

The Politics of Sex Education

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Marc Ginsberg
The University of Georgia
Department of Lifelong Education, Administration, and Policy (LEAP)

123 Hollie Street
Athens, GA 30606
Goonie@uga.edu

B.S.ED, 2004, University of Georgia, English Education (major), Sociology (minor)
M.ED, Projected 2006, University of Georgia, Educational Administration and Policy

Dr. William G. Wraga, Program Coordinator
850 College Station Road
The University of Georgia, River's Crossing
Third Floor, Room 312
Athens, GA 30602
Wraga@uga.edu

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Abstract: Sex education in America is baffling. Massive funds filter into schools for abstinence-only programs, but parents desire comprehensive sex education. Abstinence-only curricula fail to honestly address contraception, homosexuality, and sexually-transmitted-diseases, but abstinence-plus curricula may exceed some ideas of proper sex education. This paper examines opposing political arguments and strategies in 2004 by Representative Henry Waxman (D-CA) and The Heritage Foundation through the lens of political philosophers John Kingdon and Amy Gutmann. The author concludes abstinence-plus proponents must sponsor local population surveys and national studies of sex education programs in action. Public education must become more democratic to address the omnipresent teen pregnancy problem. Abstinence-plus sex education should be the rule – not the exception. Parents who deem abstinence-plus programming inappropriate should exclude their children from sex education – not the federal government.

Brief history of federal funding for sex education programs in public schools

In the last decade, sex education has become a more hotly debated political issue while the federal government continues to increase funding significantly for abstinence-only sex education programs in public schools. Federal funding for abstinence-only programs began in 1981 with \$11 million for “chastity” education through the Adolescent Family Life Act; the act was “conceived in the first year of the Reagan administration as the conservative ‘alternative’ to family planning for teens ([Saul, 1998](#)). Much of AFLA’s funding went to religious organizations, and:

In 1983, on behalf of a group of clergy members and taxpayers, the American Civil Liberties Union's (ACLU) Reproductive Freedom Project filed suit against the program, arguing that it violated the separation of church and state mandated by the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. ([Saul, 1998](#))

AFLA survived via several appeals in the courts, and a Supreme Court ruling remanded the case to continue investigating whether or not AFLA was constitutional in action ([Saul, 1998](#)). In 1993, the ACLU and the Department of Health and Human Services reached an agreement. According to the Alan Guttmacher Institute:

The five-year settlement placed certain conditions on administration of the grants and actions of the grantees, such as requiring AFLA grantees to submit curricula to DHHS for review and "consideration of whether the curricula teach or promote religion and whether such materials are medically accurate. ([Saul, 1998](#))

The 1993 agreement came toward the beginning of the Clinton administration, and after 1996 legislation designed to further abstinence-only programs, the administration began cutting AFLA funding ([Saul, 1998](#)).

In 1996, Congress passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. Under Title IX, Section 912 of the bill which amends Title V, Section 510 of the Social Security Act, Congress authorizes allocating money to states “to provide abstinence education, and at the option of the State, where appropriate, mentoring, counseling, and adult supervision to promote abstinence from sexual activity, with a focus on those groups which are most likely to bear children out-of-wedlock” ([Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, 1996](#)). The bill goes on to define abstinence education as an “educational or motivational program which:

- (A) has as its exclusive purpose, teaching the social, psychological, and health gains to be realized by abstaining from sexual activity;
- (B) teaches abstinence from sexual activity outside marriage as the expected standard for all school age children;
- (C) teaches that abstinence from sexual activity is the only certain way to avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and other associated health problems;
- (D) teaches that a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity;
- (E) teaches that sexual activity outside of the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects;
- (F) teaches that bearing children out-of-wedlock is likely to have harmful consequences for the child, the child's parents, and society;
- (G) teaches young people how to reject sexual advances and how alcohol and drug use increases vulnerability to sexual advances; and
- (H) teaches the importance of attaining self-sufficiency before engaging in sexual activity. ([Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, 1996](#))

Passed during the Clinton era, this bill pledged \$50 million per year for five years to individual states to spend on rigidly defined abstinence-only sex education programs, and for fiscal year 2005, President Bush proposed \$270 million in funding for abstinence-only programs; actual funding dropped to \$167 million (Fiscal Year 2005 Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2004; [Office of Management and Budget, 2004](#)).

Abstinence-only programs function thanks to large chunks of public money, and with increased funding comes increased scrutiny. The issue is not that public schools are teaching students about sex; public schools have been doing so consistently since the early 1900's (Cuban, 1986; Campos, 2002), and poll after poll demonstrates widespread support for some type of sex education in public schools ([Dailard, 2001](#); [Kaiser Family Foundation, 2004](#)). The

public disagrees on the topics addressed by different sex education programs, as social conservatives embrace abstinence-only curricula and liberals favor abstinence-plus or comprehensive sex education.

Social conservatives and abstinence-only sex education

Other names for abstinence-only include authentic abstinence or traditional abstinence programs. According to Campos (2002), most of these programs function on a Christian premise proclaiming that sex outside of marriage is morally subversive, and these curricula emphasize that the only effective way to eschew sexually-transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancy is abstinence until marriage. Some programs vehemently discourage any sexual activity that might end in intercourse. Moreover, abstinence-only sex education claims to shelter teenagers from possible psychological and emotional trauma associated with premarital sex. These programs do not construct knowledge of contraception; rather, they warn students of the possibility of failure when using contraceptives. Additionally, abstinence-only proponents criticize abstinence-plus curricula, claiming that lessons on contraception encourage teens to have sex (Campos, 2002). Citizens who favor abstinence-only curricula are represented by many organizations and interest groups, including [Family Research Council](#), [The Heritage Foundation](#), [Focus on the Family](#), [Concerned Women for America](#), [Eagle Forum](#), [The Medical Institute for Sexual Health](#), [The National Coalition for Abstinence Education](#), [STOPP Planned Parenthood International](#), and [Abstinence Clearinghouse](#).

Social liberals and comprehensive/abstinence-plus sex education

On the other side, comprehensive sex education curricula accept the undeniable, unequivocal, indisputable fact that some teenagers engage in premarital sex. Such programs emphasize abstinence until marriage as the ideal behavior for teens and young adults; however, these programs take a more holistic approach, highlighting sexuality as an important component of human life and educating students about healthy sexual behaviors. Debra Haffner, former president of the [Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States \(SIECUS\)](#) says:

This education has four primary goals: to provide young people with accurate information about sexuality, to give them an opportunity to develop their skills and increase self-esteem, to help them develop interpersonal skills and to help them exercise responsibility in their relationships. The ultimate goal is the promotion of adult health. (Haffner, 2000, p. 80)

Citing ample research demonstrating that teens engage in sexual activity early and often, teens often neglect to use condoms, and that rather high percentages of people have sex before marriage ([US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2001](#); [Planned Parenthood of America, 2005a](#); [National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2001](#)), comprehensive sex education proponents seek to empower students with reliable information concerning contraception and other sexual activity including (but not always) abortion, condoms, masturbation, oral sex, and homosexuality (Campos, 2002). In addition to SIECUS, the [American Medical Association](#), the [American Public Health Association](#), [the National Council of Churches](#), [Advocates for Youth](#), [Planned Parenthood](#), and the [National School Boards Association](#) all promote comprehensive programs. While abstinence-plus programs might appear to blend well with comprehensive sex education programs, Campos denotes a definitive line between the two curricula, saying abstinence-plus programs:

can be identified along the center of the continuum of sex education programs. They promote abstinence as the ideal option for youth and recognize that they should practice protected sex, but the programs do not encompass the array of instructional units to target that are proposed by comprehensive sex education programs. (Campos, 2002, p. 15)

He admits that comprehensive and abstinence-plus programs and proponents are “seemingly one in the same” (2002, p. 16), and for the purposes of a discussion of the political world surrounding the issue of sex education, abstinence-plus and comprehensive curricula will go hand-in-hand to simplify matters as social conservatives show little support for abstinence-plus programs as well as comprehensive programs.

Brief history of political developments leading up to the present

Beginning in 1970, Title X of the Public Health Service Act “appropriated \$200 million yearly in family-planning funds through 1996. Most sex education programs of this time instructed students about sexual anatomy and technique” (Campos, 2002, p. 17). In other

words, while the programs were not necessarily comprehensive, they strayed even further from the abstinence-only extreme. Popular among abstinence-only advocates, [“The Failure of Sex Education” by Barbara Dafoe Whitehead \(1994\)](#) paints programs since 1970 rather negatively as unsuccessful. The public backlash against these programs as well as AFLA’s establishment during the Reagan years had a major hand in the 1996 bill’s success, and with the election of George W. Bush in 2000 and his reelection four years later, abstinence-only sex education programs continue to receive more and more federal money.

Opponents of abstinence-only take issue with the immense rise in funding for a program they deem completely ineffective. Conventional rhetoric from the (far) left reads, “Abstinence-only programs often promote alarmist misinformation about sexual health and force-feed students religious ideology that condemns homosexuality, masturbation, abortion, and contraception. In doing so, they endanger students’ sexual health” ([Planned Parenthood, 2005b](#)). Such strong claims are not without merit. In December 2004, [Representative Henry Waxman \(D–CA\)](#) published a telling report titled [The Content of Federally Funded Abstinence-Only Education Programs](#). Waxman often finds himself in the middle of public health debates; he was also a central figure in the recent Congressional hearings on steroid abuse in Major League Baseball ([Waxman, 2005](#)), and as Paul Chesser from The Weekly Standard notes in a scathing criticism of Waxman titled “Abstain from Waxman,” the representative in question has addressed tobacco industry ethics, air pollution, and pharmaceutical companies during his time on the House Government Reform Committee ([Chesser, 2005](#)). No doubt should exist concerning Waxman’s intentions with the report. As [Kingdon](#) states, “An [important] congressional resource is formidable publicity. Legislators hold hearings, introduce bills, and make speeches, all of which can be covered prominently in the press and communicated effectively to other participants” (2003, p. 37). Kingdon does not mention publishing investigative reports here specifically, but he does later, saying “studies are often conducted on a particular problem at a given point in time, either by a government agency or by non-governmental researchers or academics. Such studies may also suggest a problem that might need governmental action” (2003, p. 91). Waxman is

attempting to create a “focusing event” (Kingdon, 2003, p. 94) that specifically addresses abstinence-only curricula; the broader crisis is the relatively high, though improving teen pregnancy rate ([CDC, 2001](#)). Waxman’s report is a damning evaluation of abstinence-only programs, and to his credit, the media ate the report up like cake.

What Waxman’s report says: 11 major curricula contain major errors, distortions

Given the hefty chunk of change doled out to abstinence-only programs by the federal government, Waxman recognized an opportunity to scold the Bush administration and its promotion of abstinence-only programs. Research on the overall effectiveness of different sex education programs already exists, albeit somewhat inconclusive due to poor methodologies and contextual problems confounding external validity. Recognizing the production-function research’s existence, Waxman notes “the content of the curricula taught in these programs has received little attention” ([2004, p. 4](#)). The report focuses on the thirteen curricula used by the 100 organizations receiving funding for abstinence-only programs through Special Programs of Regional and National Significance – Community-Based Abstinence Education (SPRANS-CBAE), providing “an overall assessment of the accuracy of the curricula . . . used in 25 states by 69 grantees, including state health departments, school districts, as well as religious organizations and pro-life organizations” ([Waxman, 2004, p. 4, 7](#)). Among the thirteen curricula, eleven contain factual errors and distortions, including [Choosing the Best Life](#); [Choosing the Best Path](#); [A.C. Green’s Game Plan](#); [WAIT Training](#); [Choosing the Best Way](#); Sexual Health Today; [Me, My World, My Future](#); [Friends First/STARS](#); [Why kNOw](#); [Navigator](#); and [FACTS](#) ([Waxman, 2004](#)).

The report breaks down the errors and distortions into five major areas:

- Abstinence-Only curricula contain false information about the effectiveness of contraceptives;
- Abstinence-Only curricula contain false information about the risks of abortion;
- Abstinence-only curricula blur religion and science;

- Abstinence-only curricula treat stereotypes about girls and boys as scientific fact; and
- Abstinence-Only curricula contain scientific errors ([Waxman, 2004](#)).

SPRANS programs are required to promote abstinence as the only method of avoiding pregnancy and sexually-transmitted diseases, and they mention contraception only by denoting its rate of failure ([Waxman, 2004](#)). Such information in these programs would be noble were it actually true. Waxman criticizes several curricula that cite a 1993 study by Dr. Susan Weller titled *A Meta-Analysis of Condom Effectiveness in Reducing Sexually Transmitted HIV*; Weller claims that condoms prevent HIV transmission just 69% of the time (1993). Again, such information would be noble were it actually true; according to the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Latex condoms, when used consistently and correctly, are highly effective in preventing the transmission of HIV” ([2003a](#)). Moreover, in 1997, The Department of Health and Human Services rejected Weller’s findings, writing the “FDA and CDC believe this analysis was flawed” and contained “serious error” ([HHS, 1997](#)). Waxman points out another serious distortion of the truth:

Another curriculum inaccurately attacks a study published in the New England Journal of Medicine that demonstrated that condoms are effective in preventing HIV transmission. In the study, there was not a single case of HIV transmission between HIV-positive individuals and their HIV-negative partners using condoms consistently, despite a total of 15,000 acts of intercourse. The curriculum states: “This study has been criticized by three different university groups as being seriously flawed in at least six areas, and therefore the results are questionable and not statistically significant.” In fact, the “university groups” referred to in the curriculum appear to refer to individuals who sent letters to the editor to the journal in which the study appeared. The central finding that consistent condom use resulted in zero HIV transmission was statistically significant and has not been challenged. ([Waxman, 2004, p. 10](#))

Thankfully, the lies and distortions do not go much further – at least for information about contraceptives. Unfortunately for the impressionable students of such misinformed programs, the report labors even further.

One book “erroneously states that touching another person’s genitals ‘can result in pregnancy’” ([Waxman, 2004, p. 12](#)). Predictably, statistics and information concerning abortion

are widely misused. Furthermore, widely held moral opinions are presented as scientific facts.

Waxman notes:

Although religions and moral codes offer different answers to the question of when life begins, some abstinence-only curricula present specific religious views on this question as scientific fact. One curriculum teaches: "Conception, also known as fertilization, occurs when one sperm unites with one egg in the upper third of the fallopian tube. This is when life begins. Another states: "Fertilization (or conception) occurs when one of the father's sperm unites with the mother's ovum (egg). At this instant a new human life is formed. ([Waxman, 2004, p. 15](#))

Other curricula used in SPRANS programs contain "stereotypes that undermine girls' achievement" ([p. 16](#)), "stereotypes that girls are weak and need protection" ([p. 17](#)), and "stereotypes that reinforce male sexual aggressiveness" ([p. 18](#)). Also, the curricula are riddled with scientific errors. One curriculum claims that male and female partners each contribute 24 chromosomes when fertilization happens; the actual number is 23 chromosomes from each parent ([Waxman, 2004](#)). Another error presented as fact suggests that tears and sweat aid in HIV transmission, but the [CDC](#) – our nation's highest authority on such matters – writes, "Contact with saliva, tears, or sweat has never been shown to result in transmission of HIV" ([2003b](#)).

Indeed, some abstinence-only programs operating under federal tax dollars do not hold themselves to a substantial degree of honesty or integrity, and according to [Amy Gutmann](#), a democratic society cannot "teach false doctrines that threaten to undermine the future prospects of a common democratic education" (1987, p. 103). Such an education based on false knowledge does no justice to what Gutmann calls conscious social reproduction, and poor information undermines the democratic society's aim to "[develop] the capacity to understand and to evaluate competing conceptions of the good life and the good society" (1987, p. 44). Students ultimately decide for themselves what their own behavior will be, and in a potential sexual situation, an adult cannot always be physically present with the student to discourage certain behaviors. Thus, students need a truthful and accurate range of information concerning their bodies, sexuality, healthy sexual behavior, criminal sexual behavior, differing conceptions of 'moral' sexual behavior, and responsible sexual behavior. Without such information, students are not fully capable citizens, nor do they possess the necessary knowledge and skills to function

optimally in American society. Additionally, one wonders if the factual errors reported by Waxman are honest mistakes from abstinence-only curriculum entrepreneurs or subtle attempts at repression; the conservative response to Waxman's report lends some insight into this question.

The right-wing's response to Waxman

The religious conservative response to Waxman's report came swiftly and systematically. Waxman's report was officially released on December 1, 2004; late in the evening that night, [The Drudge Report's](#) major headline warned of a [Washington Post article](#) on the report in the morning.ⁱ The Heritage Foundation quickly responded, circulating an internet memo titled "Waxman Report Is Riddled With Errors and Inaccuracies," calling the report "yet another attempt by aggressive proponents of comprehensive sex education to discredit and undermine the message of authentic abstinence education" ([Pardue, 2004](#)). Religious websites such as [The Christian Post](#) and [The Catholic Herald](#) also supplied terse rebuttals to Waxman.

While The Heritage Foundation's memo completely ignores the substantial errors and distortions in abstinence curricula outlined by Waxman, the memo does raise points worth considering in the public debate; unfortunately, the memo and its sources cloud the truth and present inaccurate information themselves. First, Pardue claims, "government funding for contraception-based sex education far outweighs the spending for abstinence education. In 2002 alone, the government spent \$12 promoting contraception and condom use for every \$1 spent to encourage teens to abstain from sexual activity" ([2004](#)). This statistic is carefully worded; Pardue is writing that total spending involving contraception for all citizens outnumbers total spending for abstinence-education on teenagers. In other words, spending for the entire population outweighs spending for a specifically targeted population. Should this finding come as any shock? Since the memo is web-based, no citation is provided, but there is a text-embedded hyperlink to another Heritage Foundation piece titled "Government Spends \$12 on Safe Sex and Contraceptives for Every \$1 Spent on Abstinence" ([Pardue, et al, 2004](#)). This document then links to another document from the Republican Study Committee from 2002 titled "2002 Federal Sex-

Ed/Contraception vs. Abstinence Funding” ([RSC, 2002](#)). Here, finally, one can see that in 2002, the federal government did in fact spend more money on programs promoting or involving contraception than abstinence programs in schools. However, this document is outdated, and besides how it is framed, the data is quite misleading. First of all, funding for abstinence programs has increased significantly since 2002 (Fiscal Year 2005 Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2004), but the latest web-memo ([Pardue, 2004](#)) ignores this fact altogether. Additionally, the 12-to-1 ratio offered by Pardue is dangerously misleading. As the RSC tables show, total 2002 funding for teen pregnancy prevention programs acknowledging contraception runs to approximately \$427.7 million, and total spending on teen abstinence programs comes to \$102 million ([RSC, 2002](#)); therefore, the real ratio that Pardue should cite looks more like 4-to-1, not 12-to-1. Pardue’s original figure comes from all pregnancy prevention programs – not just those aimed at teenagers; she compares programs aimed at a specific target population (abstinence programs for teens) to programs aimed at the general population as well as other target populations (contraception programs). When the comparison is set up in this manner, the information is easily manipulated to support Pardue’s agenda. And finally, the RSC table further clouds the issue as it includes spending for several healthcare programs – Medicaid, mainly – combined with spending for educational programs in the contraception table while the abstinence-only table solely focuses on educational ventures ([RSC, 2002](#)). Pardue’s swift response to Waxman’s report fails to make any of this information apparent to the passive researcher, misleading even true believers in abstinence-only education to believe that abstinence-only programs deserve more funding. The RSC table is included below to demonstrate visually how The Heritage Foundation and the RSC fog information to lead the reader to believe their assertion that abstinence-only programs deserve increased funding.

2002 Federal Sex-Ed/Contraception vs. Abstinence Funding

Sex-Ed/Contraception Programs¹:

Program Title and Administering Agency	FY'02 Total Program Funding ²	FY'02 Pregnancy Prevention Portion	FY'02 Teen Pregnancy Prevention
Title X Family Planning Program (OPA)	\$265 million	\$265 million	\$88 million ³
TANF (ACF)	\$16.7 billion	~\$230 million	~\$230 million ⁴
Health education in schools (CDC), Division of Adolescent and School Health (DASH)	\$47.6 million	\$47.6 million	\$47.6 million
Community Coalition Partnership Program for the Prevention of Teen Pregnancy (CDC)	\$13.1 million	\$13.1 million	\$13.1 million
Direct health care services for American Indians and Alaskan Natives (IHS)	\$3.06 billion	\$119 million	?
Social Services Block Grant (ACF)	\$1.7 billion	\$23.8 million <i>(Planned Parenthood received \$17.4 million in FY99⁵)</i>	?
Preventative Health and Health Services Block Grant (CDC)	\$135 million	~\$1.9 million ⁶	?
Medicaid (CMMS)	\$145 billion	~927 million ⁷ <i>(Planned Parenthood received \$38.9 million in FY99)</i>	~\$49 million ⁸
Subtotal Sex-Ed/Contraception Funding		\$1.6 Billion	~\$427.7 million

Abstinence-Until Marriage Programs:

Program Title and Administering Agency	FY'02 Total Program Funding	FY'02 Pregnancy Prevention Portion	FY'02 Teen Abstinence Funding
Abstinence Education Program Block Grants (HRSA)	\$50 million	\$50 million	\$50 million
Abstinence Education Program SPRANS community-based grants (HRSA)	\$40 million	\$40 million	\$40 million
Title XX Adolescent Family Life Demonstration and Research Program (OPA)	\$29 million	\$29 million	\$12 million
Subtotal Abstinence Funding		\$119 million	\$102 million

Table copied from <http://www.house.gov/burton/RSC/Abstinence4.PDF>

A separate Heritage Foundation document also from 2004 titled [Comprehensive Sex Education](#)

[vs. Authentic Abstinence: A Study of Competing Curricula](#) co-authored by Pardue claims

“Currently, the government spends at least \$4.50 to promote teen contraceptive use for every

\$1.00 spent to promote teen abstinence” ([Martin, et al, 2004, p. XII](#)). So which is it? 12-to-1?

4.5-to-1? Such a claim demands careful investigation of the facts, but the facts simply do not

uphold the claim; rather, the numbers have been carefully pasted together to support The

Heritage Foundation’s agenda.

The claims from these reports do not exist in a bubble; in October 2001, [Congressman Ernest Istook \(R—OK\)](#) called for more money for abstinence-only programs on the House floor, saying:

This does not attack the programs that we have been funding for years, but it does say that it is about time that the average, American, the typical American, the normal values of everyday people in this country, receive the same emphasis from their government as we have put on other things. ([Collins, et al, 2002](#))

One wonders what “typical Americans” Istook speaks of; are these the same Americans who called for “schools [to] go farther and address issues often labeled controversial, like abortion and sexual orientation, as well as teach communication and coping skills” in a 2000 Kaiser Family Foundation poll ([Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2000](#))? Both the [Center for Law and Social Policy](#) and [Planned Parenthood](#) have noted that the “parity” argument unfairly compares funding for school programs against funding for clinical programs ([Collins, et al, 2002](#)). Istook and The Heritage Foundation know what they are doing, and it is recklessly irresponsible. If one considers The Heritage Foundation an educational enterprise (which it is), it fails Gutmann’s (1987) definition of democratic education by undermining the truth. Distorted funding levels and suicide (see the next paragraph) tug on emotion instead of the real issues at hand: preventing teen pregnancy and educating citizens for democratic life.

Pardue’s memo goes on to claim that Waxman “denies the well-established correlation between teen sex and increased risk of attempted suicide” ([2004](#)). The language here is tricky; Waxman does not “deny” the data. The word “deny” implies that he addresses this point and attempts to dispel it. Rather, Waxman does not acknowledge the data because his report focuses on the content of abstinence-only programs and not data established in survey research that focuses on the effects of sexual behavior of teenagers; such a ‘denial’ would constitute an entirely different report, as well as a different title. The Heritage Foundation attempts to define the issue by associating teenage sex with suicidal tendencies. This information might be useful in sound-bite driven media dialogue, but with truth, it fails miserably. Any respectable social

scientist would admit that reading the sentence “Sexually active boys are eight times more likely to attempt suicide than boys who are not sexually active” ([Pardue, 2004](#)) is a bit disturbing; the same respectable social scientist would also admit that it is impossible to conclude that the boy’s sexual behavior directly influenced his suicide attempt. Kingdon credits Robert Walters with saying, “When less comfortable changes come your way ... you attempt to define the problem in such a way as to place the burden of adjustment elsewhere, and to avoid changing your own pattern” (Kingdon, 2003, p. 110). For abstinence-only proponents, the constant problem is that teenagers can, will, and do have sex. Suicide and depression are not laughing matters, and to claim that Waxman “denies” such matters places the responsibility on abstinence-plus liberals to address teenage suicide statistics. Of course, such political clamoring fails to further abstinence, and it further confuses an already confused public debate.

Pardue closes by claiming “[Waxman’s] report is sorely out of touch with the goals of parents and students in the United States. It makes misleading statements about abstinence education programs, and is therefore a tremendous disservice to millions of American teenagers” ([2004](#)). Ironically, the same point can be made concerning The Heritage Foundation’s rebuttal. The two documents consider two entirely different sets of data. Waxman attacks the content of abstinence-only programs, and Pardue attacks Waxman through any available data that can be skewed to present Waxman’s report negatively while simultaneously defending abstinence-only programs. Debate and dissent are good for society, but this debate looks more like a bitter argument.

The Heritage Foundation’s curriculum report

Also in 2004, The Heritage Foundation released [Comprehensive Sex Education vs. Authentic Abstinence: A Study of Competing Curricula](#). Pardue co-authors this piece, along with Shannan Martin and Robert Rector, both of whom are cited as authors of similar pieces in the aforementioned web-memo. From the get-go, the hundred-page-plus document attempts to define abstinence-only curricula more positively than abstinence-plus curricula. The authors shy from using the term ‘abstinence-only’ in favor of ‘authentic or traditional abstinence’ ([Martin, et al.](#)

[2004](#)) in an attempt to re-codify the issue. In isolation of any meaning whatsoever, what sounds better: abstinence-only or abstinence-plus? Rigid or inclusive? One or many? The left successfully redefined the issue, and now the right is attempting to do the same. Additionally, the term ‘traditional’ appeals to Christian conservatives. Kingdon clarifies the politics at work in this document. He writes, “There are great political stakes in problem definition. Some are helped and others are hurt depending on how problems get defined” (Kingdon, 2003 p. 110). Granted, Kingdon is not directly referring to semantics; he refers to how the public comes to understand a political problem in terms of how the issue is discussed and the alternatives associated with it. However, the words and the connotations they carry will directly influence the direction of the public debate; thus, the avoidance of ‘abstinence-only’ in conservative literature is worth noting.

Semantics are but a small portion of these matters, though. The authors claim that abstinence-only curricula devote 53.7% of page content to abstinence-related material, and abstinence-plus focuses on abstinence only 4.7% of the time; such a statistic should not be surprising given the names of such programs. These numbers are a bit misleading, too. On the next page, the authors compare the two opposing curricula through ten topics including abstinence-related material, healthy relationships and benefits of marriage, promoting contraception, HIV/STD awareness, Biology and reproduction, sexual behaviors and sexual alternatives to intercourse, date rape, dangers of drugs and alcohol, general behavioral skills, and miscellaneous content ([2004](#)). While abstinence-only curricula maintain a staggering 53.7% focus on abstinence-related material, abstinence-plus curricula only addresses contraception – supposedly its central subject matter – 28.65% of the time ([Martin, et al, 2004](#)). Big numbers look good, and smaller numbers look bad to the passive researcher. However, the insightful researcher might note that abstinence-plus curricula appear to be more balanced, also addressing HIV/STD awareness 24.6% of the time as well as dedicating 25% of subject matter to general behavioral skills ([Martin, et al, 2004](#)). It might be unfair to imply that the Heritage Foundation’s goal here is to deceive its audience; on the other hand, the information may be intended to appeal to The Heritage Foundation’s base.

The document does make several valuable points that hold up well. Citing a 2003 Zogby poll, the authors write:

Seventy five percent of parents want schools to teach teens about both abstinence and contraception. Abstinence curricula, in general, do not teach about contraceptive use, except to explain contraceptive failure rates. However, this disparity between abstinence education and parental opinion is more apparent than real. Schools that teach about abstinence usually also teach the basic biological facts about reproduction and contraception in a separate class, such as health. This arrangement has widespread parental support. Some 56.4 percent of parents believe that abstinence and contraception should not be taught in the same class. Only 39.9 percent of parents believe that abstinence and contraception should be taught in the same class. ([Martin, et al, 2004, p. XII](#))

The implication here is that abstinence-plus curricula will confuse students, blurring the line between abstinence and healthy sexual behavior and subtly permitting premarital sex when both abstinence and contraception are addressed in the same class. Of course, abstinence-plus proponents can counter that careful, quality instruction makes this line more apparent. This point is important to consider. Just like an [anti-evolution sticker on a science textbook](#) might confuse students into doubting science altogether, an abstinence message taught alongside promotion of healthy, responsible sexual behavior might have a similar effect for *some* individuals, even with careful instruction aimed at clarifying necessary distinctions to the students. The Heritage Foundation addresses one more viable point in the debate: that abstinence-plus curricula often contain explicit and controversial material.

Illustriously, Chapter 5 of the report begins with “WARNING: This chapter contains sexually explicit, graphic material, as quoted from the material reviewed” ([Martin, et al, 2004, p. 35](#)). Subject headings include: condom distribution and practice, practicing condom use, condom races and games, obtaining condoms, condom hunts, mom and dad don’t need to know about your condoms, the wonderful world of condoms, sexual alternatives to intercourse, graphic sexual discussions, homosexual themes, and encouraging masturbation ([Martin, et al, 2004](#)). The prevailing criticism is that not all parents approve of these messages for their children, and such messages are counter-intuitive to an overall abstinence message. A likely response from a proponent of abstinence-plus programs might note how children are bombarded with anti-

abstinence messages every day through peer pressure and popular media, and therefore, abstinence-plus curricula are necessary to guide students to realistic and responsible sexual behavior.

Poll data backs up The Heritage Foundation's claims in this case. A 2003 Zogby poll of 1,245 cited in the document shows that parents showed high disapproval rates for children being taught to use condoms as foreplay, erotic alternatives to intercourse, and practicing putting condoms on phallic objects among other hypothetical situations ([Martin, et al, 2004](#)). It is extremely hard to decipher exactly where the general public draws the line between acceptable abstinence-plus subject matter and the unacceptable. Conservative interest groups lead the reader to believe that the line rests on the word 'abstinence,' but such rhetoric bears little substance. Individuals and communities generally will share localized beliefs on the matter, and broad, blanket generalizations do little to solve the teenage pregnancy problem.

The political fodder from both sides does not help the teenage couples engaging in irresponsible sexual activity while even this essay is written or read in the future. The scientific research that both sides pull out does not matter. Research is a powerful tool to improve society, but it has its limits. Common sense informs us that different communities will show different pregnancy and sexual activity rates; we also know that teenagers get messages about sex from virtually every direction. How many teenagers lie about sexual activity in survey data anyways? What we claim to know about the issue is not 100% accurate. All that we know empirically is that teenagers can and do have sex. Instead of debating sex education on the grounds of morality and character education, we should debate sex education on the basis of democratic education: schools teaching citizens in a free and democratic society. After all, the entire purpose of K-12 public education in America is democratic education.

Public education's role in American society: citizenship, not sinners

American citizens often ponder, "What is the purpose of education?" The usual response is, "To prepare students for life." Right. And wrong. This answer is only part of the picture. Life in America is different than life in China; life at any particular location in America is different than another particular location. We live on a large piece of land inherited by a diverse population of people, and we encourage citizen involvement in government. The most proper education for any group, cross-section of society, or sect will differ vastly from the most proper education for a separate group. To a degree, our education system recognizes this need for differentiation; there is no nationally mandated curriculum even in the new age of standards and accountability. Our judicial system recognizes this need for differentiation as well, as there is no federal mandate for public education. Within such a complex system, however, there is one common link between every student at every school in the United States: citizenship. Every single student is a future adult citizen in a democratic society. Therefore, as Gutmann says, "A democratic state is ... committed to allocating educational authority in such a way as to provide its members with an education adequate to participating in democratic politics [and] to choosing among (a limited range of) good lives" (1987, p. 42). Students must become critical-thinkers and learn group problem solving skills to function as citizens in a democracy, and even amongst various value impositions, students ultimately form their own conceptions of morality. Such skills and constructions of ideas are what Gutmann calls "conscious social reproduction ... the primary ideal of democratic education" (1987, p. 45). So which approach to sex education is democratic? Which approach fulfills the mission of public education in the United States? The answer is without a doubt abstinence-plus sex education.

Democratic citizens must be mindful of authority, but they cannot blindly adhere to authority. In a democratic society, authority carries limits. According to Gutmann:

One limit is that of nonrepression. The principle of nonrepression prevents the state, and any group within it, from using education to restrict rational deliberation of competing conceptions of the good life and good society . . . it forbids using education to restrict rational deliberation or consideration of different ways of life. (1987, p. 44)

Clearly, abstinence-only education violates the principle of nonrepression by restricting rational deliberation of the good life. Well, even that statement is unfair; abstinence-only sex education feebly attempts to restrict rational deliberation of the good life, and therefore, it wastes taxpayer dollars on ineffective programs. Abstinence until marriage is not a value held by every member of society, nor should it be pushed as a value that must be held by every member of society.

Abstinence-until marriage is an inappropriate message for homosexuals throughout the United States; marriage is not an option for them. For everyone, abstinence is the best, safest option for all human beings who want to lead sociomorally responsible lives; it is also a decision that individuals ultimately make for themselves, absent of the physical presence of adult authority. This is not moral relativism; it is reality. Teenagers will gladly sit through several weeks of sex education and pay it absolutely no mind at all; many do it with their core classes every day of every year. This, specifically, is exactly why teenagers need abstinence-plus sex education. The ends of education don't always match the means; therefore, children need knowledge to make their own decisions. Sex is a highly intimate subject, and like other highly intimate, closely held subjects, sex is a decision that the individual lays down – not authority. With requisite knowledge, a teenager who pays the consequences for irresponsible sexual activity should be held responsible in some fashion; since abstinence-only programs do not give teens the knowledge they need to rationally decide whether or not to have sex, it is even harder to hold them responsible for ignoring the abstinence message.

Moral education cannot take the place of democratic education. Gutmann asks, "Who should decide what kind of character to cultivate" (1987, p. 41). The more important question is, "Who finally decides what kind of life one leads?" Parents, schools, government, and religious institutions can have input, but the individual ultimately makes his own decisions. Gutmann would speak here, saying, "A democratic state of education recognizes that educational authority must be shared among parents, citizens, and professional educators even though such sharing does not guarantee that power will be wedded to knowledge" (1987, p. 42). When the knowledge

that is transmitted through such authorities is false, what rational purpose does it serve?

Gutmann adds:

These principles permit families and other subcommunities to shape but not totally to determine their children's future choices, in part by preventing any single group from monopolizing educational authority and in part by permitting (indeed, obligating) professional educators to develop in children the deliberative capacity to evaluate competing conceptions of good lives and good societies. (1987, p. 46)

Parents and the community at large will dictate moral education; schools play a role in moral education, too, by introducing ideas and expanding rational deliberation through discussion and critical thinking. Such a design for education can better uphold the abstinence message by using it more effectively alongside rational deliberation of the good life. If the message internalizes itself rationally, it is more likely to be upheld than if the messages internalizes itself authoritatively. Might repression stir up curiosity? If every human being adhered to authority automatically, we would not need law enforcement. Absolute abstinence-until-marriage education presents itself as the law, no doubt, but there is little to no physical, human enforcement of the law when teenagers have sex – planned or spontaneous. Abstinence-plus sex education better fills this law enforcement void, albeit imperfectly. While it cannot prosecute teenagers for irresponsible behavior, it is more likely to protect them from severe consequences of this ill-advised activity. Abstinence-only attempts to guarantee an end through a repetitive, authoritative mean; abstinence-plus attempts to prevent an end through an educational mean. Public education should promote many ends through many means, and abstinence-plus is the only sex education curriculum appropriate for these broader goals.

Conclusion

If democratic education is the ideal working model for K-12 public education in America, then schools must become more democratic. The impetus for democratic education requires that students become active in democratic processes. This is not to say that students should protest sex education programs or design their own! Schools should organize educational research clubs, and students should conduct research about their schools and local communities. The

students should survey the students to investigate local problems. How many students are having sex? How many students use protection? How many students have deeper questions about their own sexuality that are not being addressed by current sex education programs? The students should survey the teachers and parents to find out what adults in local communities approve of for their children. How many parents want broader discussion of contraception in sex education? How many parents of 9th grade children want graphic condom demonstrations? How many teachers feel compelled or prepared to facilitate such lessons? The club could then present the findings to the school board and school administration to help inform how sex education programs should be designed. This activity would empower the students and the community at large, as an actual exchange of ideas might take place instead of the intensely moralized public debate that only disserves the very problem it attempts to address. Interested students would likely include newspaper students, debate teams, the math-inclined as well as independently-minded students already embarking on their quests for truth in the universe. Staunch proponents of both sides of the current debate might not like such a suggestion, but how many pregnancies are prevented immediately by pointing out the flaws in the current system? If communities see the numbers that affect them closely, they will see the need to reform their current systems. National numbers bear less importance to the individual than local statistics, and such research will better inform local debate. Ultimately in most areas, individual school districts decide upon curricular matters themselves. This work is what will prepare students to become responsible American citizens. Liberal activists in abstinence-only communities should lead the way here and challenge the current system by integrating the students and the research. Not only will the students learn something, but the community might recognize the power of democratic education.

Additionally, sex education programs must be evaluated while they are in action. In-depth, qualitative and observational research must be conducted on many programs in many locations. Percentages of pages dedicated to certain topics only tell us about the textbooks; what about the students and the material they inject back into the curriculum? If 76% of the printed

curriculum stresses an abstinence-message, does that translate to 76% of class-time focusing on abstinence? What about condoms? Surely, students in abstinence-plus programs do not have daily, prolonged practice unrolling condoms, but Heritage Foundation propaganda might lead one to believe so. A finer line exists, but amidst the political rhetoric, it is very hard to delineate exactly what parents deem appropriate for their children.

Finally, the political debate must be refocused to the idea of democratic education. Conservative moralists and liberal educators present incongruent arguments that are not addressing similar points; meanwhile, teenagers still have sex and give birth to babies. Nobody needs to hear the conservative complaint that “parents have the right to educate their children about sex.” We know! Nobody needs to hear the liberal complain that “scare tactics will not prevent teens from having sex.” We know! We need to discuss the power of democratic education and the need to empower American citizens with the best knowledge possible to ensure that they make appropriate decisions and take responsibility for them. The abstinence message is congruent with this knowledge, and contraception is, too. Like other curricula, a school’s sex education curriculum must be visible to parents, and if parents disapprove of certain parts, they can “exempt their children from” these particular days “and rely upon the informal teachings of friends” (Gutmann, 1987, p. 110). Schools and communities can work together to ensure that every child has access to abstinence-plus sex education curriculum; in this system, parents reserve the right to restrict their children from certain lessons, or altogether for some parents. The values of one group cannot suppress the education of others in a democratic society, and in the suggested democratic system of sex education, no value imposition takes place. Abstinence-plus sex education is the only appropriate sex education in democratic society, and anything less is repressive and ineffective.

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ⁱ To view the snapshots of the Drudge Report homepage containing the relevant headlines, visit both http://www.drudgereportarchives.com/data/2004/12/02/20041202_012800.htm and http://www.drudgereportarchives.com/data/2004/12/02/20041202_045400.htm