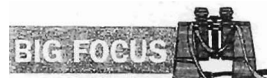


Socially aware students



By TRACY PAPICCIO

WEST Coast students are among some of the first, and few, in the country to be involved in a new alcohol education project.

The Social Norms Analysis Project is being trialled in Tasmania at only four schools — two in the State's south and two on the West Coast.

A successful educational tool in America, SNAP started at Rosebery High and Mountain Heights in December with fantastic initial success.

"They wanted rural areas to be similar in area size and demographics to the other schools," West Coast project officer Louise Hart said.

"The kids seem quite pleased with the fact that if it's successful it'll be used around Australia."

The project focuses on young people's perceptions of how much alcohol they think, their mates drink and how much they themselves drink, taken

from an anonymous survey. The students are then shown the actual figures, the reality of which often doesn't match up with their perceptions.

University of Tasmania project director Dr Clarissa Hughes said young people were prone to overestimating how much others were drinking.

"They tend to remember things that stand out," she said.

"When they've come from a party they remember who was being outrageous rather than the people who were being normal.

"They act in accordance to what they think everyone else is doing."

Not quite peer pressure, the problem comes in a more subtle form but project organisers are tackling it head on.

"If kids don't have any information to the contrary they'll take it on board," Dr Hughes said.

"We're trying to shift that culture so it's more supportive of not drinking and safe drinking."

Students were given the positive facts about drinking among young people in a fun and interactive way late last year ahead of another survey, set for the West Coast schools in March.

It is hoped that survey will have even more positive results as the students learn their friends aren't drinking as much as they thought.

Those results will be presented via multimedia projects the students put together and another survey will then be conducted later in the year.

"Rather than hammer home you shouldn't be doing this, we say they're actually a really good bunch of kids," Dr Hughes said.

"We've seen a really good response, a lot were surprised there weren't more people drinking.

"A lot of the non-drinking kids felt better because they often felt like the odd ones out."

The Department of Rural Health at the university, the Tasmanian Institute of Law Enforcement Studies, Tasmania Police and the Departments of Education and Health and Human Services are all partners of the project.



Social Norms Analysis Project officer Louise Hart (left) with Mountain Heights School students (lower, from left) Morgan Whitnell, 14, Amber Cook, 14, and Steven Thompson, 16, with Jason Hart, 13 (rear) and Jacob Green, 13, and Curtis Schwach, 14 (top). Picture: Tony Cross.