

November 30, 2012

Ms. Connie Calisti-Meyers, J.D.  
Assistant Commissioner  
Division of STDs, TB and STD Services  
NJ Department of Health  
PO Box 360  
Trenton, NJ 08625

Dear Ms. Calisti-Meyers :

We are twin brothers and currently college students who experienced the Teen PEP program as freshmen in our New Jersey high school and wanted the Department of Health to know what message we as students took away from that program.

We felt that we were given a message promoting a very limited philosophy to young, impressionable and receptive students at a vulnerable time in their lives. Our takeaway from the Teen PEP program was that it does not try to help young people avoid the risky behavior of sexual activity or understand the full emotional and physical impact of engaging in sexual relations at that age. Instead, it offers methods and materials in an attempt to prevent consequences ... and from what we experienced, does not truly attempt to address the root causes of STDs, emotional distress and the socio-economic damage that early sexual activity can inflict.

We also thought it ironic that one of the so-called "advantages" of Teen PEP is that it is taught by other High School students ... ironic in that one would never propose to have "Behind the Wheel Driver Ed" taught by another High School student, but something as life changing as Sexual Health is taught by other amateurs. We also found that the students held up as "Teen PEP role models" were more often than not the students who were engaging outside of school in the parties where sex and illegal substance use was happening.

Some observations of the program that we experienced as 15 year olds were:

- There was a single session that covered the topic of delaying sex, but we didn't feel it was promoted as a better choice. It was just one of several choices that weren't really taken seriously. The rest promoted contraceptives and condom use. We felt as if the message was "you're going to do this anyway, so use these and everything will be OK." NOT!
- "Condom man" ... promoted condom use ... handed out condoms to freshman
- The mentors, who were supposed to be role models, handed out contraception
- Did not mention emotional drawbacks of a sexual relationship. Focus was on pregnancy prevention using a condom
- Teen PEP made us feel uncomfortable because we already had chosen to avoid sex for now as a life choice, and we did not feel supported in that choice by this curriculum or the way it was presented.
- We actually felt un-cool in our choice not to participate in sex and were made to feel like we were in the minority of students by abstaining.
- Demonstrated how to properly put on a condom using a banana (in a large group ... after this, we were then broken into small groups – this was very uncomfortable)
- Used the chant "Sex can wait, masturbate" ... not cool!
- Promoted the exact opposite of what we would have thought should have been taught – not to get sexually involved! (As 15 year old boys)

At the time we went through the Teen PEP program in school, we did not, like most of our friends, speak with our parents about how uncomfortable it made us feel or the strong message it was sending us that promiscuous sex is alright for us as teens as long as we used "protection", got tested and chose our sex partners wisely. Four years later, we have realized how foolish this message was and how it could have turned our lives in a completely different direction. We are completely certain that our choice to abstain from early sex has allowed each of us to pursue our dreams and ambitions in college.

We greatly appreciate the opportunity to share our Teen PEP experiences with you and thank you for taking the time to read this. We honestly feel that the teenagers of New Jersey deserve better than Teen PEP to advise and prepare them for the challenging part of growing up that early sexual activity presents.

CC:

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