

Modernizing New Jersey's Sexual Education

Jordyn Ives

Institute for Youth in Policy

1700 Van Ness Ave #1143, San Francisco, CA 94109

jordyn@fellow.yipinstitute.com,

Abstract— In this brief, the author examines an aspect of New Jersey state educational policy focused on promoting abstinence and withholding comprehensive sexual education from students. Proposed suggestions to modernize the curriculum are similar to the guidelines of other tried policies and are intended solely to benefit the future well-being of the youth, especially those without a strong adult presence.

Keywords— abstinence, sexual education, preventative measures, destigmatizing, comprehensive

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Before the 1980s, sexual education focused solely on preventing diseases and dissuading students from engaging in sexual activity. Moral purists did not view sex as a part of life, and for that reason, students were not educated on birth control measures and how to properly engage. Sexual expression was deemed inappropriate and intolerable and would cause students to lead a life of sin. With an outbreak of STIs during WWI in the 1920s, Congress passed legislation to allocate money towards [preventing syphilis](#) and gonorrhea, using risk as a scare tactic and continuing the emphasis on abstinence. As the sexual revolution unfolded in the 60s and 70s, the debate to expand sexual education and promote- not invalidate- sexual expression began. Sexual education became a hot-button issue, representing the growing divide between traditionalists and progressives. In 1964, Planned Parenthood employee Dr. Mary Caledrone founded the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, which issued standards defining comprehensive sexual education

and aimed to implement this program across the country. Conservative Christian groups, like the John Birch Society and Christian Crusade, arose in opposition to SIECUS and saw their efforts as a decrease in American morality and values. Sexual education was not widespread until the AIDs epidemic of the 1980s when states allocated funding toward educating students on this disease and its dangers. This was an issue that the federal government could not ignore, so as a result, most schools mandated some type of sexual education, even as federal funding for abstinence-only programs grew in opposition.

II. OVERVIEW

In short, sexual education straddles the line between moral traditionalism and progressivism, and the constant pushback demonstrates how these two ideologies play an ongoing game of tug-of-war in the world of educational policy. Fundamentally, the traditionalists believe that sexual expression is shameful and that educating students on their bodies will only encourage such behavior, whereas progressives see sex as a part of life, and believe that education enables students to engage in safe, destigmatized sex. However, sexual education is just as partisan as it is ideological: each year, millions of tax dollars are dedicated to federally funded abstinence-only programs. The [Title V](#) Sexual Risk Avoidance Education grant program and the discretionary Sexual Risk Avoidance Education

grant program operate collectively in the vast majority of states and receive a total amount of \$110 million annually. However, despite the ongoing support for these programs, they remain ineffective, and bar students from a comprehensive sexual education.

A. Pointed Summary

- There has been an ongoing debate between the need for comprehensive sexual education and abstinence-only education since the 60s
- In spite of their ineffectiveness, abstinence-only programs receive millions of dollars each year, while there are currently no programs to fund comprehensive sexual education
- As a result, students will lack the knowledge they need to properly engage in sexual activity and could feel ashamed of expressing themselves, even as societal norms have progressed to semi-normalize sexual activity

B. Relevance

By their senior year, more than [half of teenagers \(57%\)](#) have had sex, but only 38% of high schools teach all of the information students need to practice safe sex. These topics include but are not limited to, birth control methods, preventing STIs, anatomy, and types of relationships. While abstinence-only education is meant to serve as a scare tactic to prevent diseases and teen pregnancy, the numbers show that many teens are unaffected by the bleak future this strategy preaches for sexually active youth. Additionally, abstinence-only education stigmatizes sex- especially for the LGBTQ+ community- and can make students feel ashamed of their choices when in reality, it is just a part of growing up. [The “Stress Abstinence Law,”](#) which is a part of the New Jersey state curriculum, is an example of this policy in action. Students may learn

why sex is bad and thoroughly understand the consequences of teenage pregnancy, but those who do engage in sexual activity, will be ill-equipped with the knowledge needed to practice safe sex. A more comprehensive, and modernized, view of sexual education will create a more supportive atmosphere and give teens the information they need to make good decisions. In practice, abstinence is the only way to completely safeguard against pregnancy, but as the numbers show, American teenagers are increasingly more sexually active and will benefit more from practical knowledge than an emphasis on a solution the majority cannot use.

C. Current Stances

While the US government annually grants more than \$110 million to states to fund abstinence-only education, ultimately, sex education is left up to the discretion of individual states. Some states, like New Jersey, have a “Stress Abstinence Law,” but also mandate lessons on sexual orientation and gender identity. Thus, a state’s curriculum can be both progressive and traditional, making its current stance on the issue difficult to deduce. For example, Louisiana does not even mandate sex education, but when it's taught, the state is one of the few that requires it to be religiously unbiased. Either way, abstinence-only education is required in [37 states](#) as part of sex education, and 29 states have stress abstinence laws, showing that in varying regions of the country, there remains one constant.

D. Tried Policy

Following the national government’s lead, the New Jersey state legislature passed N.J.S.A. 18A:35-4.20, as part of the AIDS Prevention Act of 1999. Known as the “Stress Abstinence law,” this bill retaliated against HIV by stressing abstinence as the only way to completely safeguard against

pregnancy and disease. With the Welfare Reform Act in 1996, the federal government began spending millions on abstinence-only education, to the benefit of religious conservative groups. Similarly, the stress abstinence law was passed as a consequence of the HIV epidemic, however, it was the first time that STD prevention was required in the curriculum. New Jersey has always required HIV and sex education to be medically accurate, meaning lesson plans are rooted in statistics and free from cultural and religious bias. As is the case with other states, New Jersey's abstinence-focused programs were born out of fear and were created with the intent to protect youth, but in the process, narrowed their education.

To mirror the state-level changes, the federal government established the Title V Sexual Risk Avoidance Education grant program in 1996, to educate low-income children on the dangers of HIV and premarital sex. States are awarded money based on the amount of low-income, high-risk students, and are supposed to use the funds to further the program's goals. New Jersey currently receives a total of [\\$1.2 million](#) from Title V, and the amount changes yearly.

E. New Policy

Even though the stress abstinence law remains effective, New Jersey recently updated its sex education standards. In 2020, the standards were [amended](#) to include topics such as abortion and gender identity, but at a recent state school board meeting, Republican board members spoke in opposition to implementing the redeveloped curriculum for this upcoming school year. The 2020 New Jersey Comprehensive Health and Physical Education State Learning Standards focus more on student growth and individuality, rather than the challenges that come with puberty and maturation.

Additionally, a new section was added to introduce the topic of pregnancy starting in grade 2, with a specific focus on the dangers and responsibilities of this choice for high school students. However, despite this progress, the stress abstinence law remains integral to the [NJSLS](#), and could potentially negate the effects of these changes.

III. POLICY PROBLEM

A. Stakeholders

With the recent debates over the 2020 NJSLS, more parties have been vocal regarding this topic. Made up of more than 70 partner organizations, [Thrive NJ](#) is the largest statewide coalition advocating for better sex education. Thrive NJ calls upon elected officials to support their mission and provides detailed information about the New Jersey curriculum that is easy to read and up to date. Nationwide, Planned Parenthood is one of the largest advocates for comprehensive sex education and works closely with Thrive NJ to further its message. These groups worked closely with the Board of Education to update the NJSLS standards in 2020. The opposition is less unified and consists mostly of state-level Republicans. Socially, New Jersey is a very progressive state, so while it does not have the most comprehensive sex education, widespread support for these new standards shows where the state generally stands.

B. Risks of Indifference

Not only is abstinence-only education outdated and ineffective, but it is also [harmful to students](#), specifically those in the LGBTQ+ community. The majority of abstinence-only education stigmatizes not only sex but students who are in non-heterosexual relationships. In turn, this increases their risk of STIs, substance abuse, or poor mental health because they are not receiving

information and support. Additionally, if students do not feel comfortable, they will not talk to their teacher or ask questions, causing them to rely on potentially inaccurate information. And for all students, studies have shown that abstinence-only education does not reduce the risk of sex; it only leads them to have unsafe sex, because they are not equipped with all the necessary tools. And by only learning why pre-marital sex is immoral, teens will feel ashamed and associate all sexual activity with negative outcomes. This may affect students in the long run when they get into relationships and are ill-equipped to deal with the challenge it brings. Especially for students who are victims of sexual assault or rape, abstinence only education is particularly harmful, because they were forced to do something their teacher looks down upon. All in all, abstinence-only education focuses too much on risk and too little on safety, leading all students to be misinformed on an important topic.

C. Nonpartisan Reasoning

For decades, sex education has been a partisan issue, with both sides viewing it as an ideological domain. However, the evidence shows that the conservative, abstinence-based only approach is ineffective. In a [2011 report](#) from the National Library of Medicine, experts compared teen pregnancy data from states using an abstinence-based approach and those with more progressive standards. They found that there is a positive correlation between abstinence-only education (AOE) and teen pregnancy, meaning the less comprehensive sex education a girl receives, the more likely she is to be pregnant. While level 3 states (states where AOE is the only form of education) tend to be poorer, the researchers took demographic details into account and still arrived at the same conclusion: AOE is not only ineffective

but detrimental. The study also found that level 1 states- states that stress abstinence but also demonstrate how to use contraception and educate students on HIV- had the lowest teen pregnancy rates.

Compared with other developed nations, the United States has a much higher teen pregnancy rate, with every 52 out of 1000 girls giving birth. The UK has the next highest rate of 30 out of 1000. One of the main reasons for this disparity, the study found, is that the US does not mandate sex education and leaves it up to the states. Most European countries have a national curriculum, with a more comprehensive, progressive approach. Instead of focusing on abstinence, Western European countries emphasize relationship building, healthy practices, and contraception. Thus, comprehensive sex education is not just a matter of a traditional vs progressive approach. It has real effects, and we can see that by comparing teen pregnancy statistics.

IV. POLICY OPTIONS

The most straightforward way to ensure all American students have access to comprehensive sex education would be to implement a national curriculum, however, this is not possible. In 1965, [Section 604 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act](#) forbade the government from establishing a national curriculum. Instead, schools could voluntarily follow national guidelines, such as the common core, but were not mandated to follow a standardized curriculum. More broadly, the ideal solution would be to repeal section 604 of this act and establish a national curriculum, not just for sex education, but for all subjects. This would ensure that all students receive the education they deserve, and that school quality and access to education would not vary by state.

A less straightforward way to fix this disparity would be to direct federal funds, not towards abstinence-only education programs, but towards comprehensive sex education. Currently, there are no federal dollars allocated to providing comprehensive sex education, but spending AOE reached its peak in 2008, with a total of [\\$177 million](#). Under the Obama administration, \$176 million was directed toward programs focused on preventing teen pregnancy. This took a more comprehensive approach but was not nearly as widespread as Title V grants. To continue the work of the Obama administration, a potential solution would be to gradually limit the amount spent on Title V grants and replace it with a new grant, one which focuses on comprehensive sexual education. This could happen in either of two ways: Title V could rebrand itself as a program promoting comprehensive sexual education, leaving everything else intact, or tax dollars allocated to Title V could be shifted to a new grant program with a different goal. While this policy would not create a uniform educational experience, it would allow the federal government to change its philosophy on sex education and promote that message through grants.

On the state level, New Jersey could get rid of the Stress Abstinence law and completely remove it from the curriculum. While jurisdiction is left up to the schools as to what they want to teach, this law influences the NJSLS, which in turn influences what students learn. Amending the NJSLS was a step in the right direction, and undoubtedly, the 2020 revision did improve New Jersey's sex education. However, with this law still in place, there will still be an emphasis placed on abstinence more so than preventative measures and learning about contraception. This state-level change is the simplest way to change sex education.

V. CONCLUSION

In short, America's sex education needs improvement, and there are a variety of ways to manifest that change. Sex education is a vital part of the school, especially for students without strong parental figures and access to supplementary materials. For some students, the only way they learn about contraception and STIs is in school, so purposefully withholding information from those students can have consequences worse than teen pregnancy. Without the proper instruction, they might become misinformed and engage in detrimental practices as a result. Thus, abstinence-only education is not only ineffective but unethical. The aforementioned statistics show that sex education is not a matter of ideology or politics. It is an issue that affects the livelihood of young people and has a direct correlation with the choices they make later in life. Placing supposed morals in front of the future is the main issue here, but through policy changes, American youth can get the sex education they deserve.

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