
Peer-Taught Sex-Ed Program In School Troubles Parents

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MULLICA HILL, N.J. — A new high school sex education program taught by older students to younger ones has outraged parents here.

A number of parents claim that the Teen Prevention Education Program at Clearview Regional High School encourages children to engage in "irresponsible sexual activity" and should immediately cease.

The Clearview school district is planning to meet with a group of parents to address their concerns.

"We appreciate and respect the very strong values of individuals," said Superintendent John Horchak. "This is an issue that presents an opportunity to have an open and honest dialogue."

Teen PEP is sponsored by the Princeton Center for Leadership Training, HiTOPS Inc. (Health-Interested Teens Own Program on Sexuality) and the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services. Horchak said that Teen PEP is implemented in 45 districts throughout the state and that the need for the program is based on national and regional data in concert with Rutgers University.

The program is an elective health course taken by 26 juniors and seniors that covers issues of sexual health, teen pregnancy and homosexuality. Students in the PEP program serve as "peer educators" and hold five "sexual health workshops" with students from four freshmen classes.

Parents of the younger students said Teen PEP teaches too much too soon. They also claim that Clearview officials hid the explicit content of the course and of the freshman workshops from them.

Lisa Westermann was shocked to find that, as part of the program, her 14-year-old son learned how to put a condom on a banana during English class.

"The only way I found out anything about my child's involvement with the teachings of Teen PEP was because my son told me he felt weird in English class, one day at dinner," she said.

Westermann said school officials sent permission slips that gave a summary of the course, but that she never signed one.

Michael Porter, the Teen PEP adviser, said some students did attend the workshops without signed permission slips due to administrative oversights.

When Westermann eventually did see the permission slip, she claimed it was "extremely vague."

"Half of the people whose kids are involved in Teen PEP still don't know what they're being taught," she said.

Westermann said she doubted, for example, that parents of a 14-year-old girl would want a 16-year-old boy telling their daughter as part of an official school class to go to the clinic when she's ready to have sex .

That, she said, is what her son was told in the workshop.

Clearview will soon issue new permission slips that will include the topics of each remaining workshop, Porter said.

Parents say, however, that school officials have yet to sufficiently communicate what is actually being taught in the classes.

"There's what we call the 'phantom curriculum,'" said Natalie Fortunato, mother of a sophomore at Clearview. "There's the one that's on paper, and then there's the one that's being taught in the classroom."

Fortunato has reviewed the 900-page New Jersey Teen PEP Faculty Adviser Handbook in an effort to find out what the students are learning.

"What is currently being taught with the Teen PEP program is nowhere near a true health message for a teen audience," the Clearview parent said. "This so-called comprehensive sex-ed program works to an end goal of sexual sophistication. It gives lip-service to abstinence and has classroom activities that demean abstinence while doing its best to present it as an unrealistic option."

Fortunato pointed to a classroom activity in the "Birth Control Methods" unit that asks students to identify the following

behaviors someone can engage in while still being abstinent. They can choose from holding hands, talking sexy and reading erotic literature, mutual masturbation and oral intercourse, according to the curriculum obtained by the Times of Trenton newspaper.

The point of classroom activities, said Fortunato, should be "for students to determine when they would put themselves at risk for contracting a disease, not "What are your feelings about activities that we have you now considering engaging in?"

Porter, the Teen PEP advisor, said there is a "big difference" between the curriculum used for the seniors and that applied to the freshmen workshops.

"Some of the materials (parents) are objecting to, their students aren't being exposed to," said Porter.

Porter said the five freshmen workshops cover abstinence, sexual harassment, alcohol and drugs, violence, and dating and HIV/AIDS.

"If (parents) were to walk through the halls and hang out at the bus stops, they would see that the students are talking about these things," he said. "Teen PEP is not introducing sexual content into these teens' lives; the content is already there ... we're just trying to provide accurate information so that they can make decisions that are informed."

Porter stated that the number of parents upset with Teen PEP is a small percent of those with children in the school.

Horchak said the curriculum is "voluminous" but that it is designed to cover a wide spectrum of school districts, from urban to suburban communities.

"You have to align what's being delivered with the community's values and expectations," he said.

The superintendent added that a subcommittee of the school board, school administrators, and representatives from the NJ Department of Health, HiTops and Teen PEP met recently to "refine" the curriculum, which he is presenting to a group of parents.

"We need to define and explain the program to everybody up front and paint a clear picture as to what's really happening," he said.

Meanwhile, Fortunato and other parents have started a group called PURE Pioneers (Parents United for Responsible Education). The group has launched a Web site.

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