

Newport News

High school class tackles family, community and global health.

[By Cathy Grimes](#)

757-247-4758

March 27, 2009

NEWPORT NEWS — Remember your high school health class?

Chances are you recall films on hygiene, discussions about hormones and lectures on fitness, nutrition and just saying no to alcohol, drugs and other substance abuse. You probably didn't do a risk assessment of your school, discuss the drawbacks of tattoos and body piercing, or create team projects tackling a global health issue such as famine or AIDS.

Susan Ragan's Woodside High School students do all of those things and more.

"I'd rather have the kids read current articles and answer questions than watch videos," she said. "There's far more discussion and far more activities."

Ragan, a health instructor who recently received a state award for her work, does not have a classroom of her own at the school. She carries her materials on a rolling cart and uses a workroom as her between-classrooms prep space. She focuses on interactivity and timely topics. If it's in the news, it's probably being discussed by her students.

Health education in Newport News high schools is split into two semesters. One semester focuses on personal health, zeroing in on nutrition, fitness, safety and first aid, disease prevention and substance use and abuse.

Ragan's students study family life and community health, with units on decision making, risk taking, emotions and mental health among other topics. Her students don't spend much time turning textbook pages. Instead, they use computers to read current articles and research on health topics.

Their computer work provides a launching point for some of her lessons, such as questioning the credibility of a source, making decisions, and being aware of Internet risks and dangers.

"We ask, 'How credible is that information?'" she said. "It is hard for them to do research. They think it's right there. They don't want to read more than one article."

The 20-year teaching veteran said high school students are more aware of global and public health issues than they were even a decade ago.

"A lot of kids come in with, 'Now I know this, what are we going to do to save the world?'" she said. "For instance, they know about nutrition so they want to feed the world. But there are gaps in what they know."

Ragan focuses on filling those gaps. During lessons on risks and choices, students talk about the leading cause of death for young people. Most are not surprised to learn motor vehicle accidents cause the most teen deaths, but they don't know why.

"They want to say it's drinking and driving, but it's not," she said. "That's 7 percent of it. They don't know the lead cause is speed."

The unit on risks also looks at homicide, the second leading cause of death. Ragan said students assume the murders are related to gangs and are surprised to find eight in 10 teenage homicide victims were killed with firearms. Such statistics fuel classroom discussions about what students can and can't control. She also helps students recognize biases and generalizations: their own and those held by friends and sources.

Because students learn about personal health in other classes, she can broaden the discussion to include consequences and choices. When they discuss body piercing and tattoos, students are surprised to learn they can get diseases from needles.

A talk about pregnancy might cover fetal alcohol syndrome, genetic disorders, heredity and fetal health.

Her class has a broader definition of family than students encountered 20 years ago.

"Your family is what you make it. We talk about single parents, foster parents, adoption, wards of the state, blended families," she said.

But some topics, such as homosexuality, are not covered by the curriculum.

"You have to follow the guidelines," she said. "If the kids do ask, what if, I tell them we look at what info we have."

Ragan follows state and district curriculum guidelines for the topics she covers, which include a unit on health careers. But she would like to expand the school's health program.

"There is so much more I want to do. I'm looking into dual enrollment courses with Thomas Nelson Community College. I want to have a service learning class," she said. "There is so much I'd like to teach and so little time."

21st-century health class discussion topics

- Personal health with a focus on nutrition, fitness, safety and first aid. For example, in a discussion on body piercing and tattoos, students learn they can get diseases from the needles used.
- A talk about pregnancy might cover fetal alcohol syndrome, genetic disorders, heredity and fetal health.
- How to question the credibility of a source, make decisions and be aware of Internet risks and dangers
- Disease prevention and long-term health and wellness
- Links between personal health and community and national health issues

Copyright © 2009, [Newport News, Va., Daily Press](#)