

Cripple Creek-Victor School District Cripple Creek, CO

Identifying the Problem

When school psychologist Dr. Wanda Eppes arrived in Colorado in Sept. 2005, she was struck by the disproportionate number of pregnant teens in the tiny Cripple Creek-Victor School District. “I asked, ‘What are we doing about this?’” Dr. Eppes recalls. “I couldn’t accept that people weren’t doing anything to teach teen pregnancy prevention. At that point, I decided that I wanted to change the culture here.”

Dr. Eppes describes the area as an at-risk community because it’s built on addictions. Originally, Cripple Creek’s economy was based on ranching and gold-mining, but when production began to slow, residents looked for other means of support. Gambling, as a local option, was introduced to the struggling area. Impoverished wages and population fluctuation led to enormous turnover in a district that has fewer than 500 students from kindergarten through high school.

A typical senior class at Cripple Creek-Victor High School includes 18-30 students, only 15 percent of whom began kindergarten in the district. “A tourist economy based on gambling contributes to several things that increase the rate of teen pregnancy,” Dr. Eppes says. “Most of the children are raised in homes with absent parents due to many parents’ working shift schedules.”

Dr. Eppes began investigating ways to confront the problem. “It was not part of my job description,” she says, but she felt the issue needed to be addressed. She discovered that the school district owned a number of RealCare[®] Baby infant simulators, but was told that the program didn’t work. “Students were required to get signatures to take home the electronic baby. The kids were smart enough to know that they could tell their



Cripple Creek-Victor High School Psychologist Wanda Eppes being interviewed about her RealCare Program.

parents they would wreck it and the parents would not sign the permission form.” Dr. Eppes spied an opportunity and became determined to renovate the program.

Transforming the program

Dr. Eppes decided to take one month of a semester-long eighth grade health class and help students focus on learning and improving life skills. During this month, her program brings in guest speakers and has students

(continued next page)

“I couldn’t accept that people weren’t doing anything to teach teen pregnancy prevention. At that point, I decided that I wanted to change the culture here.”

– Wanda Eppes - School Psychologist

participate in an intensive assignment to calculate the cost of the first year of a baby's life. For one week, each student is a parent to their own RealCare Baby – including bringing the infant simulators to classes. “Teachers have been amazingly supportive because they see the benefit,” Dr. Eppes says.

To motivate the class, Dr. Eppes created a three-tiered incentive system tied to the care of the infant simulators. First, she established a competition between the students themselves. The top three “parents” from each class receive gift cards to a local retail store. Winners are determined by comparing levels of care scores from the RealCare report printouts available to instructors at the conclusion of a multi-day simulation.



Eighth-grader Emma Ravage with her teacher, Regina Viktorin, and RealCare Baby.

Second, recognizing that students respond well to learning experiences outside the classroom, she organizes an all-day field trip at the end of the program. The field trip has two parts: a visit to a hospital and a shopping expedition. At the hospital, students tour the neonatal unit and listen to a nurse give an information-packed presentation.

Dr. Eppes recalls how this portion of the trip saved one student's life. A pregnant student had the opportunity to listen to the nurse, who talked about pre-term labor and other risks. Two days later, the student went into pre-term labor, recognized the signs and was able to get help.

The second part of the field trip – the shopping expedition – teaches teens to help others. Students' grades from the experience are turned into points. After being split into smaller groups, classes use their points to shop for diapers and other necessary baby care products. In partnership with three community organizations, the items are then donated to families who are experiencing an unplanned pregnancy.

Dr. Eppes is moved by the experience. “It's amazing to see the teens not just working for their own grade, but working to help others. One class pooled their points and purchased a car seat. Another class, a stroller.”

Students receive support from peers and community

Cripple Creek-Victor School District now has 20 RealCare Babies as a result of three grants for which Dr. Eppes has applied. Having this many simulators allows each student to experience the program at the same time. “It's a mutual support system,” Dr. Eppes says. “Kids aren't going through this alone.”

The program at Cripple Creek-Victor School District is funded primarily by grants, but Dr. Eppes also values local efforts to aid the program. When monies run short, individuals and corporations are quick to respond to her requests for help.

The field trips could not happen without volunteer assistance. “It's a real community effort,” Dr. Eppes says. Dr. Eppes also credits the school district for giving her the flexibility to continue to grow the program.



Toby Wuellner, a student in the Cripple Creek-Victor School District, practices with RealCare Baby before taking it home.

Measuring the impact

Currently, the program is part of the eighth-grade health class, but Dr. Eppes says she would love to see it incorporated into the tenth-grade health class as well. Her goal is to get 100 percent of the eighth-grade students to take RealCare Baby home. During 11 semesters, she has met this goal three times.

“Prior to this, only 20 percent of the students participated. The program now averages 85-90 percent participation,” she says.

“About 170 kids have gone through the program and only one of those students has gotten pregnant,” Dr. Eppes observes. “The effectiveness of the program is very, very high.”

Dr. Eppes believes the efforts are critical. She is focused on preparing students for real life situations. “It takes two generations to change a culture. I won’t be around that long, but I hope to make a dent in it.”