



Educating NYC Youth Beyond 2+2, Sexual and Reproductive Health, an Indispensable Element of the Equation

Shari Jardine, Northwell Health

New York State law is failing New York City students by ignoring their need for sexual and reproductive health education. As a matter of social justice, it is imperative within NYC to empower youth with consistently implemented, comprehensive, medically accurate, sexual health information. Yet during 2017 and 2018, only one in three middle schools and three in four high schools in New York covered all 20 critical sexual and reproductive health topics **recommended** by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

By depriving young people of SRH education, New York is jeopardizing the health of young people, widening racial/ethnic and gender health inequities, and imposing avoidable costs on young people, their families, and taxpayers. The New York State legislature can address these issues by passing the **Comprehensive Sex Education in Schools** bill, which would mandate medically accurate, sex positive, age appropriate, and inclusive comprehensive sex education for grades K-12—this education would facilitate understanding of consent, healthy relationships, human rights, and gender equality among all students in New York.

Youth Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health Information and Services

Young people are in a vulnerable position. They often lack readily available, quality STI prevention and disease management services and face higher barriers to healthcare information and access. Unlike adults, many teenagers and young adults must manage parental, community, and academic expectations and restrictions—such as parental notifications, lack of transportation, and school scheduling demands—as well as pervasive stigma and shame. This severely limits their ability to protect against STIs and unplanned pregnancies, making it little surprise that national estimates attribute half of all new STD infection diagnoses to people ages 15-24, despite the fact that this age group constitutes only 25% of the sexually experienced population.

People of color are particularly at risk of adverse sexual and reproductive health effects, due to a complex history of racism, economic disenfranchisement, and more limited healthcare access. For instance, women of color experience **higher rates** of teenage pregnancy and maternal mortality than their white counterparts.

The lack of sexual education can pose a lifetime of challenges—young people are experiencing STIs and unplanned pregnancies at a time of their life when they are actively preparing for their education and careers. For some, a pregnancy can limit their choices and economic stability or sidetrack their careers.

Sex Education in New York City

New York City has the largest public school system in the world—New York City officials are responsible for education and safeguarding 1.1 million students. Of these, 70% of students come from an economically disadvantaged background, and more than 75% identify as non-White. Yet, the standards for sexual and reproductive health education in the city remain troublingly low.

While New York law requires one semester of health education taught by a certified instructor in middle and high school, sex education is not mandatory. Additionally, NYC Department of Education data estimates that a staggering 97% of NYC health instructors are not licensed to teach health education, and there are currently no reporting standards on sex education. Furthermore, while a state endorsed sexual and reproductive health curriculum exists, it is antiquated and neglects topics such as intimate partner violence, healthy relationships, and the spectrum of sexuality and gender.

Recommendations

The absence of school-based sex education is a human rights and health equity issue. Sex education is an integral component of preparing healthy adults. The Comprehensive Sex Education in Schools, identified as Senate Bill S-2584A, would mandate age-appropriate, inclusive, and comprehensive sex education for all K-12 public and charter schools. Passage of this bill is a critical step toward providing youth tools to positively impact health throughout the life course.

Once the bill is passed, however, it is equally important to ensure it is implemented carefully in order to fully meet the needs of young people throughout the city. Specifically, the New York City should:

1. Mandate teacher training and certification for sexual and reproductive health education
2. Require data collection and accountability regarding implementation
3. Ensure data collection and follow-up with parents who opt-out of classroom sexual and reproductive health education, including development of a toolkit for virtual/at-home learning
4. Enhance partnerships between schools and community-based organizations to buttress sexual and reproductive health education and service delivery
5. By 2025, Make sexual and reproductive health regents' examination a requirement for high school graduation in NYC

By offering inclusive and thoughtful sex education, New York will prepare and equip students with the knowledge they need to negotiate successful transitions to adulthood.