

About 50 people attended the follow-up Community Conversation on Tuesday, May 11, at Trackside Teen Center to continue a dialogue with students on the issue of teen drinking and substance abuse. Ten students on a panel — most from the Peervention and Youth to Youth programs run by Wilton High School — were also there.

Connie Cobb, from Positive Directions, presented a summary of information compiled at the original Community Conversation held at Cider Mill in April. Her presentation is available at the Wilton Youth Council Web site at [wiltonyouth.org](http://wiltonyouth.org) . At the same Web site is the Community Conversation Follow-Up Report to the Community.

According to the report, which is a compilation of questions, answers and discussion from the original Community Conversation, the three leading contributing factors to substance abuse among teens is lack of alternatives, poor role modeling by adults, and easy availability.

One of the issues discussed at the Cider Mill meeting was: To what extent is underage drinking and drug use becoming a social norm?

It was rather clear students in the upper grades — 11th and 12th — were frequent consumers, given they are more independent and their parent have less control and less knowledge of where they are and what they are doing. The reasons students gave included “work hard and party hard,” “peer pressure,” “image,” “calming nerves or enhancing performance,” and a feeling “they can drink the night before and still perform the next day” (whereas it is not the case with drug use).

Younger students appear to base their assumptions of what older students are doing on things they see and hear, such as the behavior at a recent RAVE at Trackside, the hearsay “knowledge” of the “drug hallway” and “pot bathroom” at the high school, and pictures on Facebook of parties that identify groups of students using alcohol. Eighth graders also believe chewing tobacco is prevalent among high school athletes.

The report also indicates a perception that despite clear and strong school rules about alcohol and drug use, the high school does not have an active enforcement policy; that “teachers don’t

do anything about it and/or the faculty doesn't have time to police this behavior."

Students went on to point the finger at media and music being huge influences on underage drinking and drug use.

Other comments on how to change what has become a social norm include:

- The way a parent handles any situation determines when and how much information they will get from their child.
- Kids feel safer when parents are at home and check in; however, that isn't happening enough.
- Just saying "just say no" doesn't work; give reasons when discussing.
- Parents need to teach responsibility.
- Parents need to be more invested in their child's social scene. Who are they hanging out with, who are their parents, and what do they stand for?
- Need to get parents to not allow drinking in their homes. Parents' permissiveness is a huge problem.
- Keep kids busy.
- Have dinner as a family.

- Get on the same page. Parents should lead by example.

Students also thought bringing back Safe Rides would help. They said “coaches should enforce rules more. Hold kids accountable for actions.” They also supported using Breathalyzers more, including at the end of dances.

According to the Wilton Youth Council, the town has not heard the last of this topic. It said it is planning to continue the conversation and plans future events to “make our ‘Call to Action’ meaningful and relevant to the Wilton community.”