



Highlights of *Raising Expectations in the Rockies:* *Colorado's Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Industry and the Imperative for Real Sex Education*

In recent years, Colorado has shown an increased dedication to improving the lives of its young people through ensuring that sex education provided in schools is comprehensive; however, abstinence-only-until-marriage programs are still prevalent in the state and continue to use fear- and shame-based tactics to spread misinformation and forward an ultra-conservative ideology. In an effort to inform Colorado's residents of both the gains made in the state and the challenges local schools districts still face to implement comprehensive sexuality instruction consistent with state law, The Healthy Colorado Youth Alliance and the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) released a report examining Colorado's abstinence-only-until-marriage industry and the effect it has on Coloradan youth. The report found:

- **While Colorado schools are not required to teach sexuality, pregnancy, HIV- or STI-prevention education, districts can decide whether to teach such instruction and may address the subject in preschool through 12th grade.** With the passage of HB07 1292, Colorado law states that when offered, sexuality education classes must emphasize abstinence as “the only certain way and the most effective way to avoid pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases,” and must use curricula that are science-based, age-appropriate, culturally relevant, medically accurate, and that discuss contraception, including emergency contraception. Additional requirements state that instruction must include topics such as parental involvement and family communication; responsible and healthy decision-making; instruction on STIs, including HIV/AIDS and HPV; the health benefits and potential side effects of using contraceptives and barrier methods; and, how alcohol and drug use impairs responsible and healthy decision making.
- **Despite gains made at the state level and the work of local schools to implement sexuality instruction consistent with recent law, abstinence-only-until-marriage program providers continue to operate in local school districts.** In the face of the state's changing political climate and even the elimination of federal community-based grants for abstinence-only-until-marriage programs, these providers have rebranded themselves in order to continue providing programming across the state, particularly in public schools.
- **Colorado's most prominent abstinence-only-until-marriage providers** include WAIT (Why Am I Tempted?) Training, Friends First, the YMCA of Pueblo, and Life Network. These providers commonly target specific populations that they deem to be “at-risk,” including Latino/a students, teen parents, low-income youth, and single-parent families. For example:
 - The YMCA of Pueblo and Friends First conduct Quinceañera Programs, which work to “reinforce the traditional quinceañera [sic] values of purity and virginity until marriage,” and include a graduation ceremony where each girl pledges her commitment to abstinence until marriage and is presented with a purity ring “as a reminder of her promise to save her virginity for her future husband.” While the purpose of the Quinceañera is to mark a rite of passage for young women, particularly in the context of church and family, a “virginity pledge” has not been a traditional element of the ritual. Such programs undermine and remake a cultural tradition of Latino communities in order to further an ideologically driven mission.
 - Friends First and WAIT Training target the “high-risk” populations that result from the “broken nature” of single-parent homes and uphold the notion that abstaining from sexual activity until marriage is a panacea that will bring “freedom from broken relationships,” and infer that abstinence will increase marital stability, decrease depression, and increase adult happiness. These programs present one family structure as morally correct and beneficial to society, while, in reality, any Coloradan classroom is likely to have children of never-married or divorced parents as well as children of gay, lesbian, and bisexual parents who cannot legally marry in Colorado.
- **Abstinence-only-until-marriage providers in Colorado use many of the same curricula commonly used nationwide,** including *WAIT Training*, the *Choosing the Best* series, *ASPIRE: Live Your Life. Be Free.*, *Game Plan*, and *STARS*. These curricula promote marriage, rely on messages of fear and shame, and present biased information about gender, sexual orientation, and pregnancy options in a way that is harmful and exclusive to many youth. For example:
 - The *Choosing the Best Soul Mate* curriculum includes a story of a knight and his princess that enforces stereotypical and discriminatory beliefs about how men and women relate to each other. The story explains that “deep inside every man is

a knight in shining armor, ready to rescue a maiden. When a man feels trusted, he is free to be the strong, protecting man he longs to be.” Unfortunately for this particular knight, his princess is not one to sit back and allow herself to be rescued. The princess offers suggestions to the knight about how to best slay a dragon, making the knight doubt his own instincts and feel ashamed. The moral of this story: “Occasional suggestions and assistance may be all right, but too much of it will lessen a man’s confidence or even turn him away from his princess.”

- One activity included in *WAIT Training* promotes marriage by having youth engage in a mock wedding ceremony, “complete with a wedding dress, tuxedo, band and all the trimmings.” This lesson promotes marriage, makes the assumption that all students will choose to get married someday, and ignores LGBTQ students who do not have the right to legally marry in Colorado.
- The *Game Plan* curriculum uses an exercise called “Candy in the Bag,” in which the teacher gives each student a piece of plastic-wrapped hard candy and tells them to unwrap it, put in their mouths for a few seconds, and then wrap it back up. The teacher then collects the rewrapped candy and mixes it with candy from an unopened bag. A volunteer is then asked to choose a piece of candy from the bag without looking and eat it. As the curriculum suggests, “The point is, they didn’t know whether or not the candy they were picking was already ‘used’ or not.”
- Several of the abstinence-only-until-marriage curricula used in Colorado’s public schools feature variations of an exercise with tape designed to showcase how a person’s ability to bond decreases with each sexual partner she or he has. A video from *ASPIRE* shows a piece of duct tape being stuck to different objects in a school building, such as a water fountain, garbage can, school locker, and classroom door. The narrative of the video reads: “What if this duct tape represented your body? Every time it’s stuck to something, you take a little bit of it with you and leave a little bit of yourself behind.”

What is clear in the report is that abstinence-only-until-marriage programs have been widely implemented in Colorado communities and classrooms and that program providers will continue to seek out ways to adapt and reframe their messages to appear consistent with state statute and community norms. These curricula, however, will continue to promote a specific political and moral agenda.

In order to support the potential for healthy development, academic success, and ensure the best sexual health outcomes for Colorado’s young people, The Healthy Colorado Youth Alliance and SIECUS recommend the following policy actions:

1. **Make HB07 1292 a Reality.** Individual schools need to be given support by the state in order to ensure that sexuality education being taught in their schools is comprehensive and in line with Colorado state law. School districts should implement policies to align their sexuality and health education with the instructional guidelines established by HB07 1292.
2. **Continue to Reject Title V Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Funds.** Failing to provide young people with the information they need not only has grave ramifications for their health but also creates a financial burden on taxpayers.
3. **Apply for Personal Responsibility Education Program (PREP) Funding.** A PREP-funded program will, by definition, be consistent with HB07 1292, and will allow Colorado’s government to work with schools and community partners to provide age-appropriate, evidence-based, and medically accurate programs to prepare young people to make healthy decisions.
4. **Implement the State Academic Standards for Comprehensive Health Education with Evidence-Based Programs and Principles.** While Colorado has made significant strides in highlighting the importance of health education for youth across the state, the Colorado Department of Education should ensure that the standards implemented and the instruction provided emphasize science-based approaches to sexuality education.
5. **Create a Statewide Resource for Teachers and Administrators on Comprehensive Sex Education that Supports Consistent Implementation of HB07 1292.** Because not all school staff are trained in science-based, medically accurate, culturally relevant, and age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education, a resource is needed with which these educators and administrators may adequately and appropriately respond to the needs and questions of students.

Colorado is on the right track and must continue to bolster its commitment to a comprehensive sexuality education approach for the health and academic benefits of its young people as well as to address unintended teen pregnancy, the epidemics of STIs and HIV/AIDS, and school drop-out associated with early parenting and poor sexual health outcomes. Sexuality education in Colorado schools must prioritize the real health needs of students in order to foster their academic achievement and allow them to attain their future life goals. Our moral sense demands this of us and Colorado’s youth deserve nothing less.

To read the full report, please visit www.siecus.org/specialreports.