

“Many students came to me, begging for LoveSmart to come back next year!”

As a school counselor for Jersey City and a mental health clinician for several counties, I believe that the best way to help someone make the best decision for themselves is to provide them with as much information as possible. Too often, people will make life-changing decisions without weighing the pros and cons of the situations or even knowing what other options there could be for them out there.

Our adolescents are constantly being bombarded with different messages and suggestions of how to be cool and respected by their peers but not by their own standards and definitely not how to respect themselves. They are always changing themselves to fit into a mold that they believe society wants them to be in and oftentimes, it's not a respectful or sustainable lifestyle. Our adolescents are being shown things in the media that aren't indicative of real life, but they are unable to know that because they don't understand the number of things that are photoshopped and manufactured to look and be a certain way.

Enter the *LoveSmart* Program provided by the Institute for Relationship Intelligence. This program provided my school's sixth, seventh, and eighth graders with in-depth information about love and relationships in a straightforward and fun (but no nonsense) way that my students could truly engage in and understand.

Our coordinator, Ms. Julie Edwards, patiently and painstakingly addressed every single concern or question the students had and was able to present the information in a way that commanded respect but conveyed true dedication to her craft and to ensuring that the students got everything that the program had to offer.

Ms. Julie empowered my students with the knowledge, skills and confidence to make decisions about their bodies, love and relationships based on their own terms not what they thought society wanted them to do. Through interactive activities, personal assignments, and incredibly informative and decorative PowerPoints, the *LoveSmart* Program gave my students the ability to really take control of their own destinies and live a respectful, informative risk-free life. Soon after our program tenure ended, I had many students come to me, begging for Ms. Julie and *LoveSmart* to come back next year so they could learn more about taking care of themselves and successfully securing their future.

I personally cannot thank Ms. Julie and the *LoveSmart* Program enough for the positive things that they have brought to my school and to my students. To see them so proud of themselves and what they have learned and can also incorporate into their lives makes my job even more worthwhile. **I believe that every school with the appropriate grades should do the *LoveSmart* program. The change that can be seen with the students is inspiring and you'll want to keep passing that on year after year.**

Sincerely,
Ronieka Thomas, Guidance Counselor
Jersey City Public Schools
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