



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 in the past decade.¹ Thankfully, three years ago, Congress and President Obama ended two of the three federal “abstinence-only” programs and for a short time the third program sunsetted as well, but unfortunately, anti-choice lawmakers succeeded in reviving the third program in the health-care-reform law. 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.²
 - 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 2010 poll shows that 73 percent of adults and 46 percent of teens believe that young people should receive information about abstinence and contraception.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.⁷
- 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).⁸

Did you know?

A 2008 Zogby International poll of parents in Washington, D.C., the U.S. city with the highest HIV and STD rates, showed an overwhelming 93 percent of parents in support of age-appropriate comprehensive sex education that includes information about both abstinence and contraception.³

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.⁹
- Only 14 percent of Americans think that schools should teach abstinence-only programs and withhold information about condoms and other types of contraception.¹⁰
- A 2006 study concluded that Americans, regardless of political ideology, favor a more balanced approach to sex education, compared to “abstinence-only” programs.¹¹

Americans Across Party Lines Support Sex Education

- Americans from diverse political backgrounds support sex education, when such programs are comprehensive in scope:
 - Seventy-six percent of Independents and 62 percent of Republicans believe the government should support sex-education programs that provide information about abstinence, contraception, and sexually transmitted diseases.¹²
 - Two-thirds of Republicans and Independents prefer a candidate who supports comprehensive sex education over a candidate who supports “abstinence-only” programs.¹³

Americans Recognize the Public-Health Needs for Sex Education

- More than 80 percent of Americans believe that comprehensive sex-education programs, which emphasize abstinence but also encourage condom and contraceptive use, should be implemented in school.¹⁴
- 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”; and
 - “Young people are having sexual intercourse and they need to have information to protect themselves.”¹⁵

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.¹⁶

- 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."¹⁷
- 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."¹⁸
- 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.¹⁹

January 1, 2012

Notes:

¹ SIECUS. State Profiles: A Portrait of Sexuality Education and Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Programs in the States (2010), at <http://www.siecus.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=Page.ViewPage&PageID=1263> (last visited on Oct. 24, 2011). 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 National Public Radio et al., *Sex Education in America*, General Public/Parents Survey (Jan. 2004).

³ Scott Swenson, *New Poll: Parents Overwhelmingly Support Age-Appropriate Comprehensive Sex Ed*, RH REALITY CHECK, Oct. 2, 2008 at <http://www.rhrealitycheck.org/blog/2008/10/02/new-poll-parents-overwhelmingly-support-ageappropriate-comprehensive-sex-ed> (last visited Oct. 24, 2011).

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 The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, *With One Voice 2010 America's Adults and Teens Sound Off About Teen Pregnancy* (Dec. 2010) at http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/pdf/pubs/WOV_2010.pdf (last visited Oct. 28, 2011).

⁷ National Public Radio et al., *Sex Education in America*, General Public/Parents Survey (Jan. 2004).

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

⁹ 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).

¹⁰ 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).

¹¹ Amy Bleakley, PhD, MPH, Michael Hennessy, PhD, MPH, Martin Fishbein, PhD, *Public Opinion on Sex Education in US Schools*, 160 ARCH PEDIATRIC ADOLESCENT MEDICINE 1151 (2006).

¹² Press Release, The National Women's Law Center, *Opinion Survey Shows Broad Support Among Republicans and Independents for Reproductive Health Care Agenda*, at <http://www.nwlc.org/press-release/opinion-survey-shows-broad-support-among-republicans-and-independents-reproductive-hea> (last visited on Oct. 24, 2011).

¹³ Press Release, The National Women's Law Center, *Opinion Survey Shows Broad Support Among Republicans and Independents for Reproductive Health Care Agenda*, at <http://www.nwlc.org/press-release/opinion-survey-shows-broad-support-among-republicans-and-independents-reproductive-hea> (last visited on Oct. 24, 2011).

¹⁴ Kirby, Douglas, Ph.D., *Emerging Answers; Research Findings on Programs To Reduce Teen Pregnancy*, THE NATIONAL CAMPAIGN TO PREVENT TEEN PREGNANCY (November 2007).

¹⁵ Data from public opinion survey conducted by Hickman-Brown Public Opinion Research for Advocates for

Youth and SIECUS (Mar. 1999).

¹⁶ SIECUS, *The National Coalition to Support Sexuality Education*, at <http://www.ncsse.com/index.cfm?pageid=932> (last visited Nov. 24, 2011); National Education Association (NEA), *NEA 2000-2001 Resolutions*, B-39. *Sex Education*; The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, *Resources and Briefs: Teen Pregnancy Prevention Programs*, at http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/policymakers/res_preg_prevention.aspx (last visited Oct. 24, 2011).

¹⁷ 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).

¹⁸ 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).

¹⁹ 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 Oct. 24, 2011).