



Sexuality Information and Education
Council of the United States

Highlights of Sex Education in the Sunshine State: How Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Programs Are Keeping Florida's Youth in the Dark

In March 2009, The Healthy Teens Campaign of Florida and the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States released a report on the explosion of failed abstinence-only-until-marriage programs across the state with a particular emphasis on their presence in public schools. The report found:

- Florida's laws concerning sex education for young people in public schools are woefully inadequate. They fail to require school districts to provide the most basic instruction in sex education prior to graduation and when school districts do provide it, the state law requires them to teach "abstinence from sexual activity outside marriage as the expected standard for all school-aged students." Even though this may seem to set a high standard, this requirement is wholly inconsistent with reality, is borrowed from the now-failed and discredited federal abstinence-only-until-marriage program, and is code language designed to censor additional information being provided to young people who may be sexually active so that they can act responsibly by using contraception.
- Inadequate laws and evidence-based prevention programs have no doubt contributed to the nightmare of poor health outcomes in the state. The most recent data available shows Florida has the third highest rate in the nation of new AIDS diagnoses, the fifth highest rate of new HIV infections; teen pregnancy rates that are the sixth highest in the nation; nearly two-thirds of all new sexually transmitted diseases in the state were among young people; and 15% of new HIV infections occurred among those under the age of 25. In sum, Florida has some of the worst health outcomes on these key indicators of reproductive and sexual health nationwide.
- Over the past decade, fueled by millions of federal tax dollars and further supplemented by millions more in state taxpayer funds, failed abstinence-only-until-marriage programs have proliferated across the state and entered into contracts with schools in at least 19 counties, including all counties with large population centers. \$64 million in federal dollars have been funneled into Florida since 2002, only Texas receives more money. The state has gone above and beyond what the federal government requires in terms of matching funds (\$1.8 million required per year since 1998) and since 2003, has contributed a total of \$3.5 million each year, siphoning off a total of \$17.5 million from other starved programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and the Maternal and Child Health Block Grant (MCHBG).
- These programs and other home-grown abstinence-only-until-marriage curricula and materials are being provided in Florida's schools with no discernable oversight or standards of accountability. This has resulted in programs using fear and shame to scare students into not having sex, promoting antiquated gender stereotypes that discriminate against girls, providing outright inaccurate information, and using materials created twenty years ago in some cases that have not been updated. For example:
 - Middle schools students in Broward County are told that "men sexually are like microwaves and women are like crockpots...A woman is stimulated more by touch and romantic words. She is far more attracted by a man's personality while a man is stimulated by sight. A man is usually less discriminating about those to whom he is physically attracted."
 - Sumter County Public School's allow the extreme right wing organization, Christian Care Center, into its schools where students are taught from a curriculum that does not believe in contraception and says that "no contraceptive device is guaranteed to prevent teen pregnancy. Besides, students who do not exercise self-control to remain abstinent are not likely to exercise self-control in the use of a contraceptive device."
 - Walton County Schools distributes a pamphlet titled "Sex and Singles: Reasons to Wait" produced by the extreme right wing organization Focus on the Family. Their students are told that having sex before marriage is the equivalent of finding already opened presents under the tree on Christmas morning and

that the price for engaging in premarital sex is “No ongoing relationships, no commitment, no security, no family and possibly no children, if they acquire a pelvic infection from a partner.”

- DeSoto County School District students are taught under guidelines that claim heterosexual marriage is a panacea for the good things in life: “By consciously choosing to engage in sex only with one partner and within the confines of love and marriage, teens will eliminate any of the physical and/or emotional harm caused by contracting a sexually transmitted disease (STD), and they will know that a child conceived within marriage will be brought into a more secure and loving world.”
- Miami-Dade County’s 7th and 8th grade students are likely to learn from an approved instruction sheet that double standards exist between males and females when it comes to sex and love and more specifically, that males become “involved with girls for sexual pleasure primarily” while girls “become involved with boys for pursuit of love.”
- Another pamphlet distributed in Walton County schools titled “The Silent Epidemic” provides egregious misinformation about condoms. “Condoms fail so often in preventing pregnancy (10-36%) that doctors call them ‘antiquated birth control.’ Condoms fail even more often in trying to prevent STDs.” The same pamphlet then compares the effectiveness of condoms in this way: “Would you buy a ticket to go bungee jumping from a company that admits their bungee cords will fail about 40% of the time?”
- Leon County School District approves at least four videos for instruction that date to 1990 and earlier. Osceola County schools recommend videos for instruction as well and the majority of them were produced between 1991 and 1996 with one of them sensationally and irresponsibly titled “Teen Sex—It Can Kill You.” And while most of today’s fifth graders were born around 1997, the last time the health education curriculum for fifth graders in Highlands County public schools was updated was in 1991.

What becomes clear in the report is that too many of Florida’s schools are failing to provide our young people with the information they need to behave responsibly and avoid unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS. Most disturbingly, the state of Florida itself continues to prop up the failed abstinence-only-until-marriage approach by taking federal money though nearly half the other states have abandoned them. In keeping faith in these failed programs, the state perpetuates an enabling environment that keeps our young people in the dark or even provides them with blatantly false information.

A comprehensive approach to educating our young people about sex and relationships works. Studies indicate that providing comprehensive information about abstinence, contraception, and condoms will not increase young people’s sexual activity or lead them to engage in sex at an earlier age. Further, a more comprehensive approach to sex education has been proven to do a better job of helping young people be abstinent and delay sex than do abstinence-only-until-marriage programs while also increasing the likelihood that young people will use condoms or contraception when they become sexually active.

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

1. Enact the Healthy Teens Act, a bill requiring Florida public schools that already teach information about sexually transmitted infections, family planning, and pregnancy to provide medically accurate and comprehensive sex education—including facts about abstinence and methods of preventing unintended pregnancy and the spread of diseases.
2. Join the company of nearly half of the other states across the country that are no longer participating in the Title V abstinence-only-until-marriage program and reject these harmful monies. In this, Florida will save state resources and can re-direct efforts toward a more comprehensive approach to sex education.
3. Adopt comprehensive sex education curricula in local school districts and provide adequate training for instructors who are teaching these materials.

Florida must act to turn the tide against ineffective and failed efforts in the state to address unintended and teen pregnancies, as well as the epidemics of STDs, including HIV/AIDS. Public policy in this area must be made to follow the evidence and commit to a bold new agenda to implement comprehensive sex education. Our moral sense demands this of us and our young people deserve nothing less.