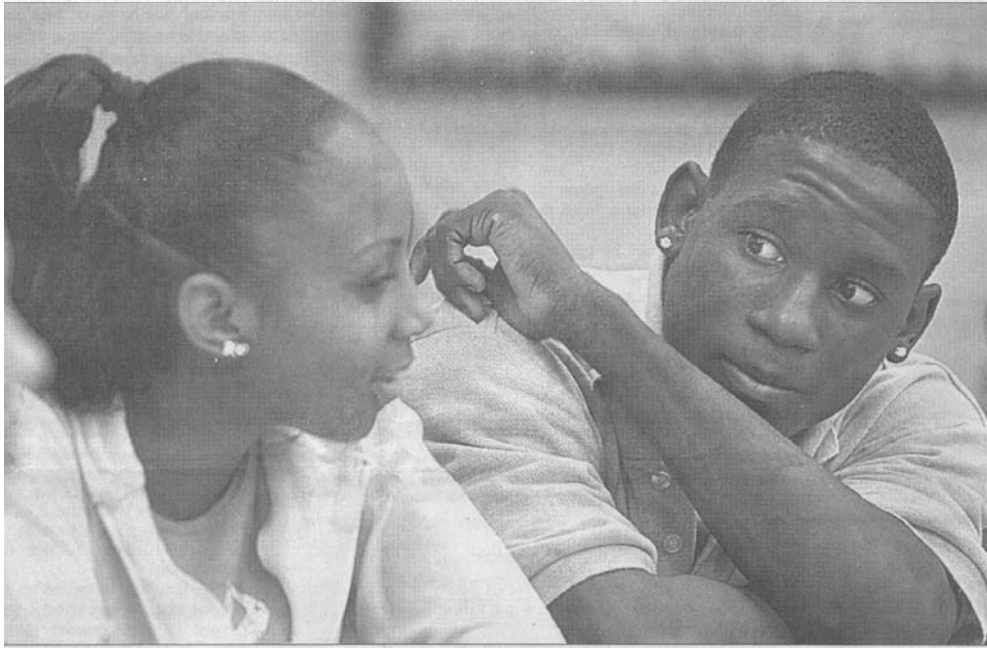


# The Star-Ledger

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Katrina Lee and Hans Dominique, 17-year-old students at Abraham Clark High School in Roselle, answer questions about gender stereotypes. They are participating in a Teen PEP program that seeks to enable students to promote sexual health among their peers.

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## Students promote sexual health

**BY JENNIFER GOLSON,**  
Star-Ledger Staff

Their desks were arranged in a circle, allowing the high school seniors to face each other and let the ideas flow.

The topic of discussion: gender roles.

"What do you think when someone says, 'Act like a man'?" asked Jennifer Roman, one of the tag-team teachers for a new class at Abraham Clark High School in Roselle. "Unemotional?" said Rayna Latimer, a 16-year-old with a ponytail and giant silver hoop earrings.

Another student said cold, and one said invincible, as instructor Cary Richetti wrote each adjective on the chalkboard. And they used the same exercise to describe women, using words like

delicate, emotional, strong and "smells good."

It was all background for discussions they plan to have later with freshmen to teach them about sexuality, ranging from safe sex to homophobia to breaking gender stereotypes.

The course, called Teen PEP, is part of a statewide peer-education program that started in 1999 and teaches teenagers how to share the skills and behaviors that promote sexual health. It is an elective, and the students will have to convey the material by putting on a series of skits and workshops for the school and residents in the borough.

"It teaches them how to become peer educators ... to talk about the issues that might be a little embarrassing," said Nicole Masi, the district's student assistance coordinator.

Roselle is the first district in Union County to participate as part of the New Jersey Teen Prevention Education Program, sponsored by the

NJ Department of Health and Senior Services and NJ Department of Education, in collaboration with the Princeton Center for Leadership Training and Princeton HiTOPS Inc., Health Interested Teens' Own Program on Sexuality.

Thirty-four schools around the state offer the program, according to officials from the Princeton Center, which trains the high school teachers to lead the class. To make sure the students work well together, they must attend a weekend retreat before the school year starts, said Sherry Barr, program director for the Princeton Center. Without that bonding experience, she said, the program would have less chance of succeeding.

"They are relying on one another within the group to hold the accurate information," Barr said.

"It's really building a group and a cohesive team."

Roselle students traveled to Camp Burnie in Port Murray earlier this month, and it did help solidify their bond, said 17-year-old Jennifer Cosey.

"Now we're really close,"

Cosey said. "Everyone is like, 'Hi!' in the halls."

To Jignesh Chokshi, 17, "It's kind of like family."

The Roselle students and their parents know the topics will become more dicey as they start talking about birth control, sexually transmitted diseases, the impact drugs can have on sexual decision-making and violence in relationships, Richetti said, adding that the parents had to sign permission slips for the students to take the class.

But it makes more sense to have teenagers talk to other teenagers about these issues to drive them home, Roman said. "Students do learn from other students. As a health teacher, I hear all the time birth control

methods, and I don't know where they (students) get them from," including myths like drinking a coke will stop a pregnancy, Roman said.

Students are expected to learn more about sexual health, as well as the skills necessary for public speaking and leading discussions, Masi said.

While it may be an elective for the students, they still receive a grade.

They are assigned reading materials, and they get points for quizzes and class participation -- as well as the quality of the presentations and how well they remember their lines for the skits.

The teenagers said they signed up for the chance to make a difference in their school.

"I have a lot of friends who come to me and ask me questions," said Janelle James, 17. "I thought it would be a great thing for me to be educated to help my friends."

School officials said they limited the class to seniors to make sure the students were mature enough to handle the material, Roman said.

They picked freshmen as the target audience so they can see how the program works over time, including

whether it will have an impact on the number of teen pregnancies.

Last year, there were four pregnant teenagers at Abraham Clark High School, and two students who had children, said Evelyn Stanislawczyk, school nurse. But that's down from 1992,

when there were 36 pregnant teenagers and 15 teenage parents, Stanislawczyk said. While the numbers are down, teen pregnancy is still an issue, said Nathan Fisher, school principal. He acknowledged that the discussion may become more sensitive as the class goes on.

"Sometimes there's no way around those types of situations," Fisher said. "You have to call it like you see it. Some of the topics they're already discussing. You need to have that information facilitated in the proper perspective."

*Jennifer Golson covers Roselle.*

*She can be reached at [jgolson@starledger.com](mailto:jgolson@starledger.com) or (908) 302-1508.*