



May 5, 2008

Schools address contraceptive access in summer

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The first day back from winter break Amanda Jacobs, a doctor at the South Bronx Educational Campus in Mott Haven, gave nearly 20 pregnancy tests to high school girls, responding to a story line she heard throughout the day, she said.

"We didn't plan to, but it happened. I might be pregnant..." Jacobs said, recounting students' fears. "I thought, 'thank God we're here.' Where would these kids go? If not student health, it's nothing."

Jacobs works at two Montefiore Medical Centers on two high school campuses in the Bronx and provides students with contraceptives and birth control, along with answering any questions they might have. She is a firm believer in the importance of having such clinics on school campuses, and worries that when summer arrives, the students must make a special effort to get contraceptives, which for some students can mean little or no contraceptive use.

"I try to arm everyone with an adequate supply," Jacobs said. "I started a month ago talking about the summer, when we were still wearing coats."

Martinez, a social worker at Jane Addams High School. Teenagers can access medical attention about reproductive health without parents' knowledge or involvement.

"They think if they go, they are going to call their parents," Martinez said, explaining some students' reluctance to visit off-campus clinics. On campus, students can obtain condoms for free, and at some school clinics they can also receive free birth control pills, depending on the students' insurance or confidentiality needs. Because condoms are less convenient and cost money off campus, students might be less likely to go off campus. Some students fear that if they go to a clinic, insurance notices will appear in their parents' mail, and even the extra step of making an appointment can be a deterrent.

Tyesha Simon, 17, is a student at Health Opportunities High School in the South Bronx. As a peer educator at her school, she knows students are hesitant to seek out clinics on their own. "Everyone's afraid to go to the doctor," she said. "They are scared their parents will find out. It's easier to avoid the situation."

Martinez and Glenn Tepper, an English

And there is a reason for concern. Seven percent of Bronx teenagers ages 15 to 19 have been pregnant or made someone pregnant, a rate higher than in any other borough, according to a 2005 report from the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. While 56 percent of teens in the Bronx ages 15 to 19 reported having sex, 48 percent of teens citywide reported having sex, according to a 2005 study by the federal Department of Health and Human Services.

The borough ranks higher in condom use among teenagers, with 74 percent using condoms the last time they had sex versus only 69 percent citywide. But when other forms of birth control are compared, only 6.4 percent of sexually active Bronx teens reported using it compared with 8.1 percent citywide. Across the United States, however, 17.4 percent of sexually active teens reported using other forms of birth control.

While clinics offering free contraceptives are scattered throughout the Bronx, such as Planned Parenthood, these agencies only work, of course, if students go to them. Not only do students have misconceptions about sex and pregnancy, but they are also unaware they have rights to confidentiality, said Ana



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As a health resource teacher at Jane Addams High School, Glenn Tepper is there to answer questions students have about contraceptives and give condoms to students who ask.

teacher at Jane Addams, run the school's condom availability program. In preparation for the absence of summer service, they try to spread the word about other clinics. Tepper said he will allow students to stock up on condoms.

"Anything that could be perceived by anybody as an impediment might just be the deal breaker," he said, explaining his belief in the value of the condom availability program.

Pat Maloney, director of the Teen Choice program at Inwood House, a New York City nonprofit for teen-pregnancy prevention, said pregnancy rates are typically higher in September because of the issue of access during the summer, and students need to be

better informed throughout the year through sex education.

"We are not going to prevent pregnancy or disease if they don't have information to protect themselves," she said.

As it stands, New York City schools do not have mandated sex education beyond a curriculum of HIV/AIDS courses. More in-depth sex education is a school-by-school decision. While the HIV/AIDS classes are valuable courses, some critics say schools should do more to address pregnancies and reproductive issues.

"It's about condoms. It's not about preventing unwanted pregnancy. There's not anything about feelings," said Nancy Biberan, president of Women's Housing

and Economic Development Corporation in the Bronx.

Combating teen pregnancy is crucial to addressing other social problems in the South Bronx, including high dropout rates and poverty, she said. "There is nothing more central to preventing dropouts than assuring kids don't get pregnant."

Jacobs said she is often baffled by the misinformation teens have about sex and pregnancy. However, she said she is not frustrated with the students when they come to her for help, but with gaps in sex education.

"It's normal for them to be confused," Jacobs said. "If no one has ever told them this information, how can we blame them?"