

The Case for a New Approach to Sex Education Mounts; Will Policymakers Heed the Message?

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Authors:

Boonstra, Heather D.

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Description:

Abstinence-only-until-marriage education is a key component of social conservatives' global moral and religious agenda, and the cornerstone of the Bush administration's approach to reducing U.S. teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection (STI) rates. Since 1996, when a major overhaul of the nation's welfare policy prompted a massive escalation of funding in this area, the federal government, with mandatory matching grants from the states, has spent well over one billion dollars to promote premarital abstinence among young Americans, through highly restrictive programs that ignore or often actively denigrate the effectiveness of contraceptives and safer-sex behaviors. Fearful of being portrayed as anti-abstinence, policymakers have continued to support these rigid, ideologically driven programs even though there is clear evidence—including compelling recent evidence from a long-awaited, congressionally mandated report on federally funded abstinence-only-until-marriage programs—that they are not effective in stopping or even delaying teen sex. In fact, the federal government has been supporting and evaluating single-purpose abstinence promotion programs since the early 1980s, and there is now evidence suggesting that they may be harmful to young people in the long term. Meanwhile, there is still no comparable federal program to support comprehensive approaches that promote delayed sexual activity as well as protective behaviors for when young people do initiate sex, even though such programs have been shown to be effective at accomplishing both. Adding to the body of evidence on sex education approaches and teen sexual behavior, three new studies from Guttmacher Institute researchers forcefully demonstrate that the current U.S. emphasis on stopping teens from having sex is out of touch with young people's lives and needs. The question that now presents itself is whether the new Congress may at long last be ready to change course and, if so, how far and how fast.

Links:

<http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/gpr/10/2/gpr100202.pdf> [1]

Themes:

[Sexuality education](#) [2]

Regions:

Americas and the Caribbean [3]

USA [4]

Resource types:

Journal articles [5]

Keywords:

abstinence [6]

sex education [7]

Languages:

English [8]

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[1] <http://www.gutmacher.org/pubs/gpr/10/2/gpr100202.pdf>

[2] https://hivhealthclearinghouse.unesco.org/library/search/_all_/theme/sexuality-education

[3] https://hivhealthclearinghouse.unesco.org/library/search/_all_/region/americas-and-caribbean

[4] https://hivhealthclearinghouse.unesco.org/library/search/_all_/region/usa

[5] https://hivhealthclearinghouse.unesco.org/library/search/_all_/type/journal-articles

[6] https://hivhealthclearinghouse.unesco.org/library/search/_all_/keyword/abstinence

[7] https://hivhealthclearinghouse.unesco.org/library/search/_all_/keyword/sex-education

[8] https://hivhealthclearinghouse.unesco.org/library/search/_all_/language/english