Children's Hospital of Philadelphia PolicyLab

“Girls with Options” Expands Contraceptive Education for Philadelphia’s Teens

Adolescent Health & Well-Being

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Access to information about sexual health is critical for youth, yet Pennsylvania law does not mandate sex education beyond information about HIV and pregnancy prevention. In many school districts, abstinence-only is the sole focus of pregnancy prevention programs. Even with the additional resources in Philadelphia, many teens still lack any form of comprehensive sex education. In fact, only nearly 1 in 5 high schools across the city of Philadelphia have Health Resource Centers where teens can access information about sexual health. This gap in resources is particularly pronounced for Black and Latinx girls who disproportionately experience differential treatment, care and counseling when it comes to family planning.

Human sexuality is an important aspect of development and students should have opportunities to learn about their bodies, practice safety and understand outcomes associated with sexual behavior. Schools are the optimal place for sharing this information because we can meet students where they are—**in the classroom**. Discussing these issues in school has the potential to normalize a topic that is often considered taboo. Given that most people will be sexually active at some point in their lives, education that provides early, accurate information on the topic of human sexuality has the potential to encourage healthy sexual practices and change the way we view sex and sexual development in the broader society.

Filling in the Gaps

To address the issue of access to information, Philadelphia Citizens for Children and Youth, with the input of high school girls who live in Philadelphia, developed “Girls with Options” (GWO). GWO is a free, contraceptive education workshop for Black and Latinx girls who live and attend school in the city of Philadelphia that takes programming into communities and schools where they spend their time. The sessions are facilitated by educators who are rooted in the community and are knowledgeable about sexual health and adolescent development.

Our sessions fill a knowledge gap by making girls aware of not only their contraceptive options, but effectiveness rates and expands their understanding of reproduction and how contraceptives work in their bodies. We center our discussions around the voices and experiences of the participants by creating opportunities for them to share and learn from from each other. Our primary focus is on long-acting reversible contraceptives (LARCs), which includes both IUDs and implants. We focus on LARCs because they are the most effective form of contraception. In fact, the American Academy of Pediatrics has identified LARCs as a first line form of contraception for adolescents who are sexually active. Despite this information, ?less than 4% of Pennsylvania’s teen girls use LARCs as their primary method of contraception.

Educators can offer GWO both during the school day and after-school hours at community-based program locations. The workshop is age-appropriate for grades 6-12, engaging and informative. We understand the

complicated history of LARCs and the impact on the communities we serve and have incorporated it into our sessions. Participants leave well-informed about LARCs, with details on the benefits, side effects and accessibility, as well as additional information on how to protect against sexually transmitted infections and diseases.

Teens also leave knowing that they have a choice about the contraceptive method they decide to use, who they can contact to gain access and what questions they should ask when they are meeting with a provider. Because we understand the complex nature of choosing a contraceptive method, the program also includes information about reproductive planning, decision-making and goal-setting, which they can apply to all aspects of their lives.

Next Steps for GWO

Our hope is to provide GWO to 850 teen girls by July 2020. To date, more than 150 teens across the city have participated in the GWO workshop. Of the girls who have participated, more than 80% say that GWO should be offered to other girls. Participants also report learning new information about LARCs and receiving information they didn't have previously about where they can access LARCs. Because the program is designed to be a safe space for sharing, the discussions often extend to issues related to consent, sexual health and healthy dating relationships. We have also observed that the workshop can lead to teens' realization that sexual development is a naturally occurring process.

Comprehensive sex education is just as important as reading, writing and mathematics for healthy life outcomes. We are starting these difficult discussions because we want teen girls to be empowered with knowledge about their bodies and understand the role of sexual health in their lives so they can make well-informed reproductive decisions. We have been reaching out to schools and community organizations in Philadelphia to share information about GWO and to schedule sessions. We will continue to reach out and offer our program to educators through July 2020 with the intention of modeling safe spaces for students to dicuss sexual health and supporting educators as they adopt and use our materials to start discussions about sexual health.

For more information on Girls with Options, visit: https://www.pccy.org/initiatives/girlswithoptions.

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