

Cardinal Compositions

University of Louisville

Sex Education in Public Schools ([Video](#) & Essay)

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For the Classroom

1. What was your experience with sex education in school? Did your school have abstinence-only, contraceptive-inclusive, abstinence-plus, or no sex education? Do you feel the sex education you received was appropriate and beneficial or inappropriate and unnecessary? What level of sex education do you think you should have received?
2. How did Cassidy Witt's video effectively further illustrate the issue of sex education? What are some ways our society could closer match sex education policies in public schools with the "public and scientific opinions of Americans"?

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In order to graduate high school in the United States, every student will most likely be required to complete a course in health. Despite what state they may live in, students will probably learn about ways to stay fit, how to maintain a balanced diet, and how much sleep is appropriate for the average teenager on a night-to-night basis. All these topics are relevant to developing young adults, but there's one important topic that isn't guaranteed to be covered: sex education.

Sex education mandates vary from state to state, as "sex education" is a relatively broad topic. Sex education can include the discussion of contraception, sexually transmitted infections/diseases, pregnancy/reproduction, consent, anatomy, and oftentimes abstinence. My high school health class covered a variety of topics extensively, but sex education was glossed over quickly, excluding details, and leaving many questions unanswered. My classmates and I had to look to exterior sources to understand things we should have had explained to us in class, and upon asking my health teacher why we hadn't talked more about particular aspects of sex, she explained how some parents would frown upon it, as they deem high school students too young to be discussing the details of intercourse. I had seen countless high school movies and television shows oriented around the idea of sex, I'd heard classmates talk about it, and I was aware of the experiences of myself and those around me. If there was a societal pressure for teenagers to be participating in sex, why were they not being educated about how to do it safely? I knew that my high school had handled sex education somewhat poorly, but upon taking to social media, I was able to find countless comments and posts from people of other public schools in different states lacking information as well, some even more so than myself. I was led to question the extent of sex education throughout public schools in the entire United States.

Sex education in America is a widely debated topic, and as a result, it exists now in many different forms and at different degrees. The center of the debate is whether sex education should be required in public schools across the United States, or whether abstinence education should be taught instead. In a world where sex seems to constantly be a topic of conversation in entertainment, but also in day-to-day interactions, it's surprising that not every student in America will be educated about it. Currently, states have varying requirements for sex education courses in public schools. The question of whether or not to regulate sex education, rather than abstinence-only or abstinence-heavy education, is likely disagreed on due to different political and religious affiliations regionally. However, studies show that perhaps this topic is more nonpartisan than expected.

"Public Opinion on Sex Education in U.S. Schools" written by Amy Bleakley, Michael Hennessy, and Martin Fishbein, summarizes a research experiment where adults above the age of 18 from all over America were surveyed regarding their opinions on sex education. They were asked to rank their support for different forms of sex education, including abstinence-only, contraceptive-inclusive, and abstinence-plus (which includes abstinence but also elaborates on other forms of protection). According to this survey, "70% of Conservatives, 86.4% of Moderates, and 91.6% of Liberals supported abstinence-plus education, and 51.2% of Conservatives supported condom instruction, as well as over 70% of Moderates and Liberals" (Bleakley et. al 11). This means that there is a clear majority of people, regardless of their political party, who support public schools having more than abstinence-only education. The counterargument for more comprehensive sex education may also be based on religion, as the majority of American adults identify as Christian, and some Christians believe in not having sex

until marriage or that speaking about sexual topics is immodest, especially for high school-aged students. However, the survey showed that of the people who attended a religious service anywhere from once a year to once a week, the majority agreed with condom instruction and opposed abstinence-only education. Bleakley includes, "it is interesting to note that among the most religious respondents (i.e., those who attend services more than once a week), abstinence only and abstinence plus received equivalent levels of support" (Bleakley et. al 12). The majority of Americans surveyed, regardless of religion or political affiliation, agree that more comprehensive sex education should be taught in schools. If this is true, then the public and scientific opinions of Americans do *not* match up with the policies in place.

According to "Abstinence Only Education and Sex Education in the U.S.," written by Linda Lowen, sex education is only mandated in 24 states, which is less than half (though some of these states require HIV education). Only 18 states require contraception be discussed (Lowen 2), and 37 states require that abstinence is discussed, 26 of which require a "stress" on abstinence (Lowen 3). The majority of states do not require students to learn about condoms and *do* require students to learn about abstinence, yet according to the previously referenced survey, the majority of Americans agree that abstinence is not a sufficient form of sex education and that condom instruction is necessary. According to "Changes in Adolescents' Receipt of Sex Education, 2006-2013," written by Laura Lindberg, the average percentage of male high school students who claimed to have received instruction about birth control went from 61% (2006-2010) to 55% (2011-2013). Lindberg also notes that this number faced a decline in females as well, from 70% to 60%. This data not only highlights that the issue is *not* one of the past, but also that it is not necessarily improving. This data displays a trend towards sex education actively getting worse.

If the people believe in sex education, why have the policies not changed? A possible explanation might be that abstinence education works and there is no need to reform the policies in place because they have shown to be effective. Unfortunately, this isn't true. Lowen states that of the nine states with absolutely no sex education or HIV education mandates, five of them rank in the top twelve states with the highest teenage birth rates, and four of them rank in the top six (Lowen 2). Additionally, "Public Opinion on Sex Education in U.S. Schools" includes that students who took abstinence pledges used condoms less when they did become sexually active, or substituted vaginal sex for oral or anal sex, still attaining the same rates of STDs as the non-pledgers (Bleakley et. al 4). Abstinence education is statistically ineffective. Even those who pledge abstinence will eventually become sexually active (in some way or form) and will end up in potentially dangerous situations due to their lack of education.

While abstinence may be encouraged by high schools, it is directly opposed by high school culture. An article published by the BBC, "Do Young People Feel Pressured to Have Sex?" compiles quotes from students at a high school in Britain. While the topic of sex education is focused on American public schools, British teenage culture is generally very similar to American culture. The article includes a quote from a student, Beth, who thinks TV shows like *Skins* place a lot of pressure on high schoolers to have sex. Shows of similar popularity in America, such as *Euphoria* or *13 Reasons Why* also display high schoolers having sex as major aspects of the plot. Another student, Sazali, talks about how he feels peer pressure to have sex. Sazali states, "I feel like it's more of a norm for people our age to not be virgins anymore" (1). This article encompasses the many forces telling teenagers that they should be having sex, or that not having sex in high school is abnormal. With every movie, television show, and classmate making students feel as though they must have sex before they graduate, it doesn't make sense that schools refuse to educate students about how to do it safely. "Public Opinion on Sex Education In U.S. Schools" mentions that by age 17, nearly 50% of students claimed to have had vaginal sex before. With the pressure of pop culture and statistics combined, it's hard to deny that teenagers will inevitably have sex, so shouldn't schools be preparing them?

The American sex education system is not sufficient. My firsthand experience with this piqued my interest in the subject, but upon further research, I have found that I am not alone in lacking in-depth sex education at my high school. Many high schools across the United States refuse to address simple contraception methods and stress abstinence, despite the fact that the general public seems to agree with more comprehensive sex education. Teenagers feel the pressure of television shows and movies, their peers, and their own bodies to partake in sex acts. Even those who abstain throughout high school will most likely become sexually active eventually, in which case they will need to know about what protective measures to take. The policies in place in many states are statistically ineffective, resulting in high rates of teen pregnancies and STDs. With the internet available to nearly every young person, it's hard to argue that the topic of sex is too inappropriate to talk about in schools. Students shouldn't have to take it upon themselves to learn about their bodies— schools need to do what they were made to do: educate their students.

Works Cited

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