

Implementing Sexual Health Education - A case study by Communities In Schools of Chicago

The CPS Sexual Health Education Policy: In February of 2013, the Chicago Public Schools Board of Education passed the Sexual Health Education Policy in an effort to support students in making healthy, informed decisions about their sexual and physical health. Students in Kindergarten through 4th grade are required to receive a minimum of 300 minutes per year of sexual health instruction, and grades 5 through 12 receive a minimum of 675 minutes each year. Trained school staff have access to the CPS curriculum, which is aligned with the National Sexuality Education Standards and provides medically accurate, age-appropriate instruction on topics such as healthy relationships, anatomy, disease prevention, contraception and abstinence. Parents have the right at any time to opt their children out of participating in sexual health education.

The Importance of Sexual Health Education: Among the advantages to students and schools, the implementation of the Sexual Health Education Policy is a necessary part of becoming a Healthy CPS designated school. More importantly, implementation of the policy prepares students for healthy decision-making. Chicago's youth, ages 13-24, make up more than half of the diagnosed cases of gonorrhea and chlamydia in the city. According to the Youth Risk Behavior Survey conducted by CPS in conjunction with the CDC, 58 percent of middle school students are not taught about HIV/AIDs in school and ten percent of students are participating in sexual intercourse before high school. Nationally, over 40 percent of high school students report having intercourse without a condom during their last sexual experience, and over 70 percent report having not used any other contraceptives to prevent pregnancy. The goal of the CPS Sexual Health Education Policy is to decrease risky behavior in CPS youth.

Willa Cather Elementary School

Communities in Schools of Chicago (CIS of Chicago) has identified Willa Cather Elementary School, located in the North Lawndale community, as a model school that has successfully implemented the CPS Sexual Health Education curriculum.

Cather has long been recognized as a healthy school; they achieved the Silver award for the USDA's Healthier US School Challenge and is the recipient of Healthy Schools Campaign's Deborah Reese Memorial Award for school wellness. Cather promotes health on a daily basis, from having a fruit and vegetable of the week, to having a healthy snack zone. Mrs. Barbara Relerford, Cather's assistant principal works closely with Principal Wanda Carey to implement healthy initiatives in the school. "Students are not allowed to bring cookies or cupcakes for their birthday, we encourage them to bring healthy snacks; fruits and vegetables."

With this healthy environment Cather has been able to implement the sexual education program at an accelerated rate, because parents and staff understand the school's desire for students to be healthy. "Sexual health is a part of their development. It's just as important as mental health and physical health," added Mrs. Relerford.

Although some parents have decided to opt out of the program, most parents are happy to have the program. Not surprisingly, students are also genuinely interested in the program, and because the education is offered through trained professionals, students receive accurate, risk-reducing information.

To implement the program school-wide, Cather identified two teachers with flexible schedules to be the first trained in

the CPS curriculum; the physical education teacher and the technology coordinator. Afterwards teachers and administrators met to discuss program scheduling.

Cather decided to start the sexual health curriculum in November with the goal of finishing by March. This allowed students to get acclimated to school before they started the program as well as allowing for make-up days, if needed. In addition to fulfilling the policy requirements for all students, Cather provides condom kits for the older students with parental consent.

"This work is all about keeping kids healthy," says Mrs. Relerford.

Tips for Schools:

1. Get teachers trained.
2. Coordinators should have a school calendar with all school events in hand to schedule sexual education program days.
3. Be flexible – the first year will not be perfect.
4. Leave time for scheduling changes.
5. Finish the program before state testing.
6. Trust students, they want to learn this information.
7. Have an open door policy for parents, teachers and students.



How can CIS of Chicago help? Contact your CIS of Chicago partnership specialist to discuss options for your school.