CERT Training Integrated into Local High School Curriculum

A high school in a suburb of Austin, Texas has found a unique way to engage teens in the community's disaster preparedness and emergency response activities: integrate CERT training into the school's academic curriculum. Since 2011, Westlake High School has offered a Teen CERT class as a one-semester, half-credit elective students may take which prepares them to become disaster preparedness leaders in the community.

The brainchild of recent Westlake graduate Obie Jones, who is also the current FEMA Youth Preparedness Council chair, the class teaches upwards of 30 students per semester. "I felt it would benefit our school and the community of Westlake to have youth be able to respond to disasters if the need ever arose," said Jones, who was already familiar with Austin's existing CERT program, which is open to adult participants throughout the city.

Jackie Uselton, Westlake High School faculty and CERT program manager, said of Jones, "He was a freshman and Eagle Scout with the Boy Scouts of America, and he had other friends who had heard of CERT. He was interested in [starting a CERT program at the school]. He talked with a few of the principals and administrators, and they called me in to discuss the likelihood of starting a CERT program. We partnered with the City of Austin in May 2010, and they played a big part in getting [the program] started because they wanted to have a Teen CERT program under their adult CERT umbrella. "In order to effectively develop and implement the program into the school's curriculum Uselton was required to first undergo CERT training herself in order to gain a better understanding of the subject matter. "I attended a youth preparedness training led by FEMA and some other people at Austin Community College for three days. That was my first introduction to learning what was out there...The City of Houston was also there, and different people talked about their Teen and adult CERT programs, and I became CERT trained through the City of Austin's Program in fall 2010," she said.

Photo of Westlake High School Teen CERT students.

Noting one of the requirements of starting a CERT program – having a sponsoring agency – Uselton describes how the City of Austin threw its support behind the Westlake Teen CERT effort. "...The City of Austin recommended me to be able to take the instructor training and helped me find the next available class and get approved. You have to have someone else supporting you, such as a school district to sign off that they want you to do the instructor training, or your local city has to endorse you as an instructor. You have to have some backing. Not everybody can just go sign up for instructor training. There is some vetting of why you want to be an instructor."

To build her team, Uselton worked with high school students, teachers, and other adults in the Westlake community. "For the first year, for the fall and spring semester, [the City of Austin] allowed me to bring some students to the training program for basic CERT. I brought 10 students the first semester, and we met every Tuesday for six weeks getting the basic CERT training, and then we had a final search and rescue drill...that was about eight to 10 hours on a Saturday. I got a core group of students trained in CERT to establish the youth leadership and have students who knew what we were doing."

Uselton said she sought instructors who were interested in becoming trained to teach CERT classes. She told them "...to [first] get trained themselves in basic CERT, and then they can ask when the next train the trainer class is coming up and fill out the application to do that. We have a program called www.Preparingtexas.org that lists the courses coming up in the state of Texas, and people can sign up through the website."

After a core team of instructors completed CERT training, the next step was to actually get the school board to approve adding a class to the school's official curriculum. Westlake students prepared a presentation for school administrators that explained why the subject matter should actually be integrated into the school day curriculum and not simply take the form of an after school activity. "The students gave a presentation to the school board about what they had learned and the work they had been doing on their own time after school...One of the arguments we used was that our students generally are so overcommitted after school [with extracurricular activities and] a lot of homework...and for them to have to continue to do a program like this after school would make it quite challenging to keep it going," said Uselton. The board agreed and, in 2011, decided to add a "Disaster Response" class as a choice for students. Nearly 120 students have completed the course since Westlake High School began offering it.

Laura Santos-Farry, Director of Safety and Risk Management for Eanes Independent School District, which includes Westlake High, said that the timing of the proposal was appropriate, given that the district was already in the midst of trying to convey that school safety and security is everyone's responsibility. "We've gone through two sheltering [incidents] for hurricanes in the past 12 years, and [the school board] saw this as an opportunity to help the school community."

In addition to the basic CERT training, the course curriculum includes content related to cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), first aid, influenza prevention, and active shooter incidents. Instructors also bring in guest speakers over the course of the semester based on the students' interests. "Last year, one of the kids wanted to speak with a Drug Enforcement Administration agent, so we found someone who could come in and answer questions. We don't just focus on the CERT curriculum. There is a lot of time for additional things," said Teen CERT instructor and Westlake High School Campus Resource Officer Deputy Brian Peals.

For those students who do have the time after school and wish to participate in disaster preparedness and emergency response activities, a CERT club offers them the chance to be a part of an "active deployment team" which provides them with opportunities to get involved with school and community events. "Currently, we are doing a candy drive [to raise funds for] the Children's Hospital and Children's Shelter for Abused and Neglected Children...CERT students have gotten very involved with that type of outreach. Our students in the CERT club have been invited to several drills and exercises to act as victims, as well as drills and exercises for various hospitals in our area needing to do their emergency room mass casualty drill. They've got one scheduled in a couple weeks for a local hospital," said Uselton.

Not only does the CERT club provide practical experience opportunities for students, but it also keeps them engaged by promoting fun activities which teens may not be aware of otherwise. As Uselton notes, "Last year, the National Guard invited us to participate in a decontamination drill. The kids wore swimsuits under clothes they didn't mind having cut off of them...and they had to be washed and sprayed down over and over again. They said it was super fun, and they learned so much. I think we will probably get invited back. The National Guard in our area does a training every year where they need volunteers to act as the victims." Other activities include providing first aid at high school football games, passing out water and directing traffic during a recent charity bicycle ride from Houston to Austin, and even participating in the Austin-Bergstrom International Airport mass casualty drill.

To keep Teen CERT students motivated and engaged, Uselton coordinated with the Health Occupations Students of America (HOSA), a national organization for healthcare providers, to create a recognition program where students earn "points" for volunteering to support community events. "They need to do four to five major events on campus during their high school years, and that can be a football game, which lasts about four hours, or they could do a drill like the airport's full-scale disaster drill," said Uselton. "That was all day and lasted about eight to 10 hours, and that counted as a large event. Smaller activities such as bringing candy to help with the candy drive or something like that would be less points as they are on a gradient. We also give them community service hours that they can keep track of, and the school rewards students who do a certain amount of community service. They can get recognized by us and our school district for their involvement in the community. It really beefs up their college applications and resumes." During their high school graduation students who meet the program's criteria even get to wear a special honor cord with their robes to signify their involvement and commitment.

To reinforce their training and provide a fun outlet to test their skills, students also participate in CERT competitions through HOSA (Health Occupations Students of America). HOSA sponsors annual local, state, and national-level competitions for people in the healthcare industry to test their leadership and technical skills. One of the competitions tests participants' CERT skills. "We can take as many as four teams, and each team has two students. They are very dedicated because they give up their lunch hour to train and review the skills needed. They judge and critique each other. Deputy Peals also helps critique them to make sure they get all the points possible. We had two teams make it to state level, which included about 5,000 people, and one team made it to nationals and placed seventh in Nation," said Uselton.

Westlake Teen CERT students are even working with Teen CERT programs from other local high schools to practice their skills. Recently they invited these other teams to participate in a drill where Teen CERT students performed demonstrations of proper search and rescue, disaster medical operations, and triage techniques. "This was very fun and interactive because they were helping teach other high school CERT students, and they wanted to get together to do a big drill day," Uselton said.

Since completing the Teen CERT class, some students have been able to use their training during emergency situations. "At almost every sports game, we have had at least one person on the visitors or home side that have had the beginnings of a heat-related injury, and these kids were on top of it to keep it from going any further. We have had nosebleeds they have taken care of. It runs the gamut. We also have numerous kids who went from CERT to doing ride outs with paramedics, and they have put more of the training they learned from CERT to the test on the back of the busses," said Deputy Peals.

Last summer, Zoe Cook, current president of Westlake High School's CERT program, was able to provide medical assistance for her father after he accidentally cut his leg with a circular saw. Cook quickly called 9-1-1, applied pressure to the wound, and made a tourniquet to control the bleeding. By the time emergency medical services (EMS) arrived, the bleeding was under control and she provided EMS with a full set of vitals about her father's condition.

Affirming Deputy Peals' assertion that sporting events often see medical emergencies, in 2013, students took action when a pregnant woman fell and cut her head on a bleacher during a school football game. Students quickly applied pressure to the wound and called 9-1-1 using their two-way radios. "The students were able to calm the lady down and call for assistance so she could get help faster," said Uselton.

Another recent Westlake High School graduate is taking the skills he learned from his Teen CERT experience and applying them in his native language, Spanish. "He is native of Mexico, and he is very involved in CERT, as well as his family," said Uselton. "He has been asked to help teach the Spanish version of CERT to a group of Spanish-speaking citizens in Austin...He is still plugged in with the City of Austin's CERT program, and he and his mother...are helping them actively with their Spanish CERT classes."

For schools interested in starting their own programs, Uselton encourages collaboration with others in the community, particularly existing local and county CERT programs: "Talk with your closest adult CERT program first and see how that program feels about partnering. I think getting a good support system and team to start the program is a wise way to begin."

Getting students involved, engaged, and interested up front is also a great way to build out and win support for establishing a Teen CERT curriculum. Santos-Farry said of Uselton's efforts, "When Jackie came on, she understood the importance of getting more support in the community and volunteers, and we understand that a lot of that can be achieved by going through the students. It is the students' involvement that will really support the community interests in coming out and volunteering when it's necessary. I think for the same reasons of why the board decided it was a good fit is why at the county level they were trying to get this in all the schools. They are still trying to do that."

She also encourages teens who are interested in starting a school program to review the school district's history to find incidents that have impacted the community. "For our school, it's important that if anyone collapses, someone is there who knows what to do. A lot of schools usually only have one nurse and 2,600 students. You always need extra trained people. A good lesson for the future would be to pull out incidents that happened in your school district as reasons why the program is needed."

"Each year, more of the community knows that we are here, and students want to do activities to increase their knowledge," said Uselton. "I think it is the best learning environment for them to be in a real drill where they can really get the full experience. They come back super pumped about their CERT experiences and the knowledge that they pick up from those professionals. It's definitely a win-win."