BRONX — Bronx teenagers are trying to take control of their own sexual health — advocating for a broadening of the curriculum to cover more of the issues that young people face.

Members of the social justice group BronxWorks launched a campaign this year called #Enforcethemandate, which they hope will improve sexual education in New York's public schools.

The movement stems from a belief that the city is not enforcing its rules about teaching sex ed.

New York City requires schools to teach sex ed, according to the Department of Education's website. Students are required to receive the curriculum for one semester in middle and high schools.

However, the DOE has not mandated a specific curriculum for schools and parents can opt out on certain subjects, like birth control. They cannot opt out of lessons on anatomy, abstinence,
HIV and pregnancy avoidance.

BronxWorks' Sexual Health Youth Leaders say this model is too vague.

"It just tells you that you need to have a basic understanding of sexual health, which is not enough for kids," said 18-year-old Rocio Perez, who is taking part in the campaign.

Although schools can choose their own curriculum for sex ed, there are state health education standards, said DOE spokeswoman Marge Feinberg. The state also offers a guidance document for meeting its standards that the city DOE uses in training and recommends to teachers.

BronxWorks, based in Morrisanina, is coming up with recommendations for standards of its own that members would like the public school system to adopt.

Members emphasized that it is not enough for students to just learn about STDs. They should also be given more guidance about subjects like healthy relationships and how to handle sexual pressure.

"It's not as easy as telling the kids, 'Break up with someone,'" said Sherrise Palomino, the sexual health education coordinator at BronxWorks. "A lot of kids feel pressured. They're afraid to break up with a person, so they're going to give in to some of the pressures because they don't have the skills to be able to navigate it."

The group's campaign has three main components: the community outreach committee works on connecting with adults through forums like community board and tenant association meetings; the education committee works on coming up with the standards for sex ed; and the social media committee works on connecting with teenagers through sites like Facebook and Instagram.

Members said they have seen the negative impacts of a lack of sexual education on their peers firsthand, and they believe being teenagers themselves has helped make them uniquely qualified to work on reforming this topic, as it is easier for adolescents to relate to and listen to them.

Zahraa Lopez, 16, said issues like teen pregnancy tend to have the greatest impact on the young black and Latina demographic.

"Who's better to represent that than us, since we're a part of it?" she said.

Lopez argued that sex ed was not presented to parents in a positive light.

"Some parents don't want their children to learn about sex because they think that the school is encouraging them to have sex, but it's not that," she said. "We're trying to prevent anything like STDs and pregnancy in case they decide to, because it's unrealistic to think that no high school kids are going to have sex."

BronxWorks has met with the legislative director for City Councilman and Health Committee Chair Corey Johnson to discuss its ideas, and his team was receptive, the group said. Once
members complete their recommendations for standards, they will give them to City Council, which they hope will then approach the DOE, according to Palomino.

Johnson's office did not respond to requests for comment.

John Espaillat, 19, said he was happy to be part of BronxWorks, as it allowed him to take part in something bigger than himself.

"Growing up in the community and just promoting sexual health education and just getting all the teenagers just like us just to know about sexual health is amazing," he said.