

Improving Family Communication & Engagement in North Carolina Schools with Teen Speak®

Spotlight on: North Carolina

Housed within the Department of Health Education and Promotion at East Carolina University, the North Carolina School Health Training Center provides professional development and supports the implementation of educational programs throughout the state designed to reduce health-risk behaviors in children and adolescents. Michele Wallen, PhD, MPH, Associate Professor, and Jamie T. Williams, MAEd, MCHES®, Teaching Instructor, work collaboratively with teachers, nurses, counselors, administrators, and public health educators in the NC school districts demonstrating the highest level of health disparities and teen pregnancy rates, to strengthen the quality of Health Education within a coordinated school health program.



Opportunity

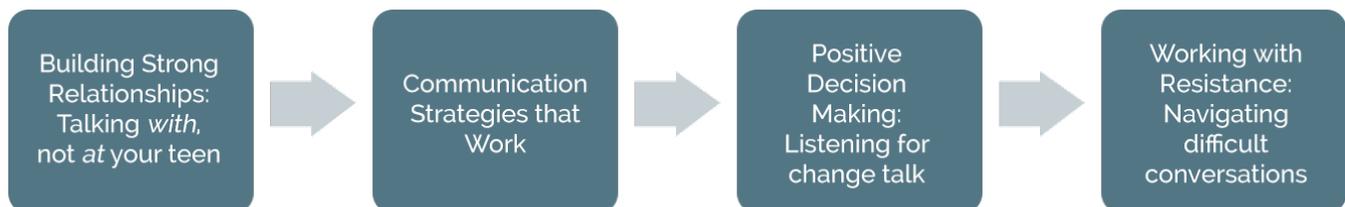
"We address public health issues by providing professional development opportunities for the professionals who serve youth in NC schools – including elementary to college-age programming," explained Michele. "We work with a team of public health educators and trainers across the state to implement evidence-based programs in our areas of highest need. We currently have grant funding that supports programs focused on positive youth development and reducing sexual health risks."

Jamie added, *"One of the most important ways we can make an impact in these risk areas is by increasing the positive communication between parents and youth. We have been implementing the 'Parents Matter' curriculum for about ten years now. It's a good evidence-based curriculum for parents of pre-adolescent youth. But we wanted to expand our programming to support parents of teens, given the additional challenges that this age group often faces."*

Solution

The School Health Training Center selected the *Teen Speak*® Training of Educators curriculum developed by Dr. Jennifer Salerno. Created especially for community-based organizations and schools who provide services and education to the parents of tweens and teens, the Training of Educators program equips facilitators with the knowledge, confidence, and resources to provide *Teen Speak* curriculum to parents and supporters. Based on the *Teen Speak* series, this curriculum is designed to help parents and supporters confidently connect with their teenagers on common risk behaviors, like mental health concerns, sex, and substance use. The *Teen Speak* curriculum provides parents with "real-life" strategies and techniques that have been proven effective at improving communication with youth – and at helping to significantly reduce risk-taking behaviors among youth.

Teen Speak Curriculum Components Include:



We asked Michele and Jamie what drew them to select the *Teen Speak* program.

"We liked that Teen Speak spans across a variety of needs and interests. It helps parents improve and increase their communication with their teenager. And these skills can be applied broadly – from simple day-to-day conversations to tackling tough topics like sex."

"For us, the ability to tailor the curriculum for our needs was key. We included two additional pages on sexual health risks in our trainings. The flexibility in how trainings can be offered is also great. There are different options designed to work with parents' schedules and commitments – four or two-hour workshops or 'book club' formats, for example. And the online training module, in addition to the book and workbooks, is really helpful."

Implementation

The ECU team embraced a true "train the trainer" approach. Key staff and educators from the NC School Health Training Center participated in one of the two sessions held by Dr. Salerno's *Teen Speak* trainers in the early summer of 2018. From there the School Health Training team began working with educators across the state preparing them to facilitate *Teen Speak* workshops and engage parents within their own schools.

"Scotland County was the first to participate – and they reached out before we even finished our own training. They had a new Principal who was really interested in engaging parents and wanted to better understand the local community."

"School staff members have all been very receptive to this program. We ended up expanding our trainings from schools to include other community-based organizations and our public health departments. So far we have held multiple trainings within five different counties. We also had a regional training in Chapel Hill where educators and public health professionals from across the state had the opportunity to participate."



Feedback

With so many *Teen Speak* parent and supporter workshops now complete, feedback from the educators is filtering in on what works, and what could work better. Here's a few themes Michele and Jamie have heard on barriers and best practices:

- 1. Think outside the box.**

"Think about how you will make it easy for parents to participate. Consider times that are outside the norm for schools – for example, early Saturday mornings and Sunday afternoons work well."

- 2. Encourage parents to do their homework.**

"Parents are busy – it's not uncommon for them to skip the pre-workshop assignments. Make sure you encourage parents to register early (leaving enough time to do their homework) and have a process in place to disseminate materials to those registrants."

- 3. Be flexible.**

"Because Teen Speak focuses on core parenting skills and covers multiple risk factors it can be positioned in a number of ways. We promote Teen Speak as 'parent-youth communication' program. And while many middle and high schools are focused on tweens and teens – others provide the workshops to parents with children of any age."

Results

The NC School Health Training Center team had several critical objectives they wanted to achieve by selecting Teen Speak to supplement the Parents Matter curriculum:

- Provide an evidence-based curriculum
- Increase positive communication between parents and their teenage children
- Reduce youth risk factors – especially sexual and mental health related risks

To evaluate success against these goals they looked at responses from participants of the Teen Speak workshops that have been held across North Carolina to date. The workshop participants represent a broad age range (from under 30 to over 60 years) and a diverse cross-representation of family structures (including foster parents, single parent, and blended families).

Across the board, participants report significant improvements in their communication skills.

- Over 85% of participants say they learned new skills they can use when talking with their tween/teen – such as the use of open-ended questions, active listening, and behavior planning
- Participants also report a dramatic shift in their
 - confidence in talking through challenging situations when they arise
 - comfort-level in talking about risks like sex, drugs and depression
- And – perhaps, most importantly for reducing youth risk – participants report feeling more connected with their teen



One of the trainers shared a great story on the efficacy of the communication strategies in practice (in this case, how the use of “fully open-ended questions” can elicit greater sharing from teenagers):

“During our workshop, a teen of one of the participants walked through the room and someone asked how their morning was going and he said ‘good’. Then another parent followed up with ‘tell me about your morning’ and he did! The parents loved it – immediate reinforcement that the strategies work. It was great to see it in action.”

As a part of the team from the beginning, we asked Michele and Jamie their overall thoughts:

“I absolutely would recommend Teen Speak,” shared Michele. “Participants are really receptive to the material and walk away with great practical communication skills. It’s beneficial not just for parents or professionals working with young people – but communication in general.”

“It really is communication for everyone,” Jamie added. “There’s applicability that goes beyond training and professional settings. Internally we have found we use these strategies in our own work and with family members as well!”