

# Grant to fund school anti-drug program

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By [ANNA GUSTAFSON](#)

Hour Staff Writer

NORWALK — Thanks to an \$18,000 grant from the Fairfield County Community Foundation to The Courage to Speak Foundation, Brookside Elementary will be able to pilot a substance abuse prevention and education program for fourth-grade students.

"Kids are earlier and earlier being approached by somebody to use drugs or somebody is telling them about drugs," said David Hay, Brookside's principal. "This program will support kids making good decisions, and not just about drugs and smoking. It will prepare them to make good decisions about healthy lifestyles."

The Elementary School Prevention Project, the new program, is an outgrowth of The Courage to Speak Foundation's middle and high school programs and will most likely launch in the beginning of February at Brookside.

The Courage to Speak Foundation is a not-for-profit charitable organization "devoted to saving lives by empowering children and youth to be drug free and by empowering parents to help their children develop lifestyles free of drugs and destructive drug-related behaviors," according to the organization's Web site.

The program is centered around Sunny's Story, a book written by The Courage to Speak Foundation's founder and president Ginger Katz and Marci Alborghetti, and the course will engage students in eight main activities, including artwork, journaling and learning drug refusal skills. Written from the perspective of the Katz family's dog Sunny, the book details the story of Ian — Katz's son who died in 1996 from a heroin overdose.

"Losing my son to a drug overdose was a call to arms. It is through sharing our story that we strive to make a difference in the lives of other children and to help other parents avoid such an overwhelming loss," Katz said. "Out of our tragedy has evolved a comprehensive substance abuse prevention and education program focused on young people, their families and their communities."

Alongside the program's class for fourth-graders, the project will also provide four informational sessions for parents, which will prompt parents to engage their children in discussions about substance abuse.

"It's very difficult for parents whose children are very young to talk about drugs," Katz said. "Parents are afraid to talk about the dangers of drugs, and this gives them the tools to sit down with their children and communicate the dangers of drugs."

Targeting younger students is important in order to yield lower numbers of middle and high school students using drugs and smoking, Katz said. Should open but "age appropriate" discussions be held with students in elementary school, fewer students will begin using drugs as they get older, Katz said.

According to state statistics, about 24 percent of Connecticut's seventh-graders and 29 percent of eighth-graders use alcohol, which is above the national average of about 22 percent. Approximately 7 percent of seventh- and eighth-graders and 22 percent of ninth- and 10th-graders in Connecticut use marijuana.

"We talk to our children about not talking to strangers at an early age, and by the time the child is 8- or 9-years-old, they have a knee-jerk reaction to run home and tell their parents when a stranger talks to them or asks them to get into the stranger's car," Katz said. "We want students to have that same knee-jerk reaction when somebody offers them drugs."

This elementary program stems from months of curriculum planning, and the curriculum was written by Deborah Prothrow-Sith, a physician and professor of Public Health Practice at Harvard University; Angela Vicenzia, a school nurse in Norwalk; Eileen Devries; Superintendent of Schools Sal Corda; Ginger Katz; and David Hay. Visit [www.couragetospeak.org](http://www.couragetospeak.org)

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