

SEXUAL HEALTH

THE ROLE OF SCHOOL PERSONNEL

The National Education Association believes that the developing child's sexuality is continually and inevitably influenced by daily contacts, including experiences in the school environment. The Association recognizes that sensitive sex education can be a positive force in promoting physical, mental, emotional, and social health and that the public school must assume an increasingly important role in providing the instruction. The Association urges that formal sex education should include parent/guardian orientation and be planned and implemented with careful attention to developmental needs, appropriateness to community settings and values, and respect for individual differences. The Association also believes that to facilitate the realization of human potential, it is the right of every individual to live in an environment of freely available information and knowledge about sexuality (*National Education Association Resolution B-40*).

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

1. Students want information from trusted adults.

- 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*).
- 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*).

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*).
- Only one-third of teen mothers receive a high school diploma (*National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy*).
- Daughters of teen mothers are 22% more likely to become teen mothers themselves (*National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy*).

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 high risk sexual behaviors.

- 45.6% of all high school students have had sexual intercourse (*Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*).
- 34% of young women become pregnant at least once before they turn 20—about 820,000 teen pregnancies. Eight in ten of these pregnancies are unintended (*National Survey of Family Growth, CDC*).
- 1 in 8 teens (3 million) contract a Sexually Transmitted Disease (STD) each year in the U.S. (*American Social Health Association*).
- 14% of sexually active U.S. high school students report having had four or more sex partners in one year (*Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*).

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

- 84% of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered students report being verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation (*Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network*).
- 49% of students reported being touched, grabbed, or pinched in a sexual way (*American Association of University Women*).
- More than one-third (35%) of students who experience sexual harassment report their first occurrence in sixth grade or earlier (*American Association of University Women*).



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.

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, multicomponent curricula (go to: www.etr.org/recapp for a complete listing).



This May 2004 publication was made possible through support provided by the Academy for Educational Development (AED) and the Ford Foundation. The opinions expressed are those of the NEA Health Information Network (NEA HIN) and do not necessarily reflect the views of AED or the Foundation. For more information contact NEA HIN at 1201 16th St. NW Washington, DC 20036; 202/822-7570 or www.neahin.org.