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## High schools adapt programs on sex assault awareness

High schools adapting college initiatives to raise awareness in a younger crowd

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By **Matt Rocheleau**

GLOBE STAFF APRIL 20, 2015

Local high schools are seeking to raise awareness about sexual assaults, and they are taking a page from the expanding initiatives on college campuses.

Earlier this year, more than two dozen New England high schools — including about 10 in Massachusetts — rolled out an adapted version of a highly acclaimed education program that has been taught in recent years to college students on hundreds of campuses. While activism around college sexual assaults has been growing, there has been little discussion over the prevalence of the crime among younger students.

“It’s critical to do prevention early,” said Katie M. Edwards, a psychology and women’s studies professor at the University of New Hampshire and an affiliate of the university’s Prevention Innovations research center, which developed the program. “We can’t just address this problem when kids go to college.”

Officials declined to identify the participating schools for fear of



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jeopardizing the validity of research — including student surveys — that will be part of the program.

While data and research are limited, some studies and surveys have found that a significant number of high school students report being victims of sexual and dating violence.

A survey by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention of more than 13,500 students at about 150 public and private high schools nationwide during the 2012-13 academic year found that 10.5 percent of girls and 4.2 percent of boys said they had been physically forced to have sexual intercourse when they did not want to.

An American Association of University Women [survey](#) of about 2,000 students across the country in grades 7 through 12 found that nearly half said they had experienced some form of sexual harassment in the 2010-11 school year, but only a quarter told family or friends.

The US Department of Education as of this month was investigating 33 K-12 schools and districts across the country for possible violations of the rules governing the handling of sexual violence and harassment complaints.

That list includes an investigation launched in June at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School.

Officials from Lincoln-Sudbury said they have met with investigators but declined to comment further.

The UNH program, called “Bringing in the Bystander,” was created for college students in 2002. It offers interactive training to teach students how to intervene if they

**10.5 %**  
of high school girls and

**4.2%**  
of high school boys surveyed  
said they had been forced  
to have sexual intercourse  
against their will

**48%**  
of middle and high school  
students surveyed said they  
had experienced sexual  
harassment

SOURCES: US Centers for Disease  
Control and Prevention  
and American Association  
of University Women

witness an act, or the risk of an act, of sexual assault or dating violence.

Through surveys and focus groups with New Hampshire high school youths and teachers in recent months, the program has been revised so it is suitable for a high school-age audience.

Changes from the college version include incorporating more basic and introductory information about sexual assault and added discussions about the role pop culture and mass media can play in students' understanding and attitudes about the topic.

The high school program, which will be administered in a series of sessions and workshops, will also present scenarios and examples that reflect situations high school students might encounter.

The high school version of the program will also add a one-hour workshop for teachers and a fact sheet for parents.

Backed by \$1 million in CDC grant funding over the next three years, the rollout to high schools will also serve as a research initiative.

Professors, staff, graduate, and undergraduate students leading the UNH project will survey high school students before the program is administered and at several points in the year to measure its effectiveness in educating students and changing their attitudes and behavior.

The results will be detailed in scholarly articles and made available for teachers. The findings will also be published by the CDC, which had issued a competitive bid request for research on the topic

Edwards said that many high schools already run programs to teach students about topics like sexual assault and dating violence.

"It's pretty rare that principals say, "This is not an issue for us," she said. "But . . . in terms of a lot of national attention, there hasn't been enough."

In February, US Senators Tim Kaine, a Virginia Democrat, and Claire McCaskill, a Democrat from Missouri, introduced legislation to improve health education in public secondary schools nationwide, including teaching curriculum designed to prevent sexual assault, domestic violence, and dating violence.

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education already has a curriculum framework that calls for students, beginning in sixth grade, to learn about the consequences of sexual harassment as well as the importance of communication and setting limits on sexual behavior.

Suzy Spresert, sexual health education project manager at Boston Public Schools, said the district is developing a program for middle and high school students about intimate partner violence that shows students the perspective of a person perpetuating violence and the perspective of a victim.

“You get to walk in the shoes of both of the individuals,” she said. “You really get to feel and build empathy and compassion for what it is like to be in these situations, what are the red flags to look for, and what are the resources that are available for individuals in these situations.”

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