

# Putting Youth Development into Practice: Oregon's Youth Action Research Project

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## Overview of Youth Action Research

Youth Action Research (YAR) trains young people how to design, collect, and interpret data so they can move from being research subjects to agents of change for both policy and practice. YAR is patterned on a citizen engagement model of community-based research with adults. While YAR has been used to inform local community planning, few state governments have explicitly adopted YAR as a method for achieving both evidence-based and participatory policymaking. Oregon's Department of Human Services, interested in producing a Youth Sexual Health State Plan using a participatory yet evidence-centered approach piloted Youth Action Research projects in three Oregon counties. Oregon's Action Research project was sparked by training from Sarah Schulman at Youth Infusion.

### What is Youth Action Research?

1. Adult Definition: In action research, the researcher and participant are one. Knowledge is produced through systematic inquiry, with the collaboration of those affected by education and affecting social change
2. Youth Definition: Action Research is "the truth" as told by youth/communities (their own perspectives, vision, words). The research guides them in their future work together and contributes to "ACTION".

## Youth Research Questions

- What do teens actually know about sex/sexuality compared to what they should know (by state standards)?
- What do teens think they lack in sex/sexuality education?
- Is information about health and sexuality more effective when taught by peers or in a traditional classroom setting?
- How does a teenager's religious community influence his/her sexual decisions?
- What are the key factors that influence a teen in our community to have sex?
- Is there a relationship between teens that do sports and their sexual activity in our community?
- How do high school boys and high school girls' views differ on what age it is okay to have sex for the first time?

## Methods

Oregon's Youth Action Research Pilot Project began with adult training and curriculum development. Staff of the Department of Human Services and members of the Teen Pregnancy Prevention/Sexual Health Partnership Group took part in two all-day workshops facilitated by Sarah Schulman of Youth Infusion. The workshops were designed to introduce participants to the theory and principles behind action research and to educate them in research methods and youth-adult partnerships. Participants subsequently revised the curriculum to better fit the Oregon context and conducted in-house training to review the sequence and content of the amended curriculum. Additional supporting documentation is currently being prepared to help with future replication of the model.

### YAR Models

Three counties were selected to run the Youth Action Research pilot projects. Counties were identified primarily based on their interest and ability to coordinate the project in the agreed timeframe. Two county health departments and one Planned Parenthood organization took the lead. Counties received \$3500 with which to organize the pilot projects, including money for recruitment, youth stipends, and meeting expenses. Pilot projects commenced in the Spring of 2006 and had to be completed by the end of the calendar year. County coordinators received technical support from a staff member of the Oregon Department of Human Services, but independently owned and operated each pilot project.

### All pilot projects shared a set of core features:

- Upperclass high school students were recruited to serve as action researchers
- Action researchers received a small stipend for their participation as well as the ability to use the research results as part of their 'senior project' for graduation
- College students and/or research professionals were recruited from the community to serve as research mentors and guides
- Youth received training in research methods and adolescent sexuality
- Youth developed their own research question and corresponding research design
- Youth navigated local ethics procedures and collected data
- Youth sifted through their findings and developed recommendations
- Youth presented their results and recommendations at a community forum
- Youth turned over their results and recommendations to the Oregon Teen Pregnancy Prevention/Sexual Health Partnership

	Inputs	Outputs	Outcome
Deschutes County	115+ hours of AmeriCorps time	Completed research project ! Completed community forum ! Presentation to state conference	Peer health education practices revised and outreach increased ! Participants reported increase in research and presentation skills and confidence
	120+ hours of volunteer time		
	\$1250 in youth stipends		
	Meeting space & computer equipment		
Jackson County	Food	Completed research project ! Completed community forum ! Presentation to state conference	Healthy teen sexuality curriculum developed for religious community ! Changes in local school's health education course ! Participants reported increase in knowledge
	50+ hours of pro bono staff time		
	120+ hours of volunteer time		
	\$2200 in youth stipends		
Multnomah County	Meeting space & computer equipment	Completed research project ! Completed community forum ! Presentations to 2 state and national conferences	Curriculum changes at local charter school, including a course on training youth as peer resources ! Participants reported increase in research and presentation skills and confidence
	Food		
	120+ hours of pro bono staff time		
	200+ hours of volunteer time		
Oregon DHS	\$2000 in youth stipends	Youth action research curriculum ! 3 completed research projects ! 3 youth-led community forums	Increased local capacity to coordinate action research ! Increased number of local youth advocates ! Developed State Youth Sexual Health Plan
	Meeting space & computer equipment		
	Food		
	\$10,000 for training and curriculum development		
	\$10,500 for three pilots		
	1 FTE staff		

## Selected Results

### What Youth Know about STDs

- Females were more likely to correctly identify STDs than males
- Majority of respondents correctly identified most common STDs
- Majority of respondents knew three most effective ways to prevent pregnancy
- Majority of respondents knew that abstinence (87%) and condoms (60%) prevent STD's

### Youth Recommendations for Teaching Sexual Health in School

- Incorporate Games (Fun small group or class activities)
- Use More Workshops
  - " Led by a trainer who has specialized skills in engaging young people
  - " Techniques for every kind of learner
  - " Activity stations
- Develop Curriculum
  - " Should be supported by State Dept of Education
  - " Age appropriate

Youth are viewed as target audience

**1**

Adults are viewed as authoritarians

Youth are viewed as intermittent resource – the focus group

**2**

Adults are viewed as intermittent advisor – someone to go to in times of need

Youth are viewed as a volunteer source

**3**

Adults are viewed as mentors – someone to learn from in good & bad times.

Youth are viewed as decision-makers, equal partners & agents of social change.

**4**

Adults are viewed as trusted guides & lifelong learners – they both teach and learn from youth.

**5**

Youth Action Research engages youth at the highest levels 