



# **Life-Planning Skills Training: Experiences from a School-Based Program**

**Beijing Family Planning Association**

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**China Youth  
Reproductive Health Project**



**Suggested citation**

Beijing Family Planning Association on behalf of the China Youth Reproductive Health Project. *Life-Planning Skills Training: Experiences from a School-Based Program*. Beijing, China: CFPA and PATH (2005).

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Support for the development of this document was provided by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

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**Abstract:** Beijing was one of 14 China Youth Reproductive Health project sites. This case study describes the collaborative efforts of the Beijing Family Planning Association and the department of education in various schools. It also summarizes the lessons learned from the school-based life-planning skills training.

## 1. Background

China, with its historical and cultural heritage, traditionally has been very conservative about the discussion of sex and related subjects. It will require a long time, perhaps generations, for the Chinese to face such topics with scientific and open views. Providing high quality sex education for young people is one of the best ways to solve this problem, and schools are usually considered the best venues in which to conduct these programs. If every person had access to sexuality and reproductive health education in elementary or middle school, situations in which college students or adults find themselves in desperate need of such knowledge could be eliminated. This is the core belief that motivated the Beijing Family Planning Association (FPA) to document what it learned in a school-based youth reproductive health education program.

Although the project had its successes, it was not without its obstacles. In the beginning, there were mistrust, misconceptions, and various pressures from schools, teachers, parents, and the general community, mainly because people believed that sexuality education would introduce harmful ideas to students, negatively affect their attitudes and behavior, and lead to destructive outcomes. As the project progressed, Beijing FPA, the department of education, and other related agencies worked hard to gain the support of policymakers by inviting relevant officials to the life-planning skills (LPS) training sessions and arranging media coverage to raise awareness among leaders and the community at large. In time, the encouraging results of the project gradually won the recognition and support of adolescents, parents, schools, and society.

At present, 10 of 18 Beijing district governments and the Beijing FPA have jointly issued official documents mandating school-based youth reproductive health education programs. In Haidian District, in particular, the district department of education and family planning agencies have issued five different official documents that include youth reproductive health education in the district government's work plan. This helped establish a strong foundation for widespread institutionalization of the program. The Beijing FPA is committed to ensuring both the continuity and the expansion of the program throughout the city.

The China Youth Reproductive Health (YRH) project, launched by the China Family Planning Association (CFPA) and PATH, was implemented in seven districts of Beijing: Dongcheng, Xicheng, Xuanwu, Chaoyang, Haidian, Shijingshan, and Tongzhou. Between 2000 and the end of 2005, Beijing FPA fully utilized its networks to introduce and promote LPS training in schools, communities, military camps, and penitentiaries. Each of these sites has unique characteristics in terms of the types of education and youth-friendly services provided. Among them, the school-based

youth reproductive health education program, jointly implemented by the Beijing FPA and the department of education, has become one of the defining achievements of the project in Beijing.

## **2. Project experiences**

### **2.1 Significance of the school-based reproductive health education program**

Beijing has 15 million residents, of which approximately 3 million are young people ages 10 to 24. At the end of 2004, the city had 1,504 elementary schools with 516,042 students. Along with 760 middle schools serving 386,511 middle school students and 274,803 high school students, Beijing is also home to 77 vocational/technical schools and their 80,824 students. Furthermore, Beijing has 56 mid-level specialized vocational schools with 113,689 students and 77 higher education institutes with 500,345 students. In summary, Beijing has about 1.87 million in-school youth, which represents over 60 percent of the adolescent population in the city.

As the springboard for the future of young people, school-based education is the starting point for many important life events. Using schools as the venues for LPS training has many advantages. Perhaps most importantly, integrating LPS training materials and methods into the school system's teaching plan can ensure sustainability of the LPS approach, allowing new generations of students to participate beyond the life of a project.

Project staff conducted a participatory learning and action (PLA) formative research exercise with parents and young people from December 2000 to January 2001. PLA participants considered 10 to 15 years of age as the opportune age group in which young people should receive sexuality education and school as the best place for this to occur. Another youth reproductive health education needs assessment survey, conducted in May 2005 with 2,091 fifth- and sixth-grade students and 919 parents from three elementary schools randomly selected in Haidian District, revealed over 80 percent support of the idea of providing youth reproductive health education in the schools.

School-based reproductive health education started in Beijing in the 1980s, when Middle School Number 25 in Dongcheng District introduced a "boys' class" and a "girls' class" as a form of sexuality education. In 1998, with support from the United Nation's Population Fund (UNFPA), CFPA conducted youth reproductive health education programs in QingHuan University, the China People's University, and the Capital Normal University. This program provided valuable experience useful for future school-based reproductive health education programs.

## **2.2 Implementation of the life-planning skills training**

### **2.2.1 Advocating for support from the department of education**

In order to implement a school-based reproductive health education program, consent and support from “gatekeepers” (e.g., school principals, moral education directors, and faculty members) is essential. From the beginning, the Beijing FPA established partnerships with the department of education, a member of the FPA board, and individual schools. The FPA coordinated policy changes to promote unified actions by the FPA and the department of education. For example, in Haidian District, after the project was launched in mid-2000, one of the first measures was to coordinate with the department of education, gaining its support by inviting officials in 2001 to visit school-based project sites in Shanghai. After thorough preparation, the district FPA went to Shanghai with the officials, where all were impressed by that program’s approach and outcomes. Immediately after the trip, the Beijing Department of Family Planning, the FPA, and the Sex Education Research Association submitted *Suggestions for Conducting Reproductive Health Education in Haidian District*. In April 2001, an official document, *Framework of the Pilot Reproductive Health Education Program in Haidian District*, was jointly issued by the department of family planning, the FPA, the department of education, and the All China Women’s Federation, carefully defining each department’s work plan and responsibilities. To disseminate the document and its agreements, Haidian District conducted a governmental conference to mobilize local agencies and schools to participate in the reproductive health education program, signing contracts with nine individual schools to start the pilot program. During this conference, Mr. Zhao Jianzhong, vice-governor of Haidian District and director of the district FPA, said, “We are doing an important project that will benefit generations to come. Youth reproductive health education will not only ensure the healthy physical and mental development of adolescents but will also positively influence their whole life. As a government-implemented project, the district government hopes to see a close partnership among the FPA, department of education, and the women’s federation, for that is the only way to guarantee high quality project implementation.”

### **2.2.2 Promoting life-planning skills training among gatekeepers**

Although actively reaching out to gain support from the department of education was effective to some degree, the partnership also faced pressures from a variety of parties, particularly in the beginning. When FPA staff conducted a pilot program at Middle School Number 8 at the beginning of 2002, school leaders and many teachers expressed concern, worried that sexual and reproductive health education could negatively affect students’ academic performances by distracting them from their studies, introducing “bad ideas” to them, or drawing opposition from parents.

Instructor Gong Baohua, one of the teachers who had received project training in participatory facilitation techniques, understood the content and approaches needed for LPS training. She proposed a daring plan to first conduct a pilot project with her own class, and she was willing to

assume punitive consequences if the plan caused any trouble. The LPS training did not bring trouble to her class; rather, teachers from other classes observed continued strong academic performance, while the interactions between boys and girls in her class became more relaxed and friendly. Many students asked to be included in the training program; thus, the program spread to the whole school. In April 2003, Beijing television reported on the LPS training program at the school, bringing further encouragement to students, teachers, and school leaders, and positive reactions from the community.

Luxun Middle School is another good example of how the project expanded. The school designated only two eighth-grade classes as pilot project sites. At the end of 2002, the women's federation conducted a youth reproductive health education field assessment, and the school principal wanted to include these two classes in the assessment. However, the assessment was double-blind; school teachers were not allowed to participate in the process. This made the principal very anxious, since he had no control over what the students would say or do or how their input would affect the school's reputation. After the assessment team departed, the principal had access to recorded interviews, through which he learned of the growing interest in and need for reproductive health education among students. The students' requests deeply affected the principal, and as a result, he expanded the LPS training to cover the whole school.

In order to gain support from gatekeepers, the municipal FPA oriented them to the purpose and content of the LPS training. By the end of the pilot phase of the program in 2002, the municipal FPA had advocated for the program throughout the city via demonstration classes. In West District, for example, the FPA invited principals from all district middle schools to attend LPS training presentations and hear about the pilot program. In this way, leaders from the department of education and individual schools gained dynamic knowledge and understanding of the LPS training and fully supported the program. After the presentation, a moral education teacher from Middle School Number 54 said, "One interactive class session is better than a whole semester of preaching."

### **2.2.3 Quality training of life-planning skills training facilitators**

After carefully and successfully carrying out this advocacy, the district FPA shifted its emphasis to the facilitator training program, in collaboration with the department of education. In April 2004 and March 2005, the West District FPA and the department of education carried out two training programs, inviting the co-directors of the department of education and all principals, moral education directors, and program-related faculty from the 48 schools in the district. An official district document, *Implementation Suggestions to Expand Youth Reproductive Health Education in Middle Schools*, was jointly issued by the West District department of health, the FPA, and the department of family planning in April 2004. Armed with this full consent and the support of the department of education, the project was able to quickly expand to all 48 schools in the district.

The team's strategy was to provide training for facilitators first, helping them to understand the project scheme and to grasp participatory facilitation methodologies. This was particularly important because the LPS facilitators in the pilot phase were pioneers, promoting the project methodologies and content in prototype classes meant to influence the larger population and lay the groundwork for expansion of the project to more schools and sites.

Since the beginning of the project in 2000, the Beijing FPA has conducted seven large-scale facilitator training workshops, attracting more than 460 teachers. Seven individual districts have also carried out refresher training programs for facilitators and organized numerous prototype classes and workshops so that teachers could interact with other facilitators, exchange ideas and experiences, and conduct joint problem solving.

#### ***2.2.4 Institutionalization of the facilitator training program***

School leaders, faculty, and students have gradually accepted the project over time. However, policy support from the department of education is critical to ensure sustainability of the program by mandating that enough class time be devoted to the training, the inclusion of LPS training materials in standard textbooks, and the establishment of effective faculty training schedules.

In September 2002, the Haidian District department of education and the FPA issued an official policy, *Implementation Suggestions for Conducting Youth Reproductive Health Education in Haidian District*, which outlined specific standards and a detailed implantation plan. The document mandated 50 hours each semester of reproductive health education as a course requirement and specified evaluation procedures and training requirements for faculty members facilitating LPS training. Starting in 2002, the Haidian District department of education and the FPA organized training camps for reproductive health teachers during every school vacation. The department of education sponsored these training sessions, and the FPA provided master facilitators to conduct the sessions and organized and disseminated all the materials.

In order to make the project more practical, Haidian and Xuanwu Districts have also individually arranged to produce suitable reproductive health textbooks for middle school and high school students, as well as for their parents. Xuanwu District has also included youth reproductive health education in its pre-service teacher training program, as part of the required 42 hours of practical training necessary to obtain a teaching certificate.

#### ***2.2.5 Influencing policymakers and promoting the project***

Strong advocacy for a favorable social environment for youth reproductive health education through various media channels is one of the key successes of the project. The project team worked with the media to publish or broadcast over a thousand news items on television, radio, and in publications managed by China's central and Beijing municipal government agencies. For instance, in 2002, China Central Television's (CCTV) *Big Wind Mill* program broadcast a discussion of issues related to puberty among middle school students from Haidian District. In

2004, CCTV's economic channel produced a panel discussion program with representatives of Huanxia Girls' Middle School, covering the dating and marriage topics from the LPS training. In another CCTV program, *Complex Youth*, students from Middle School Number 4 discussed the reproductive health and contraceptive topics included in the LPS training. Other television broadcast topics included "Discussing sex with children" and "Questions encountered by adolescent boys." One Beijing television station did a live broadcast during prime time of youth reproductive health education activities at Beijing's Middle School Number 8.

The municipal department of family planning worked with a leading Beijing radio station to produce a youth reproductive health program that aired as part of the *Private Conversations at Night* program. Over time, these advocacy efforts created an enabling social atmosphere for implementing youth reproductive health education.

### **2.2.6 Policy support for institutionalization of school-based youth reproductive health education**

Positive policy support is key to ensuring the sustainability of the project's approaches.

The supportive policy documents issued by the government go beyond advocacy for school-based reproductive health education to outline concrete regulations for implementation, choice of pilot sites, expansion plans, and evaluation and reporting systems. As an example, in 2001, the Haidian District department of education

The FPA and department of education in ten counties in the Beijing municipal area—Xuanwu, Xicheng, Chongwen, Chaoyang, Haidian, Shijinshan, Dongzhou, Huairou, Mentougou, and Yanqing—jointly issued official policy documents that institutionalized youth reproductive health education program in 240 schools.

and the department of family planning issued an official policy document entitled, *Framework for Conducting Sex and Reproductive Health Education Pilot Programs with Haidian Middle School Students*. In 2002, they issued a more detailed policy, *Implementation Guidelines for Conducting Youth Reproductive Health Education in Haidian District*, and, in May 2004, released "Notice of Full Expansion of the Youth Reproductive Health Education and Declaration Honoring Schools and Teachers Excelling in Youth Reproductive Health Education. Finally, in 2005, they issued *Evaluation of the Youth Reproductive Health Education Programs* to ensure thorough reporting of project outcomes and continued quality improvements. These five official documents ensured government support for program activities, greatly facilitating the staff's work by guiding program implementation and institutionalizing proven approaches.

In 2004, the Central Communist Party Committee and the State Council issued an important policy document, *Recommendations to Strengthen and Improve Moral Education Among Minors*, affirming that youth reproductive health is a very important part of adolescents' moral education. This policy led a variety of government agencies to lend their support to the project.



The department of family planning, the FPA, and the department of education continue to work together to encourage more districts and counties in the Beijing municipal area to issue supportive policies and implementation plans. The effort these partners put into advocacy and policy support have direct impact on the institutionalization and long-term sustainability of school-based youth reproductive health education in Beijing.

### **3. Results**

Over the five-year project period, 2.16 million adolescent students from Beijing attended 53,000 school-based LPS training sessions of approximately 1.5 hours each. A total of 460 teachers participated in 7 courses of LPS facilitator training. The local FPA and the departments of education of 10 districts jointly issued 18 official documents in support of school-based youth reproductive health education, and 240 schools in Beijing institutionalized the program. In addition, 16 youth-friendly clinics throughout the Beijing municipal area served 36,000 adolescents.

Teachers who received the LPS facilitator training reported using the interactive, participatory methods in their daily teaching activities, noticeably improving overall teaching quality.

### **4. Difficulties and challenges**

Although the project has influenced a large number of local leaders and policymakers, the lack of participation and support from the highest leadership levels, such as the national department of education and policymakers from provincial and national governments, has delayed fulfillment of the widest institutionalization of youth reproductive health education. The central government needs to explicitly support such programming to build on local accomplishments.

The project has achieved many successes and raised society awareness of the importance of the issue. Yet, uprooting longstanding tradition, altering conservative views toward youth reproductive health education, and genuinely improving Chinese adolescents' reproductive health status will require a demanding long-term commitment.

## 5. Future plans

School-based youth reproductive health education has proven to be feasible. The Beijing team is committed to the following:

- **Including youth reproductive health education in the regular work plans of the family planning agencies**

In 2005, the department of family planning established a coordination mechanism that includes the FPA, advocacy services, technical departments, and clinics to ensure high quality education and services. In the future, LPS facilitator training programs, workshops, and demonstration classes will be part of this group's yearly work plans.

- **Expanding the project**

Only 7 of 18 districts and counties in the municipality participated in the project (although 10 districts issued supportive policies based on project advocacy). The team commits to expand the project approaches to the remaining seven districts and four counties, ultimately covering the whole city.

- **Continuing to obtain financial support from the city government**

The 2006 municipal budget includes 350,000RMB (approximately US\$43,680) to cover the costs of including reproductive health education in regular work plans.

The China Youth Reproductive Health project introduced new concepts and methodologies that improved the delivery of youth reproductive health education and services in Beijing and throughout China. As the current project draws to an end, the team is committed to redoubling its efforts to ensure both the expansion and sustainability of youth reproductive health education.