

DAILY NEWS

Bronx kids get sex-education by teen teachers in the Just Ask Me program

By Corinne Lestch
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Yanilsa Frias, Emily Godoy, and Chanell Joseph, youth councilors with the Women's Housing Economic Development Corp, have had a model for sex education in schools for years.

A group of Bronx high school students were teaching peers about the birds and the bees long before the city mandated sex ed classes.

In a one-of-a-kind program, 10 teenage girls give lessons three times a week to students at Public School/Middle School 218. The semester-long course covers pregnancy, sexual orientation, STDs and anatomy, using pop culture cues to make the material relevant.

"We're role models for them. We try to give them the best advice we can," said Yanilsa Frias, now 18, who helped start the program, known as Just Ask Me.

The girls crafted the curriculum five years ago in an after-school program at Bronx nonprofit Women's Housing Economic Development Corp. to educate sixth- through eighth-graders.

"It first began with teen pregnancy, and then we thought about what's causing teen pregnancy, and obviously it's sex," Frias said. "So with the lack of sex education in public schools, we continued on from there."

Since JAM's first class in 2009, peer educators have taught roughly 250 students at the Highbridge school, which is affiliated with WHEDco.

They incorporate TV shows like "16 and Pregnant" and "Skins" to point out promiscuous behavior.

"When I do the pregnancy workshop, I try to include '16 and Pregnant' on MTV and ask them what they think about the show," Frias said. "They usually say they like it, and it's a cool show. And I just explain to them that it's glorifying teen pregnancy, which isn't good."

The school's principal, Leticia Rosario, said the course has been a hit.

"I thought it was a wonderful thing," she said. "Kids need this, and it's better they get information that's correct rather than information on the street."

Frias was thrilled with the city's announcement on Tuesday mandating sex ed classes in all middle schools and high schools.

The Ithaca College-bound high school grad and the other WHEDco teens testified in front of the City Council in 2007 about providing comprehensive health education in public schools.

"It's an indescribable feeling," she said. "I pioneered this. ... I think people should be grateful for this new curriculum."