The Challenge: Two of the most commonly reported communicable diseases in Wisconsin are the sexually transmitted infections (STIs) chlamydia and gonorrhea. In Winnebago County, about 70 percent of chlamydia infections occur among 15 to 24-year-olds. Research demonstrates that comprehensive sex education delays initiation of sexual activity, reduces the number of partners and increases contraceptive use.

Project Goal: The aims of this project were to develop and pilot a middle school sexual health curriculum based on National Sexuality Education Standards, train health educators to deliver an approved curriculum and measure the impact on student knowledge and risky sexual behavior in comparison with current curricula. Initially, the Oshkosh school district’s sex education curriculum was evaluated for gaps, including a need to focus on identity, pregnancy and reproduction and healthy relationships. Training was provided to health educators in the Oshkosh school district. Two other school districts also attended training.

Results: The group that received comprehensive sexual health education had a higher average score in three focus areas: sexual identity, pregnancy and reproduction and STIs. However, overall there was no significant difference between the new and old curricula for increased knowledge of sexual health.

The new education did significantly affect awareness and the degree of openness toward more diverse sexual identities and gender equality. Students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) are more likely to indicate that they felt sad or helpless, have considered attempting suicide or have actually attempted suicide compared to heterosexual students. This curriculum’s focus on identity offers a potential future strategy to prevent bullying and suicide among LGBTQ students and encourage acceptance of gender differences.

In 2016, the project will present results at the annual meeting of the Midwest Sociological Society and Safe Healthy Strong Conference, and plans to submit a manuscript for publication.