

## Office of the Governor

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### NEWS RELEASE

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#### **Governor Whitman Speaks to Middle School Students about Substance Abuse**

Gov. Christie Whitman today stressed the important role that students play in helping each other stay away from substance abuse when she spoke to more than 600 middle school students and their advisors from 38 schools around the state, and thanked them for stepping up to do their part as "members of our one family of New Jersey."

"Since I've been Governor, I've worked to make New Jersey a better place in which to live, work and raise a family," said Gov. Whitman. "Nothing is more important to achieving that goal than winning the fight against substance abuse. As long as the chains of dependency shackle any of our young people - whether on drugs, alcohol, or tobacco - we will have work to do."

The student leaders, adult mentors and parents met in Plainsboro for the third annual Day of Learning about Substance Abuse Prevention through New Jersey Peer to Peer, a year-round program designed to change young people's attitudes about substance abuse.

Citing the most recent statistics from the National Institutes of Health, Gov. Whitman said more than one in five eighth graders have, at some time in their lives, used marijuana, while nearly half have smoked cigarettes, and more than half have tried alcohol. By the time they're seniors in high school, these numbers, added the Governor, will have expanded significantly.

"These numbers are disturbing, but what's more disturbing is the fact that behind these numbers are people," said Gov. Whitman because they are "the girl who sits next to you in math class, the boy whose locker is next to yours, the captain of the soccer team, the student council president, the kid who eats alone in the cafeteria, maybe even you."

Gov. Whitman also discussed the key role adults play in reducing substance abuse among young people, an area which will be expanded through the state's new Parent Leadership Corps component of New Jersey Peer to Peer. But when it comes to resisting drugs, alcohol and tobacco, she said, nothing can replace the effectiveness of one student talking to another about the

dangers of substance abuse - and the reason for the start of New Jersey Peer to Peer in 1997.

"At it's root," explained Gov. Whitman, "the peer to peer program is really about caring for those you come across in your daily life. I often speak of New Jersey as being one family with many faces. As a family, we need to care for one another. We need to care enough to say to someone, 'Please don't light up that cigarette,' 'Please get rid of that beer,' 'Please stay away from drugs,' 'I don't want you to hurt yourself.'

Speaking earlier in the day, New Jersey Health and Senior Services Commissioner Christine Grant discussed the 1999 Middle School Survey conducted by the department, which showed an overall decline in substance use from 1995. According to Grant, the most substantial reduction was in smoking, which dropped 35 percent. Other encouraging information showed that alcohol use had fallen by about 17 percent, and marijuana and inhalants usage was also in decline.

"Every day, our youth face a challenge to remain free from drugs, tobacco and alcohol," said Grant. "The skills you learn today will provide you with the ability to have a profound impact on the lives of your fellow classmates."

Gov. Whitman allocated \$245,000 in the state budget for the peer leadership initiative, which is part of her Drug Enforcement, Education and Awareness Program. The initiative is sponsored by the Department of Health and Senior Services with the departments of Education, and Law and Public Safety, and supported by GPU Energy, in cooperation with the Governor's Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse. The Princeton Center for Leadership Training designed and coordinates the initiative.

As a school-based prevention program, it uses a peer to peer approach to reduce tobacco, alcohol and marijuana usage among the state's middle school students; the program currently serves 94 middle schools reaching over 200,000 students. Using a tested school-community model with teams of trained adult mentors, New Jersey Peer to Peer establishes a Student Leadership Corps in each of the participating schools. A Parent Leadership Corps program has recently been started to help interested schools strengthen substance prevention efforts in conjunction with their Student Leadership Corps.