

Allison Hanes: Getting over the hang-ups about sex ed

“I could tell (students) ‘Jesus is gonna cry if you have sex before marriage,’ but they’re not gonna care,” says longtime sex ed teacher Clorinda Antonacci.

ALLISON HANES, MONTREAL GAZETTE ([HTTPS://MONTREALGAZETTE.COM/AUTHOR/AHANES2014](https://montrealgazette.com/author/ahanes2014))

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Clorinda Antonacci makes pamphlets available to her students at Lester B. Pearson High School. Part of her job is setting students straight about stereotypes or pervasive cultural myths. *JOHN MAHONEY / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

If only they hadn't called it sex ed, maybe there wouldn't be so much angst.

Health, sexual well-being, personal and social development — almost anything would have been better, said Clorinda Antonacci, a teacher at Lester B. Pearson High School in Montreal North.

“If you put health, everybody's for it,” she said. “You set them up by calling it sex ed. The kids are loving it, because they think they get to talk about sex. The parents are like: ‘Oh my god, you're talking to them about sex!?’ ”

Antonacci had been teaching sex ed when few others were, helping coordinate workshops on topics like relationship violence or how drugs and alcohol can influence sex for her Secondary 5 students since 2013. In an interview, she offered helpful tips and valuable perspective on the return of the taboo topic to classrooms this fall.

As Quebec rolls out a new mandatory sex-ed curriculum for every grade from kindergarten to Secondary 5, there has been much confusion among teachers, who say they haven't received adequate training on how to present this sensitive material, and some trepidation from parents about what, exactly, their kids will be learning.

Sex ed has come and gone from the Quebec school curriculum over the years. Most recently it was an optional unit for teachers willing to take it on. After Ontario introduced a progressive program in 2015 tackling issues like consent, same-sex relationships and gender identity, Quebec followed suit. Ironically, Quebec's new curriculum comes into effect just as Ontario's has been cancelled by incoming Premier Doug Ford to appease his socially conservative base.

Antonacci, who has taught the subject on and off throughout her 17-year career, said a news story about a resurgence of syphilis convinced her to try to counter the lack of knowledge among young adults having very adult experiences.

Assisted by the school nurse and guidance counsellor, her students have had instruction on the contraceptive ring and conversations about how men can get cancer from HPV too. They've had the police come in to talk about child pornography, which many teens fail to realize they might be illegally distributing if they're sharing revealing Snapchat pictures of underage friends.

Social workers or public health nurses often pay a visit, then Antonacci follows up with a classroom discussion.

"We come in and we talk. It's very casual — there's no talking down to them," she said. "I tell them, 'Whatever question you have — anything.'"



Clorinda Antonacci has taught sex ed on and off throughout her 17-year career. As Quebec rolls out a mandatory sex-ed curriculum for every grade from kindergarten to Secondary 5, she hopes the children who are exposed to the program grow up with a better grasp of everything from the proper names for body parts to the warning signs of sexual abuse.

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Part of her job is setting students straight about stereotypes or pervasive

cultural myths. Oral sex is sex. Why did you call that classmate a slut? What do you mean by that? Just because you don't hit your girlfriend doesn't mean you're not in an unhealthy relationship.

The professionals, especially those who work in the school, are "instrumental" to the lessons, said Antonacci, because they have knowledge and resources at their disposal. She suggests teachers who are unsure how to proceed reach out to them as a starting point. But she said it's crucial teachers set the parameters for the lessons and stay in the classroom to keep things on track.

Over the years, Antonacci said, she has faced reservations from administrators who wanted her to take an abstinence-only approach.

"I could tell them: 'Jesus is gonna cry if you have sex before marriage,' but they're not gonna care," she said. "I mean, their hormones, their bodies ... they're teenagers, they're exposed. They see all sorts of things on television, movies dictate that they have sex, you know, at prom. So for them, it's like a rite of passage. 'Ya, but who says it's a rite of passage?' 'Well, I saw it in a movie.' And I'm like: 'Oh, good lord.' "

At the same time, Antonacci said, it's important to tell kids abstinence is a viable option despite living in a society where normal behaviour is shaped by Hollywood films, sexual imagery is everywhere and posting revealing shots on social media is considered normal.

"American Pie — the whole thing was: 'We're going to get dates for prom and we're going to lose our virginity and have sex.' Really!? That's what you want?" she said. "Well, what does virginity mean to you? Those are the conversations we should be having with our students. But at the same time, we get the backlash from parents that 'I don't want you talking to my child about sex.' "

Some parents see the subject as a discussion best kept in the family. Others are afraid sex ed will give their children permission to experiment.

"Do you think we're going to be encouraging them? Do you think we're

going to tell them these are the best sexual positions to climax? No. That's not my job. That's not what's in the ministry guidelines either," Antonacci said. "Parents need to start putting aside their hang-ups and really hang it up somewhere else."

Other parents are relieved, thinking the school is going to take care of awkward conversations for them. But Antonacci said the classroom is no substitute for the parent-child chat.

"Studies show parents who speak to their children about their expectations on sex, their children will live up to their expectations," she said. "If you don't want them to have sex, then have that conversation about why. Don't tell them: 'Because I don't want you to.' Tell them, 'Look, I don't think this is something teenagers should be experiencing. I would really love it if you found someone to really share that connection with, because it's such a beautiful connection.' "

Teaching sex ed to Secondary 5 students, Antonacci quickly sees the consequences of it not having been a required part of the curriculum from a much younger age. She hopes the children who are exposed to the new program grow up with a much better grasp of everything from the proper names for body parts to the warning signs of sexual abuse by the time they graduate high school.

"We as adults put so much emphasis and pressure and, oh my god, taboos on it. But kids are very innocent and open, and they absorb this stuff better. They don't have the malignant ideas the way we have. For children, it's just another topic for them to learn or for them to explore."

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