



The Fernwood Project: HIV Prevention for America's Youth

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Content

- knowledge about HIV
- discussing sensitive topics with students and their parents
- handling students' discomfort with sensitive topics
- building teachers' confidence and comfort with sensitive topics
- working with parents and community to protect young adolescents

The Fernwood Project: HIV Prevention for America's Youth is a middle school (grades 6-8) HIV education program developed and conducted by Redefining Actions and Decisions (RAD) with support from the Pediatric AIDS Foundation. It was field-tested in four diverse communities. It provides a sound curriculum (including information on risk elimination — i.e. abstinence — and risk reduction) and staff development for teachers. The program's goal is to educate students about how to protect themselves against HIV infection by using an age-appropriate, interactive curriculum.

Training increases teachers' knowledge about HIV, and their skills, confidence, and comfort with classroom discussion of sensitive topics. Program developers contend, and evaluation data support, that teachers' comfort is contagious and an outcome of the program's success would be students' increased comfort level in talking to peers, teachers, or parents about HIV-related issues.

The program fosters community involvement and strong commitment from the school administration. Parents and community members may preview the lessons and curriculum prior to students' engagement with it. The program develops middle school students' knowledge about HIV and impacts their ability to make responsible and healthy life choices.

Context

- diverse school settings
- support from school district and local community
- parental involvement and support
- support and involvement from other staff, nurses, counselors, and community agencies

PROGRAM CONTEXT

The four sites where The Fernwood Project was implemented were demographically diverse. Three school districts were urban, one rural; three had substantial or predominant Hispanic student populations; and three describe themselves as serving socially conservative communities. Two were pedagogically conservative. Other distinct features of the schools included the involvement and concerns of the leadership and existing health instruction at the middle grades. Whether teachers were recruited to participate in training and pilot activities or volunteered also was significant.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM



The staff development program involved a two-day teacher training which occurred during the school day on release time. It included teachers in grades 6-8 and others such as primary teachers, nurses, counselors, community health educators, and parents. Community members also attended the training. Training was conducted by Redefining Actions and Decisions (RAD) trainers.

A staff member from each school helped with logistical arrangements, data collection, and parent communication. The training focused on helping teachers feel comfortable with a more interactive and experiential approach to teaching about HIV/AIDS. While teachers initially expressed apprehension about teaching sensitive topics to young adolescents, they found that the training and their experience in teaching the program made them more confident.

During the training, teachers had opportunities to consider and examine the curriculum, explore their own feelings about teaching sensitive topics, and participate in decisions about which units they would teach as part of the program. Following training, teachers were given support both by their local school and district personnel, and also by the Redefining Actions and Decisions staff.

Process

- training
- modeling
- demonstration
- curriculum design
- follow-up support

Intended Audience

- entire school
- entire department
- individual teachers with school, district, and community support

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

“By all measures the Fernwood Project arguably qualifies as a success. Although not perfect, when considered across all data types, the data reveal a program that met its demanding goals: teachers were able to learn a new, dynamic [way] to approaching HIV education; communities could accept it as a viable approach; and, most importantly, students could learn and retain critical information regarding their risks of HIV infection and ways through which they can avoid infections” (Brett, et al, 1998).



EVIDENCE OF INCREASED STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT



Success Indicators

- Center for Disease Control tests
 - knowledge test
 - attitude survey
 - behavioral and perception battery
- teacher surveys
- teacher and community focus groups



The comprehensive evaluation of The Fernwood Project involved assessment of teachers, community, and student outcomes. Student outcomes were measured on questionnaires developed by the Center for Disease Control, addressing knowledge, attitudes, behavior/behavioral intentions, perceptions about peers' behaviors, interactions with teachers and peers, and sources of information about HIV/AIDS. Other general data about students were collected via surveys and focus groups.

Students showed significant gains from pre-test to post-test on many measures and maintained the gains through a three-month delayed post-test. Students in both grades demonstrated increased, broadened, and more complex understanding of the HIV-related issues. There were often highly significant, desirable, and sustained changes in knowledge at both grade levels. Students at both grade levels reported high levels of satisfaction with The Fernwood Project. More than 80 percent of students in both grades indicated that their teachers "seemed comfortable during the sessions."

It is notable that both student and teacher gains occurred in a climate not marked by the usual hostility, fear, and frustration associated with implementing HIV education. Students, as well as their teachers, administrators, and parents expressed considerable enthusiasm for the Fernwood Project process and activities.

The Fernwood Project: HIV Prevention for America's Youth is unique in a number of ways. It acknowledges the important influence teachers' comfort with content has on students' comfort in the learning environment. It also employs a comprehensive evaluation process to explore various ways teacher and curriculum enhancement affect students, their teachers, and the community. This program has confirmed that where community concerns are addressed and administrative support is earned, middle school teachers can be trained to use a brief, pedagogically challenging, highly explicit curriculum with middle school students and win the support of their communities while achieving significant results with both students and teachers.

THE BOTTOM LINE



SAMPLE SITES



✓ La Junta Middle School
Ron Davis
Principal
9th & Smithland
La Junta, CO 81050
phone: 719-384-4371
fax: unavailable
e-mail: unavailable
web site: unavailable

✓ Lennox Middle School
Mara Simmons
Assistant Principal
Kim Woods
Math/Science Resource Teacher
11033 Buford Avenue
Lennox, CA 90304
phone: 310-330-4910
fax: 310-677-4635
e-mail:
mara_simmons@lennox.k12.ca.us
web site: unavailable



KEY CONTACT PERSON . . .

Deborah Schoeberlien
Redefining Actions and Decisions
P.O. Box 1433
Carbondale, Colorado 81623



Phone: 970-963-1727



Fax: 970-963-2037



E-mail: dsrad@csn.net



Web site: unavailable

DOCUMENTATION

Brett, J., Pownell, S. & Stone, T. (1998). *The Fernwood Project: Final Report on Statistical Data*. Denver, CO: Author.

Deutsch, C., Brett, J. & Redefining Actions and Decisions. (1998). *The Fernwood Project: Evaluation Report*. Carbondale, CO: Author.

