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Activism Toolkit

Sex Education in Public Schools

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Introduction

Abstinence-only until marriage (AOUM) sex education and medically inaccurate materials are still the norm in far too many of America's public schools. According to the reproductive health policy group the Guttmacher Institute, despite evidence indicating that **"adolescents who intend to practice abstinence fail to actually do so, and they often fail to use condoms or other forms of contraception when they do have intercourse"** and that AOUM is **"not effective at preventing pregnancy or STIs, nor do they have a positive impact on age at first sexual intercourse, number of sexual partners or other behavior,"** the United States has spent more than \$2 billion on AOUM programs in the last 20 years.

Not only does abstinence-only until marriage sex education not reduce pregnancy rates, STI infection rates, nor postpone commencement of sexual activity, it increases teen pregnancy rates and STI infection rates. Abstinence-only until marriage programs are not neutral or benign "options," they are actively harming young people.

While that funding dramatically decreased during the Obama administration, the Trump administration has expressed interest in including AOUM funding for fiscal year 2018 and beyond.

What follows is an activist toolkit and step-by-step instructions to give your group the resources needed to change minds and policy in your local school district.

First Steps

Determine What is Being Taught

Call the school district and ask who the administrator is that is in charge of their sex education curriculum. Ask to be connected with that person.

Ask the administrator if the district teaches their own district sex education or if it is outsourced to an outside organization.

If it is an outside organization, ask what organization teaches the material and developed the curriculum. If it's not outsourced, ask who wrote the curriculum.

They should be able to provide you with that information. If not, that is a red flag.

In some states the district doesn't decide and it is up to each individual school.

Make an Appointment

Ask to set up an appointment with the administrator to view the district's sex education curriculum. Be persistent and don't take no for an answer. Keep calling back and go to their office in person, if necessary. Demand—politely—to see the curriculum at the meeting.

If the district uses an abstinence-only program and it is taught by an outside organization, the district may not have a copy and may have difficulty getting it.

Meet with an Administrator

Bring a notebook and a pen, so you can take lots of notes while you are viewing the curriculum. Make copies or take pictures if possible. Look for sources and citations while viewing the curriculum. If there are statements made without any citation, write them down.

Pay close attention to activities. What does the curriculum say about condoms and birth control? Does the curriculum discuss consent? Does it make negative, shaming, judgmental remarks about pre-marital sex?

If the sex education curriculum is an abstinence-only, medically inaccurate, fear-based, and shame-based, voice your concerns and complaints about it to the administrator you are meeting with immediately.

After the meeting, call and voice your concerns about this to the superintendent. Ask to set up an appointment to sit down and speak with him/her. Try to set the meeting a few weeks down the road.

Building Support

Know the Issue

Once you have a copy of the curriculum, identify the problems with it. Incorporate these problems into your talking points and presentations to potential partners. Familiarize yourself with talking points (Appendix A), facts & figures (Appendix B), and the presentation available at www.atheists.org/issues/sex-ed to be able to answer their questions.

Identify Coalition Partners

Within your group, identify potential partners to increase the size and strength of the public outcry about this issue. Examples: Local Planned Parenthood chapters; State NARAL group; Other local American Atheists affiliates, FFRF / Americans United / American Humanist Association Chapters; Progressive faith groups (such as Catholics for Choice); Teachers and administrators; Doctors, nurses, and other medical professionals; LGBT groups. Think outside the box.

Ask to meet with the leadership of these groups or to attend a meeting. Bring talking points (Appendix A), one-page information sheet (Appendix B), and (if possible) give the slide show presentation available at www.atheists.org/issues/sex-ed.

Ask for their support in whatever ways they are able to provide it. Options include:

- Attending school board meetings to discuss this issue
- Letters to the editor in the local newspaper
- Email campaign to all school board members
- Join a social media campaign (Facebook group, Twitter hashtag, etc.)
 - EXPOSE _____ (use the name of an abstinence only group here)
 - I DESERVE THE FACTS (your area)

Raising Awareness

Attend School Board Meetings

Mark your calendar for the school board meetings and tell everyone else who is opposed to the curriculum when and where it is. Plan to attend and speak, and communicate to everyone else the importance of attending and speaking, as well.

Distribute the talking points to speakers and coordinate assigned points for each person. Have some overlap in case not everyone is able to speak. Include young people, faith leaders, teachers, and medical professionals in the speaking. Show the diversity of the support for medically accurate sex education.

Stay until the end of the board meeting and speak to the superintendent and board members about this individually. Be strong and assertive about your opposition to this harmful curriculum. Do the same thing every month at every board meeting, until the curriculum has improved.

Record the speeches you give to the board. If possible, record your one-on-one interactions with school board members and the superintendent. Post the videos to Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.

Use the Media (and Social Media)

Have coalition partners write letters to the editor and op-eds using the suggested templates included in this packet (Appendix D). Think outside the box about who should be the author listed on the letters. For this issue, having a faith leader co-author the letter with a medical professional can send a powerful message about the importance of this issue and diffuse potential framing of “religion vs. science.”

Contact local newspapers and television stations about your plans to attend the school board meeting. Provide them with high quality video, audio, and pictures if they aren't able to attend themselves. Have group leaders and coalition partners available to discuss this issue on the record with members of the press. Be prepared to do on-camera interviews.

Rehearse the four core talking points and stick to them. Practice with others in the group to get comfortable doing the interview, but don't plan exactly what you're going to say. Just remember bullet points.

Tell a personal story about why this issue matters to you (i.e. you have a child in school and want them to learn facts).

Create buzz around this issue by using your group's social media presence, your coalition partners' social media presence, and your own social media to boost any article, story, or discussion about this issue.

Follow Through

Do the Work for Them

Use the medically accurate sex education curricula provided by coalition partners like Planned Parenthood and Advocates for Youth. Give them to the school district and tell them

how easy it is to instruct students on these issues. Show them that it's cheaper, more effective, and that the community supports it.

Be Persistent

Stay strong. Don't give up. Keep attending every school board meetings to urge them to change the curriculum. Keep contacting the media with updates about new groups joining your coalition. Educate the public with letter writing campaigns and local press.

These fights can take months or even multiple years, but are winnable and have a measurable effect on the lives of children in your community.

Hold Them Accountable

If the school board leadership does not act on this issue, consider running for school board yourself. Ask people running for school board what their position is on this issue.

Be prepared for this the curriculum to not change overnight. Prepare to ramp up actions over the course of the school year and year over year. Bring more and more groups into your coalition.

If you have students in the school district, work with them to stage protests in school. Print visible and identifiable shirts that protest abstinence only education (suggested designs are available in Appendix C).

If your students are passionate about this issue, consider organizing a walk-out during an abstinence only class.

Appendix A

Medically Accurate Sex Education Talking Points

The following are talking points for you to use in discussing this issue with the press, school officials, and potential coalition partners.

Abstinence-Only until marriage programs do not work. Not only are they ineffective, they're actively harmful.

- AOUM programs have no measurable impact on sexual behaviors, including on delaying sexual intercourse, reducing the number of partners, or facilitating “secondary abstinence” (i.e. encouraging students who were already sexually active to cease sexual intercourse after participating in the program).
- Adolescents who took “virginity pledges” were found to have higher rates of sexually transmitted infections and non-marital pregnancies than those who did not. When students who intend to abstain fail to do so, they are less likely to use condoms or other forms of contraception to protect themselves.

AOUM curricula are full of false, misleading, or incomplete information. Students deserve the facts.

- These include false claims about failure rates for condoms for STI prevention and contraception. Some AOUM programs claim that condoms do not prevent transmission of HIV or other infections and fail to prevent pregnancy as often as 15% of the time. Actual annual failure rates for perfect usage are about 2%.
- These programs often reinforce gender stereotypes (woman are vulnerable, men are aggressive, women should be kept “pure” for marriage, etc.) and exclude information for LGBT students.
- Programs include false information about transmission of HIV (that infection is possible through sweat or tears, that condoms fail to prevent HIV transmission 31% of the time), abortion (that women who have an abortion are more likely to commit suicide and that 10% of women who have abortions become sterile), and effectiveness of the program itself.

More than 85% of parents and almost all students favor comprehensive sex education over abstinence-only approaches.

- 95%+ of Americans want students to be taught about HIV/AIDS and other STIs, including how to reduce risks and get tested.
- 85% want students to know how to use condoms.
- 71% want students to know they can obtain birth control pills from their doctor or a clinic on their own.

Every single reputable medical organization backs comprehensive and medically accurate sex education and says that abstinence-only until marriage curricula are harmful.

- American Academy of Pediatrics
- American Medical Association
- The American Psychological Association
- The American Public Health Association
- The Institute of Medicine
- The Society for Adolescent Medicine
- The American Foundation for AIDS Research
- The National Education Association
- The American School Health Association

Appendix B

Facts and Figures about Abstinence-Only Programs and Comprehensive Sex Ed

The next page is a fact sheet you can give to school administrators, members of the media, or even potential allies in the fight to bring medically accurate sex education to your schools.

These are not talking points—you don't want to get too bogged down in numbers when talking to the media—but can be used to supplement the talking points in Appendix A.

You can simply print the following page and leave it with the person you meet with to give them concrete information about this issue.

Medically Accurate Sex Education

Students Deserve the Facts

All the available evidence shows that abstinence-only until marriage programs not only do not work, they are actively harmful for teens. Only by teaching comprehensive and fact-based sex education can we ensure that students are protected from sexually transmitted infections and minimize their risk of unplanned pregnancy.

In the past 20 years, the United States has spent \$2 billion on abstinence only programs that show no evidence of being effective.

Until 2010, the federal government spent no money on comprehensive sex education and spent as much as \$180 million annually on abstinence-only programs.¹ Starting in 2010, comprehensive programs have accounted for the bulk of all federal spending. Since then, teen pregnancy rates have declined from approximately 34.3 per 1,000 to 24.2 per 1,000 (in 2014).²

Huge majorities want comprehensive sex education taught in schools.

- 99 percent of parents want youth to get information on other STIs in addition to HIV.
- 98 percent of parents want youth to be taught about HIV/AIDS.
- 94 percent of parents want youth to learn how to get tested for HIV and other STIs.
- 83 percent of parents want youth to know how to use condoms.³

Teen pregnancy rates are higher in states that only teach abstinence only.

In Mississippi, for example, teen pregnancy rates are as high as 55 out of every 1,000. The national average is 34.3. The state with the lowest rate is New Hampshire, with just 16 births per 1,000. New Hampshire requires a comprehensive curriculum to be taught. According to a study by the National Institutes of Health, "increasing emphasis on abstinence education is positively correlated with teenage pregnancy and birth rates."⁴ In other words, abstinence programs don't just not work: They actually raised pregnancy and birth rates among teens.

Teens are getting most of their information about sexual health online and it isn't accurate.

By failing to educate teens in schools, we are forcing them to turn to inaccurate online resources. A study in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* found that 46% of sexual health websites had inaccurate information about contraception and 35% had inaccurate information about abortion.⁵

¹ Guttmacher Institute, *The Looming Threat to Sex Education: A Resurgence of Federal Funding for Abstinence-Only Programs?*, <https://www.guttmacher.org/gpr/2017/03/looming-threat-sex-education-resurgence-federal-funding-abstinence-only-programs>

² United States Department of Health and Human Services, *Trends in Teen Pregnancy and Childbearing*, <https://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/adolescent-development/reproductive-health-and-teen-pregnancy/teen-pregnancy-and-childbearing/trends/index.html>

³ National Public Radio et al., *Sex Education in America: NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy School Poll*, Menlo Park, CA: Kaiser, 2004.

⁴ Kathrin Stranger-Hall and David W. Hall, *Abstinence-Only Education and Teen Pregnancy Rates*, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3194801/>

⁵ Journal of Adolescent Health, *Quality and Accuracy of Sexual Health Information Web Sites Visited by Young People*, [http://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X\(10\)00021-2/abstract](http://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X(10)00021-2/abstract)

Making condoms available to students does not increase sexual activity but does increase safer sex practices among sexually active students.

Schools in large cities like New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia are now making condoms available at student health centers. In one study in Philadelphia, schools with high health resource center usage reported that making condoms available to students saw an increase in reported usage rates of 35% while also showing a decrease in the number of students having intercourse.⁶

“Virginity Pledges” may delay onset of sexual intercourse, but not until marriage, and reduce the likelihood of contraception usage.

While the virginity pledges did delay sexual intercourse for some teens, on average pledgers only waited approximately 18 months, not until marriage.⁷ A study of these pledges found that young people who took abstinence pledges were one-third less likely to use contraception when they did become sexually active⁸, were less likely to seek out medical testing or treatment, and were more likely to engage in riskier sexual behaviors than non-pledgers.⁹

Americans, on average, have sex for the first time at age 17 but do not marry until their mid-20s.

During this nearly decade-long gap, young people who receive abstinence only education are less likely to use condoms or other forms of contraception to prevent unwanted pregnancy or condoms and other safer sex practices to reduce STI infection risks. Teaching young people about highly effective, but under-utilized, contraception methods can greatly reduce the rate of unintended pregnancy.¹⁰

⁶ Advocates for Youth, *School Condom Availability*, <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/publications/449-school-condom-availability>

⁷ Peter Bearman and Hanah Brückner, *Promising the Future: Virginity Pledges and the Transition to First Intercourse*, *American Journal of Sociology* 106.4 (2001): 859-912.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Peter Bearman and Hanah Brückner, *After the promise: The STD consequences of adolescent virginity pledges*, *Journal of Adolescent Health* 36.4 (2005): 271-278.

¹⁰ Finer LB and Philbin JM, *Trends in ages at key reproductive transitions in the United States, 1951-2010*, *Women's Health Issues*, 2014, 24(3): e271-e279.

Appendix C

Suggested Designs for Protest Materials

The following designs can be adapted for protest t-shirts, signs, social media graphics, etc. In particular, the messaging that students deserve the facts (especially when said by students) is powerful.

If your school district continues to teach abstinence only programs, have students wear shirts with these designs (or a similar unified message) to classes on days the curriculum is being taught. Print the design on both sides of the shirt and get a bright color (like pink or some other neon color) Allow students to be their own advocates on this issue. According to survey data, more than 90% of students support comprehensive sex education being taught in schools.



Suggested Tweets

Be creative with these. Cite facts, keep it short, and stay positive and on-message!

Why doesn't Anytown School District trust students with the facts? Abstinence only doesn't work. [link to your page]

Our students deserve the facts! We demand comprehensive sex ed now! [link to your page]

Comprehensive sex ed cuts teen pregnancy rates by a third! Anytown School District should give kids all the facts. [link to your page]

More than 90% of parents want schools to teach medically accurate and comprehensive sex education. [link to your page]

Appendix D

Suggested Letter to the Editor / Op Ed

Use the letter below (with changes made to better fit with your community) as a letter to the editor or opinion column in your local newspaper. Letters to the editor are typically written in response to an article published by the newspaper or recent news. To get your letter published, be current, be concise, and be controversial (not a problem here).

If possible, use talking points from Appendix A or facts from Appendix B to write other letters from members of our coalition. If you have faith leaders, medical professionals, or teachers supporting your work, see if they are willing to sign the letter. Parents of students in the district and even students themselves are also good letter or opinion authors for this issue.

Be sure you know your local outlet's length restrictions (200-300 words is common). You should send your letter to as many different outlets as possible, but some outlets have rules about multiple submissions (i.e. they won't publish a letter that has been published elsewhere). Adjust the letters' content, have different authors, and approach the issue from different angles if necessary.

Letter to the Editor (250 words)

We entrust our schools to teach unbiased facts to our children. Nothing more and nothing less. But XXX School District is not holding up their side of that bargain when it comes to sex education.

On questions ranging from the effectiveness of birth control to the simple information about pregnancy, the district's abstinence-only until marriage curriculum is failing our young people. The curriculum not only gets the facts wrong, it puts students' health at risk and ill-equips them to deal with the realities they face in the world today.

Why is our district spending our tax dollars a program that, according to every reputable national health organization, doesn't work and in fact, harms students?

Critics say that giving students accurate information about sexual health will encourage them to have sex, but that isn't the case. Teaching young people the facts allows them to make smarter decisions for themselves. Study after study has shown that students who receive comprehensive sex education that teaches about contraception, sexual health, and relationships in a medically-accurate and positive way are less likely to engage in sexual activity and are more likely to use contraception and practice safer sex when they do.

We owe it to our kids to teach them the facts and we owe it to ourselves to spend our tax dollars on programs that actually work, rather than a failed abstinence-only until marriage curriculum that puts ideology over science.

Huge majorities of parents support teaching ALL the facts. It's time the district listened.

Appendix E

Online Resources

Planned Parenthood

<https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/for-educators>

Planned Parenthood not only offers a variety of comprehensive resources online for advocates, educators, and even students, some local Planned Parenthood chapters will teach medically accurate and comprehensive sex education in your schools. For more information, we strongly urge you to contact your local clinic.

Advocates for Youth

<http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/for-professionals/sex-education-resource-center>

Advocates for Youth champions efforts that help young people make informed and responsible decisions about their reproductive and sexual health. Advocates believes it can best serve the field by boldly advocating for a more positive and realistic approach to adolescent sexual health. Their website includes resources for advocates to change policies as well as guides for parents and students looking for more information.

Guttmacher Institute

<https://www.guttmacher.org>

The Guttmacher Institute is a leading research and policy organization committed to advancing sexual and reproductive health and rights in the United States and globally by producing high quality and independent research and analysis, collaborating with other groups, and addressing emerging issues to promote understanding and shape public debate.

Future of Sex Education

<https://www.futureofsexed.org>

The Future of Sex Education Initiative (FoSE) is a partnership between a number of national advocacy groups that has developed the National Sexuality Education Standards to provide clear, consistent, and straightforward guidance on the minimum, core content necessary for sexuality education in schools. More information about the NSES is available here: <http://www.futureofsexed.org/nationalstandards.html>

MTV's It's Your (Sex) Life

<http://www.itsyoursexlife.com>

It's Your (Sex) Life is MTV's Emmy and Peabody Award-winning public information campaign to support young people in making responsible decisions about their sexual health. The campaign focuses on reducing unintended pregnancy, preventing the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV/AIDS, and open communication with partners and healthcare providers.

SIECUS (Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States)

<http://www.communityactionkit.org/>

SIECUS has put together an excellent community action kit that gives step by step instructions about how to get your school district to teach comprehensive sex education instead of abstinence-only until marriage.

ETR (Educational Training and Research Associates)

<https://www.etr.org/ebi/programs/ebi-selection-tool/>

ETR is a health nonprofit that provides science-based programs and services for youth and families. The link above is a selection tool to find an evidence-based program (EBP) that will be age appropriate and meet the needs of your school district's sex education programming.