



Americans Support Responsible Sex Education

One of the most striking disparities between public opinion and public policy relates to “abstinence-only” programs. The public overwhelmingly supports age-appropriate, comprehensive sex education, yet anti-choice policymakers have increasingly promoted restrictive abstinence-only programs that censor information about contraception and STD/HIV prevention strategies. For instance, federal abstinence-only programs have received more than \$1.5 billion in taxpayer dollars, and the Bush administration requested an unprecedented \$204 million in funding for FY’09.¹ Yet no federal program exists for traditional, honest sex education that teaches young people about both abstinence and contraception.² This focus on abstinence-only programs is in direct contradiction to parents’ wishes, the clear majority of whom want their children to have medically accurate, age-appropriate sex education.

Americans Overwhelmingly Support Sex Education

- The vast majority of Americans has consistently supported sex education in schools:
 - A 2004 poll revealed that only seven percent of Americans believe teachers should not provide sex education in schools.³
 - A 2002 study revealed that 90 percent of the “engaged” public⁴ supports age-appropriate and medically accurate sex education for all students beginning in the early grades and continuing through high school.⁵
 - A 1999 public opinion survey found that 93 percent of Americans support teaching sex education to high school students, while 84 percent support sex education for junior high school students.⁶
- Ninety-nine percent of Americans believe it is appropriate for young people to have information about STDs, and 94 percent of Americans think it is appropriate to teach young people about birth control.⁸
- More than eight in 10 Americans believe that young people should be taught how to use and where to obtain contraceptives (86 percent). Americans also want schools to cover “real-life issues,” such as how to deal with the potential consequences of having sex (94 percent) and the emotional consequences of being sexually active (94 percent).⁹

Did you know?

A 1998 Gallup poll revealed that an overwhelming majority of public-school parents believe that sex education should be a part of the high-school curriculum, with support steadily increasing since 1981.⁷

- When given the opportunity to remove their children from sex-education classes, no more than one to five percent of parents actually do so.¹⁰

Americans Oppose “Abstinence-Until-Marriage” Programs

- Seven in 10 Americans oppose the use of federal funds to promote abstinence-only programs that censor information about condoms and contraception.¹¹
- Only 14 percent of Americans think that schools should teach abstinence-only programs and withhold information about condoms and other types of contraception.¹²
- Only 13 percent of adults believe that “teaching teenagers to abstain from sex until marriage is extremely realistic.”¹³

Americans Recognize the Public-Health Needs for Sex Education

- Nine in 10 Americans find the following arguments in favor of sex education convincing:
 - “The AIDS epidemic means that young people can die from sexual intercourse. They need information to protect themselves”;
 - “Schools need to supplement what parents teach at home so kids have full information about contraception, sexually transmitted diseases, HIV, and AIDS”;
 - “Young people are having sexual intercourse and they need to have information to protect themselves.”¹⁴

Leading Medical and Educational Organizations Support Responsible Sex Education

- More than 140 national organizations support comprehensive sex education, including: American Academy of Pediatrics, American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, American Medical Association, American Public Health Association, National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, National Education Association, National Medical Association, National School Boards Association, and Society for Adolescent Medicine.¹⁵
- The National Academy of Sciences’ Institute of Medicine has criticized funding of abstinence-only programs, stating, “[I]nvesting hundreds of millions of dollars of federal and state funds over five years in abstinence-only programs with no evidence of effectiveness constitutes poor fiscal and public health policy.”¹⁶
- In October 2006, the United States General Accountability Office (GAO) served notice to the Bush administration that per an existing law, literature distributed by federally funded abstinence-only programs must contain medically accurate information about the effectiveness of condoms in preventing sexually transmitted diseases. In a letter to Michael Leavitt, secretary of Health and

Human Services (HHS), the GAO dismissed a baseless Bush administration claim that materials provided by such programs did not fall within the scope of the law, which was passed in 2000. The GAO recommended “that HHS reexamine its position and adopt measures to ensure that, where applicable, abstinence education materials comply with this requirement.”¹⁷

- In 2001, then-U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher endorsed responsible sex education that includes information on both abstinence and contraception. Recognizing that abstinence-only programs have not been proven effective, the Surgeon General concluded that programs covering both abstinence and contraception have demonstrated positive results in delaying sexual activity and increasing contraceptive use.¹⁸

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Notes:

¹ U.S. Dep't of Health & Human Services (HHS), *FY 2009 Budget in Brief*, at 6 (2008); Office of Management & Budget, *FY 2009 Budget of the U.S. Government*, at 66 (2008).

² Alan Guttmacher Institute (AGI), *Facts in Brief: Sexuality Education* (Aug. 2002); Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), *Issues and Answers: Fact Sheet on Sexuality Education*, at 4 (Aug./Sept. 2001), at http://www.siecus.org/pubs/fact/FS_issues_answers.pdf (last visited Nov. 13, 2007).

³ National Public Radio et al., *Sex Education in America*, General Public/Parents Survey (Jan. 2004).

⁴ “Engaged” public was defined as individuals who said they were likely to vote in the 2002 Congressional elections; who had voted in all or most of the elections in which they had been eligible to vote; who read the newspaper daily; who participate in a volunteer, community, civic, or political organization at least once a month; who pay attention to politics and government; and who would write a letter to their member of Congress on an issue that concerned them. The Othmer Institute, *Mobilizing Support for Sex Education: New Messages & Techniques* (June 2002 presentation, National Coalition to Support Sexuality Education meeting, June 13, 2002).

⁵ The Othmer Institute, *Mobilizing Support for Sex Education: New Messages & Techniques* (June 2002 presentation, National Coalition to Support Sexuality Education meeting, June 13, 2002).

⁶ Data from public opinion survey conducted by Hickman-Brown Public Opinion Research for Advocates for Youth and SIECUS (Mar. 1999).

⁷ Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll, *The 30th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools*, at <http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/kp9809-3a.htm> (last visited Nov. 13, 2007).

⁸ National Public Radio et al., *Sex Education in America*, General Public/Parents Survey (Jan. 2004).

⁹ National Public Radio et al., *Sex Education in America*, General Public/Parents Survey (Jan. 2004).

¹⁰ Debra W. Haffner & Diane de Mauro, *Winning the Battle: Developing Support for Sexuality and HIV/AIDS Education*, at 42 (1991).

¹¹ Press Release, Advocates for Youth & SIECUS, *Public Support for Sexuality Education Reaches Highest Level: New Poll Reveals Public Health Issues Compel Overwhelming Majority of Americans To Support Sexuality Education That Includes Abstinence and Contraception Information* (June 2, 1999).

¹² Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc., “Memorandum: Application of Research Findings,” Planned Parenthood Federation of America and National Women’s Law Center (July 12, 2007).

¹³ Data from national survey conducted by Bruskin/Goldring Research sponsored by the *Durex Truth for Youth™* campaign (Sept. 1997).

¹⁴ Data from public opinion survey conducted by Hickman-Brown Public Opinion Research for Advocates for Youth and SIECUS (Mar. 1999).

¹⁵ SIECUS, *The National Coalition to Support Sexuality Education*, at <http://www.ncsse.org/organizations.html> (last visited Nov. 13, 2007); National Education Association (NEA), *NEA 2000-2001 Resolutions, B-39. Sex Education*; The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, *Legislative Activity: About Our Public Policy Program*, at <http://www.teenpregnancy.org/about/abtpubpol.asp> (last visited Nov. 13, 2007).

¹⁶ Committee on HIV Prevention Strategies in the United States, Institute of Medicine, *NO TIME TO LOSE: GETTING MORE FROM HIV PREVENTION 119-20* (Monica S. Ruiz et al. eds., 2001).

¹⁷ Letter from Gary L. Keppinger, General Counsel, United States General Accountability Office, to Michael O. Leavitt, Secretary, United States Department of Health and Human Services, *Abstinence Education: Applicability of Section 317P of the Public Health Service Act*, (Oct. 18, 2006).

¹⁸ The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Promote Sexual Health and Responsible Sexual Behavior (July 9, 2001), at <http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/sexualhealth/call.htm> (last visited Nov. 13, 2007).