Improving the Quality of Sex Education in California High Schools Through Student Evaluations: The Student-Assessed Sex Education Standards (SASS) Project

On January 1, 2016, the **California Healthy Youth Act (CHYA)** went into effect, mandating public middle and high schools to integrate comprehensive sexual health education into their HIV/AIDS prevention education programs. The most progressive sex education legislation in the state’s history, CHYA required that sex education should be medically accurate, age-appropriate, unbiased, and inclusive of students from diverse backgrounds. A notable limitation of the act, however, was that very few funds were allocated toward its surveillance or enforcement.

The **Student Assessed Sex Education Standards (SASS) Project** was developed and implemented by the Bixby Center on Population and Reproductive Health at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), with the assistance of the Genders and Sexualities Alliance Network (GSAN). Its purpose was to provide a tool for high school students to evaluate the quality of the sex education in their schools. Taking into consideration time constraints and student privacy, the SASS team developed a one-time voluntary and anonymous online survey that students could complete in 10-15 minutes at the conclusion of their sex education. The survey was specifically designed to collect feedback on how well the sex education the students received met the standards set by CHYA, and how conducive their classroom environments were to learning sensitive sexual health topics.

In total, 13 LAUSD high schools participated in the SASS project in May and June 2019. The team collected surveys from 684 students, of which three-quarters were eligible for data analysis. Students who participated in the survey were primarily Hispanic (64%) and identified as heterosexual (78%). The majority (81%) were completing their freshmen year at the time the survey was administered.

The SASS survey revealed significant variation in students’ ratings of how well certain CHYA standards were taught and how conducive their classroom environments were to learning. The standard that the highest percentage of students indicated as being taught “very well” concerned the transmission of HIV/AIDS (92%). By contrast, the standard that the lowest percentage of students indicated as being taught very well related to long-acting and reversible contraceptives (67%). In general, topics related to HIV/AIDS seemed to be better taught than those related to sexuality and contraception. Classroom environment ratings suggested that 1 in 4 students found sex education to be rushed, not engaging, or not adequate in covering both social and biological issues.

Student ratings varied widely depending on where they attended school in LAUSD. The biggest differences in scores between schools were seen for standards related to gender and sexual orientation stereotypes. At the highest performing school, 95% of students indicated content in this area was taught very well compared to 44% at the lowest performing. In general, the biggest differences between schools were found in thematic areas that were newly introduced as curricular standards under CHYA.

**Percent of students who answered “yes, very well” on teaching of 22 CHYA compliance questions, of 13 LAUSD high schools, May-June 2019**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Number of students | Contraception & consent (Q1-6) | HIV misconceptions (Q7-10) | Gender & sexual orientation stereotypes (Q11-13) | Sexual health services & rights (Q14-17) | Harassment, rape & trafficking (Q18-22) | **Overall Score (Q1-22)** |
|  | N | % | % | % | % | % | **%** |
| Top Performing School | 63 | 96.8 | 96.4 | 95.2 | 96.4 | 95.2 | **96.0** |
| Lowest Performing School | 41 | 65.3 | 70.2 | 43.7 | 63.8 | 57.5 | **60.1** |
| Average Score | ***515*** | ***82.1*** | ***85.1*** | ***77.1*** | ***79.9*** | ***79.6*** | ***80.7*** |

Overall, the SASS Project demonstrated that students can effectively evaluate the quality of their sex education using the assessment survey developed by the team. No bias was found by the gender of the teacher, or the gender, ethnicity or age of the student. Furthermore, teachers are able to administer the survey with basic instructions in less than 15 minutes, making it feasible to deliver during class time.

The results of the survey were compiled and sent back to each school. Follow-up surveys with teachers indicated that the results had enabled teachers to identify areas to improve. The surveys could be done on an annual basis so that administrators can track compliance with CHYA standards and classroom environment, and take steps to improve the quality of sex education in their schools.

**Based on the project’s findings, the SASS team recommended:**

**1. Districts**

* Consider incorporating the online survey developed by the SASS project into its evaluation protocol for high schools.
* Send performance feedback to all schools who administer the SASS survey.
* Assist schools to improve curricula or teaching where areas of weakness were discovered.

**2. School Leadership**

* Require all sex education teachers in their high schools administer the SASS survey to their students.
* Review survey results with teachers to discuss how to improve the classroom environment and ensure compliance with CHYA standards.

**3. Teachers**

* Become familiar with CHYA requirements.
* Administer the SASS survey at the end of each sex education course.
* Meet with school leadership to discuss survey results and plan for any improvements.

**If you would like to discuss introducing SASS into your school district, please contact Dr. Paula Tavrow (ptavrow@ucla.edu), Director of the Bixby Program at UCLA.**