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The Failure of Abstinence-Only Programs

Sex education is important, but many students finish sex education classes with a distorted view of sexuality and without a good understanding of contraception and safe sex practices. Instead, children only learn that they should not have sex until they are married. Abstinence-only programs in public schools have become popular because of a law giving millions of dollars to schools that teach the programs. These programs have the good intention of persuading young people to wait until marriage before having sex, but abstinence-only programs are not achieving this goal and are flawed by the distorted and biased perspective that they promote.

In 1996, the United States government passed a law giving funding to states that offered abstinence-only programs in public schools. Since this time, over half of a billion dollars has been given to states to promote abstinence-only programs (Brody). To receive the money, schools must agree to follow a set of rules. The rules indicate that a school's abstinence-only program must have "as its exclusive purpose teaching the social, psychological, and health gains to be realized by abstaining from sexual activity" ("Impacts"). Students must be taught that they are likely to suffer harmful effects if they have sex before marriage. They also must be taught that the "expected standard" is for

school-age children not to engage in sexual activity and for adults to engage in sexual relations only within marriage ("Impacts"). Schools receiving the funds must teach students that they should "just say no" to sex until they are married. The schools are not allowed to teach students about safe sex and "may not mention contraception except to point out the failure rates of various methods" (Brody). Some states have refused the federal funds so that their schools can determine their own ways to teach sex education, but 43 states participate in the program. With millions of dollars from the government every year, many schools now promote abstinence. They offer abstinence-only programs with encouraging titles such as "ReCapturing the Vision," "Teens in Control," and "My Choice, My Future!" ("Impacts"). They encourage students to sign virginity pledges vowing not to have sex until marriage, to proudly wear their "purity rings," and to carry their ATM ("abstinence till marriage") cards (Kelly). These programs encourage students to develop a strong sense of self and to avoid the negative consequences that might result from sexual activity, but there is a problem: abstinence-only programs do not work.

Studies show that abstinence-only programs do not reduce sexual activity by young people. In 2007, the United States Department of Health and Human Services released a study of abstinence programs. This government-funded study involved more than 2000 students. The authors discovered that "findings from this study provide no evidence that abstinence programs implemented in upper elementary and middle schools are effective at reducing the rate of teen sexual activity several years later" ("Impacts"). The authors concluded that "youth in the [abstinence-only] programs were no more likely to abstain from sex" than students not in the programs ("Impacts"). In addition, "among those who reported having had sex, program and control group youth had similar numbers of sexual partners and had initiated sex at the same mean age" ("Impacts"). Apparently, students did not benefit from all of the effort and the millions of dollars that have gone into these programs. Another study by Peter Bearman of Columbia University shows that "88 percent of middle and high schoolers who pledge to stay virgins until marriage end up

having premarital sex anyway" (Kelly). He adds that "the bad news is that they are less likely to use contraception the first time they have intercourse" (Kelly). Dr. S. Paige Hertweck, a doctor who contributed to an American Academy of Pediatrics report on teen sexual activity, states that "teaching abstinence but not birth control makes it more likely that once teenagers initiate sexual activity they will have unsafe sex and contract sexually transmitted diseases" (Preschel). In abstinence-only programs, students are taught to "just say no" to sex. They are not taught the information that they need to know about safe sex and contraception if they later choose to say "yes," as many of them are doing.

Abstinence-only programs also promote a distorted and biased view of sexuality. To receive funding, schools must follow the rules in the law for teaching abstinence-only programs. One of the rules is that students must be taught that the "expected standard of sexual activity" is a "monogamous relationship in the context of marriage" ("Impacts"). An estimated 88 to 99 percent of Americans have sex outside of marriage ("Many Who Pledge"), yet students must be taught that having sex only within marriage is "the expected standard." The rules also require that students be taught that having sex outside of marriage "is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects" ("Impacts"). Approximately nine out of ten Americans have sexual relations outside of marriage. Do most of them suffer "harmful psychological and physical effects," as the government has determined that students must be taught? The law presents a distorted view of sexuality, along with a biased view. In 2006, the government updated the funding guidelines to state that, in abstinence-only programs, marriage is defined as a legal union between a man and a woman as husband and wife, "which advocates worry will further alienate gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender adolescents and shape an education program that dismisses the sexual health concerns of those teens" ("New Abstinence-Only Guidelines"). All students should benefit from sex education programs. Student Hunter Kincaid suggests how abstinence-only programs discriminate against gays and lesbians:

"As a gay student, I thought [the abstinence-only class] was ridiculous,' he says.

'Abstinence until marriage for people who can't even get married'" (Kelly). A sexeducation program should help all students make good decisions about sexual activity. It should not promote an unrealistic standard of behavior, should not promote a particular definition of marriage, and should not discriminate against some students.

Sexual activity by young people is an important concern. In an ideal world, maybe everyone would wait until marriage before having sex and would then remain in a single, monogamous relationship. But this is not the reality. It might be a good goal to try to convince young people to wait until marriage before having sex, but taking this approach alone to sex education is not working. After ten years and a half of a billion dollars in federal funding, abstinence-only programs have not had a positive impact on the sexual behavior of teenagers. The programs may even cause harm because of the distorted and biased views that they promote and because of the information about safe sex and contraception that they do not teach. It is time to put an end to abstinence-only programs and to give students more comprehensive sex-education programs that better prepare them for the future.



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