

“With abstinence-only, kids aren’t informed of STIs or how to use a condom properly,” Velasco says. “When my students choose to become sexually active, I want them to have a happy, safe sex life. I want them to understand the risk involved in having sex, but also the good things, too. I don’t want them to think it’s all bad, because it’s not.”

And when it comes to talking about sexual violence, having conversations about healthy relationships and consent is an important first step.

“You can’t talk about sexuality without talking about consent,” says Julia Baldino, community outreach coordinator for SASS. “If people aren’t engaging in conversation before they’re getting to the point where they’re having sex, then that’s a big problem in terms of being able to prevent sexual violence.”

SCARE TACTICS

In the early 1990s, Oregon sex education focused greatly on HIV/AIDS prevention — STIs received growing attention as HIV raged across the country. By 1993, AIDS was the leading cause of death among 25- to 44-year-olds in the U.S., and hope of curbing the spread of the virus causing it motivated many states to mandate sex education of some kind, even if it centered on the negatives of sexuality rather than the positives.

In a 2014 *Time* magazine article, writer Lily Rothman describes the “fear of the then-mysterious disease” that “gave parents, educators, politicians and students a reason to put aside their squeamishness — and thus changed the history of sex ed forever.”

While the prevalence of mandated sex education increased in many states, it also created a fear-based approach to sex education, the kind that parallels driver’s ed classes with their tales of gore and woe that strike speeders and drunk drivers. Teens learned primarily about the dangers of STIs, looking at grisly pictures that served as warning of the horror that might befall them should they have sex.

Enter the Oregon Youth Sexual Health Plan (OYSHP), a sex-positive guide released in 2009 intended to help advocates in “planning programs” and “educating stakeholders to support the sexual health of Oregon’s youth,” according to the plan itself.

A task force, which included contributors from Planned Parenthood, the Oregon Department of Education (ODE) and health departments from around the state, created the OYSHP after former Gov. Ted Kulongoski expressed a desire for a cohesive approach to youth sexual health.

POSITIVE ATTITUDES

“One of the major shifts we made was that scare tactics were not to be used in the classroom,” says Brad Victor, a retired sexuality education specialist for the ODE. “When you look at the standards, they focus on healthy communication and positive attitudes about yourself and others. All of these things are meant to make life better, not work from a premise of fear.”

The Healthy Teen Relationship Act, which went into effect in 2013, specifically requires that Oregon schools address teen dating violence. Part of that includes directions for “each school district board” to “adopt a policy that incorporates age-appropriate education about teen dating violence into new or existing training programs for students in grades 7 through 12 and school employees,” according to the bill.

This means that Oregon includes specific language in its legislation and health standards requiring school districts to address sexual violence, consent and healthy relationships.

“We see comprehensive sexuality education as a resource to help reduce sexual violence,” says Michele Roland-Schwartz, executive director of the Oregon Sexual Assault Task Force. “When we’re teaching youth what healthy relationships look like, we directly impact levels of sexual violence.”

ABSENCE OF NO

While Velasco’s Network Charter School class has around 14 students, health teachers at Sheldon High School tackle much larger class sizes.

“We have around 36 to 40 students per class,” Sheldon

SOPHIE KREITZBERG, A MEMBER OF PLANNED PARENTHOOD’S PEER EDUCATION PROGRAM, SAYS SHE WANTS TO SEE KIDS TALK ABOUT SEX IN A MORE POSITIVE FASHION



High School health teacher Delia Wenrich says. “It’s too many. Teaching large classes of ninth graders at the end of the day isn’t ideal.”

Wenrich and fellow Sheldon health teacher Michael Bell say that of the 12 weeks that are allotted to teach ninth-grade health, they ideally devote about two weeks of that to sex ed. In that time, they cover date rape, relationship dangers, anatomy, HIV, safe sex, contraceptives, sexting, decision-making, refusal skills, consent, boundaries and healthy relationships.

“I’d love to do way more than two weeks if we could, because there’s just so much to talk about,” Wenrich says.

Wenrich and Bell say that when 4J had a district health specialist, they would meet with other health teachers a few times a year and share ideas, get updates and prepare for upcoming changes. But the health specialist position was cut around four years ago.

Even with these obstacles, Wenrich and Bell say they make sure to talk about consent. Wenrich facilitates discussion-based lessons, and she describes an activity in which students have to figure out what their sexual boundaries are and tell someone else about those boundaries.

“So many people don’t even know what their boundaries are, and most of them haven’t even thought about it, so we make them think about it,” Wenrich says. “If you can’t talk to your sexual partner about sexual things, you shouldn’t be taking your clothes off and doing things, or letting people do things to you.”

Wenrich says she emphasizes the idea that “the absence of no doesn’t mean yes,” and she urges her students to practice refusal skills by role-playing.

Bell says his students discuss rape culture and victim blaming, and he’d like to add more to his class on how “guys can confront guys on thinking errors around proper ways to address women, particularly around the issue of consent.”

Wenrich and Bell say they also bring speakers from Planned Parenthood and SASS into the classroom. “That’s helpful, because they can talk specifically about their work,” Wenrich says.

PEER TO PEER

Lane County teens have access to sex ed from their peers, as well. Planned Parenthood of Southwestern Oregon (PPSO) runs a year-long program called REV, short for Revolution, which trains teens as peer educators, equipping them with the skills they need to lead sessions with parents and fellow students on teen dating violence, consent, healthy relationships and sexual assault prevention.

REV youth use what they learn through the program to speak to middle and high school classes around the county.

“Peer-to-peer conversations can create a community impact on dating violence, relationships and consent,” says Jenny Russell, youth advocacy coordinator for PPSO. And peer education can sometimes be more effective than traditional forms: A 2008 study showed that students who received an HIV/AIDS lesson taught by peers demonstrated better understanding of concepts than the traditionally educated group.

Sophie Kreitzberg, a 17-year-old at South Eugene High School, is both a REV youth and a member of the board of directors at PPSO, and she says her interest in talking about sex initially stemmed from her realization that people don’t talk about sex enough. “High school opened my eyes to how little we talk about sex and healthy relationships in our day-to-day lives,” she says. “Friends talk about sex a lot, but we don’t really talk about it in healthy, constructive ways.”

When Kreitzberg joined REV, she not only learned about what healthy relationships look like but about how to communicate the concepts she learned with other teens, who often feel more comfortable talking about sex with someone their own age.

Fyona Rose, an 18-year-old senior at the Academy of Arts and Academics in Springfield, adds that as young people, they can provide a unique perspective to parents as well. “We usually do a parent night and help parents become more ask-able to create a more open environment for kids to ask questions,” she says.

A CULTURE OF CONSENT

As the definition of consent changes, the content of sex education classes must shift along with it. “One thing we’ve noticed over the last couple years is that the definition of consent is really evolving,” Victor of ODE says. “We’re learning more and more about how to teach that effectively. Consent is a very difficult concept for young people to understand, and I think you’re going to see a lot more discussion and thoughts on how to best get this across to young people so that they’re safe and their partners are safe, and they can make good decisions about their wants and needs.”

For Baldino, who works with teens on behalf of SASS, it’s encouraging that many of her students are already familiar with the concepts she presents to them. She’s given talks about sexual assault prevention and consent at Sheldon High School, North Eugene High School, Spencer Butte Middle School, Crow Middle/High School and Cascade Middle School, and she hopes to add more schools to her list.

She says that normalizing consent is her ultimate goal. “Kids are hearing about sexual violence in songs and seeing it in movies, and that’s the norm,” she says. “I think by talking more about consent in everyday interactions, hopefully we can create a culture of consent instead of creating a culture of sexual violence.” ■