

Michigan Finds Parents Vital to Quality Sex Education

Michigan has confirmed that the best way to teach adolescents how to make good decisions about sex is for schools to embrace parents as essential partners. The Michigan Department of Education encourages school districts to actively seek out parent involvement in program planning through multiple methods. The state also directly supports parents as the first and most important educators of their children.

The Michigan Department of Education uses a framework it developed to help school districts review HIV/STD and sex education curricula. "The Tool," as it is informally called, encourages educators to consider four key factors when selecting a program:

- 1) what students need;
- 2) what parents want;
- 3) research and best practice findings; and
- 4) applicable Michigan laws and policies.

This approach has provided a logical foundation for choosing curricula that are responsive to local needs and mores.

To obtain good information about what parents want to be taught, the Department developed a two-page parent survey (online at www.emc.cmich.edu/HIV/Guide/images/AppendixA.pdf) that districts are encouraged to use. Included are questions that assess whether or not sex education should be offered by the school district, and if so, what topics should be taught at specific grade levels. More than 80 school districts across the state have implemented the parent survey. Thus far, the results have been quite consistent across all types of communities. A large majority of parents want schools to teach about sex education, and they want a broad range of topics taught. Parents also indicate that instruction needs to start early, which is consistent with many experts' recommendations that sex education is most effective when started early and reinforced at successive grade levels.

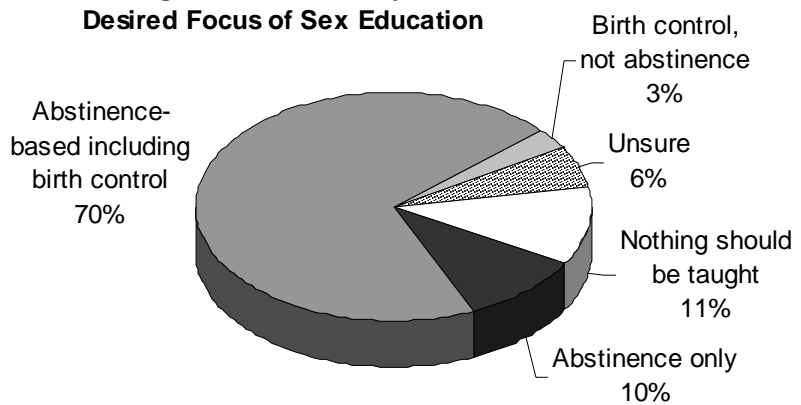
Parents' support for school-based sex education was also documented in a statewide survey conducted in April 2004. This EPIC-MRA survey, *Your Child*, found that 78 percent of parents believe that sex education should be taught in Michigan schools. Seventeen percent said it should not be taught and 5 percent were unsure. When asked what the focus of sex education should be, 70 percent thought it should be abstinence-based, 10 percent thought it should be abstinence-only, 3 percent thought it should focus on birth control and not abstinence, 6 percent were unsure, and 11 percent said that it should not be taught at all by schools.

In the fall of 2003, the Michigan State Board of Education passed a *Policy to Promote Health and Prevent Disease and Pregnancy* (www.michigan.gov/documents/Sex_Ed_Policy_77377_7.pdf). The four key components of "the Tool" were integrated into the state board's recommendations for how schools should select and implement curricular programs, with particular attention to the need for schools to partner with parents and families. The policy emphasizes the board's philosophy that good programs are medically accurate and designed to meet the educational needs of all students.

The Michigan legislature subsequently passed new legislation in June 2004 that reinforced the importance of parents in the selection of school-based sex education programs. An earlier law required districts to establish advisory boards to review materials and methods and make recommendations to the local board of education. The 2004 legislation mandated that these advisory boards be comprised of at least 50 percent parents who are not school staff members. According to state officials this requirement has reaped multiple benefits for local school districts, bringing a broader parent perspective to the table, and increased support for health education programs. It has also helped to bridge multiple perspectives on abstinence-only and comprehensive sex education programs. At the state level, the legislative process strengthened collaborative relationships between key constituencies including parent leaders, school nurses, educators, and school board members.

Michigan is also directly helping parents fulfill their role as the primary sex educators of their children. Governor Jennifer Granholm has initiated a pilot program, *Talk Early & Talk Often* (www.michigan.gov/miparentresources), to help parents who feel ill-equipped to communicate with their middle school children about abstinence and sexuality. The program was rolled out in the fall of 2005 with a goal to reach 1,500 parents through 60 workshops conducted across the state. Many parents did not receive messages about healthy sexuality when they were growing up and find it challenging to break that cycle. The initiative has been featured in *Newsweek* magazine and other national media outlets.

Michigan Parents Surveyed on Desired Focus of Sex Education



Resources:

The Michigan Department of Education maintains an extensive list of resource documents on its website: Go to www.michigan.gov/mde, click “K-12 Curriculum,” “Curriculum Subjects,” and then “Health Education.”

These resources are also available, and supplemented with additional materials, at Central Michigan University’s Education Materials Centers at www.emc.cmich.edu/default.htm.

For more information contact Laurie Bechhofer, HIV/STD Education Consultant, (517) 335-7252 or bechhoferl@michigan.gov.