

# Teacher-student relationships key to learning health and sex education

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When it comes to learning life-changing behaviors in high school health classes, the identity of the person teaching may be even more important than the curriculum, a new study suggests.

For years, many high schools around the country have been relying on outside experts to teach sensitive subjects such as the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection and pregnancy prevention. But a recent study by researchers at Ohio State University and the University of Kentucky found that students learn more about such issues when taught by their regular classroom teacher.

The reason: students may be more inclined to learn life-changing behaviors from someone they know and trust.

"The actual person teaching makes a difference in how students learn. When there is a good relationship, that really facilitates learning and motivation. And we found that in almost every area, the regular classroom teachers were more effective, they were better," said Eric Anderman, co-author of the study and professor of educational psychology at Ohio State.

The study is available online and will appear in an upcoming issue of the journal *Health Promotion Practice*.

*Strong student-teacher relationships have been linked to many positive outcomes, including better behavior in classrooms and improvement in*

*learning. Because of the established relationship regular classroom teachers have with their students, it may be easier for adolescents to talk with and learn from someone who already knows them as individuals.*

*"The relationship between the teacher and the student, particularly during adolescence, is very important. It was easier for the kids to talk about personal stuff with someone they knew. It was easier for them to absorb the material and become more interested in what they were talking about with their regular teacher in the classroom," Anderman said.*

*Nearly 700 high school students in central and northern Kentucky participated in the study. Students from seven similarly sized high schools were given the same curriculum and were taught by either their regular classroom teacher or a temporary educator.*

*Students were surveyed prior to beginning the course and three to four weeks after completion about their experience. Students were asked about attitudes toward having sex and condom use, their goals and expectations toward the class, if they valued class material, and if they felt their health teachers were credible and likeable.*

*In almost every category, the regular classroom teachers had the more positive results. Students often expect to be tested more often by their regular teacher than by a temporary educator. As a result, they may be more motivated to learn the material, to achieve high grades on tests, and to appear knowledgeable during classroom discussions.*

*More importantly, students in classrooms led by their regular teachers valued the course material more than did others. Instead of simply hearing a lecture on sex education, students were motivated to pay attention because they felt the class offered important information.*

*"When you have kids who simply memorize material for the test and two*

*weeks later don't remember any of it, you're not getting anywhere. But if you can get the kids to care and learn because they think it's important, that's something that will last a lifetime," Anderman said.*

*Students who had a sexual partner also participated in more classroom discussions with the regular teacher. These students valued the discussions, reporting that the discussions were higher in quality and more frequent overall.*

*"Students who had a sexual partner were more likely to say that there was class discussion going on with the regular teacher than those taught by the outside person. These kids were more likely to feel like there was discussion of these issues, rather than just the teacher lecturing to them," he said.*

*Regular classroom teachers were also perceived as more credible than their temporary counterparts. Students felt their regular teachers were more knowledgeable, but also liked their regular teacher more. Students felt comfortable with these teachers and were able to joke around and laugh with the teachers, but also took them more seriously, he said.*

*Despite the positive results, Anderman cautions that not all teachers will have the same impacts as those in the study. Every teacher in this study, both temporary and permanent, received professional training prior to entering the classroom. In reality, not all teachers will have the same training and know-how, and decisions should be made based on who is the best fit for each class.*

*"School is the absolute best way to get information out to adolescents, no matter who is teaching. The important thing is getting the teacher to make a connection. If the teacher can make the right connection with one kid, you've saved one person from getting HIV, you've saved one person's life," he said.*

*Source: Ohio State University*

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