

Reshaping Sexuality Education in High School:

A Comprehensive and Inclusive Approach

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Executive Summary:

Sexuality education in high schools is a critical component of adolescent development, encompassing a wide range of topics from reproductive health to gender identity and sexual orientation. The debate over comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) versus abstinence-only education (AOE) has been longstanding, with significant implications for sexual health outcomes among adolescents. Drawing on recent research, this memo explores the effectiveness and implications of CSE versus AOE, challenges and advancements in the United States, and recommendations for a more inclusive and effective sexuality education framework with a focus on inclusivity, public health outcomes, and student well-being.

Background

Comprehensive Sexuality Education: A Global Perspective

Comprehensive sexuality education aims to provide young people with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values to make informed decisions about their sexual health and relationships. Studies in various countries have demonstrated the positive impact of CSE on reducing risky sexual behaviors. For instance, in Zambia, CSE linked to sexual and reproductive health services has been shown to significantly reduce early and unintended pregnancies among adolescent girls¹. Similarly, in Ethiopia, CSE has been particularly beneficial for vulnerable groups, such as young people with disabilities and young women involved in sex work, by improving access to sexual and reproductive health knowledge and services².

Challenges and Progress in the United States

In the United States, the approach to sexuality education varies significantly by state, often influenced by political and cultural factors. While some states have adopted CSE, others continue to implement AOE programs. The Southern region, in particular, faces challenges related to reproductive and sexual health outcomes, prompting calls for policy recommendations to improve health outcomes³. Efforts to address sexuality education in Catholic higher education

¹ Mbizvo et al., 2023

² Pincock et al., 2023

³ Jozkowski & Crawford, 2016

highlight the complexities of navigating issues of human sexuality within conservative environments, especially if influenced by certain deeply-held religious beliefs⁴.

The Case for Inclusivity: LGBTQ+ Considerations

The inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons in sexuality education is crucial for creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment. A study of Chicago Public Schools' policy and curriculum found that students desire a more LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum that integrates identity topics throughout, provides holistic discussions of sexuality, and fosters a safe and accepting atmosphere⁵. Such inclusivity not only supports LGBTQ+ students but also promotes awareness, understanding, and empathy among all students.

Findings

1. Effectiveness of CSE:

- 1.1. Studies demonstrate that CSE contributes to a range of positive outcomes, including reduced rates of unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) among adolescents⁶.
- 1.2. CSE has been shown to delay sexual initiation among youth and increase the use of contraception among sexually active students⁷.

2. Critiques of Abstinence-Only Education:

- 2.1. Research indicates that AOE does not effectively delay sexual initiation or reduce teen pregnancy rates⁸.
- 2.2. AOE programs often lack comprehensive information on contraception and STI prevention, potentially leaving students ill-prepared⁹.

3. Inclusivity and LGBTQ+ Considerations:

- 3.1. CSE programs that include LGBTQ+ inclusive content promote a safer and more supportive environment for all students, contributing to their overall well-being¹⁰.

⁴ Levand, 2021

⁵ Jarpe-Ratner, 2020

⁶ Farida, 2017; Zhukov et al., 2023

⁷ Grasso & Trumbull, 2021

⁸ Kirby et al., 2016

⁹ San Francisco, 2020

¹⁰ Jarpe-Ratner, 2020

3.2. In contrast, AOE curricula typically exclude discussions on gender and sexual diversity altogether, which can marginalize LGBTQ+ students¹¹.

4. Policy and Public Opinion:

4.1. Despite evidence supporting the effectiveness of CSE, policy and funding in the United States have historically favored AOE approaches¹².

4.2. Parental and public opinion surveys indicate strong support for CSE, highlighting the gap between public preferences and policy¹³.

Recommendations

(1) Advocate for Comprehensive Frameworks:

AFT should champion the adoption and implementation of CSE in school curricula across all states. Advocacy efforts should emphasize the evidence-based effectiveness of CSE in improving sexual health outcomes, its role in fostering respectful relationships, and its contribution to an inclusive school environment. AFT can facilitate discussions, host seminars, and develop policy briefs highlighting the benefits of CSE over AOE. Collaboration with health professionals, educational researchers, and community organizations can strengthen the advocacy by presenting a united front. Additionally, AFT should encourage the integration of CSE into teacher training programs to ensure educators are well-prepared to deliver this content effectively.

(2) Support Professional Development:

AFT should actively support and facilitate ongoing professional development opportunities for educators on the principles and pedagogies of delivering CSE. This includes developing comprehensive training modules that cover not only the curriculum content but also inclusive teaching strategies, classroom management techniques for potentially sensitive topics, and effective communication skills for engaging with students and parents. Workshops and seminars led by experts in sexual health education, psychology, and LGBTQ+ advocacy can provide educators with the tools they need to create a supportive learning environment. Additionally, creating a platform for educators to share best practices, challenges, and solutions can foster a community of learning and improvement in sexuality education delivery.

¹¹ Hoefler, 2017

¹² Cecchi, 2016; Swan, 2023

¹³ Hundal, 2011

(3) Engage in Policy Advocacy:

Engage with policymakers at both the state and national levels to advocate for legislation that supports the integration of CSE into the standard educational curriculum. This includes lobbying for increased funding for CSE programs, the development of standardized CSE curriculum guidelines that are inclusive and evidence-based, and policies that protect educators from backlash when delivering CSE content. AFT can leverage its network to organize letter-writing campaigns, public forums, and meetings with legislators to communicate the importance of CSE. It's also crucial to engage with parents and community members to build broad-based support for CSE, ensuring that policy advocacy efforts are grounded in community needs and values.

(4) Promote Stakeholder Involvement:

Facilitate and encourage active involvement of all stakeholders, including students, parents, educators, and community members, in the development, review, and adaptation of sexuality education curricula. This collaborative approach ensures that the content is culturally sensitive, age-appropriate, and aligned with community values while maintaining educational standards and health objectives. AFT can host town hall meetings, conduct surveys, and form advisory committees that include diverse community representation to gather input and feedback on CSE content and delivery. Engaging students directly can also provide valuable insights into their needs and preferences for sexuality education, ensuring the curriculum is relevant and engaging.

(5) Implement Continuous Evaluation and Improvement:

Advocate for and implement a system of continuous evaluation and feedback for sexuality education programs. This involves collecting data on program outcomes, student and educator feedback, and community impact to assess the effectiveness of CSE initiatives. Utilizing this data, AFT and educational institutions can identify areas for improvement, adapt strategies, and update curricula to meet evolving student needs and societal changes. Establishing partnerships with research institutions and leveraging academic expertise can enhance the evaluation process, ensuring it is rigorous and evidence-based.

(6) Ensure Accessibility and Inclusivity:

Work towards making sexuality education accessible to all students, including those with disabilities, LGBTQ+ students, and students from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. This includes developing inclusive curricula that address the needs and

experiences of all students, providing accommodations for students with disabilities, and training educators on inclusivity and cultural competency. Advocacy efforts should also focus on ensuring that sexuality education is not just available but also welcoming and safe for all students, free from discrimination and stigma.

Conclusion

Comprehensive sexuality education offers a pathway to empower adolescents with the knowledge and skills needed for healthy sexual development. By embracing inclusivity and evidence-based practices, schools can create environments that support all students' well-being and prepare them for healthy relationships. The experiences from various countries, including the United States, underscore the importance of ongoing advocacy, research, and policy development to enhance sexuality education in high schools.

By emphasizing the importance of comprehensive, evidence-based content, professional development for educators, policy advocacy, stakeholder involvement, and continuous program evaluation, we can set a clear path towards enhancing the effectiveness and reach of sexuality education in schools.

The American Federation of Teachers, leveraging its influence and resources, is uniquely positioned to champion these efforts. Through collaboration with policymakers, educators, and communities, we can ensure that sexuality education not only equips students with essential knowledge and skills but also fosters an environment of respect and understanding.

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