

# Risky Business

**Alcohol use is a major problem for students in Indiana County. So what can we do about it?**

BY DR. DAVID ALLEN

**S**ometimes, the most important messages can get drowned out by all the other information that comes our way. As a result, we've become a nation of skeptics.

One of my concerns is that the important information educators want to convey to parents and young people will become just another opinion to disregard. Case in point, the use of alcohol and other drugs by children and teenagers.

During the 1994-95 school year, Indiana Area School District administrators made a bold and tricky decision to survey students about personal alcohol and drug use. In the spring of 1995, we administered our first "risk survey." This voluntary and completely anonymous questionnaire was given to all sixth-, ninth- and 12th- grade students. Since that initial assessment, we have surveyed the same grades every three years.

After analyzing 15 years of data, it has become clear that a scary number of kids in Indiana County use alcohol. As a result of this behavior, I see possible school failure, family problems, relationship issues, legal difficulties, college dropouts, potential never realized, criminal behavior, sexual assault, destruction of property, suicide, physical injury and even loss of life. Research clearly shows a correlation between drinking and all of these issues.

But what I see the most is opportunity—opportunity in the form of prevention and intervention.

There is one question that most young people ask themselves before they consume alcohol or use other drugs: "Will I get caught?" Obviously, the likelihood of getting caught can be a significant deterrent.

In the survey, children and teens reported that their own home and friends' homes are two of the most popular places to obtain and use alcohol. So where are the parents? I believe that, regardless of where they are, they trust that their unsupervised children would never take alcohol from their home, let alone drink it in their house.

Here is an eye opener—approximately one-third of sixth graders, two-thirds of ninth graders and a whopping 83 percent of high school seniors surveyed said it's easy or very easy for them to obtain alcohol. This helps explain why 14 percent of freshmen and 48 percent of seniors reported drinking on a regular basis and frequently drinking to the point of intoxication.

The popularity of homes as a place to consume alcohol has led to a number of initiatives, most notably the Caring Homes Pledge and the Caring Homes Directory.

The Caring Homes Program is a public agreement that



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helps parents join together to help provide a safer community for their children. By signing the pledge, parents establish a clear and consistent "no use" message, open the lines of communication with other parents and let their children know they care.

This school year, 809 district families (48 percent) representing 1,336 children signed the pledge. Each of these families will receive a Caring Homes Directory that contains the names, addresses and phone numbers of all the other Caring Homes families.

For more information about the district's at-risk survey, as well as the Caring Homes Program, visit the Indiana Area School District website at [www.iasd.cc](http://www.iasd.cc).

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