Needham Public Schools
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Sexuality Education
Frequently Asked Questions
March 14, 2011

Q1: What is this I hear about more sexuality education in the Needham Public Schools?

A subcommittee of the School Health Advisory Council (SHAC) has been meeting over the past two and one-half years to investigate the state of the current sex education program in the Needham Public Schools and to determine program needs and future direction. The subcommittee’s efforts have led to a recommendation that we revise portions of our current curriculum and increase the amount of time devoted to sex education within our existing Health Education Program.

Q2: Aren’t we already teaching sex education in the Needham Public Schools?

A: There is very little time devoted to issues of sexuality in the current curriculum. Students have one health education unit in grade 5 that addresses puberty. In grade 7 they learn about HIV/AIDS. They do not return to topics of sexuality again until their junior year in high school. This proposal plans to increase the amount of sexuality education students receive and to increase the frequency in which it is taught. Sexuality education taught over a period of many years is more effective than programs that target one or two specific age groups.

Q3: Why is it important to have a sexuality education program?

A: The statistics regarding sexual activity among teens is a compelling reason to include sexuality education in schools. Nationwide, 64% of males and 62% of females have had sexual intercourse by the time they reach age 18. The percentage of Massachusetts’ teens that report they have had sexual intercourse in their lifetime has remained stable at around 44% since 2001. Lifetime sexual intercourse among youth in the Metro West region is substantially lower than the state average (29%). The percentage of Needham teens that report they have had sexual intercourse has remained at 21% since 2006.

Q4: What can we expect to see in this new curriculum?

The new curriculum incorporates a slight modification in grade five to include information about how to deal with peer pressure and how to stay healthy during puberty (e.g., good nutrition, plenty of sleep, and proper hygiene). New and revised units in sexuality education will be implemented in grades 6, 9 and 11. In grades 7, 8, 10, and 12, sexuality topics will be integrated into existing health units. For example, in grade 7 students will not have a unit dedicated specifically to sexuality education. They will, however, learn about HIV/AIDS in a unit call Infectious Diseases. They will also develop strategies for dealing with peer pressure as it relates to sexual activity in a health unit called Peer Pressure.
Q5: In addition to the School Health Advisory Subcommittee on Sex Education, what other resources have influenced this curriculum?

A: The framework for our proposed curriculum has been informed by a subcommittee of the School Health Advisory Council; the Massachusetts Health Frameworks; commercial curricula outlines; workshops; Data from the MetroWest Adolescent Health Survey; teacher and parent focus groups; and current practice.

Several health educators have worked to develop age-appropriate unit plans with individual lessons. These lessons will guide teachers in their delivery of the curriculum and ensure consistency among teachers. We have used several resources to inform our work. They include the following:

- Current Needham Health Education Curriculum
- Get Real - Planned Parenthood of Massachusetts
- Growing into Healthy Sexuality 6-8 (Teenage Health Teaching Modules), Education Development Center, Inc.
- Health Facts Series - Education, Training, and Research (ETR) Associates
- Massachusetts Health Frameworks - Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
- How to Talk to Your Kids About Sex - Sharon Maxwell
- Puberty Happens - Family Planning Association of Maine
- Social and Emotional Learning Work done throughout the Needham Public Schools
- Strengthening Relationships with Family and Friends (Teenage Health Teaching Modules) Education Development Center, Inc

Q6: What are the goals of our sexuality education program?

The primary goal of our proposed sexuality curriculum is to help young people build a foundation of knowledge and values that will help them delay the initiation of sexual behaviors.

Our program is designed to complement and augment the sexuality education children receive from their families, religious and community groups, and health care professionals. It respects the diversity of values and beliefs represented in the community.

This sexuality education program is intended to assist young people in understanding a positive view of sexuality, provide them with information and skills for taking care of their sexual and emotional health, and help them make responsible decisions now and in the future.

This program will meet these goals by:

- providing accurate information about human sexuality
- providing an opportunity for young people to develop and understand their values, attitudes, and insights about sexuality
• helping young people develop relationships and interpersonal skills
• helping young people exercise responsibility regarding sexual relationships. This includes encouraging abstinence, dealing with pressures to become prematurely involved in sexual intercourse, and the use of contraception.

**Q7: I understand that there are different types of sexuality education programs. What type of program is being adopted by the Needham Public Schools?**

The Needham Public Schools has adopted an Abstinence Plus program (also referred to as Abstinence-centered). We chose this type of program because it emphasizes abstinence from sexual intercourse but also includes information about a range of sexual behaviors. It includes age-appropriate, medically accurate information on a broad set of topics related to sexuality including human development, relationships, decision-making, abstinence, contraception, and disease prevention. Moreover, it is closely aligned to our existing social and emotional learning goals.

**Q8: Are there any other types of sexuality programs?**

_A:_ There are two other significant types of sexuality education programs. They are abstinence-only and abstinence-only-until-marriage.

Abstinence-only programs emphasize abstinence from all sexual behaviors. These programs do not include information about contraception or disease-prevention methods.

Abstinence-only-until-marriage programs emphasize abstinence from all sexual behaviors outside of marriage. If contraception or disease-prevention methods are discussed, these programs typically emphasize failure rates. In addition, they often present marriage as the only correct context for sexual activity.

**Q9: How is abstinence addressed in an abstinence-plus program?**

_A:_ Our sexuality education program will emphasize the health and emotional benefits of abstaining from teen sexual activity. It will also give students an opportunity to explore the emotional benefits of abstaining from sexual activity. In addition, it will provide students with knowledge and social skills to help them negotiate abstinence during their teen years, while also preparing them to make responsible choices when they become sexually active adults.

**Q10: What does the research say about comprehensive sexuality education?**

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the American Psychological Association (APA), The American Foundation for AIDS Research (amfAR), and The American Public Health Association (APHA), comprehensive sexuality education programs that teach teens about both abstinence and contraception/disease prevention are an effective strategy to help young people delay their initiation of sexual intercourse.
Q11: I am worried that learning about sex in school might encourage students to start having sex.

A: Reviews of published evaluations of sexuality education, HIV-prevention, and adolescent pregnancy-prevention programs have consistently found that they:

- do not encourage teens to start having sexual intercourse
- do not increase the frequency with which teens have intercourse, and
- do not increase the number of sexual partners teens have.

Instead these programs can:

- delay the onset of intercourse
- reduce the frequency of intercourse
- reduce the number of sexual partners, and
- increase responsible use of contraceptives

(Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States)

Q12: How have parents and the community been informed about these changes?

It was extremely important to the committee to have an opportunity to share our proposed curriculum outline with parents and interested community members. Beginning in October of 2010, Dr. Kathy Pinkham has presented this proposed outline to a number of parent and community members in a variety of different settings. These presentations have been well attended. Numbers have ranged from 12 - 32 participants. At each presentation parents were asked to provide written feedback. The feedback has been informative and important to the ongoing development of the program. Parents are appreciative of the fact that we are incorporating more sexuality education into the curriculum and building in opportunities for parent participation.

Q13: I missed Dr. Pinkham’s presentations. How can I learn more about the sexuality education program in the Needham Public Schools?

A: A QuickTime Movie containing Dr. Pinkham’s presentation to parents, along with curriculum outlines for each grade level can be viewed on the Needham Public Schools website.

http://rwd1.needham.k12.ma.us/wellness/Sexuality

In addition, the schools will hold parent meetings prior to the sexuality curriculum being implemented. At these meetings, teachers will share their plans for teaching this curriculum with parents. The district will also hold another overview of the program later in the spring. Details and dates will be forthcoming.

Q14: Will there be homework assignments I can see and in which I can participate so my child and I can talk about the instruction?

A: Throughout this curriculum, students will be given homework assignments that will
involve talking with a parent/guardian or another trusted adult. This will give students an opportunity to discuss some of the material being covered in class at home. Another reason for this type of homework assignment is to support the role that parents play in educating their own children about issues of sexuality. Copies of these homework assignments will be shared with parents at the parent meetings.

**Q15: How can I be sure that my child will understand our family’s values around these issues?**

This curriculum assumes that parents are the primary sexuality educators in their children’s lives and that each family has it's own values and beliefs about sex and sexuality. This curriculum will include homework assignments (family activities) that will encourage students to discuss topics that are being covered in class with a parent/guardian or other trusted adult. These activities are designed to generate conversations about content that is being covered in class and to ensure that parents will have multiple opportunities to share information and their family's values with their own children.

**Q16: I am worried that you will teach sex education without a framework of values. Will this happen?**

A: Students will be taught that their decisions related to sex and sexual behaviors need to be weighed against a strong framework of values. Examples of values that will be stressed include respect for oneself and one’s body, respect for others, integrity, honesty, love, commitment, and trust.

**Q17: When will the new programs begin?**

A: In grade 5, the puberty unit will be taught this spring in all five elementary schools. The new 9th grade program will be piloted in April – just after the April vacation. All other grade levels will begin during the 2011-2012 school year.

**Q18: How will I know when Sex Education will be taught in my child’s classes?**

A letter will be sent home at the beginning of the school year informing parents that content about human sexuality will be taught as part of their child’s health education program. Included in this letter will be an overview of the content being taught at each grade level and a list of dates for parent information sessions. Your child’s health educator will be hosting these meetings. Parents will have an opportunity to view the curriculum lesson-by-lesson, ask questions specific to their child’s experience, and learn more about what to expect from the family assignments.

Prior to the start of these programs, reminders will be sent to parents through principals’ list-serve and school bulletins.

**NOTE:** If you are a parent of a child in grade 5 or 9, you will receive a letter from your child’s health educator by the end of March for those programs beginning in April of this school year.
Q19: Can I opt out of any of the program if I would prefer my son/daughter not participate? What happens to them during the time they are not in class?

A: Yes, Under Massachusetts Law, parents have the right to opt their child out of any single lesson or out of an entire unit that includes information about human sexuality. Parents can do this by writing a note or letter to the building principal requesting that their child be opted out of the sexuality portion of the health education curriculum. An appropriate alternative activity will be provided for their son/daughter.

Q20: Will you be teaching students how to use a condom?

Yes, in grades 9 and 11 teachers will demonstrate putting a condom on a demonstration tool. Students will also learn about other methods of protection against pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. This is done to ensure that all students (male and female) have the knowledge they need to take responsibility for their own sexual and reproductive health.

Q21: I have reviewed the general curriculum on the website, but I don’t see the specific lessons plans and the specific words and phrases that will be used by the teachers. Why?

A: The curriculum outline that is posted on the Needham Public Schools website presents a detailed framework of the units of instruction that will be taught. Specific lesson plans are being developed and will be available for parents to view as they become available.

It is important to note that each class of students is unique and the students themselves may ask questions that we cannot anticipate. Thus, from time to time, there may be topics mentioned in a classroom that do not appear on the outline or in the lesson plans. The teachers will address questions or guide conversations in a professional manner as they present themselves.