

# Sex ed offered through peer discussions

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CURRITUCK — Students formed circles on the Currituck County High School cafeteria floor last Tuesday morning, actively participating in a workshop about abstinence.

Some freshmen students giggled, and some obviously felt awkward because of the subject matter, but they still reported having a positive experience.

“I learned about refusing sexual contact,” said Kathryn Cruden. “I think it will help teenagers learn how to say ‘no’ and when to say ‘yes.’”

Alfredo Castanon said he also learned “strategies to refuse,” while Wade Fallon said he learned “when to say ‘no’ and when to have sex.”

“I learned how to control peer pressure, how to say ‘no’ and how to talk to your boyfriend or girlfriend without them getting mad about having sex or not,” said Casey Bloom.

Susan Buzzard, the healthful living teacher co-teaching Teen PEP (Prevention Education Program) with Michael Kratzer of the Currituck County Learning Center, said this class originated in New Jersey and is being offered for the first time in Currituck this semester.

According to its program statement, Teen PEP strives “to equip students with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviors to avoid pregnancy, HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections.”

The takeaway points from this first workshop were that “there are way more healthy reasons to wait to have sex than to have sex as a teenager,” and that it is important to communicate boundaries if students are in a relationship, Buzzard said.

“If you can’t talk about it, you certainly shouldn’t be doing it,” she stated.

In one workshop activity, students brainstormed all the reasons teenagers have sex, wrote them on poster board, then marked out “the reasons they decided were not so healthy,” she said.

From the exercise, students concluded that peer pressure is a common but not necessarily healthy reason teens have sex.

“Any message is more valuable coming from their peers,” Buzzard noted.



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Two Teen PEP facilitators (in black sweatshirts) read sexual scenarios to freshmen students in their group. Students hold up fingers corresponding to one of three actions they discussed that they could implement in such situations.

Fifteen junior and senior facilitators led about 75 freshmen in the workshop, which the facilitators led twice more that day, so all the school's roughly 220 freshman could participate, Buzzard said.

Buzzard and Kratzer train the Teen PEP facilitators "to be experts in their field," Buzzard said, and the facilitators had to go through a rigorous application process, including demonstrating leadership in the school, to be accepted into the class.

"It's all really cooperative learning," she said, adding that the upperclassmen lead the workshops only after they have covered the same material in class.

The facilitators are encouraged to stay in the same plane as the freshman — all seated or all standing — and to position themselves across from each other, to stress that they are all equal within the group, Buzzard said.

Facilitators attended a three-day workshop in November that was focused on team building. "With such sensitive material, it's important to get to know each other," she said.

Participating freshmen had to obtain written permission from their parents, and very few parents opted their kids out.

Some who did told Buzzard, "It's not that it's not important, but [they said] they're talking about it at home," and they did not want their message to be confused.

While Buzzard said she understands that, many students have told her sex conversations are not happening at their homes.

Four of the peer educators have brothers and sisters in the freshman class, and "they're so excited for their brothers and sisters to be in this group," she said.

Five more workshops on other topics — the next, on contraception — will take place by the end of the school year, she said.

One workshop will be open to families and to the public.

"There are not a lot of schools in North Carolina yet that have adopted this program," she said, adding that contraceptive education has only been taught "for a couple of years now" in the state.

Facilitator Jacob Schuster, a junior, said he thought his group did well.

He wanted to be a role model because he cares about the younger kids, and his sister is a freshman, he said.

"Our school in the past has had freshmen classes that were pretty terrible," Schuster said, adding that he hopes to "get them going in the right direction."

Facilitators Sadie Lindsey, a senior, and Natalie Owens, a junior, also said the inaugural workshop went smoothly.

"I think they learned a lot," Lindsey said.

"I think it's a little hard talking to freshmen; they think everything is funny," Owens said, adding that they did open up over the course of the workshop.

“There’s more of a bond [when the discussion happens] with students,” she said.

Facilitator Michael Santini, a senior, said he was pleased that most students took the workshop seriously, noting that it was not as awkward as he anticipated.

“It went better than I expected,” Santini said. “The group seemed to be actually into it and involved.”