

Youth Leader Catalyzes Tobacco Free Schools Policy in Pender County



Process of creating CHANGE

A ?Y Youth Leader started the movement in a seven-month effort to pass a 100% school policy in Pender county. As part of *building critical awareness*, the ?Y Eastern region Youth Leader for Pender County and the ?Y Adult Coordinator met with the Safe and Drug Free School Coordinator to develop a better understanding of the current school policy. They determined that the policy was close to the gold standard, but needed to be enhanced to restrict tobacco use at outdoor and athletic events. The next step was to strategize. Together, the three individuals formed a policy action team. They developed a strategic action plan to move closer to their goal of school policy change, including the following steps:

- 1) Develop a youth group by raising the critical awareness of Pender County students through a media literacy assembly program provided by the ?Y Coordinator. The ?Y Youth Leader set up a meeting with the school principal to initiate the assembly.
- 2) The ?Y Youth Leader would recruit members for the youth group from key groups such as the school band.
- 3) Team members would meet with the School Board of Education members on a one-on-one basis to request that a gold standard 100% policy be drafted.

While the team continued to meet, the Safe and Drug Free Schools Coordinator determined that the best course of action would be to first meet with the Principals of Pender County before meeting with the School Board. In order to *build skills* for speaking with school leaders, the ?Y Adult Coordinator worked closely with the ?Y Youth Leader to prepare for possible questions, especially regarding enforcement issues which were of concern to school administrators. The Youth Leader created a handout with data on NC smoking rates and harmful effects of tobacco and secondhand smoke.

The ?Y Youth Leader took the *opportunity* to meet with the Principals and share her hope for the school to go smoke free and the reasons behind this concern. She skillfully answered question regarding enforcement, and the principals overwhelmingly agreed that they

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| Type of Change: | Environmental Policy |
| Location of Change: | School district in Pender County |
| Reach of Change: | Youth, families, & staff |
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would support and enforce the policy.

The ?Y Youth was unable to meet with individual board members during the summer months, as they had put forth in the action plan. However, the Safe and Drug Free Schools Coordinator continued to work toward policy change by including the tobacco policy in a packet of policies to be revised for the coming year. Only one Board member requested more information on enforcement. Several months later, the Board passed the policy, without the need for additional efforts from ?Y.

Importance of the CHANGE

Recent research suggests that school policies restricting smoking by adults reduces the exposure of youth to role modeling of the behavior, thereby reducing youth smoking rates [Poulsen, et.al (2002). Exposure to teachers' smoking and adolescent smoking behavior. *Tobacco Control*. September:11(3).] The youth in Pender County, a rural North Carolina county with ties to tobacco, will no longer witness adults smoking (norm change) or be exposed to harmful tobacco smoke. Parents and employees will also be protected from secondhand smoke at athletic and outdoor events. According to the US Preventive Task Force, creating 100% smoke-free environments is one the most effective strategies for reducing harm caused by tobacco smoke



Pender Co. Teen worked on TFS Policy

(www.thecommunityguide.org).

What we learned about CHANGE

- Develop a strong ally within the school system. In this case, it was the Safe and Drug Free Schools Coordinator. His efforts continued above and beyond the youth and staff of ?Y. This leadership made it possible to keep the momentum going even without direct activity by the ?Y staff.
- Go with the flow. Despite a well-thought out plan, it turned out that another strategy -- meeting with school principals -- was the key to success. The team "jumped on" this opportunity rather than sticking to their original plan because they were prepared and the ?Y Youth Leader was ready to make the best of it.
- Let youth leaders shine! An added bonus: strong, well supported youth voices impress adults in charge.
- School principal support is critical. With the principal behind your efforts, it is much harder to put forward practical obstacles as arguments against the policy change.