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Bronx Program Teaches 10-Year-Olds Age-Appropriate Sex Ed

After-school sessions build on New York City's efforts to expand health-education instruction



Fifth-graders get a guided discussion about the physical, emotional and social changes associated with puberty at P.S. 218 in the Bronx. PHOTO: YANA PASKOVA FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By

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During the day, fifth-graders at P.S. 218 in the Bronx learn geography, fractions and life sciences. After school, they learn all about puberty—from menstruation to erections.

At this school, which runs from kindergarten through eighth grade, there are no taboos during sex education, an after-school program grounded in science. On a recent afternoon, fifth-graders were sitting in rapt attention, led in a guided discussion about the physical, emotional and social changes associated with puberty.

There were smiles, nods of agreement and a bit of blushing among the group of 15. But the children barely giggled or uttered an “eww.”

“Menstruation is the fancy word for getting your period,” said Sarah Cyr-Mutty, a health educator for WHEDco, a nonprofit that developed and leads the sex-education and after-school programs at P.S. 218.



Students learn the proper terminology for sexual organs. Later, they learn about love and sexual orientation. PHOTO: YANA PASKOVA FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

She walked through what happens to the body during menstruation, reassured the students that the school has pads if needed and asked the students why it is good for boys to also know about periods.

“Because if it happens to your girlfriend or something, you know what it is,” said Anthony Garcia, one of the fifth-graders.

The sex ed classes at P.S. 218 aren’t typical in New York City, where teen pregnancy rates have dropped considerably overall in recent years, but still remain high in the South Bronx, in parts of the Harlem section of Manhattan and in central Brooklyn.

In 2011 the city started to require that middle- and high-school students complete a semester of health education, which should include some sex ed. A 2017 report by New

York City Comptroller Scott Stringer found that just 57% of eighth-grade students completed the requirement of one semester of health education and that the education offered didn't actually prioritize sex ed.

Last year, the New York City Department of Education announced a four-year, \$24 million initiative to ensure more students receive comprehensive, medically accurate and age-appropriate health education.

The city said it would roll out this academic year a framework for health and sex ed for all grades. A spokesman for the Education Department, Doug Cohen, said funding for the Health Ed Works initiative began this school year. Sex-ed guidelines for kindergarten through fifth grade are out. Guidelines for older grades are expected to be released before the summer.

P.S. 218's principal, Serge Caceres, said WHEDco's after-school sex-ed program has more latitude in what it can teach compared with the in-school health program. The feedback from parents, he said, has been positive with few opting out of the program. Students are very excited and inquisitive about their bodies, he added.

"Kids are exposed to so much adult content, especially on the internet and cable television," said Mr. Caceres. "They have to know a little bit about what they watch and sex-ed education has to be age appropriate."



Teen peers like Jasmine Ruiz, center left, and Melkyn Acosta beside her are brought in to talk about their own puberty experiences. PHOTO: YANA PASKOVA FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

About 10 years ago, students raised the idea of a sex-ed after-school curriculum to WHEDco staff as a way to talk about teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. The middle-school curriculum was developed first, while the elementary program rolled out more recently. Peer educators trained in sex ed were added along the way.

Third-graders, for example, learn about consent and talking to a trusted adult. In eighth grade, students learn the 14 steps of proper condom usage.

In fifth grade, students are taught the proper terminology for sexual organs. Later, they learn about love and sexual orientation. Teen peers, like 17-year-old Jasmine Ruiz, are brought in to talk about their own puberty experience. She talked to fifth-graders about the day she got her period.

“I was scared to tell my mom because I thought she was going to make a big deal out of it,” Ms. Ruiz said, adding that she thought her mom might throw her a party for this milestone. “I didn’t get a party.”

When it came time for a question-and-answer session, arms shot up. Children asked dozens of questions about emotions, shaving, the scrotum, how babies are made, tampons, sperm, amniotic fluid, miscarriage and how triplets are made.

Peer educator Melkyn Acosta, 17, said classmates approach him with questions. At his high school, he received one semester of health taught by a math teacher, which covered sexually transmitted diseases and infections, he said.

“They don’t take this serious even though teenagers need the education,” he said.

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