



Northampton County High School students discuss safe sex practices on Friday in Conway.

ERIN CARSON | THE DAILY HERALD

## Teens in Northampton lead safe sex talks with peers

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CONWAY — Teens at Northampton County High School are taking the lead in a new program to help their peers practice safe sex and avoid unplanned pregnancies.

Northampton County High School received a grant for an initiative called Teen Prevention Education Program (Teen PEP) this past spring and began implementing it at the beginning of this school year. The program aims to train junior and senior high school students to talk with freshmen about safe sex and sexual health in a way the students can relate to, according to the faculty advisers.



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The first round of peer-led workshops finished up Friday, and adviser Margaret Putney, a school counselor at Northampton County High, said she was extremely proud of the work the students were doing already.

"We stand back and let them handle it," she said of the juniors and seniors taking on the leadership role in the workshops. "They were in a three-day retreat before school started. When we got back to school, they were ready to go. We've seen them grow and take on leadership."

Many of the kids who are leaders in the program were already leaders in the school, Putney noted, so the younger students listen to what they are saying more than they may listen to an adult giving the same information.

The tone during the workshop Friday was conversational and the presenters used phrases and terms their younger peers could relate to and take seriously. The language was meant to be easily digestible and not like a clinical speech about safe sex and pregnancy prevention one may see in a health textbook.

Jerry Squire, another faculty adviser with Teen PEP, said that down-to-earth dialogue between students made delivering vital information more effective.

"When you read a script exactly the way it is, I don't think the kids are as interested," she said. "When the kids use the language they're used to, they're more comfortable."

One topic discussed in the workshops was communication, permission and consent related to sex and physical relationships. The teen presenters offered tips for making sure both parties are comfortable, and suggested asking things like, "Are you OK?" and "Do you want me to stop?"

The younger students were attentive during the introduction and were free to ask more personal questions once the group broke up into small conversation sessions of about seven students. Putney said the ninth graders open up more in the small circles when they're just talking to their peers.

The juniors and seniors aren't just "winging it" during their discussions with the younger students. They attend a class every day where the faculty advisers educate them about safe sex and give them the skills to discuss what they've learned with their peers in a way that is effective.

Peer leader Desiree Pope said she has learned a lot just from being in the class and having to relay the information to other students.

"The retreat and the class taught me a lot. There were things I thought I knew that I didn't," she said. "Talking to the freshmen about sex and seeing them respond, it shocked me that we were doing something so beneficial."

The overall goal is to decrease teen pregnancy rates, which has been an issue in the Roanoke Valley, and decrease the risk of sexually-transmitted diseases. In addition, educators and health officials want teens to be as informed as possible about sex if they are going to be doing it, so they will be safe and make decisions that are healthy both physically and emotionally. The seminar Friday outlined ways postponing sexual relationships may be beneficial.

More than improving health outcomes, advisers said cultivating leadership skills in the older students that will help them in the future is another important result of the program.

"When they get to college, they're going to have to communicate and speak up for themselves, and this is a good place for them to start," Putney said.

Senior William Cumbo said it was important to him to have that opportunity.

"Working with kids younger than us builds our leadership skills," he said. "And they may be going through the same things we're going through. What will stick with me most is opening up to people more and sitting back and listening, going about conversations differently."