

SEXUAL HEALTH EDUCATION IN MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL

In August 2011, NYC DOE announced a mandate that middle and high schools are required to include sexual health education as part of comprehensive health education. Comprehensive health education includes lessons on violence and injury prevention, emotional and mental health, physical activity and nutrition, alcohol, tobacco and other drug prevention, HIV/AIDS, and sexual health. Teens need medically accurate information, as well as skills and self-confidence to avoid high risk behaviors that can lead to unwanted pregnancy and HIV and other STDs.

Health Education Requirements

- The New York State Department of Education (NYSED) requires one semester of comprehensive health education for all students in middle school (grades 6-8) and in high school (grades 9-12).
- The same NYSED regulation requires HIV/AIDS instruction for every student, every year.
- Health education may only be taught in advisory if the course is coded as health education in STARS, meets the time requirements and is taught by a pedagogue.

Health Education Learning Standards

- The NYS Education Department has established these three NYS learning standards for health education. For State standards, see the link on our Health Education requirements page.
 - ✓ **Standard 1. Personal Health and Fitness: *Students will have the necessary knowledge and skills to establish and maintain physical fitness, participate in physical activity, and maintain personal health.*** Examples of how this standard is applied in the context of sexual health education include: Recognize the features of male and female anatomy and physiology and how bodies develop sexually; learn proper care and hygiene for sex and reproductive organs.
 - ✓ **Standard 2: A Safe and Healthy Environment: *Students will acquire the knowledge and ability necessary to create and maintain a safe and healthy environment.*** Examples of how this standard is applied in the context of sexual health education include: Identify and avoid high risk situations; protect themselves and others from unwanted sex or unprepared sex; advocate for selves and others.
 - ✓ **Standard 3: Resource Management: *Students will understand and be able to manage their personal and community resources.*** Examples of how this standard is applied in the context of sexual health education include: How and where to obtain resources to maintain sexual and reproductive health; identify a trusted adult with whom to speak comfortably about issues concerning their sexuality or sexual health.
- Some examples of sexual health knowledge benchmarks are:
 - For Middle School:
 - Effective, clear communication is a vital aspect of healthy relationships
 - Adolescents can and should avoid pregnancy and STD/HIV/AIDS.
 - Abstinence is the only guaranteed way to avoid pregnancy and STDs.
 - For High School:
 - Becoming a parent affects an individual's short- and long-term goals.
 - Sexual responsibility includes an understanding and awareness of one's sexuality and sexual development; respect for oneself and others; avoidance of

physical or emotional harm; and recognition of the diversity of sexual beliefs within the community.

- The NYS Education Department's *Guidance Document for Achieving the New York State Standards in Health Education* specifies the components of comprehensive health education and describes the standards, topics, and specific skills that students should know and be able to do. Use it to guide or check alignment of any health education curriculum to the standards. To view the guide, visit www.WeTeachNYC.org.

Health Education Knowledge and Skills

In addition to the functional knowledge described in *A Guidance Document for Achieving the New York State Standards in Health Education*, NYSED has identified seven health education skills as foundational components of sexual health education:

1. **Self-Management.** Students learn to recognize their own feelings, how feelings can influence behaviors and how to carefully consider their own impulses before choosing to act or not act on their feelings and impulses.
2. **Relationship Management.** Students learn to recognize the qualities of healthy relationships, how to nurture healthy relationships and how to correct and or avoid aspects of unhealthy relationships. Students learn how to discontinue unhealthy and unsafe relationships.
3. **Stress Management.** Students learn to recognize the signs of stress within themselves and others and how to choose positive, alternative means of relieving stress
4. **Communication.** Students learn to communicate their wants and needs regarding safety and health. Students practice and employ refusal skills and/or learn to negotiate for safer sex or alternate ways to express affection.
5. **Planning and Goal Setting:** Students are able to determine what they need to prepare, have, know, and do before making decisions to initiate sexual behaviors. Students identify personal support systems and explain their importance in achieving the personal health goal.
6. **Decision making:** Students are able to determine consequences, ask questions about risks, and weigh the risks and benefits of sexual behaviors in the decision making process. Students describe how personal health decisions may affect subsequent decisions.
7. **Advocacy:** Students identify ways to increase sexual health awareness throughout the school community. Students work collaboratively with individuals, agencies or organizations to advocate for the health of self, families and communities.

Expectations for Sexual Health Education

We believe sexual health education should be part of comprehensive health education. It must be age appropriate, medically accurate and enable students to develop the necessary skills to make healthy and responsible decisions throughout their lives. Sexual health education addresses factors that affect sexual behavior, such as self-esteem and perceived social norms, and helps young people develop a positive view of sexuality in the context of family and community values.

Comprehensive sexual health education lessons focus on the needs of the students and center on:

- The right and responsibility of every individual regardless of age to make responsible sexual choices and avoid high risk behaviors.
- Abstaining from sexual intercourse as the best and most effective way to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS.

- Providing scientifically accurate information about the effectiveness of condoms and other birth control methods, and the importance of using protection consistently and correctly to reduce the risk of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.
- Recognizing healthy and unhealthy relationships.
- Developing the communication and interpersonal skills to avoid and/or handle high risk situations.
- The right and responsibility of young people to access medically accurate information and appropriate health care services.

A sexual health education program includes lessons on human anatomy, physiology and the reproductive system. It covers human sexuality and sexual identity. It discusses decision making and responsibility in the context of personal and family values and a student's life goals. It includes lessons on healthy relationships and helps students develop communication and interpersonal skills to support their decisions and help them handle risky situations including unwanted sexual advances.

Parent/Guardian Notification

- Schools should inform parents and guardians when their child is scheduled for comprehensive health education, including sexual health education, using the NYC DOE Parent Notification Letter (see Health Education requirements page of our website).
- Parents/guardians have the right to opt their child out of lessons having to do with HIV/STD prevention and birth control, not including abstinence. They cannot opt their child out of lessons pertaining to abstinence as a means of preventing sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy or any other lessons.
- Parents or guardians who wish to make such a request must write a letter to the principal stating that the child should not be in the classroom during lessons about birth control and methods of prevention; and that they will provide instructions on prevention to the child in their home.

Staff Requirements

- Health education should be taught by a health education teacher who is
 - knowledgeable and comfortable with the material;
 - familiar with NY State Education Department and NYC DOE health education policies;
 - able to create an environment that is safe for students;
 - skilled at leading classroom discussions about potentially sensitive topics; and
 - able to facilitate role plays, debates, and other activities that will provide students with opportunities to practice the seven health education skills.

Curriculum, Materials and Professional Development for NYC DOE Teachers

- **Recommended Health Education Curricula:** NYC DOE recommends using the *HealthSmart Middle School 2nd Edition* for middle school classes and *HealthSmart High School 2nd Edition with Reducing the Risk 5th Edition* curricula for the required high school health education course. These curricula are aligned to NYSED Learning Standards. Principals who choose not to use these curricula must ensure that the curricula they choose meet the health education requirements, including sex education. The NYSED Guidance Document can help inform the review and selection process.
- **HIV/AIDS Education:** The NYCDOE requires and provides annual lessons using the *HIV/AIDS Curriculum* which is available to teachers on www.WeTeachNYC.org.

- **Free Professional Development:** NYCDOE teachers can register for free workshops using the Office of School Wellness Programs Professional Development catalog.
- **Materials:** NYC DOE teachers who attend the Comprehensive Health Education or HIV/AIDS training receive free curricula and materials. Additional Health Education materials are available at www.WeTeachNYC.org.
- **Contact us:** For more information, visit schools.nyc.gov/wellness or email HealthEd@schools.nyc.gov.