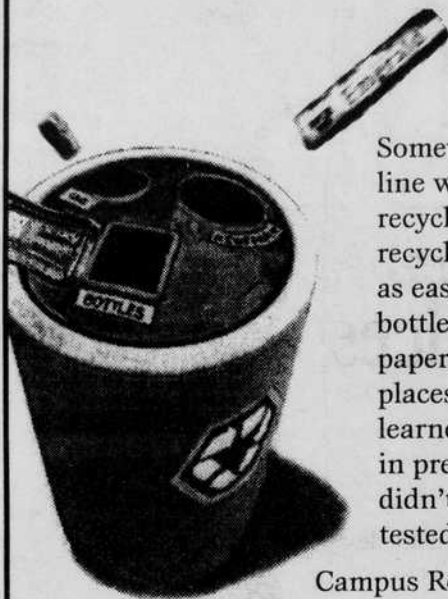


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**Students learn of AIDS threat, less about overall protection**

By Anjetta McQueen  
AP education writer

ALEXANDRIA, Va. — A girl in Matthew Wentzel's class of ninth-graders at Minnie Howard School wanted to know who gets HIV/AIDS. "Gay people do," said a 15-year-old classmate in the back. When Wentzel told them no, statistics show that among adolescents, heterosexual females are at highest risk, the class was silent.

"That's the basic introduction," Wentzel told a reporter later. "The realism of this epidemic hasn't really sunk in."

Wentzel says he doesn't sugarcoat the issue. "If you ask, I'm going to give you an honest answer," he tells his human development class, which includes this northern Virginia district's coursework on sex education.

But nationally, sex education lessons might not be as informative, a new report suggests.

A survey of 1,501 students and their parents, plus 1,300 educators, found that students learn in school the "birds and bees" basics of how babies are conceived. Most also learn how sex partners can contract diseases. And — because of state policies — many teachers stress abstinence as a way to prevent HIV/AIDS, other STDs and unplanned pregnancy. What's missing, say teachers, students and their parents, are lessons that would help young people avoid such situations in the first place.

"What's important is that this class is being taught at the most difficult time for them," Wentzel said. "If sex education is to become part of the curriculum, it has to evolve."

Others say sex education has gone too far, leaving parents out of the process.

"Parental control or lack of it is the basic problem, rather than what just happens in schools," said Liz

Alston, the pro-abstinence-only chair of the Charleston County, S.C., school board that's battled over teaching abstinence only or including lessons about birth control.

But the report, conducted by non-profit health researchers at the Kaiser Family Foundation and released Tuesday, found that parents want their children to learn more about birth control and safe sex, more than their children reportedly learn.

Now reluctant school officials should be more willing to expand their programs, said Ramon Cortines, a former superintendent who now directs a school reform research project at Stanford University.

"We tend to be responsive to the politics of rhetoric," he said. "We now have better information than who can yell the loudest."

For instance, 97 percent of parents want their children taught how to deal with sexual assault; just 59 percent of students said they covered that in their most recent class. Nine in 10 parents want their children to learn about birth control; eight in 10 students say they do.

"Sex education is often debated at the political and advocacy kind of levels, but rarely does it get down to real world discussions," Tina Hoff, Kaiser's chief public health researcher. She said the study is meant to further research on the issue, not invoke changes in any particular state or school board's policies. The margin of error for family and teacher responses is plus or minus 3 percentage points.

Federal and private research — distributed with the Kaiser study — show declining sexual activity and unplanned pregnancies among teens. However, figures that often raise concerns show that approximately 4 million teens will get an STD each year, and nearly half of teens didn't use condoms in their most recent sexual encounter.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention statistics show that among teens age 13-19, young women, especially black females, are being infected with HIV at higher rates than males.

Another survey, released today by reproductive-rights advocates, said teachers in such classes are less likely to introduce information about obtaining birth control, as well as abortion and sexual orientation. The Alan Guttmacher Institute said according to its survey — exclusively of teachers of these courses — that one in four instructors say they are being told not to teach contraception and focus instead on the abstinence message.

"Teachers are covering far less ... than they believe is needed," said institute president Sara Seims. "Abstinence messages are very important, but clearly the coverage of contraceptive topics is also crucial."

The Guttmacher Institute receives most of its funding from large foundations, though a small amount comes from Planned Parenthood of America.

Thirty states mandate that if sex education is taught in schools that they include lessons that encourage teaching young people to remain abstinent until they are emotionally and physically ready for sex. Just 18 states and the District of Columbia mandate that schools offer sex education at all.

Virginia doesn't tell its districts to provide sex education courses, but requires the ones that do offer such lesson include abstinence and contraceptive use in those lessons.

"It's important to provide options," said Cheryl Mercer, one of four human development teachers at Minnie Howard who cover the district's sex education curriculum. "They're all over the map and there's so much information they're trying to filter."



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