

SUPPORT AND IMPLEMENT COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN LOCAL SCHOOLS





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Comprehensive sexuality education is a lifelong learning process that addresses issues related to sexual development, reproductive health, interpersonal relationships, affection, intimacy, and gender roles. The goal of comprehensive, school-based sexuality education is to help young people gain a healthy view of sexuality, provide them with sexual health information, and empower them to make sound decisions now and in the future.¹ Providing young people with information about sexual and reproductive health is important because most young people engage in sexual activity for the first time during adolescence.² Evaluations of comprehensive sexuality education, HIV-prevention, and adolescent pregnancy-prevention programs have shown that these programs delay the onset of intercourse, reduce the frequency of intercourse, decrease the number of sexual partners, and increase condom and contraceptive use.³ Comprehensive sexuality education programs provide an important strategy for creating healthy communities for young people in urban areas.

THE NEED FOR COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION

Adolescents are in need of comprehensive reproductive and sexual health information and services to help prevent unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). In 2001, more than 811,000 U.S. women under the age of 20 became pregnant and 82% of those pregnancies were unintended.⁴ Each year, over nine million teens and young adults are diagnosed with STIs.⁵ A recent nationally representative study from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that one in four teenage girls has a sexually transmitted infection.⁶ Comprehensive sexuality education is an important component of preventing unintended teen pregnancies, the spread of HIV and other STIs.

In addition to educating young people about reproductive and sexual health, comprehensive sexuality education

programs teach students about sexual identity and sexual orientation. These lessons can provide valuable support and information for teens who may be exploring and questioning their own sexuality, as well as create an environment that dispels the perpetuation of homophobia by removing stigma and building knowledge. Traditional abstinence-only programs inherently alienate LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning) teens by promoting heterosexual marriage as the only acceptable family structure. This message also ostracizes students from divorced and single-parent families. Comprehensive sexuality education provides students with critical information about healthy relationships and healthy sexuality, which is much needed in light of the high rates of dating violence present in teen relationships.

PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION

Recognizing the need for reproductive health information, an overwhelming majority of American adults (89%) support sex education that includes information about contraceptives and STI prevention.⁷ In addition, major medical associations across the country have expressed their support for comprehensive sexuality education, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, American Medical Association, American Public Health Association, and Society for Adolescent Medicine.⁸

Unfortunately, despite vast public support and research showing their effectiveness, comprehensive sexuality education programs are not employed in many of our cities'

schools. Instead, abstinence-only programs that either do not teach about contraception or provide misinformation have proliferated over the past decade. Under the George W. Bush administration, over 1.5 billion state and federal dollars were spent on abstinence-only programs.⁹ Despite their prevalence, numerous research studies, including a federally funded study authorized by Congress, have proven abstinence-only programs to be ineffective by demonstrating that they do not prevent young people from engaging in sexual intercourse.¹⁰ As of August 2008, twenty-five states had refused federal abstinence-only funding.¹¹ Fortunately, it is widely expected that federal funding for comprehensive sexuality education and teen pregnancy prevention programs will be available in 2010.



RECOMMENDATIONS TO SUPPORT AND IMPLEMENT COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN LOCAL SCHOOLS

Political support at the local level for comprehensive sexual health information and services is essential to the health and well-being of young people and the community as a whole. Each state and county has a unique set of laws, regulations, and funding sources regarding sexuality education. Some states mandate comprehensive sexuality education, some require that abstinence be stressed or that curricula be medically accurate and comprehensive if taught at all, and some are silent on the issue. Beyond the point of what curriculum is mandated or recommended, individual principals and teachers vary greatly in the content they teach. The variations between state, county, and school board policies, and their complicated relationship to each other, make it necessary for advocates to be well informed and to strategically target appropriate decision-makers. Ultimately, local activists and local policymakers are well positioned to respond to the unique and complex set of policies determining and regulating sexuality education and funding in their school districts.

WE CALL ON LOCAL LEADERS TO SUPPORT AND IMPLEMENT COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN LOCAL SCHOOLS BY:

Creating, implementing, and enforcing local policies that require comprehensive sexuality education within local school districts. School-based sexuality education is a lifelong lesson that develops a broad range of knowledge and skills. In addition to providing necessary information to combat rising teen pregnancy rates, comprehensive programs also target critical issues in the lives of young people. Comprehensive programs include not only information on preventing pregnancy and STIs, but also on how to communicate more effectively, develop healthy relationships, and boost self-esteem. This information extends beyond the confines of a school day and truly prepares students with the knowledge they need to make informed and healthy choices throughout their lives.

- We urge local elected officials to enact legislation mandating and supporting medically accurate comprehensive sexuality education.
- We urge local officials to collaborate with advocacy groups to implement a comprehensive sexuality education model for students of all ages that targets issues facing younger adolescents, such as peer pressure, healthy body image, and media messaging.
- We urge local officials to ensure implementation by adopting guidelines that schools can use to measure the quality of and evaluate their sexuality education programs.

Supporting local efforts that encourage parents to provide sexuality education and coordinating these efforts with school-based curricula. The most effective comprehensive sexuality education involves not only a school-based program but parents as well. Research has proven the success of parental involvement—when parents tell their teenager to wait, their son or daughter is more likely to delay sexual activity.¹²

- We urge local officials to support school boards and parents in implementing programs focused on improving parent-child communication and educating parents with the latest health information.

LOCAL EXAMPLES:

- **Chicago** has created local guidelines to ensure that students receive comprehensive sexuality education that is medically accurate and age-appropriate despite a state policy that requires an emphasis on abstinence.
- When the mayor of Cleveland called for comprehensive sex education in **Cleveland public schools** to combat the rising number of HIV cases, the Collaborative for Comprehensive School Age Health, a diverse coalition of stakeholders, worked with the Metropolitan School District to develop and institute a comprehensive sex education plan that relied on the CDC's Healthy People 2010 goals for the city's entire student body.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), "Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education."
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- 5 Hillard Weinstock, Stuart Berman, and Willard Cates, "Sexually Transmitted Diseases Among American Youth: Incidence and Prevalence Estimates, 2000," *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* 36, no. 1 (2004): 6–10.
- 6 Sara E. Forhan, "Prevalence of Sexually Transmitted Infections and Bacterial Vaginosis Among Female Adolescents in the United States: Data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) 2003–2004," The 2008 National STD Prevention Conference (Chicago: March 10–13, 2008), <http://cdc.confex.com/cdc/std2008/techprogram/P14888.HTM> (accessed May 31, 2009).
- 7 Hickman-Brown Public Opinion Research, "Public Support for Sexuality Education Reaches Highest Levels" (Washington, DC: Advocates for Youth, 1999).
- 8 Jonathan D. Klein and the Committee on Adolescence, "Adolescent Pregnancy: Current Trends and Issues," *Pediatrics* 116, no. 1 (July 2005): 281–286; "Sexuality Education for Children and Adolescents," *Pediatrics* 108, no. 2 (August 2001): 498–502; American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, "Teens Need Comprehensive Reproductive Health Care, Sex Ed," http://www.acog.org/from_home/publications/press_releases/nr05-04-09-2.cfm (accessed June 11, 2009); American Medical Association, "Report 7 of the Council on Scientific Affairs: Sexuality Education, Abstinence, and Distribution of Condoms in Schools" (Chicago: American Medical Association, 1999); American Public Health Association, "Sexuality Education As Part Of a Comprehensive Health Education Program in K-12 Schools" (Washington, D.C.: American Public Health Association, 2005), <http://www.apha.org/advocacy/policy/policysearch/default.htm?id=1304> (accessed June 11, 2009).
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- 10 Christopher Trenholm and others, "Impacts of Four Title V, Section 510 Abstinence Education Programs, Final Report" (Princeton: Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., April 2007), <http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/publications/PDFs/impactabstinence.pdf> (accessed June 4, 2009).
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- 12 The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, *Parent Power: What Parents Need to Know and Do to Help Prevent Teen Pregnancy* (Washington, DC: National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2003), <http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/pdf/pubs/ParentPwr.pdf> (accessed August 26, 2009).



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