

CityViews: ‘Me Too’ is a Moment for Broader, More Effective Sex Ed in NYC Schools

By Nicole Jennings | February 4, 2019



WHEDCo

A day at WHEDCo's program.

High-profile media stories and trending hashtags have raised awareness of a problem many of us know well: that instances of sexual assault and domestic abuse are all too common. These aren't just grown-up problems; they are problems for young people, too.

In New York City, one in five young women between the ages of 15 and 24 is involved in a dating relationship that is characterized by physical violence. Two-thirds experience coercion as part of their relationships, and more than one-third experience forced sexual experiences.

Our public schools are not doing enough to address this issue, but—thanks to proposed City Council bills—that may soon change. We need to pass those bills immediately.

WHEDco, through our after-school program, has stepped in to fill the void in education and counter negative relationship statistics in the Bronx—the borough with the highest per capita rates of domestic violence incidents in the city. We're giving kids the skills they need to develop and maintain healthy relationships throughout their lives.

During our peer-led workshops, trained high school students educate middle school students about consent and healthy relationships, as well as other important topics like anatomy, safe sex, and pregnancy prevention. We arm students with medically-accurate facts about their bodies and provide a safe space for dialogue about what they hear in the world and see online.

The feedback from students has been incredibly positive. It turns out that kids—and their parents—are hungry for this information. And we know it works: 6th grade students who participated showed a 90 percent increase in their knowledge. And, assessments show that 7th and 8th grade students are retaining what they learned as they moved forward in school.

But we also found that many middle-school students were coming into our program with misinformation and unhealthy messages about sex, relationships and their bodies. We realized we needed to start earlier, to give even younger kids a better foundation of knowledge on these topics.

We developed a special program for 3rd through 5th graders where we talk about basic respect for other people's bodies and boundaries in ways they can understand.

Unfortunately, too many New York City students aren't given opportunities to learn about and discuss these vital issues in age-appropriate ways.

While current city law requires sexual health to be included in schools' health curriculum, there is a lack of detail as to what that should include, or how extensive the lessons should be. That's assuming it happens at all: the NYC Comptroller's office has determined that it often does not.

WHEDco strongly supports the proposed City Council bills requiring the Department of Education to report information regarding sexual health education. We also support the resolution to adopt all of the policy recommendations of the Mayor's Sexual Health Education Task Force and provide comprehensive sexual-health education on a regular basis, across all grade levels.

Additionally, we hope that the improved curriculum will include consent as a mandated topic.

When young people have the tools to articulate their boundaries and to respect other people's, they will grow into adults who believe in and practice this. If we formalize discussions around consent early and often—and create spaces for kids to ask questions and explore the concept—we may be able to prevent another generation from having to say “Me Too.”

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