Carlbrook School Three Year Longitudinal Study

Combating Substance Abuse

By: R. Grant Price

Carlbrook School strives to help adolescents develop the skills and personal traits needed to succeed in the world while providing them with a rigorous curriculum designed to foster intellectual growth. This requires addressing the core issues underlying maladaptive behavior patterns, like substance abuse, that can pull them away from optimal adolescent brain and psychological development and then helping them identify healthy alternatives for meeting needs and satisfying typical adolescent urges.

In 2006 Carlbrook School contracted with a team from Duke University (Jeff Georgi, MDiv, MAH, LCAS; Becky Georgi, MS, LCAS; and Aaron White, PhD) to assess the substance abuse education, treatment and prevention needs of its students and their families. Results of the assessment revealed high levels of substance use by students in the year prior to enrollment at the School and elevated rates of return to substance use following graduation.

Following the 2006 assessment Carlbrook implemented a host of clinical enhancements to tackle substance use and better prepare students to live substance free lives after graduation. These changes included but were not limited to the following:

- Introduction of Brain 101 - a semester course on adolescent brain development that teaches all Carlbrook School students about their brains, how they develop and how to keep the mind healthy. Taught directly by Aaron White, PhD of Duke University Medical Center this course has been exceptionally well-received by our students.
- Development of a comprehensive Recovery Maintenance Program that ensures students have the skills and resources they need to remain substance free post graduation. This can be adjusted to fit a range of pre-existing substance abuse patterns and entails concentrated group work as well as individual counseling for those students/families exhibiting moderate to more severe risk profiles.
- Creation of Alumni and Transition Services to help students and their families' transition home or the next academic destination without losing the positive momentum gained while at Carlbrook. Currently, Carlbrook School employs 5 full-time therapists in their Alumni and Transition Services Department that begins approximately six months prior to commencement and extends for a full year following graduation.
- Implementation of Family Brain Defense Weekend - an intensive therapeutic/experiential conference for higher risk students and families that helps them identify and cope with issues that could impede continued improvements in well-being after students graduate Carlbrook School. There is particular emphasis on how students and their families can work together to continue their family transition planning process.

In 2009 a follow-up study was performed to assess our progress toward addressing substance abuse and helping our students learn to live substance free lives after graduation. The findings are summarized below.

Summary of findings from the 2009 follow-up study

Fewer students use substances after graduating from Carlbrook School

- Students who graduated Carlbrook School after implementation of new strategies for addressing substance abuse were significantly less likely to abuse alcohol, tobacco and other drugs after graduation.
- When comparing students who graduated between 2004-2006 (before curriculum changes) and between 2007-2009 (after curriculum changes) weekly post-graduate use of alcohol, tobacco and marijuana were all reduced by roughly half.
  - 41% reduction in weekly Alcohol use
  - 47% reduction in weekly Tobacco use
  - 47% reduction in weekly Marijuana use
- Importantly, this decrease in post Carlbrook School drug use occurred during the same period when pre-Carlbrook School drug use rose significantly. In other words, these strides were made swimming against the current.

Families have confidence in Carlbrook School

- Most parents of recent (2007-2009) graduates agreed or strongly agreed:
  - They are glad their child attended Carlbrook School (94%)
  - Their child left Carlbrook School with optimism for the future (87%)
  - Their child changed for the better as a result of Carlbrook School (87%)
  - Their relationship with their child improved as a result of Carlbrook School (87%)
  - They felt confident Carlbrook School was taking good care of their child (95%)
- Twice as many parents of 2007-2009 alumni than parents of pre-2006 alumni reported their child left Carlbrook School with a clear plan to keep them on track after graduation (81% vs 39%).
- Compared to data from parents of pre-2006 alumni, parents of 2007-2009 alumni reported lower levels of problems with alcohol (27% vs 14%) or other drugs (23% vs 18%) and lower rates of smoking (43% vs. 36%) by their students since graduation.

Students thrive at Carlbrook School

- In 2009 most current students reported:
  - Finding at least one member of the faculty/staff in whom they confide (95%)
  - Feeling safe at the School (94%)
  - Their relationship with their parents/guardians has improved as a result of Carlbrook School (92%)
- Nearly twice as many current students in 2009 (63%) than 2006 (36) agreed or strongly agreed that Carlbrook School is doing a good job of preparing them to live sober lives after graduation if they want to do so.
- Approximately 9/10 recent (2007-2009) graduates agreed or strongly agreed they were glad they attended Carlbrook School (88%), have fond memories of the experience (95%) and that their life improved as a result of Carlbrook School (78%).

Conclusions

The changes implemented by Carlbrook School in response to the 2006 survey reduced the likelihood that students will return to substance use after graduation and increased satisfaction with the program. While this is indeed encouraging there remains much work to be done. We are exceptionally proud of the extreme clinical and statistical significance the data above suggests; however, it underscores that maintaining vigilance and being open to change is simply good practice. I am grateful to have an opportunity to stand beside such talent and even more appreciative we have been able to construct lasting, systemic solutions for those students and families suffering the negative effects of substance abuse.

Best wishes for 2010 and may this year bring better times to everyone.

About the Author: *R. Grant Price is the Director of Development at Carlbrook School in Halifax, VA. After receiving his Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of South Carolina, Mr. Price earned his Master of Arts degree from California State University, focusing on the study and analysis of various educational models. Prior to co-founding Carlbrook School, Mr. Price worked as both a secondary school counselor as well as a Certified Educational Consultant at the Price Group in Columbia, SC, where he visited and evaluated hundreds of unique and innovative educational programs, conducted individual student evaluations and assessments, and identified appropriate educational environments for students nationwide. He is a former member of the Independent Educational Consultants Association. For more information, please contact Carlbrook School at 434-476-2406, or visit the website at www.carlbrook.org.*