

# Rhode Island Spotlight: Keeping Kids Tobacco-Free



If you think you've heard everything about the dangers of smoking, just sit in on Jessica Walters' class for half an hour and you might be surprised.

Walters, who teaches 6th grade at the Woodlawn Regional Catholic School in Pawtucket, is using a new nationwide program called "Get Smart About Tobacco," developed by Scholastic, the global publishing company, in partnership with the CVS Health Foundation right here in Rhode Island.

"I'll take anything that gets kids to stay away from cigarettes," Walters said in an interview last month. She has taught at Woodlawn the past seven years and said the curriculum, which included an art project, taught her some things *she* didn't know before about smoking.

"They really latched into the other science behind it — the second-hand and third-hand smoking — which was new information for me," she said. "I had never heard about third-hand smoking. And at first I didn't quite believe it, but then I did my own research and it's a problem. It's that lingering cigarette smoke, the lingering chemicals in the air or in fibers. It can cause major problems."

Veronica Procopio, the principal at Woodlawn, heard about the program in an email from Scholastic, and was intrigued that the CVS Foundation was helping support it, especially since the company made national news two years ago for pulling all tobacco products from its stores.



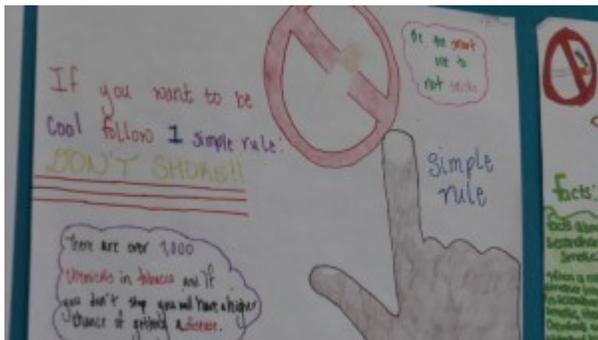
"(Woodlawn is) an inner-city school. I knew what the non-smoking policy was at CVS and how staunchly they backed the no smoking policy and it seemed to speak to me," she said. "And so that's why I passed it along to the teachers to get involved with the students."

This past spring the students learned about everything from the science of smoking to slick advertising campaigns by tobacco companies and Walters told them about the physical effects of being a smoker.

“The majority of them are totally anti-smoking,” Walters said. “Many of them know people who smoke and they don’t like it, especially the kids who are very concerned about their appearance and their image. They really hooked into the parts of the program that explained how it could affect your skin, it could affect your hair and it could affect the way that you smell.”

And that’s what stood out to Victoria Adegboyeda. “(Miss Walters) talked about how it affects every single body part. It could make the tongue swollen, make your lungs black, it makes your teeth turn yellow, it makes your hair get thinner. You don’t want that.”

Procopio added: “In speaking with the children I was surprised at how many knew 12-, 13- and 14-year-olds who are currently smoking. So it’s important for us to speak to them, people they trust, people they spend their days with — not their parents necessarily — to tell them that this isn’t a good healthy thing. And these kids are not to be admired for doing something that you would think maybe is cool.”



The students also created individual posters as part of a national contest. Scholastic notified the school last month that one of Miss Walters’ students was a national runner-up for this poster. The award carries a \$200 VISA card for the student and \$50 for his teacher.

Walters said, “He was a little shell-shocked at first, then he was really, really excited that he won. He really enjoys art so it was a nice validation for him.”

Walters says electronic cigarettes — or e-cigarettes — are the latest trend and catching on quickly with youngsters. The Scholastic curriculum hit it head on. “E-cigarettes were a major component. There was a reading selection that went with it and e-cigarettes figured very heavily in that, which was great because it really demystified and deglamorized the electronic cigarettes.”

Teachers and students also learned that with all of the challenges facing Rhode Island, the state is actually leading the country when it comes to the anti-smoking message to its youth.

“We have an 8% percent youth smoking rate, significantly better than the national percentage, which is great to see,” Walters said. “Again, it validates that what we’re doing in Rhode Island is working, to keep kids away from tobacco.”

*If you want to see the video version of this story go to [www.RhodeIslandSpotlight.org](http://www.RhodeIslandSpotlight.org). If you know of a person or organization who you think deserves the Spotlight, send an email to [jim@RhodeIslandSpotlight.org](mailto:jim@RhodeIslandSpotlight.org)*