Healthy Kids Learn Better: Hawaii’s “Seven by Seven” for Adolescent Health

by Beth Pateman

What was health education like when you were in middle school? For many of us, answers to this question will range from boring to nonexistent. In Hawaii, we decided that our young people deserve a much better education to prepare them to deal with the mental, emotional, social, and physical needs and effects of early adolescence.

Although Hawaii’s youth report lower health-risk behaviors than their counterparts across the nation, the data from local surveys show that Hawaii’s youth are at risk for serious health problems. For example, Hawaii’s students report greater suicide ideation, plans, and attempts than do students nationally. In addition, our students are less likely to eat the recommended servings of fruits and vegetables and to exercise regularly.

Hawaii schools were ill-prepared to help students respond to these issues. Outdated health textbooks and no systematic health education professional development or training left educators without the means to instruct students. Although the student survey data indicated a tremendous need to address important health-risk areas, the local infrastructure to support health education had fallen into disrepair.

Standardizing Health Education

In the summer of 1999, a committee of health and education organizations came together to support health education for K-12 students. The resulting Hawaii Partnership for Comprehensive School Health Education designed a new “seven by seven” approach to K-12 health education.

The partnership began with the Hawaii Health Education Standards. Based on national standards established in 1995, these seven standards include the following skills:

1. Core Concepts
2. Accessing Information, Products, and Services
3. Self-Management (practicing healthy behaviors)
4. Analyzing Internal and External Influences
5. Interpersonal Communication
6. Decision-Making and Goal-Setting
7. Advocacy

To provide context for learning and practicing these skills, the partnership adapted and expanded on the priority health-risk areas identified by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). These seven risk areas include:

1. Injury and violence prevention
2. Alcohol and other drug use prevention
3. Sexual health and responsibility
4. Tobacco use prevention
5. Nutrition and physical activity
6. Mental and emotional health
7. Personal and consumer health

The partnership established a plan for professional development on the seven by seven approach, integrating the skills and risk areas. Programs included annual spring “Got Health?” district-level workshops, Healthy Hawaii Initiative graduate-level summer institutes at the University of Hawaii at Manoa (UHM), and a fall statewide Health Celebration Conference. In addition, UHM developed new pre-service courses in personal and social health skills.
Seven By Seven in Action
The excitement around school health education has grown steadily in our state. Workshops and conferences routinely draw more than 500 K-12 educators. However, the greatest excitement may well be found among Hawaii’s K-12 students.

At King Intermediate in Kaneohe, Hawaii, seventh graders learn and practice the seven standards and then apply those skills to the seven risk areas. The students look forward to learning which risk area their team will be assigned for the day’s lessons. For example, the skill of using peer resistance (interpersonal communication) sounds quite different when used to refuse pressure to try tobacco, walk away from a fight, or have unwanted sex. The principles are the same, but the words and actions students use to communicate their decisions must make sense in context. King’s students are so well versed in the health education standards that they were invited to provide artwork to illustrate their skills for a national school health textbook for elementary and middle-level teachers.

Hawaii’s approach to school health education is just getting started with ongoing evaluations of students’ health-risk behaviors and related school-based programs. After five years of concerted effort to reach schools, the word is beginning to spread that health education is an important contributor to better health and school achievement for Hawaii’s young people.

Resources


Beth Pateman is a professor at the Institute for Teacher Education at the University of Hawaii at Manoa in Honolulu, Hawaii. Her e-mail address is mpateman@hawaii.edu.