

Sex Positive

FROM CONDOMS TO CONSENT IN LOCAL HIGH SCHOOLS by Amy Schneider

“That’s what she said.” When students walk into Denise Velasco’s sex education classroom at Network Charter School, they see this phrase on a poster. This appeal to juvenile humor is not what it seems: Look closer and you’ll see two women kissing beneath a word in bold letters — “Yes.” As corny as the poster is, it sends a clear message about sex.

“Consent is talked about on an almost daily basis in my class because I can incorporate it into every lesson in some way, shape or form,” says Velasco, who has taught sex ed at Network Charter School for 10 years. “It’s a big part of my program.”

Definitions of consent vary, but according to the UO Student Code of Conduct, “explicit consent” means “an affirmative verbal response or voluntary acts unmistakable in their meaning.”

It’s complicated, because the definition of the word “consent” has evolved, and simply saying “No means no” doesn’t cut it anymore when teaching teens the ins and outs of sexuality. The concept of consent is much more fluid than that.

The UO community is in the midst of figuring out how to deal with its sexual assault problem — preliminary results from a survey of UO students conducted by UO prof Jennifer Freyd found that 35 percent of female respondents and 14 percent of male respondents had at least one sexual experience without their consent. Recognizing the benefits of teaching kids consent before they head to college, Oregon has updated its sex ed standards over the past 10 years to emphasize positive, healthy sexual relationships instead of scary diseases.

Sex education experts in this state believe that when teens learn what healthy relationships look like, what consent means and how to apply these concepts in their own lives, incidences of sexual violence can be reduced. When teaching sex ed across Lane County’s school districts, health teachers face large class sizes, staff shortages and crunched class schedules, yet despite such difficulties, local teens are learning more about consent and healthy relationships than any previous generation, thanks to Oregon’s strong health education standards.

LET’S TALK ABOUT SEX

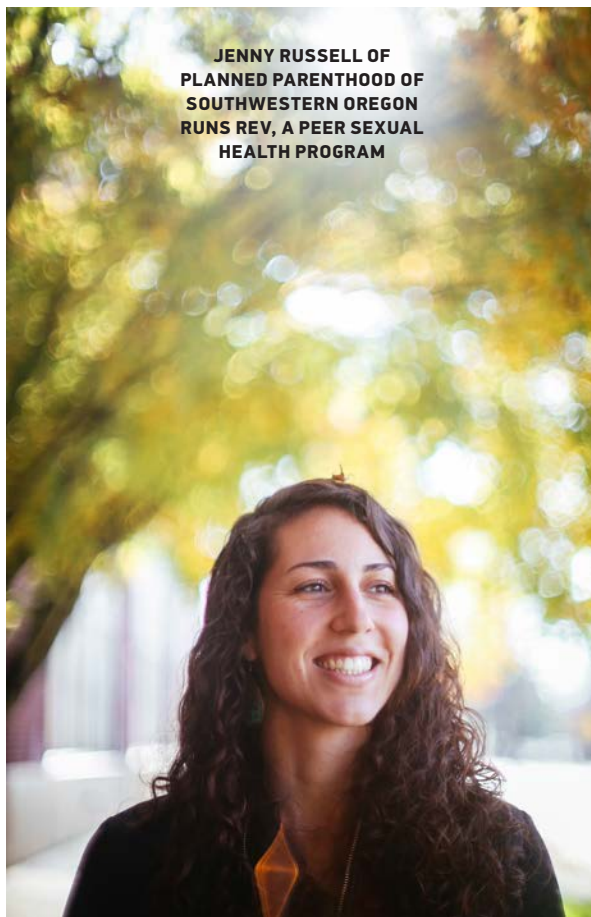
The way sex education manifests in the classroom varies from school to school. Depending on the school, some teens get an entire class devoted exclusively to human sexuality. Most of the time, though, sex ed is incorporated into health class.

At Sheldon High School, students have to take two trimesters of health in four years. Health teachers at Sheldon are required to cover all subject matter listed in Oregon’s health education standards, which dictate benchmarks and skills that Oregon students should know. Besides sex ed, this includes alcohol, tobacco and drug prevention, prevention and control of disease, environmental health, healthy eating, mental health, physical activity and injury prevention.

Communications Specialist Devon Ashbridge says that in the Springfield School District, health teachers follow Oregon state standards for high school health education, incorporating topics like consent into the healthy relationships portion of the class. Ashbridge says that “students in Springfield talk specifically about ‘No means no,’ and they explore both male and female perspectives by discussing current events, reading perspectives from those who’ve been in situations where consent wasn’t clear and role-playing so they have the opportunity to hear and express consent.”

Of course, while all Oregon schools are supposed to adhere to Oregon’s health standards, that doesn’t always happen.

Velasco says when she worked in Roseburg in Douglas County over 10 years ago, she taught parenting classes to teen parents who still attended high school. Part of the curriculum included information on how to prevent having a second child, but when the school district found out, that section of the class was removed. “The district didn’t think it was appropriate for these girls to have that type of education, even though they’d obviously already had sex,” Velasco says.



Mary Gossart of Planned Parenthood of Southwestern Oregon says that although Oregon’s laws on sex education are considered a model of comprehensive sex education, implementation of the standards is not always up to par. “It’s an unfunded mandate, so you could go to different schools around Lane County and find varying degrees of sex ed being taught,” she says. “In some schools they’re doing a terrific job and in alignment with health education standards, and at other schools not much is happening.”

CONSENT IN THE CLASSROOM

In Velasco’s class at Network Charter School, students take half a year of sex ed in a mixed class of ninth through twelfth graders. Velasco’s students cover everything from masturbation to sexting, and she invites Sexual Assault Support Services (SASS) and Womenspace to speak to her students about sexual assault.

“We talk about what consent looks like, the importance of asking for consent and that consent can be taken away at any moment,” Velasco says.

One of her teaching strategies involves discussion, a popular way of getting teens to open up and relate topics to their own lives. In high school, sometimes this means that silliness ensues, but humor often transitions to constructive debates.

During class, Velasco asked her students what “reproductive rights” means. A student answered, “If you were to live in China, you can’t have more than one child. In America, you can have five kids.”

“Or 18,” another student chimed in.

“Or 75!” added another.

Once the laughter died down, the conversation turned toward more serious topics: unintended pregnancies and the role of the government in controlling abortions.

In another class activity, Velasco gave every student a piece of paper. Then she wrote a statement on the board, and students had to write whether they agreed or disagreed. Students then crumpled the papers and threw them at each other, scrambling the papers up so it was impossible to tell who wrote what. After that, each teen found a new paper. Even if they didn’t agree with the viewpoint expressed on their paper, they had to make an argument in favor of it.

“It’s a way for them to put themselves in someone else’s shoes,” Velasco says.

She acknowledges that gender is fluid, so instead of saying “woman” or “man,” she says “someone with a vagina.” She also says she tries to speak in inclusive language, using terms like transgender and cisgender.

YES MEANS YES

Oregon’s health education standards specifically require students to “define sexual consent and explain its implications for sexual decision-making,” as well as “demonstrate respect for the boundaries of others as they relate to intimacy and sexual behavior.” In the classroom, teachers measure their students’ progress through discussion, role-playing, essay writing or any combination that teachers find effective.

Compare this to Texas, which requires its school districts to unrealistically tell students “a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity.”

Part of Oregon’s strength comes from its “comprehensive” model of sex education. Comprehensive sex ed emphasizes the benefits of sexual abstinence but also acknowledges sexual activity by providing the knowledge and skills required for current and future sexual behavior.

Only 22 states require sex education in public schools, and abstinence-only curriculum is still pervasive. Study after study shows that abstinence-only sex education does not decrease levels of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), two of the biggest measures of success in a sexual health program.