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Tuesday, June 8, 2004

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School kids told to make passing out a passing fad

By MARK PETERS, Portland Press Herald Writer

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Teachers and parents in Cape Elizabeth are warning middle school students about the dangers of deliberately making themselves pass out, a developing trend among youngsters in the community.

The strange behavior became an issue last week at Cape Elizabeth Middle School when teachers learned that students were going through a regimen in which they blocked the flow of oxygen to their brains, which caused them to lose consciousness. Students told staff members that it gave them a "rush" or a "good feeling."

"It was a fad that was going through and we just needed to stop it," Principal Nancy Hutton said.


School officials responded by talking with each class about the dangers of the behavior and sending an e-mail to parents explaining the fainting phenomenon.

Hutton said school officials first heard of the behavior among eighth-graders. The fainting, however, was being discussed in other grades, so she decided to talk with all students about it.

The process of inducing the fainting, which the students do to themselves, involves deliberately hyperventilating, bending over and standing up quickly, then holding the neck to restrict blood flow to the brain. Possible injuries include falling from fainting, and brain damage from oxygen deprivation.

Hutton said no student has been injured or disciplined because of the activity. The main emphasis has been educating the students about the dangers, the principal added.

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The e-mail about the fainting surprised and worried parents and became a subject of conversation around Cape Elizabeth during the weekend.

School Board member Anne Belden, whose son is an eighth-grader at the middle school, said she sat down with her son and explained what happens when blood is cut off to the brain. Once he learned the health risks, he understood the dangers of the trend, she explained.

Students "don't realize the potential for serious harm. You have to educate them," said Belden, who praised the middle school for responding to the behavior and informing parents.

Kathy Johnson, co-president of the middle school parent association, planned to discuss the issue at the association's regularly scheduled meeting today.

"It is hard. You don't know how widespread it is," Johnson said.

The practice of induced fainting among middle and high school students has occurred in towns and cities throughout the country. The behavior, educators said, stretches back decades.

Recent news accounts from South Carolina and Arizona described similar behavior among students. In April, a sixth-grader in New Mexico was hospitalized with a concussion after falling to the floor when two friends helped him faint.

Hutton said Cape Elizabeth students stopped the behavior once they learned about the dangers. She complimented the work of staff members who got the information out, and said she has not heard of any incidents this week.

"We seem to have caught (the fad) relatively early," Hutton said.

Staff researcher Beth Murphy contributed to this report.

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