



Schools chief says meth use declining due to shocking ads

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By: Matt Gouras

HELENA — The state's school chief said Tuesday methamphetamine use among high school students has dropped because of the Montana Meth project's shocking advertisements.

State Superintendent of Public Instruction Linda McCulloch said that meth use has been dropping ever since 1999. But use has dropped even faster — by about half — since the Meth Project started airing advertisements two years ago, according to Montana's Youth Risk Behavior Survey.

The Meth Project released a separate survey that showed meth use among teens nationwide remained unchanged during the same period.

The group touted the results as yet more proof that their advertising campaign is working. The report were lauded by the state's congressional delegation, and the Montana attorney general.

The Meth Project, based in California, and the Montana branch of it were founded by software billionaire and part-time Montana resident Tom Siebel. His aim was to use consumer research-based advertising to reduce use of the drug.

It has been backed by political leaders from both parties, and support from state and federal tax money is in the works.

McCulloch said meth use in Montana high school students has dropped 66 percent since 1999, when 13.5 percent of students reported using meth at least once according to her agency's Montana Youth Risk Behavior Study. The largest reduction came after the Meth Project, she said.

"We are well on the road to getting rid of meth in every community in Montana," McCulloch said.

The Montana Meth Project said the state is on the cutting edge of solving the problem nationally. Peg Shea, executive director, said the program needs to continue or risk losing momentum.

Attorney General Mike McGrath lauded Siebel.

"This is a program that indeed does work," he said. "I think it's impossible to now say it doesn't."

The Montana Legislature earlier this year decided to earmark \$1 million in state tax money toward the project, which must clear a competitive bid process.

U.S. Sens. Max Baucus and Jon Tester, along with Rep. Denny Rehberg, are working on getting \$500,000 for the Montana Meth Project. The three joined Siebel in Washington, D.C., at an unveiling of a national survey on attitudes toward meth.

"It's clear that powerful messages and smart laws are working," Tester said.

Rehberg called the results "astounding."

Siebel appeared Tuesday before Baucus' Senate Finance Committee.

The national study released by his group reportedly shows "that too many U.S. teens are unaware of the dangers of taking meth," Meth Project executive director Nitsa Zuppas said in a release.

The group hopes to expand the project in other states. Beyond Montana, where it started, the Meth Project has affiliate programs in Arizona, Idaho and Illinois.

Siebel, who has spent millions of his own money launching the campaign, has stumped in Montana for more private donations to help keep the project going in that state. A new round of advertisements is expected in early 2008.