

## Comprehensive Sexuality Education

In too many schools, students receive incomplete, medically inaccurate sexuality education that often imposes one particular religious viewpoint about sex on all students regardless of their individual religious traditions. In order to make responsible, healthy decisions, young people need — and society has a moral obligation to provide — medically accurate, age-appropriate information about sex and sexuality. Comprehensive sexuality education teaches that abstinence is the only sure way to avoid pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) but also provides accurate information about contraceptive options so that individuals can make informed life decisions.

### What questions do I ask?

Effective advocacy starts with asking the right questions. How can you create change if you don't first know exactly what is wrong with the status quo? Asking the right questions arms you with the knowledge you need to make a difference in your community. Use this guide to help you use the Healthy Community Checklist on Comprehensive Sexuality Education to determine if your community's schools offer this kind of education to students.

### Who are the constituencies with an interest in this issue?

Before taking action, it is important that you know who in your community is involved in the issue of sexuality education. Those involved may be interested individuals, such as parents, clergy, educators, or health professionals. They may be organizational players, such as parents' groups, government officials, religious denominations, or advocacy organizations on either side. For example:

- ▶ Individual parents and students
- ▶ Advocacy organizations
- ▶ Parent-teacher organizations
- ▶ Activists
- ▶ Local or state government officials
- ▶ Religious groups

### Who are the decision-makers?

You might think that the content of sexuality education is determined by school systems at the local level, but often other factors are at play. State or federal funding may be contingent upon the content of sexuality education courses and thus exert considerable influence on what is taught. Textbooks may be approved at the state level. Local government bodies may intervene in the decision of school boards and committees. Below are some examples of decision-makers who you might seek to influence when trying to address this issue in your community:

- ▶ School boards and committees
- ▶ Local governing bodies
- ▶ State legislatures
- ▶ State education agencies
- ▶ Governors
- ▶ Local government officials
- ▶ Health professionals
- ▶ Physician associations
- ▶ Health-related associations

## With whom can I work?

While it may appear that few share your belief that sexuality education is a necessary part of a public school curriculum and that it must be comprehensive and medically accurate, you are not alone. Many others agree. But too often those who agree are silent, out of embarrassment or fear of attack by opponents who will say that opposing abstinence-only sex education means condoning adolescent sex. Finding like-minded people in your community to work together so that your collective voice is heard loud and clear by decision-makers on every level is key to success. Identifying allies with appropriate credentials, such as religious leaders and health professionals, will strengthen your efforts.

- ▶ **NCJW members:** As a member of the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW), you can always look to NCJW for assistance as you tackle these important issues. Think about engaging with:
  - ▶ NCJW sections (yours and others near you)
  - ▶ NCJW State Public Affairs (SPA) chair (if your state has one)
  - ▶ NCJW Washington office
  - ▶ NCJW Action Center
- ▶ If you are not affiliated with NCJW, log on to [www.ncjw.org](http://www.ncjw.org) for more information about NCJW's Plan A campaign efforts to promote comprehensive and accurate sexuality education and to learn about how to get involved in NCJW's activities in your state.
- ▶ A number of national and local organizations are working to promote comprehensive sexuality education. Use the *Resources* list to find organizations with whom you can partner in your efforts.

## What are the laws and policies that affect sexuality education in the public schools in my community?

*Follow the money.* As you begin to examine the political climate in your state, following the money can be a wonderful investigative tool. How much money does your state government invest in abstinence-only-until-marriage programs? How much does it invest in medically accurate sexuality education? What do the programs funded by your tax dollars say about contraceptives and about sexuality transmitted infections (STIs)?

There are three funding streams through which abstinence-only programs receive money from the federal government: Title V, Section 510(b) of the Social Security Act (Title V); Community-Based Abstinence Education (CBAE); and the Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA). Title V and AFLA money goes from the federal government to the state government, and the state then distributes the money via grants. CBAE money bypasses state government, going directly from the federal government to community-based organizations.

To learn if the public schools in your community are offering sexuality education classes funded by either of these three programs:

- ▶ Contact your governor's office and ask if your state accepts Title V money from the federal government.
- ▶ If your state does accept Title V money, contact your state's Title V coordinator (usually within the state Department of Health) for more information about how that money is spent.
- ▶ Visit the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States' website at [www.siecus.org](http://www.siecus.org) and check out the "State Profiles" publication. There you will find extensive information about the abstinence-only-until-marriage programs operating in your state.
- ▶ Reach out to coalition partners doing work on this issue (see the *Resources* section of this toolkit).

*Examine state laws.* Many states have laws that mandate that schools teach sexuality education. These states generally set certain requirements for what must be taught in those classes. States that do not require that schools teach sexuality education may still have guidelines that must be followed by those schools choosing to offer sexuality education.

To learn about your state laws:

- ▶ Contact your state's Department of Education and your state's Board of Education.
- ▶ Visit [www.siecus.org](http://www.siecus.org) and check out the "State Profiles" publication. There you will find complete information on your state's laws regarding sexuality education.
- ▶ Reach out to coalition partners doing work on this issue (see the *Resources* section of this toolkit).

## What is the political climate?

As you begin to assess the availability and content of sexuality education in your public schools, consider the political climate in your state and locality. Watch for newspaper articles, letters to the editor, and other media reports that relate to the educational, moral, and religious debates occurring in your state. Is sexuality education generally controversial in your state, county, or school district? Is the community generally supportive of abstinence-only or comprehensive sexuality education? Is it clear that people understand the difference? These questions and others will help you gauge the general attitude toward this issue in your state.