

Lessons learned from spending lots of time in the field

Or

How I learned to stop worrying and love teachers and school administrators regardless of their appreciation for Rape Prevention and Education.

My name is Tom Reardon and I've been doing Rape Prevention and Education since 1997. I'm addicted, yes, to promoting positive societal change and preventing sexual violence in all of its forms. I believe we can stop rape, sexual abuse, and any other label you want to put on sexual violence against men, women, and children. Am I an optimist? Yes, always have been, but my beliefs about sexual violence are not based on optimism. They are based on my theory that people are basically good and want to do good things, but need some help, at times, to find the direction they need to travel in. Rape prevention and education is one way to do this.

This is where things get a bit tricky. In order for us (the fine folks at Casa) to spread the RPEP message, it is necessary to partner with schools and community organizations who work with students in grades seven through twelve. Most of the time, these organizations are happy as heck to have us in their school or community center. We are able to provide valuable information to their students at no charge to them. Not many things of any worth come without a fee to the consumer anymore. All we ask in return is for a relatively small amount of their time. Class time is very valuable in this day and age of standardized testing, but AIMS has yet to cover subjects such as physical education, health, or family and consumer sciences, so we are often partnered with teachers in these subject areas.

Lately, there have been some difficult schools and tough teachers to please. Apparently, not all teachers enjoy giving up their class time to provide sexual violence prevention programs. In our experience, these teachers typically remain silent at their desk during my presentations, going out of their way to avoid eye contact and only provide the least amount of assistance while I am at there school. We usually only need a small amount of assistance with classroom management, for example, and I usually only ask questions about where I can get a decent lunch near the school or what time classes will start on the days with different schedules. We are pretty used to going with the flow while we are guests on a campus, so we don't ask for much.

As in any profession, there are going to be the occasional challenges. Illness sometimes affects our ability to get to every school or cover every class. We are fortunate, at Casa, to have two presenters. Most of the school year we are both scheduled at the same time, usually at different schools, so it is very difficult for us to cover for each other in times of illness, family emergency, or car trouble.

Schools generally understand when these things come up, and we almost always work with schools in order to make up classes in a timely fashion. In May, a teacher loudly and rudely questioned our professionalism in front of another teacher and several students. This was a first for me and I did not exactly know how to handle the situation. I have to admit I was angry. It was my first thought to tell her exactly what professional behavior was and where she could find it if she was flexible enough. I decided, though, to practice what I preach and exercise some anger management. I had a class to teach, anyway, so I left the building and used the three minute walk to compose myself.

After I taught my next two classes, I had a break so I went to my contact person at the school who was the school counselor. I attempted to tell her what happened, but before I could, she interrupted me to start a conversation with another person. My anger was renewed, so I opted again to take the high road and leave for lunch. The counselor responded by yelling at me in the school offices to stay and continued by saying she had a student in her office in "crisis" and didn't want to leave him. Obviously I was horrified at her response. If I were the student in crisis, I don't think I would have wanted the whole office to know about it.

Eventually I met with the school principal and we figured out a way to continue the POWER program without any interference from the offending teacher. This was not the easiest conversation in the world as I was continually patronized by the principal until I reminded him that I did indeed understand why I did my job and that it really is for the children. While I do love my job, I am definitely in it for the money or the prestige. My main concern was for my co-presenter, Raymond, and his ability to finish his presentations in a safe working environment. I reiterated this to the principal and arrangements were made to cover the classes of the teacher in question.

The following are some things I think might help other RPEP program facilitators in similar situations:

1. Meet with your school contact person prior to the presentations and go over a memorandum of understanding. This will help to have everything out in the open in terms of the expectations of the school and the expectations of the presenter.
2. Establish an additional contact at the school, usually a principal or vice-principal you can contact if the previously mentioned contact is unavailable or uncooperative.
3. Meet with teachers prior to presentations to talk about expectations and answer any questions they may have. It may be necessary to remind them you are not necessarily a certified teacher and they have to remain in the classroom at all times. Some teachers take the opportunity of having a guest speaker to go on break. This does not help anyone.

4. Let the school know you are willing to stop the presentation at any time you feel you are not being allowed to do your job in a safe or effective manner. We are guest speakers, typically invited by the school, district, or in some cases, diocese, and we should be treated with the same respect anyone would want in the same situation.
5. Let your supervisor and contract administrator know immediately when you are having difficulty with a teacher, administrator, or community leader. It helps a lot to know your organization understands what is happening and supports your situation.
6. Remember that you are an agent of change and act as such. It would be easy get a little aggressive and tell an offensive teacher or administrator exactly what you think of them, but credibility is our bread and butter and much too valuable to lose over someone else's immaturity.
7. Also remember your message may be making the offending teacher or administrator uncomfortable because they are a survivor of relationship or sexual violence.
8. Lastly, remember to be assertive and stand up for yourself. The odds are good that no one else at the school is going to do this for you. Even if the results of the discussion are not what you had hoped for, if you give the best effort you can, there will be much less to regret.