

# Curriculum Controversy

## Lessons from the Field

### INTRODUCTION

Teen pregnancy prevention organizations can play a critical role in ensuring that schools choose and offer science-based, evaluated, effective sex education curricula. Most parents today believe that their children should receive, as part of their schooling, medically accurate, comprehensive sex education. Yet controversy over sex education remains common.

This controversy can be intense due to diverse and conflicting views about adolescent sexuality, yet, such controversy can work to build community consensus. This document offers “Do’s and Don’ts” to help you 1) effectively advocate for comprehensive sex education and 2) successfully navigate potential controversy.

### HOW CAN YOUR TEEN PREGNANCY PREVENTION ORGANIZATION ADVOCATE EFFECTIVELY FOR COMPREHENSIVE SEX EDUCATION?

#### Do...

- ✓ Create a broad sex education working group to support science based programs. The working group should include members of key groups, including parents, county commissioners and other policy makers, and representatives of supportive community agencies, religious organizations, and local businesses.
  - Appoint an advisory council for the working group.
  - Inform stakeholder groups about the purpose of the working group and its mission to promote evaluated, effective sex education curricula.
  - Be sure to solicit the support of these stakeholder groups *before* conflict arises so they can be prepared and successfully advocate for comprehensive sex education.
- ✓ Follow the school system’s established procedure for curriculum review. If there is no procedure, ask the school board to develop one now, before challenges arise.
  - As you move through the review process, be prepared for questions. Provide accurate answers and focus on the facts.

- Be ready with facts that support comprehensive sex education as well as with pertinent policies, statutes, statements of goals, and state mandates, if any.

- Develop a one-page fact sheet and be sure it cites credible sources.

- ✓ Find an articulate leader or spokesperson who is respected in the community to represent your perspective in community meetings and with the media.

- Build a working relationship with media, especially with reporters who cover education and health issues.

- When appropriate, submit letters to the editor and op-eds and grant interviews to local media.

- Use public forums to build awareness and to educate the community, especially parents, about the need for effective sex education.

- Draw upon your professional experience to make your point. Be assertive and polite.

- Use humor selectively and cautiously. Unwise remarks can too easily backfire, returning to haunt you later.

- ✓ Know your opponents.

- Ask what opponents are doing to address critical issues of adolescent reproductive and sexual health.

- Be prepared to identify opponents’ sources of support and suppliers of materials.

- Ask about the sources of their data and check these sources. Often opponents of comprehensive sexuality education have no reputable data to support their side.

- Use specific examples and accurate data to let the community know when the truth is being stretched, misused, or taken out of context.

- Point out incorrect information that you hear repeatedly.

- Be aware that some people’s arguments about adolescent sexual health and sex education are not reasonable, rational, or realistic. Acknowledge people’s feelings while you clarify and assert the facts.

# STRATEGIES

## FOR ORGANIZATIONAL SUCCESS

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# Find an articulate leader or spokesperson who is respected in the community to represent your perspective in community meetings and with the media.

- Document and maintain records concerning all activities related to the opposition.
- ✓ Follow the public debate.
  - Correct misinformation promptly, before the community comes to believe that it is fact.
  - Develop a fall-back plan in the event that the opposition is successful in blocking approval of a science-based curriculum.
- ✓ Regularly thank the people and organizations who support your efforts.

## **At the same time ...**

- ✓ Don't let internal debate within your organization or working group undermine your efforts.
  - Don't fight your internal battles in public – in the media, community forums, or public hearings.
  - Don't make promises you can't keep.
- ✓ Don't participate in emotional debates. Instead, stick to the facts.
  - Don't make personal attacks.
  - Don't make unsubstantiated charges.
  - Don't be defensive.
- ✓ Don't be afraid of threats. Threats of lawsuits and program cuts are common but few are attempted. Fewer still are successful.
- ✓ Don't attempt to use the media to stifle opposition. Media will seek viewpoints from both sides.
  - Don't expect media to print your response to every inconsistency or piece of misinformation. Choose your battles wisely.
  - Don't deny a charge without any explanation. Provide factual evidence, substantive data, and/or legal information to refute false statements about your working group, your issue, or your stand.

- ✓ Don't ignore the opposition.
  - Don't believe it will disappear if you ignore it.
  - Don't expect to change opponents' views of the issue.
  - Don't accept the opposition's claims, data, or research. Always check it out.
- ✓ Don't allow people from outside your county, district, and school system to be involved in decisions about a sex education curriculum. Make sure that those who have children in the schools and/or live in the community are the ones who speak at public forums.

## **Be active and organize now.**

### **WHAT ADVICE CAN YOUR ORGANIZATION GIVE TO TEACHERS WHO ARE ADVOCATING FOR SCIENCE-BASED CURRICULA?**

Those who actually teach sex education classes make a difference in how parents, school administrators, and the school board receive the curriculum debate. In addition, when teachers thoughtfully introduce and implement science-based curricula, they often face less resistance than those who introduce and implement the curriculum quickly and without careful preparation. Your working group can encourage teachers to follow these "Do's and Don'ts."

#### **Do...**

- ✓ Become credentialed or certified in health education and/or sex education.
- ✓ Know and follow your school system's policies and procedures about selecting and implementing curricula.
  - Meet with your principal and other school administrators to assess their involvement and support of science-based sex education.
  - Identify and select a curriculum that has been proven effective through rigorous evaluation.
  - Plan to implement it with fidelity to its evaluated standard.
  - Encourage administrators to develop policies on the role and use of outside speakers for *all* classes.
- ✓ Notify administrators and parents about the components and activities of the selected curriculum.
  - Follow the school's guidelines for notifying parents, holding parent nights, and following the district's opt-out or opt-in policy.
  - Talk with parents who opt their children out. Review with them what the curriculum covers. They may change their mind about letting their child participate.

- Accept that some parents simply will not approve of school-based sex education.
- Develop take-home exercises for students to complete with their parents, if such activities are not already included in the curriculum.
- Have your supervisor review and approve all materials, videos, and resources.

**At the same time..**

- ✓ Don't bring in outside speakers without your principal's prior knowledge and approval.
- ✓ Don't put yourself in a "defensive" position publicly. If controversy arises, the principal or school board should handle public comments.
- ✓ Don't withhold information from parents.
- ✓ Don't be afraid of threats. Threats of lawsuits and program cuts are common. But few are attempted. Fewer still are successful.

**WHAT ADVICE CAN YOUR ORGANIZATION GIVE TO SUPPORTIVE SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS?**

School boards often bear the brunt of curriculum controversy. The debate can be particularly intense and challenging when the issue is sex education. Your working group can support school board members, both as individuals and as a board, to handle controversy. Encourage them to follow these "Do's and Don'ts."

**Do...**

- ✓ Anticipate and prepare for controversies.
  - Know the data on teen pregnancy, STIs, and HIV among youth in the community, county, and/or state.
  - Become familiar with the science of sex education and HIV prevention education.
  - Ask advocates on both sides of the debate to cite their data. Make sure they know that someone representing the school board will verify their citations and their data.
  - Ask advocates on both sides what their organizations are doing to address the issue of adolescent sexual and reproductive health.
- ✓ Establish policies for curriculum review.
  - Identify the source or supplier of all curriculum materials.
  - Verify the data and evaluations of proposed curricula.
- ✓ Develop guidelines or rules for comments at public meetings.
  - Decide who may speak at a hearing – for example, only people who live in the school district or who have children in the local

schools. The rules should also limit how long and how often one person may speak and the number of people allowed to speak.

- Require speakers to sign up in advance.
- Ask media representative to register.
- Use a moderator.
- Ask for both written and oral testimony.
- ✓ After a curriculum is approved, criticism may persist.
  - Expose any unfair tactics immediately and clearly. Use specific examples and data to let the community know exactly how the truth is being stretched, misused or taken out of context.
  - Understand that some people's arguments about adolescent sexual health and sex education are not reasonable, rational, or realistic.

**At the same time ...**

- ✓ Don't allow public hearings to be hijacked.
  - Don't give opponents half of speaking opportunities or half the time allotted when an overwhelming majority of parents in your community or school district support science-based, comprehensive sex education.
  - Don't allow people from outside your county or school district to participate. Listen to those who have children in the schools and/or who live in the community.
- ✓ Don't make a decision immediately after receiving public testimony.
  - Don't hesitate to take time to discuss and read written testimony.
  - Don't hesitate to verify or refute claims made or to identify the facts.
  - Don't blindly accept the claims, data, or research presented by opponents of comprehensive sex education.
  - Don't accept demands for 100 percent agreement in order to approve a comprehensive, science-based sex education curriculum.

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## MISSION

Established in 1980 as the Center for Population Options, Advocates for Youth champions efforts to help young people make informed and responsible decisions about their reproductive and sexual health. Advocates believes it can best serve the field by boldly advocating for a more positive and realistic approach to adolescent sexual health.

## OUR VISION: THE 3RS

Advocates for Youth envisions a society that views sexuality as normal and healthy and treats young people as a valuable resource.

The core values of Rights. Respect. Responsibility.® (3Rs) animate this vision:

**RIGHTS:** Youth have the right to accurate and complete sexual health information, confidential reproductive and sexual health services, and a secure stake in the future.

**RESPECT:** Youth deserve respect. Valuing young people means involving them in the design, implementation and evaluation of programs and policies that affect their health and well-being.

**RESPONSIBILITY:** Society has the responsibility to provide young people with the tools they need to safeguard their sexual health, and young people have the responsibility to protect themselves from too-early childbearing and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV.

## SOME RELATED PUBLICATIONS FROM ADVOCATES FOR YOUTH

Hot Potatoes: Keeping Cool in the Midst of Controversy

Managing Controversy in Pressure Cooker Situations

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