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Teen PEP: A Peer Education Initiative to Promote Sexual Health Among Adolescents

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Recent reports indicate significant drops in teen pregnancy rates in the U.S.-17% during the 1990s, to the lowest level since 1973. The number of sexually active teens also declined during the 1990s, while the proportion of sexually active teen using condoms increased. These encouraging findings have been linked to an increase in school and community-based education programs and, in particular, to the power of 'positive peer pressure.' A specific strategy for increasing 'positive peer pressure' is peer education programs.

Peer education is a promising prevention strategy for a number of reasons. Peer educators benefit by increasing their knowledge and expertise about HIV/AIDS, other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), pregnancy prevention, and reproductive health. Participating in meaningful roles in their schools and communities is also an important factor in developing resilient youth. Other young people benefit from peer education by learning the information and practicing the skills taught by credible peer educators, leading to greater knowledge and potential changes in their behavior. In addition, peer educators serve as positive role models to help shape behaviors and shift toward healthier school and community norms. Recent research indicates that peer-assisted interventions can reduce risky sexual behaviors, such as unprotected intercourse, frequency of sexual intercourse, and number of sexual partners.

Although the drop in teen pregnancy rates demonstrates that progress has been made, it is clear that our work is not finished. Approximately 85% of males and 77% of females have had sexual intercourse by age 19. Each year approximately 3 million teenagers acquire a sexually transmitted infection and it is estimated that 1 in 4 new HIV infections in the U.S. occur in young people under the ages of 22. New data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that African Americans under age 25 make up two-thirds of the new cases of young people with HIV, with Hispanic youths next at about 19 percent.

Students consistently report that they do not get information about sexuality in time for it to influence the sexual decisions they make. Schools are often intimidated by the small, but vocal, minority that favors an abstinence-only approach to sexuality education. As a result, educators do not get the training they need to provide effective sexual health education to teens. One initiative that addresses this need is the New Jersey Teen Prevention Education Program (Teen PEP), a school-based prevention program to increase knowledge, skills, and behaviors that promote sexual health among adolescents.

Teen PEP assists high schools in implementing a year-long course for credit for a core group of trained students who are effective sexual health advocates. The course curriculum is based on the nationally recognized HiTOPS-Health Interested Teens' Own Program on Sexuality-curriculum and the model of peer-to-peer leadership developed by the Princeton Center for Leadership Training. The course is team-taught by two advisors who build a cohesive team of student leaders who become knowledgeable, effective, and capable peer educators and role models.

Peer educators engage in skill-building training and are also trained to facilitate innovative, effective prevention education workshops, focusing on unplanned pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, other sexually transmitted infections, homophobia, sexual harassment, dating violence, date rape, and other sexual health concerns. Workshops are conducted with peers, parents, and educators in their schools and communities. Workshop activities focus on building critical skills such as communication with peers and parents; problem-solving and decision-making; negotiation and refusal; and self-management.

A special component of Teen PEP is the Day of Learning about Adolescent Sexual Health. This annual event includes workshops and special presentations, along with motivational speakers and state leaders who address a wide variety of teen sexual health issues.

Currently, 22 high schools throughout New Jersey are members of the Teen PEP network, with this number expanding yearly. Interested New Jersey schools submit applications in the spring to join the Teen PEP network, and ten to twelve new schools are selected each year.

For more information about Teen PEP, or to inquire about a custom training package of services, contact Dr. Sherry Barr at 609.252.9300, ext. 117 or email: sbarr@princetonleadership.org.