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DOING IT FOR THEMSELVES: NYC TEENS TAKE ON SEX ED STORY AND PHOTOS BY ALICE PROUJANSKY

The spring season brings birds and bees and ... youth-led sexual education workshops.



At the More Than Just Sex Conference, emcee Octavia Allen, a Teens P.A.C.T. peer educator, waits for the crowd to quiet down before speaking.

Half of New York City high schoolers have had sex. Where did they learn about sex? Good question. Could be from their parents, the media, each other – but probably not from public school. The state curriculum does not require sex education, and the city Department of Education does not dedicate funds for it, leaving students with widely varying experiences in schools. Some are taught a sex ed unit by a gym teacher or science teacher; some hear from visiting adult or peer educators with non-profit organizations, and others receive nothing more than a brief session of required HIV/AIDS education (and some say even that is not always provided).

According to statistics from the 2005 New York City Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 16 percent of sexually active youth say they have gotten someone pregnant or have been pregnant. One in four teens have had a sexually transmitted infection, and less than half of the city's teenagers know what emergency contraception is.

Activists are responding to these statistics by promoting the Healthy Teens Act, a bill introduced in both the State Assembly and Senate (A.2856/S.1342), which would provide grants to schools and communities for sex ed. In the meantime, peer educators – meaning young people – are stepping up to provide information in the form of workshops, health fairs and conferences.

One factor motivating both the teens and adult activists is the connection between teen pregnancy and the high school dropout rate. According to a Summary of Vital Statistics 2006 by the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, there were 8,695 live births to teens age 20 and under in 2006 citywide. Meanwhile, according to statistics cited by DOHMH educators, less than half of teen mothers under 18 graduate from high school. In a city where only about 60 percent of boys and girls graduate from public high school in four years, sex ed advocates say education about delaying pregnancy could increase the graduation rate.

Community Healthcare Network's Teens P.A.C.T. program held a conference last month called "More Than Just Sex," which featured workshops, speakers and performances presenting a holistic view of sexual health. Peer educator Melissa Dover, 18, said, "Sometimes teens think that a relationship is built on just sex. But everything doesn't have to be about sex, it's also about communication and doing fun activities."

Teens P.A.C.T. peer educator Rich Ross, 19, explains that, "We can't have kids being around each other not knowing about their bodies. There are a lot of myths going around."

Fellow Teens P.A.C.T. peer educator Chanta Simon, 20, adds, "I think people are still afraid that their child is being taught [sex ed]. Our curriculum is a lot more realistic: we understand that kids aren't all abstinent. We need to have sex ed in schools."

In a similar project, also held at the end of May, middle school students at P.S./M.S. 218 in the Bronx worked with the Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation (WHEDCo)'s Project STEP to organize a health education fair. Having chosen the topic from a variety of options, students made informative posters and a public service announcement calling for sex education in schools, and invited community organizations to distribute condoms, facilitate educational games, and answer questions about teen health.

Project STEP peer educator Chanell Joseph, 14, says of sex ed: "It saves lives. If we had sex ed in public schools, I think it would reduce teen pregnancy" and rates of sexually transmitted infections.

"Most of my [teenage] family members are pregnant," Joseph added. She says that she did have sex ed in school – for one day.

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