

LIVESTRONG at School: Changing Classroom Talk About Cancer

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In 2005, at the Lance Armstrong Foundation, we began to see that students were not receiving the support they needed to talk about cancer in an age-appropriate and empowering way. We knew that students all over the country were dealing with cancer whether by their own diagnosis, or the diagnosis of a sibling, a parent, a grandparent, a loved one, or a school teacher. And we were also aware that from 5 to 18 years, students spend a great deal of their time in school. Yet, what we did not know was how teachers were handling these discussions. As a first step in this project, we took a look at all of the school curricula about cancer we could find. What we found were interventions that were targeting specific situations related to cancer, but not broadly accessible curriculum that teachers could use in their classrooms. We also found school curriculum which addressed cancer prevention, cell biology, and even some which discussed Lance Armstrong's specific cancer treatment protocol. What we did not find was curriculum that any teacher could use to begin a dialog about cancer, to demystify the disease and provide a forum for questions and show students ways they could support people with cancer. We saw providing school professionals with a tool they could use to teach about cancer in a way that was inspiring and empowering was an important gap that needed to be filled, and so we created **LIVESTRONG at School**.

LIVESTRONG at School includes lessons for kindergarten through 12th grade, all of which are free, available online, and include everything a school professional needs

to implement them—from grade level standards to a check for understanding. Each grade set has three lessons: one about cancer that provides age-appropriate information about the disease, one about how students can get involved and support their loved ones, and one about what **LIVESTRONG** means to each student. In the youngest grades, the curriculum focuses on the fact that cancer is not contagious and that even at a young age, there is something children can do to support their loved ones—such as giving a loved one a cup of chicken noodle soup, just like their mom does for them when they are sick. As the grade levels progress, the lessons become more complex and challenge students to find ways to address cancer in their own communities.

Before the curriculum was developed, teachers often told us that they were unsure of how to teach about cancer and they felt it was too complex and depressing a subject to bring into the classroom. On top of this, many felt that cancer was just not relevant to the lives of their students. It was not until the pilot test of the curriculum that we were able to truly see the overwhelming need, importance, and appropriateness of this curriculum. Teachers across the country helped to review the lessons and allowed us to visit their classrooms to implement the curriculum. After implementing the lessons, teachers consistently reported that they were shocked that so many of their students were both dealing with cancer and so hungry to have a forum to discuss it.

In one fifth grade classroom, a simple prompt was asked of the students: what do you know about cancer? What would you like to know about cancer? After a full 45 min of animated discussion, the class listed everything they knew—from broad concepts down to specific details. For example, one student noted that her friends' straight hair had grown back in curly after chemotherapy. Their questions showed their desire to really understand the

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disease. As another example, one student asked the first author of this article, who attended the class and had shared that she was a cancer survivor, which had hurt more chemotherapy or radiation.

Overwhelmingly, from the visits to the classrooms and the more than 300 survey responses we have captured over the last year, the most important part of these lessons has been both sharing with students how they can help and providing them with a forum to talk about something that is affecting so many of their lives. Demystifying cancer and supporting loved ones with cancer is not often talked about in schools, but the students welcomed the platform for discussion. This was as true for those classes who were actively coping with a cancer diagnosis of a classmate, teacher, or parent as much as it was for those classes who had been less directly impacted.

Many parents, teachers, and advocates requested additional resources in order to support and promote the

program within their own communities. In response, we created a letter for parents to help them understand why it is important to talk about cancer, talking points for others who would like their schools to implement the program, and a tool for teachers to share information about the curriculum with others. We will continue to assess the curriculum. This program does continue to support recommendations such as children should wear sunscreen. However, even more importantly, the program provides a way for schools to engage students in the fight against cancer and to get them talking about something that is relevant to their lives.

One teacher said it best, “Helping children understand how to help a love one who is facing cancer is a life lesson that will help my students in the years to come. Perhaps one day, these lessons would not be necessary, but for now, thank you for providing materials that the children can learn from.”