

## Highlights from *Sex Education in Mississippi: Why ‘Just Wait’ Just Doesn’t Work*

In an effort to inform all of Mississippi’s citizens about the colossal failure of abstinence-only-until-marriage programs in Mississippi and the ongoing waste of taxpayer dollars, Planned Parenthood in Mississippi and the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) released a report on the saturation of taxpayer-funded abstinence-only-until-marriage programs throughout the state of Mississippi and the status of sex education, or lack thereof, provided in Mississippi public schools.

Mississippi has the highest teen birth rate in the country and young people in the state have higher rates of risky sexual activity, unintended pregnancy, and sexually transmitted disease (STD), including HIV, infection than their peers nationwide. The poor sexual health outcomes of Mississippi’s young people make it clear that they lack access to adequate sexual and reproductive health information and services they need to protect themselves and make safe and healthy decisions.

The poor sexual health outcomes among adolescents in Mississippi, the state’s heavy investment in abstinence-only-until-marriage programs, and the lack of sex education required in public schools are of great concern. Planned Parenthood in Mississippi and SIECUS partnered together to take a closer look at the information students are receiving in schools and the messages delivered by school-based and community-based abstinence-only-until-marriage programs reaching youth across the state of Mississippi. The report found that Mississippi school districts and the Mississippi Department of Human Services rely on failed abstinence-only-until-marriage programming that use fear and shame tactics to promote abstinence until marriage; reinforce antiquated gender stereotypes that impose a double standard on young women, provide outright, inaccurate information; and use outdated materials, some which are 20 years old. It is clear from the evidence detailed in the report that a fundamental change is needed in how Mississippi educates its young people and prepares them to be sexually healthy adults.

Details from the report include:

- The majority of sex education programs in Mississippi, whether provided by schools, state agencies, community organizations, or churches, take an abstinence-only-until-marriage approach, and messages promoting abstinence until marriage are pervasive in the state—appearing on billboards, in print media, and radio and television ads as well as in formal programs. Young people in Mississippi are practically bombarded with messages about staying abstinent until marriage. Many of these programs, media campaigns, and activities are supported by federal funds.
- In Fiscal Year 2008, Mississippi received \$5,742,594 in federal funds for abstinence-only-until-marriage programs, which was the eighth largest funding amount awarded to any state. By far, the largest recipient of abstinence-only-until-marriage funding in the state is the Mississippi Department of Human Services (MDHS) which received a total of \$1,428,753 for Fiscal Year 2008 from both the Title V abstinence-only-until-marriage and Community-Based Abstinence Education (CBAE) grant programs.
- With its federal funding, MDHS operates the “Just Wait” Abstinence Program which includes a statewide media campaign and abstinence-only-until-marriage programs, conferences, annual rally, and school presentations that reach youth throughout the state of Mississippi. The agency’s annual abstinence teen summit brings 5,000 young people to Jackson each year and includes speakers that are closely associated with the national abstinence-only-until-marriage industry, some of whom espoused religious messages during the government-sponsored event.
- Mississippi schools are not required to teach sexuality education or provide instruction in HIV, STD, or pregnancy prevention; however, if schools choose to teach any of these topics, state law requires that they stress abstinence-only-until-marriage, including “the likely negative psychological and physical effects of not abstaining.” In addition, monogamous heterosexual relationships in the context of marriage must be presented as “the only appropriate place for sexual intercourse.” While state law does permit school districts to provide more comprehensive instruction, none of the information taught may contradict the components of “abstinence education” outlined in the law. The convoluted nature of the law leaves school districts with their hands tied, and with little option to provide more comprehensive sex education to students—if they choose to teach sex education at all.
- Examples of programs funded by federal abstinence-only-until-marriage dollars and other locally developed abstinence-only-until-marriage curricula and materials being provided in Mississippi schools include:

- Leland School District distributes a pamphlet to students, entitled “The Truth About...Sex & Love.” It states, among other things, that sexually active high school females are three times, and sexually active high school males two times, more likely to suffer from depression. It goes on to suggest that “[t]een virgins can expect to earn \$370,000 more in income over their lifetimes.” The pamphlet also states that sex outside of marriage “is playing Russian Roulette with your emotions, self-respect, health, and your [sic] future.”
- The “Not Now” abstinence-only-until-marriage program, delivered to students in four Mississippi Delta counties, has students participate in a mock wedding ceremony. As part of the ceremony, the bride presents the groom with a dirty sneaker as a wedding present. The dirty sneaker signifies “a lifestyle of impurity” and relays the message that no sock (representing a condom) could ever fully protect the foot from dirt and diseases. The groom, on the other hand, gives the bride a clean sneaker representing his “purity up until marriage.” At the end of the wedding activity, the students “pledged to remain pure” and bring clean tennis shoes to marriage.
- The information on AIDS included in the 1994 edition of *Fearon’s Health* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), a textbook used in Forest Municipal School District, does not include any method of treatment for HIV. In addition, its most recent statistics for AIDS are from 1991, including statistics indicating a mortality rate from 1981–1991 of 64 percent. By contrast, the estimated AIDS mortality rate in 2006 was 38 percent.
- An activity used in the Title V “Just Wait” abstinence-only program, called the “Cookie Exercise,” aims to teach students how easily STDs are transmitted. Five volunteers are each handed a cup of water. Four of the volunteers are instructed to bite off a piece of a cookie they are given, chew it without swallowing, and then spit the contents of their mouth into a cup of water. The fifth volunteer remains holding a clean cup of water. All the volunteers are instructed to swap cups with each other and asked to drink the water. According to the lesson, the four volunteers with the cookie contents in their cup represent “sexual activity” while the fifth volunteer with the clean cup of water “represents purity.” The entire class is then asked which of the five cups they would choose.

What is made clear by the report is that Mississippi is failing to provide its young people with the information they need to make healthy decisions and avoid unintended pregnancy and STDs, including HIV/AIDS. Most disturbingly, the Department of Human Services, which is seen as a trusted state agency, plays a large role in disseminating this ineffective programming to young people instead of equipping them with public health information that is medically accurate and based in science.

Every major medical and public health organization in this country and around the globe agrees that abstinence-only-until-marriage programs are not best for young people and believe in the importance of providing comprehensive sexuality education. Studies indicate that providing comprehensive information about abstinence and contraception will not increase young people’s sexual activity or lead them to engage in sex at an earlier age. In fact, more comprehensive approaches to sex education have been proven to do a better job of helping young people delay sex than do abstinence-only-until-marriage programs while also increasing the likelihood that young people will use contraception when they become sexually active.

The authors of this report therefore recommend the following policy actions for the state of Mississippi:

1. Amend state law on sex education to require school districts that choose to teach human sexuality instruction to provide medically accurate, evidence-based, and comprehensive sex education, which, among other things, would include information about both abstinence and contraceptive methods for the prevention of unintended pregnancy and STDs, including HIV. The state law should also be amended to remove language that requires sex education to teach abstinence-only-until-marriage.
2. Update the state’s health education standards to include specific curriculum standards for human sexuality education, including those that address pregnancy, STD, and HIV prevention; the effectiveness and proper use of all forms of contraception and barrier methods, including condoms; and how individuals can access sexual and reproductive health care services; and require academic instruction to comply with these standards.
3. Increase communication and coordination between the Mississippi Departments of Health, Education, and Human Services in order to update the health education standards as well as to provide curricula, public health resources, and teacher training to school districts who choose to provide sex education.

Mississippi must end ineffective and failed efforts in the state to address the epidemics of STDs, including HIV/AIDS, and unintended teen pregnancies. Public policy in the state must be made to follow the evidence and commit to a bold new plan to implement comprehensive sex education. The taxpayers and young people of Mississippi deserve nothing less.