



HIV/AIDS Education Isn't *Only* for Health Class! (It's for English, Math, Science, Spanish...)

Article by Gary Hopkins
Education World® Editor-in-Chief
Copyright © 1997 Education World



A special multidisciplinary curriculum has transported HIV/AIDS education out of its relegated position in America's school health classes and moved it into other areas of the curriculum where it belongs!

HIV/AIDS curriculum is often relegated to Health class where instruction can be clinical and boring. But at Patrick Henry High School in Minneapolis, Minnesota, a special AIDS Awareness Week program involved teachers of all disciplines. AIDS education came to life in art class and English class, in math and in geography.

"The thought was that many students resist AIDS education, which they usually find only in the health classroom," says Dr. Claudia Windal. "To approach AIDS education in a multidisciplinary way had the potential for making the curriculum fun. More importantly, if students missed the message in one course, an activity in another course might capture their imagination and begin the learning process."

"In one English class, HIV/AIDS education came alive for students as they interviewed a child who has AIDS," Windal explains. "In math class they solved problems using AIDS-related statistics, and in cooking class they put together a special diet for an HIV-positive mother."

The curriculum which Windal designed with support from the staff at Patrick Henry provided all the resources teachers needed, including lesson plans, activity materials, and classroom speakers.

AIDS AWARENESS WEEK: JUST LIKE ANY OTHER WEEK, WITH A FEW TWISTS

AIDS Awareness Week at Patrick Henry High began with a panel discussion on Monday. The 800 students at the inner-city school attended the session in groups of 100. The panel of six comprised three men and three women from ages 20 to 53, including Caucasian, Black, and Native Americans and members identified as gay and straight. Panel members told their stories and responded to students' questions.

"The students were on the edges of their chairs," Windal says of the panel discussion.

The panel discussion was emotional, educational, and stimulating. It got kids thinking and talking. Windal knew it was effective when, a few days later, the softball coach related a story about the ride on the team bus on the night after the panel discussion. All the students were talking about the speakers, he said. They were rehashing what they'd heard, asking questions of each other, and sharing their own experiences. He'd never heard anything like that on the team bus!

The balance of the week went as any normal school week might go, with just a few exceptions. Each morning, an announcement related to HIV/AIDS was read over the school PA system during daily announcements. Those announcements included background on the panels of the AIDS Memorial Quilt that were on display in the school that week and a tape produced by a local DJ that used Bruce Springsteen's music from the movie "Philadelphia" as the background for a voice-over by Tom Hanks. In addition, people living with HIV/AIDS were available to answer questions each lunchtime outside the cafeteria.

But the learning didn't end there...."A group of students took it upon themselves to take index cards and hand write the individual names of those memorialized on the AIDS quilt," says Windal of another exercise that impressed her. "Then they strung those index cards and hung them around the three floors of the high school to illustrate in a most visual way the number of persons lost to complications of HIV."

AIDS ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

"One of the primary goals of the curriculum I created was to have students experience the practical application of academics to HIV/AIDS," adds Windal. "The hope was that learning about HIV/AIDS through its connections to all areas of the curriculum would translate then to the students' personal lives."

So, from class to class, the topic of HIV/AIDS was woven into the discussion and the lessons. Following is a sampling of the across-the-curriculum activities Windal suggested:

- **Math.** In math class, students could study and solve problems using AIDS-related statistics; they translated statistics into simple graphs.

- **English/journalism.** One activity involved a study of the correct use of AIDS-related buzzwords. In addition, speakers---including a child with AIDS---spoke to students and students responded by writing poems to describe their feelings or responses to speakers or to questions such as: How did it feel to have someone living with HIV/AIDS here in class? Was there a question that you would have liked to ask but either didn't or couldn't? Do you have different feelings or understandings about people who are living with HIV/AIDS than you had before you met and heard the speakers?
- **Social studies/geography.** Students could study HIV/AIDS distribution maps and talk about the needs of people with HIV/AIDS in rural vs. urban settings.
- **Science.** Students tested different brands of condoms for their ability to protect and they tested the viscosity benefits of water-based over petroleum-based lubricants.
- **Spanish.** Students translated into English the text of a Spanish comic book about AIDS provided by the Red Cross.
- **French.** Students wrote poems based on their reactions to the panel speakers.
- **Art.** Students designed panels for the AIDS Memorial Quilt for people they knew or, if they didn't know anyone who has died of HIV/AIDS, they designed a panel for one of several "make-believe" people based on personality profiles provided. They used official specifications provided by The NAMES Project Foundation.
- **Sewing.** Students learned to sew panels for the AIDS Memorial Quilt.
- **Cooking.** Students planned a diet for HIV/AIDS patients based on information about their health needs. As a source they used the "Now That You Know" booklet series provided to people who are HIV-positive by Kaiser Permanente. In addition, students taste-tested various food supplements (ie., Ensure).
- **Phys Ed.** Students used the "Now That You Know" series to learn about the physical limitations of people with HIV/AIDS. They ran up and down the basketball court with ten pound weights strapped to their ankles to simulate how tired a person with HIV/AIDS might feel.

"The program was designed so that teachers had very little or no added work to do," Windal notes. "I spoon fed lesson possibilities to teachers and encouraged them to come up with their own creative ways of weaving HIV/AIDS into their lessons for the week. The only other commitment that some teachers made was to attend a special in-service session conducted by the Red Cross prior to AIDS Awareness Week. That session was intended to make teachers more comfortable with the topic and its terminology."

Winald encourages all high schools to investigate using a cross-disciplinary approach to AIDS education. "It's more important than ever," she says. "The news is full of positive information about a potential cure for AIDS and news of the decreasing numbers of new HIV/AIDS cases. But this is no time to get complacent about the need to educate our kids about the disease. The need is greater now than ever."

Article by Gary Hopkins
Education World® Editor-in-Chief
Copyright © 1997 Education World

COPYRIGHT EDUCATION WORLD. REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION 2001.