



**Raising Awareness on Health Related
Issues Among Middle School Students:**

**An End of Year Report on the
HIV/AIDS Awareness and Prevention Initiative
funded by
The Elton John AIDS Foundation**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In many schools, the focus on academic achievement often overshadows the other pressing socio-emotional and health needs that students have. Yet, such needs if left unaddressed are deleterious in their consequences for students' academic, cognitive, social and personal development. Recent policy debates fueled by the alarming statistics on the rising rates of HIV, and other sexually transmitted diseases, as well as diabetes, obesity, and hypertension among adolescents; and particularly adolescents of color, have brought to the fore the importance of addressing students' health within the context of schools. In 2007, the Elton John AIDS Foundation provided funding to the National Urban Technology Center (Urban Tech), a not for profit organization based in New York, to bring awareness on HIV/AIDS to middle school students in that city. This report examines the impact which this initiative had during the 2007-08 academic year.

The HIV/AIDS awareness project was launched in Districts 3 and 5. During the first year of the grant, the project was folded under the general umbrella of the “*Get Healthy Harlem!*” (*GHH*) initiative. *GHH* afforded Urban Tech the opportunity to implement a pedagogical approach in which life skills training was used to help students develop self-control, self-management, make positive decisions and become aware of outside influences on health-related behaviors. Eleven schools and approximately 3,000 students were involved in the *GHH* project. Two premises informed the implementation of *GHH*: First, that students needed to be provided with information and knowledge that would result in their acquiring an expansive and broad understanding of their health; and that this knowledge needed to be presented in stages from a discussion of basic health concepts such as eating healthy and exercising to more sensitive and complex topics such as HIV and AIDS prevention. The second premise recognized the importance of motivators/incentives in building students' self-concept and encouraging them to make the necessary and sustainable changes in their behaviors to achieve healthier life styles.

There were three major components to the *GHH* initiative during the 2007-08 academic year. These were: (1) A robust professional development experience for 22 teachers from the 11 participating schools; (2) establishing behavioral milestones for students; and (3) the implementation of the YLA curriculum modules in the science classes. All three components were inextricably linked with each.

Findings from the evaluation reveal the following:

Overall Findings

- ❖ The initiative has resulted in a number of positive outcomes and shows signs of affecting student knowledge and behaviors. These improvements in students' attitudes and behaviors are encouraging as the link between health and learning has been well established. Moreover, in classrooms where discussions on the consequences of negative sexual behaviors have taken place, students according to teachers, have shown a remarkable maturity and frankness in handling the

subject. This augurs well for the fall, when the STD HIV/AIDS awareness module will be fully rolled out.

Teacher Professional Development

- ❖ Ninety percent of the teachers in the project indicated that the curriculum materials that they received were useful for promoting their students' learning.
- ❖ Eighty percent of the teachers believed that they acquired new pedagogical strategies that they could employ with their students
- ❖ All the teachers (100%) felt that they were supported by Urban Tech staff. A similarly high percentage (95%) stated that the Bank Street professional developers were very supportive of their efforts.
- ❖ Seven out of every 10 teacher noted that their involvement in *GHH* is likely to have a positive and lasting impact on their classroom instruction.
- ❖ Eight out of every 10 teachers believed that as a function of participating in the project they now have a better understanding of health standards.
- ❖ More than 80% percent of the teachers stated that they now understood issues related to student development
- ❖ Eight out of every 10 teachers felt that through their involvement they developed a better understanding of curriculum integration.

Student Outcomes (as Perceived by Teachers)

- ❖ Almost 7 out every ten teachers felt that the students they taught had shown growth in the following areas: knowledge about the benefits of a healthy life style, ability to critically analyze the influence of culture and media on health attitudes and behaviors, and an appreciation of the benefits of exercising.
- ❖ Sixty percent saw a heightening in students' awareness of how their peers and media influence their behaviors; and almost fifty percent found that students' self esteems had improved.
- ❖ Students were greatly motivated by the program as reflected in the following quote from a teacher: "I thought it was a worthwhile program that provided a positive learning experience to the students and staff that participated in it. The Healthy Habits module was particularly valuable in that it really motivated students to take a look at their eating and overall health habits; and it galvanized them to take responsibility for changing some of their unhealthy behaviors".
- ❖ Students were very engaged in discussions on the adverse effects, such as contracting sexually transmitted diseases, of engaging in unhealthy sexual behaviors.

Recommendation

The *GHH* experience underlines the importance of a sustained and focused professional development component; the value of cultivating close partnerships with district personnel; the need to provide strong support for teachers and the importance of incentives for changing behaviors. In the fall, when the HIV/STD module will be introduced to teachers and students, an essential starting point will be to make teachers comfortable with the sensitive contents of the modules. To facilitate teacher comfort,

Urban Tech may need to draw upon individuals who have some prior experience in training teachers in these areas.

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