

SEXUAL HEALTH

THE ROLE OF SCHOOL PERSONNEL

Sexual health is more than the anatomy and the physiology of reproduction. It encompasses sexual development, reproductive health, interpersonal relationships, affection, intimacy, body image, and gender roles. Parents, peers, schools, religion, the media, friends, and partners all influence the way people learn about sexuality. A sexually healthy individual is someone who appreciates his/her body, takes responsibility for his/her behaviors, communicates with both sexes in respectful ways, and expresses love and intimacy consistent with his/her own values (*Sexuality Information & Education Council of the United States*). This fact sheet provides an overview of the role school personnel play in the sexual health of their students. It explains why sexual health is an issue for all educators and highlights important statistics and key strategies for teachers and school staff to incorporate into their classroom or school setting.

Why Should This Concern All School Personnel – Not Simply Health Teachers?

1. Students cite teachers and counselors as second only to their families as the most reliable source for sexuality-related information (National Association of State Boards of Education, 1998).

- Students want more information about sexuality than their parents typically provide, including how to handle pressure to have sex and how to know when they are ready (*Kaiser Family Foundation, 1999*).

2. Studies show a direct link between sexual health and student achievement.

- Teens are less likely to begin having sex if they feel “connected” to their school, get along with teachers and students, and feel that teachers treat students fairly (*Blum & Rinehard, 1998*).
- Parenthood is a leading cause of high school dropout among teen girls (*National Association of State Boards of Education, 1998*).
- Sons of teen mothers are 13% more likely to end up in jail (*National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 1997*).
- Daughters of teen mothers are 22% more likely to become teen mothers themselves (*National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 1997*).

3. Forming a sexual identity is a key task of adolescence.

- This is a natural and ongoing process throughout all aspects of students’ lives.
- Students will read cues and ask questions at any given time – not just at home or during health class.

4. Millions of American teens engage in highly risky sexual behaviors.

- Half of all high school students have had sex (*Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1999*).
- Approximately 4 in 10 girls become pregnant at least once before age 20 (*National Campaign, 1998*).
- 1 in 8 teens (3 million) contract an STD each year in the U.S. (*American Social Health Association, 1999*).
- 70% of sexually experienced 15-17-year-olds do not consider themselves to be at risk for STDs yet this age group accounts for 25% of new STD cases each year (*Kaiser Family Foundation, 1999*).

5. Schools are obligated to protect the safety and diversity of all students.

- In a school of 1,000 students, between 30-100 are gay or lesbian. In a class of 30, between 3-9 students will have a gay or lesbian sibling, parent or other relative (*Advocates For Youth, 1999*).
- 1 in 5 high school health teachers reported that students in their classes often used abusive language when describing homosexuals (*Advocates For Youth, 1999*).
- 45% of gay youth in one study reported that they were the victims of verbal or physical assaults in secondary schools because of their sexual orientation (*Advocates For Youth, 1999*).



What Can School Personnel Do To Help Students Stay Sexually Healthy?

Sexual health can be an intimidating subject for many people; and school employees are often unsure how to address it, especially in settings where it is not an expected topic of conversation like a math class, for instance. The good news is there are plenty of ways teachers and staff can help protect the sexual health of their students and colleagues that do not require extra time or an intense discussion. Below are some strategies that can be applied in any school setting:

1. Model Inclusive and Non-Judgmental Behaviors.

- Interact with both genders in respectful and appropriate ways to create a positive environment.
- Reject stereotypes and demonstrate tolerance for people with different values and lifestyles.
- Challenge students and staff members when they make homophobic or sexist remarks.

2. Encourage Health-Promoting Behaviors.

- Teach the importance of regular check-ups and preventive measures.
- Help students practice effective decision-making.
- Discuss abstinence and use of contraception to effectively avoid unintended pregnancy and STDs.

3. Encourage Open Communication Among Students, Parents, Teachers and Peers.

- Respond to every student question. Checking on the answer or referring them to another source is better than ignoring or avoiding the request. Establish yourself as a non-judgmental resource and pave the way for students to be comfortable coming to you about more serious matters.
- Build relationships with your students' parents.

4. Start Conversations With Your Colleagues.

- Share classroom experiences to elicit colleague feedback and strategies for dealing with sensitive and/or surprising questions or situations.
- Offer in-service training about STDs, teen pregnancy & sexual health for all school employees.
- Raise with your colleagues the “real life” issues students are dealing with, even when others will not.

5. Incorporate Sexual Health Issues or Facts into Lessons and Coursework.

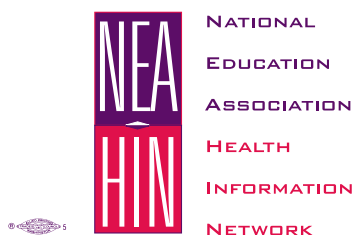
- In a math class, use HIV/AIDS or STD rates in word problems.
- In English class, discuss the relationships and gender roles described in poetry and literature.
- In journalism class, analyze sex stereotyping and the unrealistic portrayal of consequences in the media.
- In social studies, use current events to discuss healthy and unhealthy decision-making.

6. Access Different Sexual Health Resources.

- Bookmark these sites: www.siecus.org; www.ashastd.org; www.kff.org; www.plannedparenthood.org; www.teenpregnancy.org; www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dash.
- Sign up for free newsletters and list-servs.
- Contact NEA HIN for information and assistance 202/822-7570, www.neahin.org.

7. Advocate for Comprehensive Sexuality Education Programs.

- Follow SIECUS' Guidelines For Comprehensive Sexuality Education (go to: www.siecus.org).
- Implement peer-reviewed, evaluated, multi-component curricula such as those the Centers for Disease Control has deemed “Programs That Work.” (go to: www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dash).



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