

## Episode 6: Substance

FULL TRANSCRIPT (with timecode)

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**M2:** Welcome to the What's Up. APS podcast this is your host Frank Bellavia the communications coordinator for Arlington public schools. Welcome to Episode 6. We're talking about substance abuse with substance abuse counselors Jenny Sexton from Kenmore Middle School and Swanson Middle School and Maria Sabato's from Washington. The lengths that high schools we're talking about substance abuse because on September 20th. And we as a nation recognize or substance abuse professionals across the country and it's a very important topic especially now with some of the opioid crisis is going on across the country. So I want to thank both of you for joining us. Why don't we start telling us a little bit about what your roles are of substance abuse counselors.

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**F8:** Right. So thank you so much for having us. And one of the main role that we have in school is combat substance abuse counselors is to support students so they can continue their education unimpeded in order to do that.

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**F5:** We provide early intervention services to students through Indymedia and group counseling. We also met meet with all of the students that go to the Second Chance program.

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**F3:** Well and second chance for those you don't know is an early intervention program that's offered to students throughout the county either via a parent referral self referral or could be a school or kerp court referral. And what it is it's an opportunity for a three day educational opportunity for the students to really learn what substances can do to their system in the long term impact that these substances can have on their system.

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**F5:** We want to make sure that these students that a 10 second chance when they complete it we can continue to support them. We can continue to assess if you need more services additional services so they can go back to their location.

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**F2:** It gives us a good gauge to be able to as Maria noted to assess the student but also to get them the help that they need for moving forward most successfully in school and getting the education that they need. Because substance use can be very inhibiting on a student so we want to provide them all of the opportunities for the utmost of support so that they are able to get their education and move forward in their life.

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**M3:** We talk about substance abuse and it can start with you can start really at any age and I know you provide a lot of supports for our secondary students in middle school. New this year we're talking to you guys are talking to elementary students. Talk a little bit about that.

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**F2:** Sure. So this year all three of them middle school substance abuse counselors have been assigned to elementary schools to provide relief support and consultation. Although you know we don't see a high number of substance use starting at that young age. There are often times risk factors that could be factors such as students getting bullied mental health issues external stressors such as even immigration can be stressful for the students or even parents that are using. So we want to be able to offer the support to the elementary schools should they need us and to be able to really help the fifth graders successfully transition into sixth grade because that probably is the biggest most trying time of their lives transitioning from that grade into middle school when you switch classes and just so much change in transition so that can oftentimes really spark anxiety and these younger kids for those listeners who don't know how many substance abuse counselors we have in Arlington.

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**M4:** Can you explain how many there are and how you guys break out your schools.

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**F3:** Sure. So there's six of us and there is three high school substance abuse counselors and three middle school substance abuse counselors. Two of them middle school substance abuse counselors also some provide support. And to some extent at the high school level as well. Hp one line and the career center. So that's where we're split up and then elementary schools are also by the cluster that are that will feed into our middle schools.

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**M3:** Let's talk a little bit about some of the substances that we're seeing in Arlington I know people watch the news they know that opioids is probably the biggest thing that we're concerned about across the country and we're seeing a lot of that especially in the Midwest. What are we seeing in Arlington in terms of what what substances kids are getting into into kids substance.

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**F4:** Our reporter by AP students that we see more often continues to be marijuana alcohol prescription medication Xanax baby over-the-counter medication over-the-counter medication it's easy to obtain in the pharmacy so we see that kids are using over-the-counter medication as prescribed they wanted to use it to get high over-the-counter like allergy medicines and things like colon cough medication is one of dot dot kids or you've seen corseted one of the branches for the U.S. brands that are using NyQuil is also very popular amongst younger individuals because of its accessibility.

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**F3:** It's also termed like poor man's lean or poor man's scissor which is a very deadly prescribed medication for folks who have maybe pneumonia or bronchitis that contains codeine and promethazine which is prescription strength Benadryl so these students will get NyQuil because of the accessibility and it has the same effects when taken in large quantities. So I think the over-the-counter medications are particularly concerning for us because almost anybody can really walk in and purchase them.

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**M3:** What are some of the signs and symptoms the behavioral signs that parents should be on the lookout for teachers or or adults if see if their kids may be kids may be using illegal substances.

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**F2:** Well I think probably one of the biggest things that we start to see here in the schools is a drop in grades that teachers will really notice a drop in grades. The parents will change and it's difficult for us as the substance abuse counselors to always see that because we switch schools and you know there's more than eight hundred more than a thousand kids in some of these schools so we don't it is impossible for us to see all of the students all of the time so you know we'll see changes again in their behaviors. We'll see. You know they go from being very plain to just very unkept. We start to see them more Sleepyhead class and we always caution folks when we're talking about this because these are mostly teenagers we're dealing with. So we also want to make sure that this is just not typical teenager behavior lack of motivation being tired because they've been up on their devices. But we definitely see secretive behaviors not sharing passwords with mom and dad. You may start to you know smell different odors they make you know they've utilized marijuana or even alcohol you may smell that on them. The paranoia tends to increase. So you know there's certainly a big big picture but then you know what we'd like to do is as our motto is When in doubt reach out. So we encourage parents may encourage teachers to reach out if they're just not sure if they've just seen a change that doesn't sit well with them. Just reach out to us and let us meet with the student and we can assist in getting them support.

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**M3:** Is there any type of specific training you provide teachers so that they can be on the look out for some of those.

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**F2:** We do. We offer in-service training so any teachers that want the opportunity to take part in that. They also have a flyer that we give to all of the teachers there's a high school where in a middle school flyer that we provide and it's got a list of signs and symptoms kind of what to watch for. And then at staff meetings we will get the opportunity to give them a basic overview of what to look for. And we also for parents do like PTA meetings and community presentations which gives us the opportunity to help parents with what to look for at home which is a lot of the same behaviors. But it also might be a change in friends. It might be a you know change in the family dynamic or they don't want to be around their families as much much more secretive types of behaviors.

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**F5:** We have referrals from these school counselors teachers that may see this to see this as more often than us. So we said today and even if it's if they suspect that a student might be using drugs they don't have to be certain they are using drugs. They referred to us and we can screen them and continue to work with them if necessary. And we also have parents who contact us part of our role is to consult with parents and be available for Dand if they have questions about their kids and substance use. We can definitely provide that service and we can do it over the phone. They can come to the school. We are available in different ways to two parents to.

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**M3:** Talk about some of the interventions of a teacher or a parent that thinks a student might be using illicit substances. They come to you. You realize that that probably is something they're one of those interventions. How do you help a student stop using those substances.

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**F1:** We provide early intervention done means that for students that are using drugs and alcohol in the early stages which is experimentation or occasional use those are just days student debt we concentrate more in provide services school. We provide motivation interviewing. We tried to intervene earlier. We make plans with the parents for these instead are in more advanced hues. We work very closely with the parents and the student to referred down for treatment services outside the school. So we also do some prevention activities in general.

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**F5:** I don't know if you want to add something else about what we provide in school.

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**F2:** We also do groups with students that may be identified as high risk for substance use. So again taken into consideration different factors you know they may again have experimented with substances they may have come through. You know the Second Chance program so maybe students that you know are still at that early experimentation stage or at a very high risk. For example you know maybe mental health issues that are undiagnosed. So we will we do groups with different grade levels and each of the schools will combine them for example like an eighth grade I the eighth grade young men's group last year which focused on not substance use but being better individuals. And so because again that can trickle down to where they start to utilize substances because they don't view themselves positively. So you know the group is a big thing then we have three major prevention activities we do every year and then each of us is our own entities do smaller prevention activities as well.

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**F1:** So we do prevention week. We have Red Ribbon Week and then we have the National Drug and Alcohol facts week that we do Red Ribbon Week is coming up first and that will be in October.

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**F3:** And so what Red Ribbon Week is it's a DEA initiative and it's based upon a DEA agent that was kidnapped and murdered basically working undercover that week has been around for a long time since the 80s. It started as a California based initiative and then a transition to a nationwide initiative. So all of the substance abuse counselors will provide a Red Ribbon Week activities throughout that week at our schools. And so what we do is we set up tables. We get little goodies from the DEA that we give out. Last year we got red ribbon. So all of the staff and all of the schools had their red ribbons on which was fantastic. We have a day you know and some of the schools where they may wear red.

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**F4:** So we really try and you know you get each school really gets into it and that's that's a really great activity and we're very lucky because we partner we collaborate with isn't roles we collaborate with our lead on Department of Human Services they have a prevention unit. So they come in and work with us in this campaign. We also have Teen Nick Ford dad.

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**M3:** It's all located in an old school so they're also a big part of this campaign and the Partnership for Children and Families also have some of their big assets and making sure kids have positive assets to make sure they don't get caught.

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**F4:** And that's one of the things that we have done in Washington for the past two years is Students pledge to lead a healthy life without drugs and alcohol and to spread the word leaving we don't use drugs so I think that that's an empowering plans for their kids.

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**F3:** And so we have been doing that for for a while now and we all said that at the middle schools and had to think well over a thousand pledges once it was said and done which was amazing and we try and hang them up where we can just so that the kids can see and be reminded of the important pledge that they made but also when parents come in to see it while you know these kids really do take this seriously. So it's it's a great event and we all get really excited and get into it which is it's just an awesome thing. The schools really like it too.

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**M3:** It's great. That's wonderful. We talked about what what counselors can do to help with their interventions. What can parents do. How can families support their kids so that they can stop using or not use at all.

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**F4:** Parents are very powerful and sending a message to their kids early on in life definitely helps set up tone about drugs and alcohol. So we encourage parents to set these rules when there are young and then continue to remind them. And you know very specific say to their children our and our family. We don't use drugs alcohol is something that you can use when you're 21 and remind that this kid's dad don't listen to family. Rules are important.

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**F3:** I think too it's also important for parents to know that these conversations need to be held not avoiding it. You know don't be afraid to talk about it because it's something that's his reality. You know there is going to be a point in time when kids may consider trying one of these substances so it's about education and again teaching these kids you know there's nothing glamorous to alcohol you are being intoxicated or you know being under the influence of marijuana. So just having those open honest conversations so that kids feel comfortable to come say hey mom hey dad somebody approached me with this substance and I said no. And that the kids in confidence know it's OK to say no. We also encourage parents to you know come up with a buzz word. So for example if you know Maria is at a party and she gets uncomfortable because they start using substances she can send a text to her parents and just a letter X without her friends seeing it or be like Who are you texting. She just that and that's the buzz letter for her parents to know that she's in a dangerous situation and she needs to be picked up. So the parents may and say hey I have to pick you up there's an emergency so that the kid can get out of that situation. So we encourage you know the teens to come up with that buzz word or that buzz letter so that they know how to get out of that situation without being embarrassed because it's hard.

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**M3:** It's hard to be a teenager as you sit there and you think that people want to know who you're texting or you talk to the boy you're texting a girl whatever it is.

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**F3:** So you're not just they're not seeing the types of Mom or Dad I really need help come and get me great or they're using drugs because then that's going to cause a different set of issues so you know it's encouraged and you know in the health and P.E. presentations I always talk to the kids and then I follow up the next day and say OK who created their buzz word but their parents and the kids really get excited about it and come up with all these different creative you know buzz words and it could be something simple like a dog. And again your friends looking over your shoulder they're not going to think anything of you texting. You know I need to walk the dog or anything of that nature so what we want you know these kids to be able to feel comfortable to go to a trusted adult whether it be their parents their school counselor a teacher or there's substance abuse counselor.

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**M3:** Parents will say this. They can also talk to their elementary kids about this too. And we touched on it earlier but they can start having these conversations with their kids at a younger age.

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**F3:** Education is the key. Open dialogue is the key not being afraid when the topic comes up not being afraid to say yes. You know there are these different substances that we're seeing are answering the questions now as we noted earlier about the opiate opioid epidemic. Sadly we have to talk about it now because it's happening. You know the good news is we've not seen it in the middle and high schools but the bad news is that it has made its way into Arlington. So it's here. As far as a community. So unfortunately today we have to talk about heroin. We have to talk about these different prescription medications that are opiate and opioid days. A year ago we didn't necessarily have to have those conversations. But the dynamic has changed and that's part of the Substance Abuse realm. It's ever changing things we talked about last year may not necessarily be a topic this year.

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**M3:** And there are so many things in the news these days whether you know it's violence or or things that are going on like like Charlottesville's fact that there's so many things.

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**M4:** How would you recommend a parent start a conversation with their with their team their Alimentarius kids. How would you recommend they do that.

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**F1:** I would say ask them what what do you know about drugs. What do you know about alcohol abuse that simple. Try and try to get a gauge on where they're right.

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**F6:** The other thing is parents need to be aware they need to know the facts about drugs and alcohol. They need to well-rounded drugstore. And that adolescents or kids are Useem they need to know the facts so if their kid calm and talks to them about how mean they are their parents are informed about what heroin is and be able to have an open discussion about it and always tell the truth about God. Adderall.

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**F1:** Well and I think with the invention of social media it is makes things more challenging in our field because it's difficult to keep up with social media. And parents oftentimes don't have the passwords to Snapchat and Instagram and Facebook and that's something that they should have. You know we need to be able to keep up with the evolution of the different you know aspects of teenagers. But again not being afraid to ask. And I think one of the biggest things we can encourage you know your kids friends. It's extraordinary to me how many parents don't know the friends that their kids are hanging out with or their friends parents and that's just so critical to be communicating talk to each other know where the kids are. Pick up the phone and call and say you know hey you just want to make sure you know my son got over to your house. Those types of things because we have there's a lot of walking that happened. Arlington Va. So just making sure that you know you know your kids friends and that those parents is key.

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**F5:** We also ask parents to talk to each other. There is going to be a party gathering. You know parents can call parents to make sure that alcohol is not going to be served that is going to be supervised. So make sure that you are actively talking to the parents of your children and friends. So that's crucial that's crucial. Many times kids will say oh well you know my my friends mother let us do this and that. So when when the parent called that mother and say No no you know we have the same rules is going to be a party to help the party.

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**F1:** Honey I think one other thing too is it can be misleading for parents who may have done their own experimentation.

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**F3:** You know back when they were growing up because substances are so different nowadays the THC levels in marijuana today versus the 80s and 90s it's it's extraordinarily different there's much more purity to the THC in marijuana now than there was back in the 80s and 90s. And you know so parents sometimes I think get complacent saying I tried it when I was younger. So again there's so many different substances out there now that it's it's very alarming you know for kids to feel like well maybe my mom did it. My dad did it my dad drinks beer at dinner. It's OK sir really again just setting the tone. You know very early on I think is better in some of the notes you provide you provided.

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**M4:** You do mention modeling good behavior. Parents glass of wine with dinner. Have a beer with dinner they're watching a football game. They're drinking a beer. Parent Should parents worry about that. That could translate into their kids using it at a young age. Or is that just part of the conversation that I can do because I'm an adult and this is what we do. But you as under age shouldn't be doing this a healthy drinking.

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**F6:** We know that adults can drink and it can be healthy it's meant for men. Two drinks for women. One drink. Not every day it's healthy to drink it is healthy drinking.

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**F5:** So adolescence you know are in the process of developing developing the brain. So 25 is really the age when we're adolescents when people can complete they develop and do brain. So it's a different effect for for an adolescent to be drinking.

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**F3:** So and it's also too. It's it's again that conversation. Like you're saying you know yes dads having a beer but it's actions that may follow that parents need to really be conscious of having that beer and going and getting in the car. Correct. So again leading by example you know when when your age if you make this choice that's your choice. However I'm going to model the behavior you don't get behind the wheel if you drink or have a glass of wine or a beer you stay put.

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**F5:** Just like I'm doing coffee designated drivers and can do that set a very good example.

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**F3:** And remember like we encourage you know the adult addictions world everybody to have the Uber app because a DUI offense is upwards of you know 10 to 20 thousand dollars.

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**M4:** We're talking about Johnny Sexton and Maria Sabai also substance abuse counselors and our middle and high schools. We talk about here elementary kids middle school kids. We are seniors getting ready to graduate and go off to college and college alcohol abuse more more prevalent we hear stories in the news all the times kids are more prone to it. What do you talk what do you say to parents about how to prepare their kids for what they're going to see in college.

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**F1:** It's really about education. And again when you turn on the news and you see the bad things that are happening with you know drinking and driving unfortunately you know 18 19 20 year olds aren't watching the news but they're on social media. So you know it's always been my theory if we showed the bad things that could happen. You're going to you're going to have less of the devastating effects you know if you show a drunk driving crash so it's really about educating and really you know teaching them from a young age to make the right choice and make the best decision I think are some of the key is set in the expectations set and just like they should.

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**F5:** Parents have a lot of I mean kids have a lot of privileges. Parents pay for college pay for different things so I think that if you set the expectation dad drinking is not allowed and letting your your kids know that if this happened to you if you decide to drink and you have consequences from the school I'm going to have consequences. This is going to happen. You are going to be driving. You are not going to get your allowance. You might lose a semester in college because I'm not paying college for you to go and party. You can party but you know drinking and driving is out of the question is a very frank with very frank setting expectation and talk to your kid about the consequences. And you know it just ended don't you. I mean the consequences in terms of the kids you know they like to drive. They like to do other things so it's something that is on parents control and dedication. I know the colleges offered them as part of them getting into college sessions about drugs and alcohol. And they said the rules and consequences the beginning.

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**F3:** And also knowing how to access support should they find themselves in the face of making that decision. Who can I turn to. Who can be a support person for me. I think that's really key. You know on campus is going to help me. You know should I find myself in this position where I did consume alcohol or did utilize a substance and something know something dangerous really could happen. So that's why it's really like Murray is saying you set those expectations. You also want them to have a good time but you want to be realistic. And again this is starting back in elementary middle and high school having those conversations saying these things can happen. These things do happen to be going to make this choice. You know please know there could be consequences for your decisions.

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**F6:** Another thing is that I think it's important for parents to share information with their kids about their own family history. If you happen Graham grandfather grandmother uncles. People in the family that have substance abuse issues genetics are important.

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**F5:** Your child needs to know that runs in families and kids that have family that have substance abuse problems might be at a higher risk. So it's important to talk openly about these family problems.

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**F1:** It comes down to communication and being open to communication and not being afraid of having those conversations. It's not an invitation because you sit down to talk to your child about alcohol or marijuana it's not an invitation to do it but it's opening up that those lines of communication and that dialogue.

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**M4:** Let's go back for a second and talk about a second chance program. We talked about it at the beginning. Know I want to reiterate that second chance is is an opportunity for kids who may have gotten caught by law enforcement that they have a chance to go into a program that will not put anything on their record. And it's also a self referral program correct.

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**F3:** So the way that the Second Chance program could work again if a kid can suffer for it can be a parent referral. So again those would be excused absences from school. For the three days that they would be out of school. If it is a school referrals so essentially an involuntary they have to go because they were found to be in possession of a substance or under the influence of a substance if they complete the Second Chance program. It does not go on their record which is so important as again as they prepare to move on to college in a unique point about this is parents also participate with their kids. Yes. So there's a parent component. At the end of the program there's either it's either a Wednesday evening or Saturday morning session. That's up to the parent. And then about 45 days later there's another parent session which the student attends with them. And so it's kind of like a check and like a wrap around you know you went through the program and let's see how you're doing. You know about 45 days later and see you know what additional services may be of benefit to the family.

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**M4:** I think probably the two biggest things I've taken from this conversation are education and communication. Yes.

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**M3:** So what I want to thank you too ladies for taking the time to talk with me about substance abuse. Also want to tell our listeners that in October on October 12th we're partnering with Arlington County Arlington County Police Department on a drug awareness Town Hall. It's hosted by NBC News Jim Hamley. And it will be at the Central Library from 7 to 8 thirty p.m.. And it's like it's really a town hall and an opportunity for parents to come together with community leaders and health care providers and talk about this important subject.

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**F3:** And again just like are saying communication no substance says you know drug use is an issue. We are in the midst of a national crisis with substance use. Right now it's not an Arlington County issue it's not allowed in county issue it's not a Fairfax County issue. It's a nationwide issue. And we want parents to be able to come to a forum to ask questions and to hear a very realistic perspective from the folks who have been there who have you know conquered addiction. I think it's going to be a great opportunity to ask questions. And just to see you know really what's happening right now in Arlington and it's great because you know we're not turning our heads to it.

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**F5:** We're facing it head on substance abuse counselors will be there so parents can get a chance to meet us if they want to. We will also provide information.

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**M3:** And again that's a drug awareness town hall Thursday October 12th from 7 8 3 p.m. at the central library in North Quincy Street. Again Jenny and Maria thank you very much. If parents out there if you need help or you suspect that your child is please call your school counselors these two wonderful ladies will will be middle school or high school to help you out. Again thank you very much for your time.

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**M2:** Thank you. And I want to thank you for listening to the sixth episode of the What's Up APS podcast. Do you have any questions that you want to ask the substance abuse counselors or topics or future episodes of that what's up. APS podcast. Drop us a line on Twitter @APSVirginia or send us an email at apsnews@apsva.us. Thank you