

Birds and Bees: The Effects of Comprehensive Sexual Health Education on Adolescents

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Introduction

Sex education and its contents have long been cause for controversy across classrooms in the United States. The topics covered range drastically across the country, with some educators choosing to circumvent facts and science while other educators strive to provide an in-depth review. As a result, many adolescents graduate high school with inadequate knowledge of fundamental topics like the reproductive system, let alone more complex concepts covering healthy relationships and sexuality. In my research project, I overview past literature to gauge the level of success of intervention programs and reformed programs in educating adolescents in the United States on key sexual health topics.

I am looking at studies focusing on **comprehensive** programs implemented in middle school, high school, and college settings because these settings are where students are first introduced to foundational knowledge. The outcomes to specifically look at include unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, but they also extend to benefit students by teaching them about LGBTQ+ health, gender equity, consent, healthy relationships, and sexual violence. I looked at studies implementing an experimental program in schools that did not currently have comprehensive programs in place to see if there is a difference.

Key Terms of Education Programs¹

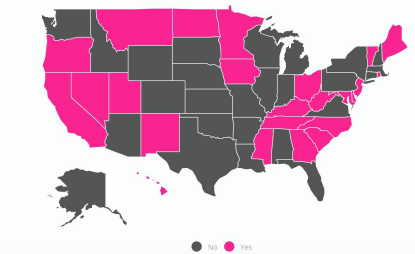
Comprehensive sexual education (CSE)

“promotes interpersonal and communication skills and helps young people explore their own values, goals, and options”. It is especially important when considering that sex education is not mandatory across the United States.

Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage

Education (AOUM) focuses on either advocating for abstinence as the only solution or abstinence as the best solution to unwanted pregnancy and STI's.

Sex Education Policy by State Is sex education mandated?



Graphic by Guttmacher Institute²

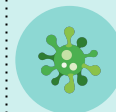
Results

The collection of studies indicate that CSE programs show a significant difference in education outcomes when compared to non-comprehensive sex education programs. These results across various studies demonstrate that it is valuable to the growth and development of students to engage with material beyond STI and pregnancy prevention.



Sexual health implementation programs have improved attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community. Additionally, LGBTQ+ affirming coursework and lesson plans is beneficial to students who are questioning their identity and students who have already come out.³

CSE is effective in reducing adolescent pregnancy, HIV, and STIs while no similar conclusions can be drawn about the effectiveness of group based abstinence based sex education.⁶



K-12 education plays a key role in prevention of sexual violence, as well as can introduce a feminist and socioecological lens to examine sexual activity and consent.⁴

CSE results in more progressive attitudes towards girls and women, separation from hegemonic masculinity, and an increase in knowledge about sexual health resources based on results between a pre-test and a post-test.⁷



CSE encourages partners to move beyond traditional approaches towards sex as a conquest and towards a healthy, mutually desired experience.⁵

Conclusion

I argue that comprehensive sexual health education is not only necessary but also crucial in the development of young adults. Comprehensive sex education has been demonstrated to improve interpersonal relationships, lower rates of pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections in adolescents, and promote more inclusivity. The American public education system as it stands is too varied and quality of education is dependent on factors such as geographic region and lawmaker morality. By adopting comprehensive sex education on a national scale, health disparities can be minimized on a more national scale. Current abstinence-only programs and other limited curriculums do not effectively reduce teen pregnancy and STI contraction, nor do they adequately address the needs of students and the variety of identities and backgrounds they may come from.

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