



## News Release

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### **National Study on Sex Education Reveals Gaps Between What Parents Want and Schools Teach**

#### **Parents Think Schools Should Cover More: From Abstinence to Homosexuality**

WASHINGTON, D.C.—A new Kaiser Family Foundation study about public secondary school sex education finds gaps between what parents want schools to teach and what students and teachers report is actually being covered in the classroom today. The basics of reproduction, information about HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, and messages about abstinence are now standard in sex education. While parents agree these topics should be covered, they would have schools go farther and address issues often labeled controversial, like abortion and sexual orientation, as well as teach communication and coping skills. Both parents and educators also think the amount of time spent on sex education should be significantly expanded.

Parents look to sex education to provide their children with practical skills that students and teachers report are *not* consistently covered. More than eight in ten parents say how to use condoms (85%) and other forms of birth control (84%), as well as how to talk about them with partners (88%), should be taught. They also want schools to address real-life issues, such as pressure to have sex (94%) and the emotional consequences of becoming sexually active (94%). Three quarters say abortion (79%) and sexual orientation (76%) should be discussed; most (74%) further specify when issues such as these do come up in the classroom they should be presented in a “balanced” way that presents different views in society.

These are among the findings of *Sex Education in America: A View from Inside the Nation’s Classrooms*, an in-depth report from the Kaiser Family Foundation based on a series of national surveys with more than 4,000 public secondary school students and their parents, sex education teachers, and principals about their experiences with and attitudes toward sex education.

“What comes across in this study is that parents look to schools to prepare their children for real life,” said Tina Hoff, Director of Public Health Information and Communication for the Kaiser Family Foundation. “Their concerns are practical, not political.”

In addition to wanting more topics covered, parents also say sex education courses should last longer than the one or two class periods taught in most schools: 65 percent say a half semester or more. Forty-seven percent of teachers and 42 percent of principals agree too little time is spent on sex education; very few feel too much time is currently devoted to these issues, most of the remainder say just enough.

(continued)

## **What Is Happening Today in the Classroom**

Virtually all (89%) of the nation's nearly 20 million public secondary school students will take sex education at least once between 7<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades. The typical class these students take today is co-ed and taught as part of health education.

Almost all secondary school students report receiving some information about HIV/AIDS (97%) as well as other STDs (93%) in their most recent sex education. Reproduction—the “birds and bees”(90%)—along with abstinence (84%)—are also frequently discussed. Fewer students say practical skills are taught, such as how to use and where to get birth control (59%) or how to talk about it with a partner (58%); 68 percent say how to use condoms, specifically, was covered. Abortion (61%), rape and sexual assault (59%), and sexual orientation (41%) are also less frequently discussed.

Teachers present a similar picture of sex education, although they are less likely to report certain topics—generally those considered to be more controversial—as being taught as compared to students.

## **Abstinence: The Political and the Practical**

“Abstinence-only” and “comprehensive” are labels often used to describe different approaches to sex education. A majority of educators (61% of teachers and 58% of principals) report that their school takes a “comprehensive” approach to sex education, teaching that young people should wait to have sex, but they should use birth control and practice safer sex if they don't; a third describe the main message as “abstinence-only.”

Students and teachers in both types of sex education report a heavy emphasis on the fundamentals: HIV/AIDS, other STDs, reproduction and abstinence. While “comprehensive” courses, as the label implies, do cover a wider range of topics as compared to those called “abstinence-only,” the distinctions between the two are not as rigid as might be expected. For example, at least some sex education courses termed “abstinence-only” by teachers did discuss how to use and where to get birth control, a topic that is covered more frequently, though not in all, “comprehensive” courses. Similarly, “comprehensive” courses were as likely as those labeled “abstinence-only” to provide messages about abstinence and to address pressures to have sex.

Parents' attitudes about abstinence-only messages are similarly complex. Many of the same parents that want their children to be told to postpone sex until marriage—33 percent—also want them to get as part of their sex education information about how to use condoms and other birth control.

## **Prepared for the Real World?**

Young people who have had sex education in secondary school generally know more and feel more prepared for the real world than those who have not. Still, many lack complete confidence in critical areas. Among the things students want to know more about: what to do in cases of rape or sexual assault (55%), how to deal with the emotional consequences of being sexually active (46%), how to talk with a partner about birth control and STDs (46%), and how to use and where to get birth control (40%). Many also say they need more information about topics that are standard in most sex education today, such as HIV/AIDS (47%) and other STDs (50%).

## Methodology

The Kaiser Family Foundation's study, *Sex Education in America: A View from Inside the Nation's Classrooms*, is based on a series of national surveys with students and their parents (1,501 pairs); sex education teachers (1,001); and principals (313). The survey was designed and analyzed by staff at the Kaiser Family Foundation and Princeton Survey Research Associates (PSRA). Field work was conducted by PSRA between February 2 and May 23, 1999.

The principal and teacher samples were designed to represent all public middle, junior, and senior high schools enrolling grades 7 through 12 in the continental U.S. Schools were randomly and proportionally selected from a national database of public schools by type of school (middle, junior, and senior high). The student-parent survey was conducted using random digit dialing (RDD) to reach a representative sample of public school students in the 7<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. The overall *margins of error* for the three surveys are  $\pm 6\%$  for principals and  $\pm 3\%$  for teachers, students and parents.

Select findings from the principal component of this study were released by the Foundation in December 1999.

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The Kaiser Family Foundation, based in Menlo Park, California, is an independent national health care philanthropy and is not associated with Kaiser Permanente or Kaiser Industries.

A summary report on the findings, including the questionnaire and topline data, are available at [www.kff.org](http://www.kff.org) or by calling the Foundation's publication request line at 1-800-656-4533 (Ask for #3048).