

Responsible Education About Life (REAL) Act

NCJW MESSAGE: NCJW strongly supports the Responsible Education About Life (REAL) Act, a bill that would provide the first federal funding stream for comprehensive sexuality education. Young people need sexuality education that is proven to be effective and will provide the public with health information that will keep them safe. Abstinence-only-until-marriage programs do not meet that need.

TALKING POINTS:

- ▶ **The REAL Act would provide grants to states for the purpose of conducting comprehensive sexuality education programs** that are age-appropriate and medically accurate.
- ▶ **A comprehensive sexuality education program funded under the REAL Act would include** material that teaches that abstinence is the only sure way to avoid pregnancy or STDs; but, it would also provide comprehensive information about the health benefits and side effects of all contraceptives and barrier methods as they relate to both pregnancy and risk reduction for STDs, including HIV/AIDS.
- ▶ **Despite years of evaluation in this area, there is no evidence to date that abstinence-only education delays teen sexual activity.** Unlike abstinence-only-until-marriage programs, comprehensive programs about sexuality have been found to be effective in delaying the onset of sexual intercourse, reducing the number of sexual partners, and increasing contraception and condom use.
- ▶ **Most abstinence-only curricula contain false information about the effectiveness of contraceptives.** Many of the curricula misrepresent the effectiveness of condoms in preventing sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy. Moreover, recent research shows that abstinence-only strategies may deter contraceptive use among sexually active teens, increasing their risk of unintended pregnancy and STDs.
- ▶ **Programs funded under the REAL Act would not teach or promote religion.** In contrast, many abstinence-only-until-marriage programs that are currently funded by the federal government and taught in public schools use messages about abstinence that are couched in religious rhetoric.
- ▶ **No federal funding stream currently exists for comprehensive sexuality education.** However, there are three separate federal funding streams – totaling \$176 million in Fiscal Year 2006 – for abstinence-only-until-marriage programs.

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Frequently Asked Questions:

What would the REAL Act do? The REAL Act would provide the first dedicated federal funding stream – in the form of grants to states – for the purpose of conducting comprehensive sexuality education programs that are age-appropriate and medically accurate.

Doesn't the federal government already fund sexuality education? Currently there is no dedicated federal funding stream for *comprehensive* sexuality education. There are, however, three separate federal funding streams for *abstinence-only-until-marriage programs*: Community Based Abstinence Education (CBAE) program; Title V Section 510(b) of the Social Security Act, authorized with the 1996 Welfare Reform Law; and the Adolescent Family Life Act (Title XX of the Public Health Service Act).

How are abstinence-only-until-marriage programs different from comprehensive sexuality education? Federal law established a stringent eight-point definition of abstinence-only education that requires programs to teach that sexual activity outside of marriage is wrong and harmful – for people of any age. The law also prohibits programs from advocating contraceptive use or discussing contraceptive methods except to emphasize their failure rates. Further, federal guidelines now define sexual activity to include any behavior between two people that may be sexually stimulating, which could be interpreted as including even kissing or hand-holding.

In contrast, comprehensive sexuality education programs include material that: is age-appropriate and medically accurate; does not teach or promote religion; teaches that abstinence is the only sure way to avoid pregnancy or STDs; provides comprehensive information about the health benefits and side effects of all contraceptive methods as they relate to both pregnancy and risk reduction for STDs; encourages family communication about sexuality; teaches negotiation skills for young people; and teaches young people how alcohol and drug use can affect decision-making.

If teen pregnancy rates are going down, doesn't that mean that abstinence-only programs work? In reality, the majority of the decline in teen pregnancy rates is due to more consistent contraceptive use. There are no published studies in the professional literature that show that abstinence-only programs will result in young people delaying sexual intercourse. In fact, at least one study has provided strong evidence that such a program did not delay the onset of intercourse.

Why is it important to pass the REAL Act? Comprehensive programs about sexuality have been found to be effective in delaying the onset of sexual intercourse, reducing the number of sexual partners, and increasing contraception and condom use. Currently, the US has one of the highest teen pregnancy rates in the developed world – almost twice as high as those of England, Wales, and Canada, and eight times as high as those of the Netherlands and Japan. Every year, roughly nine million new sexually transmitted infections (STIs) occur among teens and young adults in the US.

Does the public support comprehensive sexuality education? Yes. Recent polling reveals that a vast majority of adults support a comprehensive approach to sexuality education – one that provides students with information about abstinence *and* contraception, including birth control and condoms. 78 percent of those polled favor allowing public schools to provide students with birth control information, and nearly as many (76%) believe schools should teach teenagers to abstain from sex until marriage.