

Students push for countywide smoking ban

They haven't made much headway yet, but Mr. Swanstrom's second-hour history students are undeterred in their quest to convince officials to enact a smoking ban in DuPage County.

The students, eighth-graders at Herrick Middle School in Downers Grove, took up community activism as an adjunct to the standard history curriculum this year.

After researching several areas of interest – getting a pedestrian walkway over Ogden Avenue near Herrick, analyzing the efficiency of the Downers Grove Police Department, instituting time within the school day for a healthy snack – the class voted to pursue the smoking ban.

A smaller committee is working on the second-place topic, revamping school's ineffective recycling program.

It's the first time Jay Swanstrom, 32, has introduced real-life activism to the classroom.

"I took a class through DuPage United on becoming a more active citizen and trained through the Constitutional Rights Foundation of Chicago in teaching kids how to be more active," he said.

He chose his second-period class to pilot "Project Citizen" because those students scored highest on tests and seemed best able to handle the extra work.

The students first set their sights on banning smoking in Downers Grove but decided to expand their scope after realizing that limit in scope could hurt local restaurants and other businesses. Now they're focusing on DuPage County.

"We are very committed to ending public smoking," said Bob Boyd, 13, one of the young activists. "Banning smoking is such a big thing. It's such a rich company, and it just sells poisons. It's illogical. Why do you want to inhale smoke? It's hurting you and other people, and it's causing 700,000 hospitalizations a year."

The students' strategy is to encourage influential politicians to line up behind a ban.

"We realize lawmaking happens in the county, but wouldn't it be better if we could get big, humongous legislators saying this is a good idea?" Boyd said. "It would make it more real."

To that end, the students have contacted every elected official possible, from the Downers Grove Village Council to the DuPage County Board to state legislators, even U.S. Rep. Judy Biggert, House Speaker Dennis Hastert and U.S. Sens. Barack Obama and Dick Durbin.

More experienced activists might not be surprised to learn the chief response from most officials has been the runaround. Or as Boyd described it: "We called person upon person who directed us to people with smaller and smaller reigns of power."

Still, the kids aren't giving up the fight. The class marketing committee is preparing posters and fliers that will go up on lampposts in Downers Grove and other DuPage communities.

And they will continue to work on getting the word out that smoking is unhealthy and should be banned. Boyd believes that joining with other communities is the way to succeed.

"If we keep calling people, I think they will see the promise in our idea and find ways to help us."

Swanstrom, too, hopes other active citizens will lend their support to the students' cause.

"We need citizens to e-mail, call and send letters to their elected officials and pressure them to get a smoking ban passed." He also welcomes the help of anyone who "would be able to give us guidance and direction." Those interested in joining the effort should e-mail him at jswanstrom@dg58.org.

Some of the students are so committed they plan to continue the effort long after the school year ends. If there is one thing their real-life activism has already taught them, it's that the wheels of government turn slowly but occasionally do respond to a massive public push.

So come on, folks, altogether now. Let's push.

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