



R.E.A.L.

**Real
Education
About
Life**



ACTION KIT



WFF STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The Woodhull Freedom Foundation and the Woodhull Freedom Federation (WFF) are devoted to education and public advocacy in support of the proposition that safe and consensual sexual expression is a fundamental human right.

Based in Washington, DC, WFF brings together experienced, successful sexual freedom activists who seek to eliminate the barriers, governmental and private, to expressions of human sexuality in the United States and around the world. Helping to mobilize diverse grassroots communities, WFF utilizes lobbying, outreach, and education to help change antiquated and unjust sex laws.

WFF supports civil liberties, emphasizing issues of sexual expression, sexual orientation, gender and racial discrimination.



January, 2004

Dear Activist,

You hold in your hands the tools you can use to make a difference. The Woodhull Freedom Foundation's R.E.A.L.—“Real Education About Life”—campaign addresses a fundamental human rights issue: the right of youth to know about their bodies and sexuality. We believe that as human beings, men and women have a right to safe and consensual sexual expression, and along with that right, the responsibility for making individual decisions regarding sexual activity. But we can't make good decisions without good information.

Abstinence-only sex education forbids teachers from providing comprehensive, factual information about safer sex, sexuality, sexual orientation and gender identity and expression in the public schools. Indeed, federally funded instructional materials warn students that any sexual activity outside of a monogamous marriage violates “the expected standard” of society. This prejudiced lesson plan endangers the lives and well-being of students nationwide by denying access to simple facts about sexual health.

Inside this Action Kit, you'll find facts and ideas for tackling this deliberate mis-education of youth. We include a petition letter for local school officials, tips for finding out how your school district spends federal money to teach this inaccurate and unhealthy curriculum, sample letters for local newspapers, and other materials to reach out to concerned members of your community.

Over the years, there have been many tough battles over sex education in the public schools. In the late 1970s, when I headed the Education Division of the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW), I fought hard for a public school curriculum that did not reinforce gender stereotypes. More recently, former U.S. Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders battled many of the same conservative voices to advocate on behalf of comprehensive sexuality education. In the current political climate, we call upon you—as local activists—to bring the fight for comprehensive sexuality education back to the grassroots.

I hope you'll join us in this campaign. *Turn the page to find out how.*

Dr. Mary Frances Berry

Frequently Asked Questions About Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Sex Education in the Public Schools

What is abstinence-only-until-marriage sex education?

Abstinence-only-until-marriage sex education generally teaches that abstinence from all sexual activity is the only acceptable and appropriate sexual choice for unmarried people. These programs restrict public schools from teaching life-saving and effective condom and contraceptive use—imposing an extremist, ideologically-driven message in the public schools that runs counter to the wishes of most parents, who want their children to learn about effective safe sex methods. Abstinence-only-until-marriage curricula ignore the increasing HIV infection rates among youth.

Several of the abstinence-only programs emphasize religious messages in a public education setting, threatening the First Amendment's obligation for the separation between church and state. (Indeed, the American Civil Liberties Union sued Louisiana state education officials twice because they refused to abandon programs clearly religious in nature. In 2002, U.S. District Judge G. Thomas Porteous Jr. ordered Louisiana to stop using tax dollars earmarked for abstinence education to “convey religious messages or otherwise advance religion.”)

Additionally, abstinence-only programs fail to provide detailed information on contraception for the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases and unplanned pregnancies. One of the most egregious aspects of abstinence-only education funding is its mandate that discussion about condoms is not permissible, except to emphasize their failure rate.

Why is abstinence-only education a human rights issue?

Sexual autonomy and access to accurate sexual health information are basic human and civil rights. Unproven and misguided abstinence-only programs undermine basic human rights by endangering the health and lives of young people, depriving them of access to essential, medically accurate sexual health information. Abstinence-only programs deny youth the means to make healthier and wiser individual choices about sex, and undermine public health by discouraging safer sex.

How does abstinence-only education harm youth?

Abstinence-only-until-marriage education programs fail to provide information on the prevention of HIV, sexually transmitted diseases, and unintentional pregnancies. Some of the most popular abstinence-only curricula use scare tactics to spread their message, and include both inaccurate and inadequate medical information. All programs assert that a heterosexual monogamous relationship within the context of marriage is the only acceptable family unit, which unnecessarily stigmatizes children who live in homes where this is not the norm or who do not imagine themselves getting married. Youth who have been sexually abused are also shamed by this message, and may have difficulty reporting abuse because of the stigmatization of sexuality.

How does abstinence-only education reinforce gender stereotypes?

Many abstinence-only-until-marriage programs heavily promote gender stereotypes that hark back to the rigid sex roles of the mid-1950s. Young women are warned

heavily against “dressing to tease”, implying that unwanted sexual advances are the result of their choice of clothing. Some say that it's normal for male adolescents to desire sex, and place the responsibility for abstaining from sex on prospective female partners. Sexually “aggressive” females are warned that young men don’t like this kind of behavior. Males are told they should initiate the first contact with a prospective date.

How does abstinence-only education reinforce racial stereotypes?

Racial messages are plentiful in abstinence-only programs. Scholars at the Applied Research Center found several programs full of racial stereotypes, calling up outdated fears about inter-racial sex and employing racist images about female welfare recipients and their children. African Americans are portrayed as “promiscuous”. “Uncaring, unfaithful and irresponsible” are terms used to describe African American fathers. Homes are called “troubled” and there are hints of family abuse. Racialized images are intermingled with gender stereotyping. One program intended to be sensitive to the needs of young black women includes coaching on how to handle the “problem” of being “physically unattractive”, and how to cope with a need for “male attention” to build “self-esteem”.

How does abstinence-only education create prejudice against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersexed and questioning youth?

Abstinence-only education silences discussion about sexual orientation and gender diversity issues. Many programs reflect blatant hostility towards same-sex relationships, and stigmatize students who are, or are perceived to be, gay, lesbian or transgendered.

By erasing the existence of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth in

**Under federal law (Public Law 104-193),
an acceptable abstinence-only-until-marriage curriculum
contains ALL of the following eight elements:**

- 1.** Has as its exclusive purpose teaching the social, psychological, and health gains to be realized by abstaining from sexual activity
- 2.** Teaches abstinence from sexual activity outside marriage as the expected standard for all school-age children
- 3.** Teaches that abstinence from sexual activity is the only certain way to avoid out-of wedlock pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and other associated health problems
- 4.** Teaches that a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of sexual activity
- 5.** Teaches that sexual activity outside of the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects
- 6.** Teaches that bearing children out-of-wedlock is likely to have harmful consequences for the child, the child's parents and society
- 7.** Teaches young people how to reject sexual advances and how alcohol and drug use increase vulnerability to sexual advances
- 8.** Teaches the importance of attaining self-sufficiency before engaging in sexual activity

messages that sex can only happen in marriage, abstinence-only programs ignore the realities of youth sexuality and put teens at increased risk for HIV infection.

In addition, the rate of teen suicide—particularly among African American youth and LGBT youth—is among the highest in the industrialized world, a situation some attribute to the systematic stigmatization of people of color and sexual minorities, and greater likelihood of experiencing victimization and depression. Consequently, sexuality education should be sensitive to the distinct needs of minority and LGBT students, and should not further denigrate those who might already feel marginalized.

What's wrong with abstinence?

Nothing is “wrong” with abstinence from sexual activity; abstinence is the only sure way to prevent unwanted pregnancies and the spread of disease.

However, comprehensive sexuality education also teaches young people how to use condoms and contraceptives correctly to avoid infection when they do engage in sex.

The United States has the highest teen pregnancy, abortion, and birth rates in the industrialized world. It is essential that adults become realistic about youth sexuality. It is an unavoidable fact that many young people do engage in sexual activity. More than three million youth contract sexually transmitted diseases every year, and one half of all new HIV cases are people under 25.¹

By age 18, two-thirds of all youth have had sexual intercourse (females 65%; males 68%) according to a study by the Alan Guttmacher Institute.² Even young people who have taken “Chastity Vows” or made “Virginity Pledges” after participating in abstinence-only until marriage programs still engage in sexual activity and, even more alarming, they were one-third less likely to use contraceptives of any sort.³

What are the advantages of comprehensive sexuality education?

Comprehensive sexuality education, sometimes called abstinence-plus education, is endorsed by a majority of the scientific and medical communities as the best means for combating STDs, HIV/AIDS, and unwanted pregnancies. This program delivers a more realistic message about the benefits of abstinence while also teaching vital sexual health information about contraception and disease-prevention methods, including condom and contraceptive use as well as pregnancy termination and adoption. Ideally, age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education helps children and young adults develop healthy attitudes and values about adolescent growth and sexual development. Additionally, comprehensive sexuality education considers variations regarding body image, gender roles, racial and ethnic diversity, and sexual orientation and respects the diversity of community and individual beliefs. In schools where this program is the standard for sex education, it enhances communication between youth and adults.

What do Americans believe schools should teach about sex?

More than nine out of ten (93%) of Americans support teaching comprehensive sex education in high schools. More than four out of five parents (82%) believe that all aspects of sex education, including information about birth control and safer sex, should be taught in high school. There is also overwhelming support (84%) for teaching sex education in middle and junior high schools.⁴

How many school districts currently teach an abstinence-only curriculum?

Two-thirds of all school districts in the U.S. have established sex education policies

for their districts. Of these, 35% have abstinence-only-until-marriage programs and 51% portray abstinence as the preferred option, while only 14% of states have a comprehensive sex education policy.⁵

California is the only state in the nation that does not accept federal funds to teach the abstinence-only-until-marriage curriculum. All other states and the District of Columbia, as well as local organizations, can receive competitive grants from the Maternal and Child Health Bureau of the U.S. Department Health and Human Services.

In addition, several states have initiated their own abstinence-only-until-marriage education programs and provide incentive grants to schools to adopt this curriculum.

How much federal and state money has been spent on abstinence-only education?

Since Congress established abstinence-only-until-marriage programs in 1996, over half a billion dollars has been spent promoting this curriculum. States have appropriated another \$200 million in tax dollars to teach abstinence-only in the public schools.⁶ For more information about funding, see the section “Researching Abstinence-Only Education in Your School System,” on page 13.

Is the abstinence-only-until-marriage mandate limited to public schools?

No. Currently, there are three federal programs dedicated to restrictive abstinence-only until-marriage education. In overhauling the nation’s welfare system in 1996, conservative members of Congress mandated abstinence-only language into the legislation, and guaranteed \$50 million annually in grants to the states over five years to teach it, beginning in October 1998.⁷

These grants require educators stick to an extremely restrictive eight-point definition of abstinence-only education. (See box, page 3) For example, because the first element requires programs to have as their “exclusive purpose” the promotion of abstinence outside of marriage, no discussion of contraceptives is permitted, except to emphasize their failure rates. (When used correctly, latex condoms provide a 93% effective barrier against the exchange of body fluids.)

Under the current Bush Administration, abstinence-only-until-marriage has also become part of U.S. foreign policy. More than one-third of foreign aid monies appropriated by the U.S. Congress to combat HIV/AIDS in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean require abstinence-only education programs and discourage public health educators from discussing the proper use of condoms. Moreover, Congress and President Bush adopted this position despite strong objections voiced by health officials in the United Nations, the Republic of South Africa, Uganda and representatives of non-governmental organizations.

Is Congress considering any legislation that would provide factual, comprehensive sex education?

In February 2003, Rep. Luis V. Gutierrez (D-IL, 4th District for Chicago) introduced the “Medically Accurate Sex Education Act” (H.R. 802), which would amend the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 to require that medically accurate, factual information be included in any course material or instruction on human development and sexuality. This bill is still in the Congressional Sub-Committee on Education Reform. See the Woodhull Freedom Foundation’s R.E.A.L. Campaign website for co-sponsors of this bill.

Who opposes abstinence-only-until-marriage sex education?

Almost every major medical and health professional society has voiced opposition to abstinence-only-until-marriage sex education. Among the medical, public health and educational organizations that endorse comprehensive sexuality education are:

American Academy of Pediatrics
American Association of School Administrators
American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists
American Medical Association
American Nurses Association
American Psychiatric Association
American Psychological Association
American Public Health Association
National Education Association
National School Boards Association

In addition, the No New Money coalition (www.nonewmoney.org), coordinated through the Sexuality Information and Education Caucus of the United States (SIECUS), has over eighty members, including the professional organizations listed above. Other coalition members include:

American Jewish Congress Commission for Women's Equality
Boston Women's Health Book Collective
Catholics for a Free Choice
Center for Reproductive Rights
Choice USA
Gay and Lesbian Medical Association
Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network
Girls, Inc.
NARAL/ProChoice America
National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF)
Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays
Planned Parenthood Federation of America
United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries
Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations

What can I do about abstinence-only education in my school?

Two-thirds of all school boards set policies for sex education curricula in public schools. Except in a few major cities, the overwhelming majority of school board members are elective offices, and they need voter support to stay in office. (School board elections routinely generate the least voter turnout, with less than 20% of eligible voters participating.) As elected officials, board members are supposed to address community concerns, including the public health and human rights concerns regarding the teaching of abstinence-only-until-marriage curricula.

Some districts permit individual schools to decide the curriculum for sexuality education, sometimes with the advice of parents or district school administrators. Talk to your school principal to find out if she or he can make these decisions, or must follow stricter guidelines set by the school board.

Turn to the next section for a detailed action plan and how-to advice.

Footnotes:

- ¹ Office of National AIDS Policy, *Youth and HIV/AIDS 2000: A New American Agenda*. Washington, DC: White House, 2000.
- ² The Alan Guttmacher Institute, *Facts in Brief: Teen Sex and Pregnancy* (1999)
- ³ Peter S. Bearman and Hannah Bruckner, "Promising the Future: Virginity Pledges and First Intercourse," *American Journal of Sociology*, 2001; "Vows of Abstinence Break More Easily than Latex Condoms, Interview with Jocelyn Elders," in *Rethinking Schools Online*, 1998, http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/12_04/elders.shtml
- ⁴ Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, *Sex Education in America: A Series of National Surveys of Students, Parents, Teachers, Principals, Summary Findings*, 2, 32 (2000)
- ⁵ D.J. Landry, et al., "Abstinence Promotion and the Provision of Information about Contraception in Public School District Sexuality Education Policies," 31 *Family Planning Perspectives* pp 280-86 (1999)
- ⁶ Cynthia Dailard, "Abstinence Promotion and Teen Family Planning: The Misguided Drive for Equal Funding," *The Guttmacher Report*, February 2002
- ⁷ *Id.*

How To Develop an Activist Campaign Against Abstinence-Only Education in Your Public School

The Woodhull Freedom Foundation and its sister lobbying group, the Woodhull Freedom Federation, along with the many organizations opposed to abstinence-only programs, ask citizens to contact their elected representatives in Congress to make their concerns known.

But activism at the national level cannot be the only —or even the principal—focus of an effective campaign. We'd also like you to take action right in your own community, in your own public schools, and use that energy to put more power behind your call to Congress. This section of the R.E.A.L. Action Kit contains materials and resources to do just that. We've included:

- An action plan for getting started and for developing your local campaign
- How to obtain information about sex education in the public schools
- A statement for school officials to sign

Available on the Woodhull Freedom Foundation's R.E.A.L. website are additional resource materials, such as:

- Sample media materials and how-tos
- Tips for recruiting fellow activists and for talking to public officials
- Sample posters, flyers and stickers you can use to persuade voters to R.E.A.L.

THE ACTION PLAN: OVERVIEW

The WFF asks you to work with your local school officials to obtain statements supporting comprehensive sexuality education and opposing the teaching of abstinence-only-until-marriage curricula. (See our statement, "I Support Comprehensive Sexuality Education in the Public Schools" on page 11).

We'd like you to collect signatures on as many of these statements as you can from school officials (school principals, school board members, and public education advocates). By collecting these statements from educators and officials in your community, you will enhance your group's political power. Once you've gathered signed statements, you can approach your Congressional representatives and state legislators to ask them to support comprehensive, scientifically accurate, sexuality education in the public schools.

THE ACTION PLAN: DETAILED OUTLINE

Preparatory Work

- Meet with and organize students, teachers, parents and other interested adults to talk about the status of sex education in your local public schools. Sign up for the Woodhull Freedom Federation's listserv for the R.E.A.L. campaign.
- Learn who decides the sex education curriculum in your school. Does the school board set the policy for the entire district? Does the head of public education for the district choose particular programs? Are individual school principals permitted to determine policies for their schools (this is rare). When you've identified the decision-maker(s), find out whether her (or his) position is appointed or elected. Set a deadline for learning this information.

- Research the background of, and positions taken on various issues by, members of your school board, and try to identify a member (or members) who is likely to support comprehensive sexuality education. Get your school librarian or the reference librarian at the public library to help. Set deadlines for identifying school board members.
- Optional: Divide responsibilities for investigating your school district's current federal grants for abstinence-only programs (See “Researching Abstinence-Only Education Funding”). Set deadlines for collecting data.

Meet with School Officials Individually

- Students should request meetings with individual school officials. Consider bringing parents or other supportive adults (perhaps someone's grandmother would be willing to attend.) Parent groups should have separate meetings with school officials.
- Express your concerns with abstinence-only curricula and explain why real sex education will benefit students, protect the public health of the community and enhance efforts to prevent unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections and other unintended consequences of sexual activity. You may want to appoint a spokesperson for your group first. You may also want to have someone tell his or her “story”—explain how not having reliable information posed a potentially dangerous situation in the past. It's a good idea to rehearse this meeting a few times with a supportive adult.
- Present a clean, unsigned copy of the “I Support Comprehensive Sexuality Education” statement and request the member to consider signing it. Attempt to get a signature right there, but if not, leave the statement with the official to sign later, along with your group's contact information. If the board member is enthusiastic, you may ask that she or he persuade fellow school board members to sign the statement too.
- After the meeting, follow-up with a letter emphasizing that real fact-based education is the way to go, and repeat your request for a signature on the statement. Include a self-addressed envelope for return of the signed statement.
- Let the Woodhull Freedom Federation know, through the R.E.A.L. listserv, that you met with school board members and the results of the meetings. We'll keep track of efforts nationally and can provide suggestions for effective further follow-up.

Other Actions To Put Pressure on School Board Members

- Use the “open microphone” time of school board meetings to express your concerns.
- Provide testimony on sex education. School board meeting agendas are usually pre-set, and the voting process often has two stages—a discussion and “community comments” period at one meeting and a vote at a subsequent meeting.
- Consider testifying in a shorter format and submitting a longer version of your testimony to each member of the board for inclusion in the meeting's record.
- A little public pressure can work wonders. Consider passing out flyers and stickers in favor of comprehensive sexuality education at school board meetings. Check the WFF's R.E.A.L. website for sample stickers, posters and other publicity materials.

Other Tactics To Gain Community Support and Publicity

- Write an op-ed article for your school newspaper or your local paper, explaining why real sex education benefits students, protects the public health of the community and

enhances efforts to prevent unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections and other unintended consequences of sexual activity. For samples, see the resources section of the WFF's R.E.A.L. website.

- Survey students and parents to identify support for comprehensive sexuality education using the sample surveys included under resources.
- Attend meetings of the Parent-Teachers Association at your school to request they support your efforts. Ask the PTA to sponsor programs during “Teen Pregnancy Prevention Month” (May) or “Let's Talk [About Sex] Month” (October).
- Contact local chapters of the many national groups that endorse comprehensive sexuality education for additional support. (See the Frequently Asked Questions and consult your local phonebook.)
- Educate yourself! Don't rely on school gossip for reliable sex information; go to medically recognized sources of information. For links to recommended websites run by medical professionals, see the resources section on the WFF's R.E.A.L. website.
- Further your own education and become a sexual health peer educator.
- Hold a “speak-out” or a “teach-in” at your school to address sexuality education issues. Be prepared with flyers and posters with accurate information about sex education.
- Be outspoken against sexual harassment, including harassment of students who don't conform to gender stereotypes and behaviors.
- Oppose violence and discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersexed and questioning youth, and against students who may be perceived as GLBT.

Going National: Calling on Your Congressional Representatives

- If you don't know who your representatives in Congress are, you can find out his or her name on the Woodhull Freedom Federation website—www.woodhullfreedom.org, and type in your zip code. Go to www.senate.gov to get the names of the two senators from your state.
- Every representative has local offices in her or his district; you can get this information from the Member's website. You can also find out when he or she will be back home to meet with constituents. Note the date.
- Just as you met with school board members earlier, write a letter requesting a meeting with your representative in the office closest to you. It's likely, however, that you will meet with a staff member, rather than the Congressperson.
- You can use just about the same approach you used earlier to lobby school board members. By now you're likely to be an old hand at this. Have a spokesperson, have someone tell a story. Present copies of the signed statements (retain the originals for yourself!) and ask the Representative to vote against funding abstinence-only-until-marriage education programs in the public schools.
- Let the WFF know via the R.E.A.L. listserv that you met with your Representative, and the result of the meeting. We'll keep track of similar efforts across the country.
- Send copies of your signed letters to the Woodhull Freedom Federation at 1312 18th St NW, Suite 103, Washington, DC 20036 so we can monitor the campaign.

Statement In Support of Comprehensive Sexuality Education in the Public Schools

I support comprehensive sexuality education as the most effective means for empowering youth to make responsible decisions regarding sexual activity and consistent use of safer sex methods. Additionally, I will promote sexuality education programs that respect the diversity of my community and encourage communication about sexuality issues between parents or guardians and their children.

I also encourage my colleagues in the school district to promote comprehensive sexuality education as the only method accepted by a majority of the scientific and medical communities as effective at combating sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS infections and unwanted pregnancies.

Finally, I condemn the Congressional appropriations of more than \$100 million for unproven abstinence-only-until-marriage programs in FY 2003, none of which have proven effective. This is a wasteful expenditure of federal tax dollars in a time of budget deficits and unfunded education mandates.

SIGNED

DATE

NAME (print)

TITLE

CONTACT INFORMATION

.....

.....

Characteristics of Effective and Responsible Comprehensive Sexuality Education

Responsible comprehensive sexuality education is not only age-appropriate and medically accurate, but also serves to engage and empower youth to protect their health and shape their destinies. Comprehensive sexuality education should provide youth with appropriate training and information to instill a sense of responsibility that will pervade other aspects of their lives besides careful decision-making about sexual involvement. The following is a list of goals for comprehensive sexuality education that the “R.E.A.L.” sex education campaign subscribes to:

- Sexuality education should be age-appropriate, culturally competent and medically accurate.
- Sexuality education should aim to reduce harm by teaching about contraception and condom use, abortion, adoption, sexually transmitted infections, and HIV/AIDS.
- Sexuality education should encourage safer sex, including abstinence and contraceptive use, as the best ways to prevent unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases.
- Sexuality education funded by public money should not teach or promote religion.
- Sexuality education should encourage family communication about sexuality and sexual health issues between parent/guardian and child.
- Sexuality education should teach young people the necessary skills to make responsible decisions about sexuality, including how to avoid unwanted verbal, physical and sexual advances. Additionally, sexuality education should teach students how to refrain from making unwanted verbal, physical and sexual advances.
- Sexuality education should include information about the effects of alcohol and drug use on responsible decision-making, and the potential transfer of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) through the use of intravenous drugs.
- Sexuality education should not discriminate against or stigmatize individuals based on sexual orientation or choice of sexual expression.
- Sexuality education ultimately should empower youth to make well-informed and responsible decisions by incorporating teen voices and peer counseling on issues of sexuality, gender identification, teen pregnancy and disease treatment and prevention. This includes training youth to become media spokespersons and community leaders on sexuality issues involving their peers.
- Sexuality education should implement creative methods to deliver safer sex messages.

How To Research Federal Grants Awarded for Abstinence-Only Education

Public Money Means Public Information

The money used to teach abstinence-only programs comes from your tax dollars. Because these are public funds, and because public agencies administer their distribution, information about who receives them and how much is spent is public information. You have every right to this information under the federal Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). For more information, check out the National Freedom of Information Coalition at <http://www.nfoic.org>.

The challenge is to know where to look for this information, whom to ask and sometimes how to ask. (Politeness counts, but persistence is essential!)

Understanding How the Federal Government Funds Abstinence Programs

Congress appropriates funds for abstinence-only education through programs administered by the Maternal and Child Health Bureau (MCHB) administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (<http://www.mchb.hrsa.gov>). These two programs require grant recipients to adhere to the strict eight-point abstinence-until-marriage guidelines, including the lesson “sexual activity outside of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects.” (See details in the Frequently Asked Questions on page 3.)

The majority of funds for abstinence-only education are spent through Section 510(b) of the Social Security Act of 1935 as part of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 reforming welfare. (Section 510(b) of Title V of the Social Security Act, Public Law 104-193.) The money is available in the form of block grants to the States, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. California is the only state that does not participate in this program. To qualify, state governments must put up \$3 for every \$4 of federal funds. (See <http://www.mchb.hrsa.gov/programs/adolescents/statefs.htm>). States may distribute these funds to local governments and non-profit private organizations (including faith-based programs). There are additional incentives for targeting programs for “special needs” populations, including Native Americans and “At-Risk Youth” (often defined as African Americans and Latinos/Latinas). Total federal spending for fiscal year 2001 was more than \$43 million; Congress has not yet finalized the appropriation for 2004 (as of 12/8/03) but it is likely to top \$50 million.

In addition, MCHB distributes the Community-Based Abstinence Education Project Grants Program through SPRANS.¹ This program sends federal money directly to “any public or private entity” with no matching funds requirement, and bypasses state health departments. Over the last three years more than one hundred local government agencies and private organizations (including faith-based groups) have won \$60 million. According to MCHB materials, the “President’s budget proposal for FY 2003 includes a \$33 million increase. The proposed FY 2003 funding level is \$73 million.”

For a list of programs that received funds in fiscal year 2002, the list is available on the MCHB website: <http://www.mchb.hrsa.gov/programs/adolescents/02cbgrants.htm>. In addition, HHS Secretary Tommy Thompson announced 28 new recipients of SPRANS grants in July 2003. Of these, twelve faith-based and/or right-to-life groups such as Bethany Crisis Pregnancy Center of Colorado Springs, Metro Atlanta Youth for Christ, and Lawndale Christian Health Center of Chicago, received 41% of the \$15.2 million distributed.¹

Finding and Requesting Information from Government Agencies

A good place to start your search for government records is the public library. In addition to providing free (if sometimes censored) access to the World Wide Web, public libraries serve usually as repositories for local government reports and publications. While the information you're looking for is increasingly available on the internet, a reference librarian can help you find exactly what you're looking for without too much frustration and wasted time.

The best place to start an internet search for information is FirstGov.com (www.firstgov.com), the U.S. government's official portal which provides links to federal, state, county, local and tribal governments in the United States. Most states have developed extensive websites, but not all information is available online. Be prepared to go to the library for specific figures and facts.

In our research into state funding for school-based abstinence education programs, we've found relevant information under so many different government departments and headings that it's difficult to provide precise, reliable search methods in a short space. If you can "google" your state or local government website, one search string that seems to yield successful results is "abstinence [and] education [and] grant".

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, for example, lists the amount of money granted to local schools under its "Community Resource Connection" (www.crc.state.pa.us/crc/CRC_Site/grantlist.asp). Florida's grants to local schools are listed separately, on what seems to be an independent website (www.greattowait.com/program/index.html). In Massachusetts, the Office of the State Comptroller reports how much the Commonwealth receives in federal funds through the State Attorney General's Community Benefits Programs Database, but no specific data about grants distributed by the department of health appeared to be available online. Oklahoma's Abstinence Education Project was readily available in detail at www.health.state.ok.us/program/oaep/index.html.

Remember, too, that you can also start your search from the bottom: begin by looking at the budgets of your local school district and work your way up to identify the source of funding.

Yes, It's Like a Research Paper

Just like you should for research papers written for school, you need to keep track of where you obtained any and all facts and figures. If you can photocopy the materials, especially those with specific numbers and names, you should. Print the relevant information you find online. (It's a good idea to make sure the printer lists the full website address and the date you printed the information. These usually print on the bottom of the page.)

Holding "proof" of government grants and spending is useful if someone challenges you about abstinence-only education in your school.

Footnotes:

¹SPRANS is Special Projects of Regional and National Significance, of Title V of the Maternal and Child Health Federal Set-Aside Program.

²News Release, "HHS awards new grants to support abstinence education among nation's teens," Wednesday, July 2, 2003 <http://www.hhs.gov/news/press/2003pres/20030702.html>

A Final Note

Ordinary people, young and old, volunteering just few hours a week can change their communities. Sexual autonomy and access to accurate sexual health information are basic human and civil rights. Small and simple initiatives such as this campaign make a difference by building alliances and public support on sexuality and sexual expression issues. The R.E.A.L. Action Kit is one of several publications the Woodhull Freedom Foundation offers to local activists who support of the proposition that safe and consensual sexual expression is a fundamental human right. Join us today.

MISSION STATEMENT OF R.E.A.L.

We Need To Get Real—Real Education About Life.

The Woodhull Freedom Foundation and the Woodhull Freedom Federation (WFF) recognize that abstinence-only-until-marriage programs needlessly stigmatize, intimidate and shame youth. Positive lessons about the joys and life-affirming values of human sexual expression and the diversity of sexual and lifestyle choices, combined with candid discussions about the responsibilities of adult life, its creation and protecting one's self and others from harm, are three key elements of ethical sexuality education.

To help promote human rights and respect for diverse lifestyles, and to protect the public health and well being of people, the WFF calls upon youth, concerned public officials, teachers, parents and citizens to mobilize in favor of comprehensive sexuality education and to express their concerns to local and national representatives.

WFF calls upon legislators and school officials to acknowledge the public health benefits of comprehensive sexuality education, which the scientific and medical communities accept as the most effective pedagogical method for empowering youth to negotiate and use safer sex techniques and for preventing unwanted pregnancies. Furthermore, the federal government's aggressive promotion of abstinence-only programs in public schools, public health programs and in international aid programs, its retreat in HIV/AIDS prevention efforts, and the harassment of scientists conducting peer-reviewed scientific research about human sexual expression, all inevitably risk the health of the world's citizens.



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