SEX ED IN SCHOOLS:

How young is too young?

City schools don’t have to teach it, but teens say they should

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1 in 10: Number of Girls in NYC Who Become Pregnant Before Turning 20

Teens: Let’s talk about sex

Give us birds and bees, students say

By Justin Rocket Silverman
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Public schools aren’t required to offer sex education, but a group of young students is calling on the city today to mandate such courses as early as middle school.

“It’s as important as our other classes,” said Jennifer Jones, 14, a ninth-grader at the Manhattan Center school in Harlem. “Sex ed helps us to know about our bodies. Our bodies are us, and if we don’t know how to take care of them we could die.”

After months of circulating petitions and lobbying school officials, Jones and nine other students addressed the City Council today to make sex ed mandatory in all of the city’s public middle and high schools.

The teenagers got their mission rolling while they were students last year at PS/MS 218 in the Bronx. They launched a Web site and MySpace page devoted to the issue. At the time they were getting no sex education at the school, they say.

The students will offer starting numbers to support their cause: Almost half of the city’s ninth graders report they are sexually active, and nearly one in 10 girls becomes pregnant before they are 20, according to the Department of Health.

The Department of Education approved new standards for sex ed last month, but no public schools — even high schools — in New York City must teach it. The department says it does not track how many schools opt to offer such courses.

“There has been no mandatory sex education in New York City public schools for as long as anyone can remember,” said Nancy Biberman, president of the New York Public Library. “The minute kids become sexually active, schools. It needs to be a priority.”

The students have been working with officials to introduce their proposal.

Lesson plan

In October, the Department of Education approved “Reducing the Risk,” a new sex ed curriculum for schools available at the discretion of principals. The lessons include:

- Abstinence as an effective tool for preventing STDs and pregnancy.
- Tactics for delaying or refusing sex outright.
- How to avoid high-risk situations.
- Acquiring and using protection like condoms for safer sex.
- A vocabulary for discussing sex and protection with peers and adults.
- HIV risk behaviors.
- A detailed look at the effectiveness of condoms.

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Word on the street

What New Yorkers say about Sex ed in schools

- “I’m afraid to talk about it at all.”
  Lorraine Helliet, 37, Brooklyn

- “Before adolescence it should be parents teaching it. After adolescence, schools. It needs to be age-appropriate.”
  Chris Miraglia, 33, Brooklyn

- “The minute kids become aware of their sexuality they should be spoken to about it. It needs to be spoken about in school, especially if parents don’t talk about it.”
  Lorraine Helliet, 37, Brooklyn

- “You could walk into one school that has an amazing sex ed program going from K-12, and another school that has no program at all,” said Samantha Levine, the director of communication for Planned Parenthood. “Sexuality is a life-long process, and it’s important to start talking to kids as early as possible.”

Rest of nation avoiding the issue

Although the 10 young women testifying at City Hall today might help bring sex ed to more students here, nationwide the trend has fewer young people learning how to prevent pregnancy and reduce the risk of disease.

“The majority of school systems now focus on delaying sexual education as long as possible,” said Barbara Huberman of Advocates for Youth, a pro-education group. “While you may get an overview of contraception in the 7th or 8th grade, there are many, many school systems that are afraid to talk about it at all.”

Federal “abstinence-only” funding, supported by the Bush Administration, has further reduced meaningful sex ed, Huberman said, by giving money only to programs that discourage all sexual intercourse.

At least 10 states, including New York, have returned millions of dollars in federal money rather than commit to an abstinence-only program.

This pamphlet was distributed in support of mandated sex ed.