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CONTACT: Amy Kobeta, Communications Director
amyk@childrenfirstpa.org, (347) 607-1058 mobile

WHAT WE LEARNED IN SEX ED: GIRLS NEED OPTIONS *Black and Hispanic girls want culturally relevant sex education*

PHILADELPHIA (September 10, 2021) — When schools opened, there was a lot of discussion around masks and vaccines but little talk about a persistent health issue for teens: pregnancy. That’s a real problem since **Philadelphia’s teen pregnancy rates are the highest in the state, and the Black and Hispanic teen pregnancy rates in Philadelphia are four and six times higher than their White counterparts.**

Children First launched a sex ed program, *Girls With Options*, to fill a gap in Black and Hispanic teens’ knowledge about reproduction and contraceptive methods because what’s being used is clearly not resonating with girls of color. Today they released findings from the program in [*Informed and Empowered: Girls With Options*](#).

A significant finding is that **neither boys nor girls take responsibility for birth control.** Girls expect boys to have condoms since condoms are easy to get and are thought to be a boy’s responsibility; boys expect girls to be on birth control. But nearly every teen girl said they didn’t want to become a mother until turning at least 21.

[*Informed and Empowered: Girls With Options*](#) documents other serious gaps in public health in Philadelphia. Eighty percent of participants said schools should teach comprehensive sex ed, with girls being particularly frustrated that they don’t get enough information on the workings of their own body. Most teens were either not aware of or had misinformation about long-acting reversible contraceptives (LARCs). Increased LARC use is one reason for the remarkable national drop in teen pregnancy rates.

Keeping teens uninformed is not only irresponsible from a public health perspective, it perpetuates the racial gap in education and professional achievement. Two-thirds of Philadelphia School District female students who give birth within four years of starting high school drop out of school.

Another discovery came out of the group settings of the program itself. The facilitators found that teens learn from each other’s questions – some may be too shy to ask a question or may not even

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know enough to ask. The small group setting allowed for open dialogue and spontaneous exchange of information.

Concrete policy recommendations to address teen pregnancy in the city include:

1. **Mount a bold, public health campaign** to remedy the “I am not responsible for contraception.” approach and encourage the use of contraception, particularly by crafting culturally relevant messages to African American and Hispanic youth.
2. **Train staff on biases about teen sexuality and to proactively offer teens the full range of contraceptive options** at health care practices prescribing contraception and reproductive/sexual health organizations.
3. **Increase reproductive, sexual health, and LARC education for girls** through collaboration between the Philadelphia Department of Public Health and the School District of Philadelphia. Replicate the *Girls With Options* group-setting model to facilitate greater conversation.
4. **Engage youth-serving organizations to teach girls to be self-advocates** when it comes to reproductive health.

Under the direction of Dr. Tawanna Jones Morrison of We.REIGN, *Girls With Options* worked with Black girls to develop a sex ed curriculum, had Black women teach it to Black and Hispanic students, and solicited feedback so the program could be fine-tuned and replicated. In addition to teaching family planning, *Girls With Options* facilitators Dr. Morrison and Jazzmin Boyd collected feedback from the 719 participants – 81% girls – about their attitudes toward family planning and life priorities.

Children First is a non-profit, non-partisan organization that works to improve the lives of children in Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery, and Philadelphia counties by developing initiatives and advocating for quality health care, child care, public education, and family stability. Learn more on our website (www.childrenfirstpa.org), and Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (@childrenfirstpa).

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