodshot eyes and the gum—oh, the gum—is a clear giveaway that they have been drinking. These kids do not stumble when they walk, and their speech may be only slightly slurred. Some adolescents are able to hold their alcohol quite well because they drink so frequently.

The first night, two students were pulled aside: both of them tested positive for being under the influence of alcohol. They were taken to the office and their parents were con-

tacted and told they needed to pick up their children. They were suspended from school for three days, and upon their return they attended three mandatory sessions with our student assistance counselor.

The message was loud and clear: we care about all of you (the students) and will continue to monitor each game to ensure that you are making healthy decisions.

A Higher Standard

One question that was raised was why the teachers who are paid to chaperone events couldn't conduct the same procedure. We feel that it is not their role in the school community: the school disciplinarians, with the help of the teaching staff, need to lead this aggressive charge. Sullivan, Maher, and I worked collaboratively with the teacher chaperones, however.

Yorktown is a better place because of our zero-tolerance policy. The students at Yorktown High School realize that all of the adults in the high school community care for them. The informal conversations before the first game got the word out to the students that we were concerned about the decisions that some students were making and that we were going to institute a zero-tolerance policy.

All Friday night football games continue to be monitored closely. The conversation and vigilance continued during the winter sports season. Although drinking was not reported as a problem during the winter season, the district has implemented police presence at Friday night basketball games. As a result of our diligence, we have had no other incidents. As an administrator, the loss of family time is a concern: selfishly, I would rather be at home with my wife and son. When I look at the powerful message we are sending to 1,400 students, however, I realize that it is time well spent. **PL**