



WHEDCo's Project STEP Teens Host Health Education Fair For Young Bodies and Minds



“Nearly 1 in 5 NYC youth report having had four or more sex partners in their lifetime; 1 in 10 have had sex before age 15,” reads a statistic from a mural that Jeannely Lopez, 13, a student in WHEDCo’s Project STEP (Students Toward Educational Promise), helped hang in the PS/MS 218 school yard as part of her class’ teen health fair. Jeannely and fellow 8th-grade Project STEPers organized the first ever Health Education Fair For Young Bodies and Minds on May 29, 2008, to raise awareness among their peers and members of the community on teen pregnancy, Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), and other issues affecting teen health.

Project STEP is an academic enhancement component of WHEDCo’s After-School Program at PS/MS 218, which aims to facilitate the development of students’ critical thinking skills around issues of social justice and community service. Throughout the school year, students in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade develop and execute several service learning and advocacy projects based on a variety of topics, ranging from gang violence to global warming. This year, both the sixth and eighth graders involved in Project STEP turned their attention to sex education for their final project of the year.

The 6th-graders’ project focused on the need for sex education in public schools at the middle school level. The 6th-grade students worked with **Dr. Meredith Reitman, WHEDCo’s Director of Research & Evaluation**, in developing, administering, and analyzing an 18-question Sexual Health Survey of their peers. The students also created their own Public Service Announcement (PSA), in which they emphasized the importance of teaching sex education at the middle school level. Both the survey results and the PSA were showcased at the Fair.



For their project, the 8th-graders had decided almost unanimously to address teen pregnancy. According to 8th- grade teacher Amy Bonnaffons, “*Teen pregnancy was something the students saw directly affecting people they know. It’s something that everybody is dealing with.*” For many students like Jeannely, the answer was simple:

“We had to do something about it,” she said. Thus, they planned and hosted. They invited 13 sexual health and teen advocacy organizations, including The Door, Bronx Community Pride Center, P.H.A.N.G (Preventing HIV/AIDS in the Next Generation), Adolescent & Family Comprehensive Services, Inc. (AFCS), Teatro El Puente, Citizens Advice Bureau, and GO-GIRL! (Girls Outreach: Groups Improve Resiliency Learning), to the Health Fair. In addition to providing students with fact sheets and brochures about sexual health and youth support services, the organizations answered any sexual health related questions the students raised. According to John Glasby from AFCS, teen health fairs like the one organized by Project STEP’s 8th-graders are essential for circulating information amongst students. *“The students—middle school up through high school—are in desperate need of information and in many communities, there is no emphasis on teens.”*

Peter Miranda of Teatro El Puente, a Brooklyn-based HIV prevention Youth Theatre



Company, expressed similar enthusiasm about the fair’s development being entirely youth-initiated. *“I was glad to hear that the health education fair was by students because it means young people are empowered.”*

During the Fair, approximately 160 students and parents went from table to table, asking questions and gathering information about sexual health. For every question a student asked or answered, he/she would receive a raffle ticket for a drawing

at the end of the fair. **Katie Aylwin, Director of Youth Programs at WHEDCo**, praised the eighth graders for their use of raffle tickets as incentives for students to ask as many questions as possible. *“The eighth graders were really, really smart in the idea that they gave out raffle tickets to people when they asked questions... so there were kids who said, ‘I’ve asked 20 questions today!’ which is probably fifteen to eighteen more questions than they’ve ever felt comfortable asking a stranger—let alone an adult in their life—about sex.”*

An unforgettable ending to National Teen Pregnancy Prevention Month, The Health Education Fair For Young Bodies and Minds left a powerful imprint on students and the community. **Nicole Jennings, Project STEP Program Coordinator**, explained that next year, the sixth graders hoped to advocate for sex education in schools at the city level. *“Hopefully next year’s project for these students [the current sixth grade class] is to take what work they’ve done so far to the city government and legislators and talk to them about it.”*