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Review of Key Findings of “Emerging Answers 2007” Report on Sex Education Programs

Background

The “[Emerging Answers 2007: Research Findings on Programs to Reduce Teen Pregnancy and Sexually Transmitted Diseases](#)” report is an authoritative and comprehensive review of research findings on the effectiveness of programs—including both comprehensive and abstinence-only sex education programs—to reduce teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. It was commissioned by the nonpartisan National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and conducted by Douglas Kirby, Ph.D., a highly regarded researcher with ETR Associates. The report was also reviewed by an “Effective Programs and Research Task Force” comprised of 13 distinguished and diverse experts.

This report updates two previous studies (conducted in 1997 and 2001) and finds that “the quality and quantity of evaluation research in this field has improved dramatically and there is now more persuasive evidence than ever before that a limited number of programs can delay sexual activity, improve contraceptive use among sexually active teens, and/or prevent teen pregnancy.”¹

Key Findings

- There is **no evidence base to support continued investments of public funds in rigid abstinence-only-until-marriage programs.**

“In sum, studies of abstinence programs have not produced sufficient evidence to justify their widespread dissemination. ... Only when strong evidence demonstrates that particular programs are effective should they be disseminated more widely.”^{1(p. 15)}

- To date, **no abstinence program** of the type eligible for funding under the federal government’s \$176 million abstinence-only-until-marriage program **has been found in a methodologically rigorous study to positively impact teen sexual behavior.**

“At present, there does not exist any strong evidence that any abstinence program delays the initiation of sex, hastens the return to abstinence, or reduces the number of sexual partners. In addition, there is strong evidence from multiple randomized trials demonstrating that some abstinence programs chosen for evaluation because they were believed to be promising actually had no impact on teen sexual behavior. That

is, they did not delay the initiation of sex, increase the return to abstinence or decrease the number of sexual partners.”^{1(p. 15)}

- In contrast, **a substantial majority of the comprehensive sex education programs reviewed**—which receive no comparable federal funding—**are effective**. The positive outcomes included delaying the initiation of sex, reducing the frequency of sex, reducing the number of sexual partners and increasing condom or contraceptive use.

“Two-thirds of the 48 comprehensive programs that supported both abstinence and the use of condoms and contraceptives for sexually active teens had positive behavioral effects.”^{1 (p. 15).}

- Comprehensive sex education programs are **well suited for widespread replication and dissemination**.

“When three [comprehensive] programs were replicated with fidelity in different locations throughout the United States, but in the same type of setting, the original positive effects were confirmed. This is very encouraging and suggests that effective programs can remain effective when they are implemented with fidelity by other people in other communities with similar groups of young people.”^{1(p. 16)}

Debunking Myths

This report also shows that several myths propagated by advocates of abstinence-only education are demonstrably false. The report finds that:

- **Comprehensive sex education does not promote promiscuity.**

“No comprehensive program hastened the initiation of sex or increased the frequency of sex.”^{1 (p. 16)}

- **Comprehensive sex education does not send a confusing message to adolescents.**

“Emphasizing both abstinence and protection for those who do have sex is a realistic, effective approach that does not appear to confuse young people.”^{1(p. 16)}

- The benefits of comprehensive sex education programs **extend to many areas of decision-making and confidence building among adolescents.**

“Virtually all of the comprehensive programs also had a positive impact on one or more factors affecting behavior. In particular, they improved factors such as knowledge about risks and consequences of pregnancy and STD; values and attitudes about having sex and using condoms or contraception; perception of peer norms about sex and contraception; confidence in the ability to say ‘no’ to unwanted sex, to

insist on using condoms or contraception, or to actually use condoms or contraception; intention to avoid sex or use contraception; and communication with parents or other adults about these topics. In part by improving these factors, the programs changed behavior in desired directions.”¹(p. 16)

¹ Kirby D, *Emerging Answers 2007: Research Findings on Programs to Reduce Teen Pregnancy and Sexually Transmitted Diseases*, Washington, DC: The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2007, p. 4, < http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/EA2007/EA2007_full.pdf >, accessed Nov. 6, 2007.