Milwaukee Public Schools Team Up With United Way and Community to Reduce Teen Pregnancy by 56 Percent

**Issue:** For several decades, Milwaukee's teen pregnancy rate had far exceeded the national average; by 2005, the city ranked second in the nation. State taxpayers bore 85 percent of the cost of teen births — an estimated $136 million over the long-term. Other troubling statistics revealed a high incidence of sexual victimization: 42 percent of sexually active girls under age 15 reported their first sexual experience was nonconsensual, and 71 percent of babies born to Wisconsin teenage girls were fathered by adult men over age 20. The children of these teens faced myriad issues: a drastically increased likelihood of flunking a grade, dropping out of school, and — especially with girls — perpetuating the poverty cycle by having their own children as teens. The boys of teen mothers were more likely to become incarcerated.

**Big Idea:** In 2007, with United Way leading the charge, Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) became a partner in a community-wide effort to launch a multi-pronged program to reduce teen pregnancy. Support was also enlisted from philanthropic, youth-serving, and community-based organizations; leaders of the faith and business communities; local elected officials; state and local media; and parents. The initiative was embraced by MPS' newly hired curriculum specialist for health, physical education, Safe and Supportive Schools, Brett Fuller. Fuller was inspired by a 10-year goal set in 2005 by the Milwaukee Health Department and Center for Urban Population Health to reduce teen pregnancy by 46 percent by 2015. Among his major challenges: no dedicated funding for the program and no existing tools to measure the program's effectiveness. Although comprehensive sex education had been adopted in MPS during the 1980s, there was no school data collected on its implementation.

**Implementation:** With the support of MPS administration but no dedicated funding, Fuller unveiled a new sex education curriculum for students in grades K-9, starting with a 2008 pilot program for fourth graders (who would be graduating seniors in 2015). It was based on consistent messaging and age-appropriate guidelines. In the lower grades, for example, students learned basic male and female human anatomy and discussed what a family looks like; by grade five, teachers tackled the specifics of contraception. Despite its controversial subject matter, says Fuller, the "best practices-based" curriculum rapidly expanded across grade levels, winning the approval of the school board, parents, and faith groups. By 2014, more than 1,100 teachers had been trained and an estimated 32,000 students had been reached. The curriculum is reviewed and revised annually.

**Program Team**

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In conjunction with the MPS curriculum, the United Way funded several initiatives, including Healthy Girls, Baby Can Wait, and the Healthy Youth Leadership Institute. A pro bono marketing campaign by SERVE Marketing featured print and broadcast ads designed to reach at-risk youth, which included startling photos of pregnant teenage boys on city buses and bus shelters, captioned, “It shouldn’t be any less disturbing when it’s a girl.” These and other “guerilla tactics” were designed to support the school curriculum and “keep the conversation going,” says Fuller.

Results: Although Fuller was initially dubious of meeting the ambitious 2005 goal of a 46 percent reduction in 10 years, it was surpassed two years earlier, when the 2013 teen pregnancy rate had declined to fewer than 26 births per 1,000 from the baseline of 52 per 1,000 in 2006. By October 2014, the rate had declined 56 percent. The new goal: to reduce that number again by 50 percent, to fewer than 15 births per 1,000 among 15 to 17-year-olds.

Student surveys provided further proof of the effort’s success. Among the recent results: more than 43 percent of MS students and 58 percent of HS students stated that abstinence was the only 100% effective way to prevent teen pregnancy (a 27.1 percent and 18 percent increase, respectively); 65 percent of MS students and 51 percent of HS students said they would wait until they were 18 or older to engage in sex (a 6.6 percent and 7 percent increase, respectively); and nearly 88 percent of MS students and 91 percent of HS students said they would use a condom the next time they engaged in sex (a 6 percent and 4 percent increase, respectively).

Fast Facts:
- Students Reached: 30,000+ (more than 53 percent of total student population)
- Teachers Using Curriculum: 1,100
- Curriculum Translations Available: Eight languages

SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators is the nation’s largest membership organization of health and physical education professionals. The organization sets the standard for health and physical education in the U.S., and its National Standards for K-12 Physical Education serve as the foundation for well-designed physical education programs across the country. SHAPE America was also a proud member of the coalition that developed the National Health Education Standards, and is a founding partner of the Presidential Youth Fitness Program, Let’s Move! Active Schools and the Jump Rope For Heart/Hoops For Heart programs.

Additional Resources
Links to more information about this program can be found at shapeamerica.org/casestudies.

SHAPE America’s Appropriate Practices in School-Based Health Education
- Creating a positive and inclusive learning environment that engages students in learning the skills they need to live healthy lives
- Implementing a sequential, comprehensive curriculum — aligned with the National Health Education Standards and other relevant frameworks — that is skills-based, with an emphasis on developing health literacy
- Employing instructional practices that engage students in learning and in developing their health-related skills
- Using assessments that measure student growth, knowledge and health-related skill development
- Advocating for a positive school culture toward health and health education

50 Million Strong by 2029 is SHAPE America’s commitment to empower all children to lead healthy and active lives through effective health and physical education programs.