

## **AIDS**

Essential question: “Who is most at risk of AIDS in Philadelphia and what can we do about it?”

**School:** Grover Washington Jr. Middle School, Philadelphia, PA

**Appropriate for grades:** 7-8

**Year of project:** 2003-2004

**Subjects:** English language arts, math, science, social studies

Students in John Reinhard’s 8<sup>th</sup> grade class saw the documentary video called “Travis,” the story of a six-year-old boy from the Bronx living with HIV/AIDS. They responded strongly to the story and wanted to know: How is he? Where is he? Can we meet him?

Their teacher discovered that Travis Jefferies, 15 at the time, was unwilling to come to Philadelphia or be interviewed. But he was willing to hear from the students, who began an email correspondence with him. In the meantime, they were motivated to learn more about the disease.

The students met a counselor from St. Christopher’s Hospital for Children who works with young people infected with HIV/AIDS. They learned about the weekly medication regimen a young person with AIDS needs to take. They also heard some staggering statistics: 50% of all reported new cases of HIV acquisition are occurring in people under the age of 25, and in Philadelphia, at least 34,000 youth are sexually active and not practicing safe sex consistently. Consequently, a growing number of Philadelphia youth are at high risk for pregnancy and the acquisition and transmission of HIV and other Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs).

After learning about the issues involved, the students created a survey to gather information from their peers at school. Since Mr. Reinhard teaches math, he found a number of ways to integrate math into the data collection and analysis process. The students were eager to apply their new skills. The results they found were not surprising. Seventh and eighth graders surveyed knew little about the issues surrounding HIV and AIDS. Armed with their data, Mr. Reinhard’s students then brainstormed ways to raise awareness about the problem and advocate for testing in schools.

Their investigation showed that Philadelphia public schools did not have a policy

regarding HIV/AIDS testing for students. They then became determined to advocate for the creation of such a policy.

They contacted the Director of Health, Safety and Physical Education for the School District of Philadelphia and invited her to visit their classroom. She accepted their invitation and was impressed with their knowledge of the issues. Unfortunately, she could not guarantee that the District would follow up on their recommendation – a hard lesson for the students in how policymaking often takes time – and perseverance.