

Managing Controversy in Pressure Cooker Situations

INTRODUCTION

Most teen pregnancy prevention organizations, sex education teachers, and reproductive health advocates face controversy and conflict at some point in time. During such controversy, we and our organizations may be closely scrutinized and questioned, put on the defensive, challenged, or attacked. To address conflict effectively, we need to anticipate and strategize. This handout identifies some common 'pressure cooker situations' and offers suggestions from the field on how to approach them.

PRESSURE COOKER #1: THE PUBLIC HEARING

Our community coalition is trying to get an evaluated sex education curriculum approved for use with tenth graders in local public high schools. We have tried to avoid a public hearing because we know that such meetings are usually unproductive. They tend to draw people on the extremes, heighten emotions, and end in deadlock.

Despite our attempts to keep a low profile by working 'under the radar' with the curriculum committee, a small and vocal group of parents actively opposes our efforts. We now realize that a public hearing is inevitable. What steps can we take to ensure that the school board and community members hear our position? We can:

- Meet with representatives of the school board prior to the hearing and ask that the school board take the following measures to ensure an effective meeting:
 - Schedule a 90 minute hearing (Otherwise, the debate could go on for days!);
 - Have security available;
 - Ask speakers to sign a roster;
 - Allow only persons to speak who live in the county and/or who have children in the public school system;
 - Give each speaker a maximum of two to three minutes, a time limit established before the hearing;
 - Allow each speaker only one opportunity to speak;
 - Keep a stop watch and stick to the designated time.

- Ask influential, supportive people in the community (such as physicians, ministers, and PTA officers) to speak on behalf of the issue;
- Encourage supporters to arrive early and to fill the front rows;
- Ask articulate young people to speak about students' needs;
- Prepare press kits and develop sound bytes for the media.

PRESSURE COOKER #2: REQUESTS TO CONSIDER ALTERNATIVE MATERIAL

A health teacher in a local public high school recently contacted us for help. He explained that he is responsible for teaching family life education for 10th and 12th grade students. He teaches a science-based, evaluated curriculum that was approved several years ago after a lengthy review process. Recently, a group of parents sent him a new curriculum, with a letter firmly requesting that he introduce the material in the upcoming semester. The curriculum has not yet been evaluated. To help him respond in an effective manner, we give him the following advice:

- Accept the materials graciously. Contact the parents to let them know that you will review the materials over the next two weeks. Then, they can follow up with you during a specified period of time.
- Describe why the current curriculum was selected and explain the school's process for accepting new material. Explain that new material must meet specific criteria and competencies and must be approved by an advisory committee.
- If the group continues to press, ask one representative to meet with you in person. Explore with that person the parts of the curriculum that are acceptable. Then talk about unacceptable or questionable material.
- If the group still continues to press, take the request to the curriculum advisory committee along with your own research and findings regarding it.

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Build support among your allies on the board. Don't go out on a limb by yourself.

PRESSURE COOKER #3: THE DIFFICULT BOARD MEMBER

Most members of the board of our teen pregnancy prevention organizations clearly support the organization's governance, philosophy, mission, fund-raising efforts, and strategic direction. However, one member consistently challenges decisions and frequently undermines the work of individuals and committees. As the new president of the board, I learned from other board members that this member threatened in the past to 'go public' with his concerns. I realize that I have inherited a 'pressure cooker' situation that I must address. What can I do?

- Establish rules for the board and its committee. Rules should spell out:
 - Who can speak on behalf of the group;
 - How members should offer input and participate in dialogue;
 - The use of the democratic process and majority vote;
 - The use of anonymous voting procedures when the group is deadlocked.
- Establish operating policies for rotation and replacement of members.
- Screen new candidates for the board to ensure they will: be representative of the community; participate in constructive dialogue; and respect the democratic process.
- On controversial issues, talk with members individually to make sure you have the votes you need before you call the question. Build support among your allies on the board. Be sure that you don't go out on a limb by yourself

PRESSURE COOKER #4: THE MEDIA

Our community coalition is making a concerted effort to build public support for science-based prevention efforts in the community. We have seen professional colleagues sometimes misrepresented and misquoted in local television interviews and newspaper articles. Rather than simply reacting to community controversy when it arises, we know that we are more likely to be successful if we are proactive. We decide to develop a public relations plan and approach the media strategically. Where do we start? We:

- Anticipate when reporters will call by monitoring their interests, beats, and concerns.
- Train spokespersons and decide who will best handle the media in a given situation.
- Avoid putting teachers in the position of having to speak on behalf of a curriculum.
- Prepare to address various controversial topics. We develop a set of note cards with sound bytes. We practice our response.
- Ask supporters to be visible and vocal at public hearings.
- Develop good working relationships with local media representatives. We talk with them often, not only for interviews but to offer background and assistance with research.
- Respect reporters' deadlines and are careful to give them accurate quotes and verifiable facts.
- Use various strategies to educate the media about our key issues. We provide press packets, hold press events, and request individual interviews, as appropriate.
- We talk to reporters when we have not been asked to respond to misrepresentations by the opposition. At the same time, we honor reporters' responsibility to cover both sides of the issue.

PRESSURE COOKER #5: THE POWERFUL POLICY MAKER

Our community teen pregnancy prevention coalition focuses primarily on consumer education, professional training, and program development rather than on advocacy and policy work. Yet, we know that elected officials play a powerful role in supporting or opposing state and local teen pregnancy prevention efforts. We have seen politicians change laws regarding young people's access to health services. We have seen them enact new laws that undermine minors' rights. We have watched our school board vote for a so-called 'family life education' curriculum that provides inaccurate information and uses fear to discourage sexual risk behaviors. We have watched our governor slash prevention funding and/or veto a bill that would fund integrated programs.

Now, we realize that we will be more effective if we combine our current efforts with advocacy. We are ready to be vocal advocates for young people. How can we work within the political process to make a difference? We can:

- Determine what types of policies will help reduce teen pregnancy in our state and community. For example, what types of laws, policies, and regulations are needed to ensure that teens have complete and accurate information about their sexual health? Have access to confidential and affordable reproductive health services? Have the opportunity to participate in youth development opportunities from tutoring, to after-school programs, to job training?

- Determine which decision-making bodies or elected officials are responsible for these policies.
- Mount a carefully constructed campaign to educate policy makers, media and the public about the importance of comprehensive sex education and unrestricted access to health care. Educating elected officials *before* there is controversy is the best way to ensure their support when controversy arises.
- Identify knowledgeable people who are committed to science-based programs, including comprehensive sex education. Encourage them to run for the school board, county or city commission, and state legislature.
- Recruit people to our coalition who have access to these elected officials.
- Get involved as private citizens in campaigns by making contributions; working actively in the campaigns; and speaking out on the priority issues.
- Have a small committee that can troubleshoot in crisis situations and respond on behalf of our supporters.
- Avoid public confrontations.
- Work together to support our issues.
 - Insist on negotiating and identifying common interests. Reach decisions that the majority supports.
 - Develop a strategy that helps us to handle personal attacks and to support the one attacked.

Preparation is key to managing controversy. By anticipating our own 'pressure cooker' scenarios and developing our own strategic responses, we can be effective in handling these difficult situations!

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PRESSURE COOKER #6: GROUPS OPPOSED TO SCIENCE BASED APPROACHES AND PROGRAMS AND TO COMPREHENSIVE SEX EDUCATION

In recent years, a small, yet vocal group of advocates has grown to be a significant force in our community. This group opposes comprehensive sex education in schools. It also opposes confidential reproductive health services for teens. The group is often visible in the media and often misrepresents our positions and goals. We must address the group and the controversy head on. Where do we start? We can:

- Learn about the opposition.
 - Get on the group's mailing list so we can monitor its activities and claims.
 - Attend the group's meetings so we will know who participates and what issues they represent.
 - Develop a working relationship with at least one leader from the group.
- Do our homework.
 - Offer accurate information and valid points when rebutting opposition arguments, whether in print or at public meetings.
 - Present credible research and data on youth's risk behaviors; community polls and surveys; and program evaluations.
- Have a strategy plan to help us deal with potential controversy.
 - Develop and maintain a readily available group of spokespeople and supporters.
 - Create a telephone tree so we can mobilize our supporters quickly.

Talk with local media representatives often, not only for interviews but to offer background and assistance with research.

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

Curriculum Controversy: Lessons from the Field

The Seven Components of Organizational Sustainability

See the complete library of publications at www.advocatesforyouth.org/publications