

Conspiracy of Silence: Sexuality Education in Texas Public Schools in 2015-16

Executive Summary

Eight years ago the Texas Freedom Network Education Fund's groundbreaking study *Just Say Don't Know* warned that a "conspiracy of silence" surrounds sex education in public schools throughout Texas – a state with one of the highest teen birth rates in the nation. The report showed that a tiny percentage of school districts across the entire state went beyond emphasizing abstinence by also teaching students medically accurate information about condoms and other forms of contraception – an abstinence-plus approach. The vast majority of school districts instead took the abstinence-only approach – no medically accurate information on condoms/contraception – or taught no sex education at all.

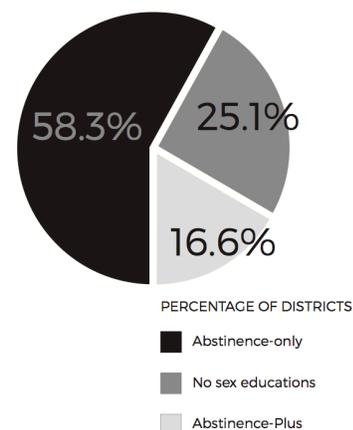
Eight years later, this new study from the TFN Education Fund shows that the "conspiracy of silence" surrounding sexuality education remains deeply entrenched in Texas public schools. Although more school districts appear to be moving beyond failed abstinence-only approaches to sex education, many others have stopped teaching sex education altogether. The findings that follow are based on information gathered from a survey of a representative sample of Texas school districts conducted during the 2015-16 school year.

By the Numbers

More than 83 percent of Texas school districts taught abstinence-only or no sex education in 2015-16. While this is an improvement from eight years ago (96 percent), the new data show that the percentage of districts teaching abstinence-only or no sex education remains stubbornly high in Texas schools.

In some ways the problem is even worse than in 2007-08. The percentage of school districts teaching no sex education at all has soared from 2.3 percent eight years ago to 25.1 percent in 2015-16. The Legislature's decision in 2009 to drop health education as a high school graduation requirement appears to be a key factor in this alarming change. Some districts still offer health as an elective or make it a local requirement for graduation, but many don't. Districts offering no high school health class were more than four times more likely than other districts to offer no sex education to students.

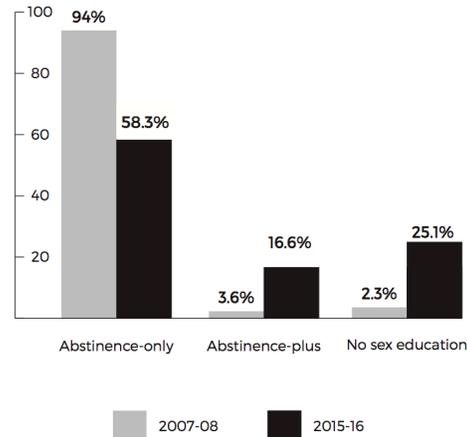
Sexuality Education in Texas Public School Districts in 2015-16



On the other hand, the news is not all bad. More districts appear to be taking an abstinence-plus approach to sex education. The percentage of districts with materials that include medically accurate information on condoms/contraception has increased more than four times, from just 3.6 percent in 2007-08 to 16.6 percent in 2015-16. In fact, of the ten largest districts (by enrollment), eight take an abstinence-plus approach to sex education. Enrollment in just those eight districts makes up about 17 percent of the more than 5 million who were enrolled in Texas public schools.

In general, rural, smaller and majority-white school districts were less likely to take an abstinence-plus approach and more likely to teach no sex education at all. For example, 31 percent of urban/suburban districts reported having obtained abstinence-plus curriculum materials compared to just 4.9 percent of rural districts. Moreover, nearly a third of districts with fewer than 500 students and nearly half of districts with 500-999 students offered no sex education at all. In contrast, no school districts with more than 5,000 students in our sample failed to offer sex education.

**Changes Since 2007-08:
Percentage of School Districts**



Serious Problems Still Plague Classroom Materials

Serious errors and biases in classroom materials – primarily in abstinence-only materials provided by third parties or created by teachers – continue to plague sex education curricula in Texas. (Specific examples of each problem described below can be found in the full report.)

Abstinence-only programs mislead students by promoting the falsehood that condoms and other contraception are ineffective and that using them is a high-risk behavior.

Abstinence-only programs continue to discourage the use of contraception by exaggerating failure rates and even suggesting that it is too complicated to use. For example, one program absurdly teaches students that using condoms involves a complex, six-step procedure. Still other programs censor information on contraception altogether. Some school district policies make the problem even worse. One district goes so far as to require teachers to present the use of contraception as “high risk” sexual behavior.

Fear- and shame-based instruction is extremely common in Texas sex education classes, particularly in classrooms relying on abstinence-only curricula.

The tone and content of most abstinence-only materials we reviewed are predominantly negative. Abstinence-only programs often describe human sexuality in terms of dangerous or shameful consequences (and those are regularly exaggerated). One program

actually tells students that sexual activity can lead to suicide. Students also learn that sex before marriage will doom them to failed relationships later in life. Moreover, sexually active teens are portrayed as impure, dirty, and uncaring about their future. The problem with this fear- and shame-based approach – beyond the lack of evidence that it is at all effective in changing behaviors – is that it is rarely accompanied by information about prevention strategies.

Abstinence-only programs teach stereotypes and dangerous misinformation about gender and sexual assault.

Gender stereotypes abound in the abstinence-only programs that dominate Texas public schools. Various programs portray men as natural leaders, protectors and sexual beings. On the other hand, students learn that women should look to men for rescue and “shut up and be mysterious.” Some programs portray women who are interested in sex, or women who are “too sexual” in the way they dress, as manipulative, unnatural and not respectable. We continue to see schools use a program suggesting boys are like microwaves – aroused and heated up quickly – while normal girls are like “slow cookers” and respond more slowly to sexual desire. The underlying message in all of this is that women must take the responsibility to prevent sexual assault and that they are somehow to blame if it happens. However, we did find some schools do a better job than eight years ago in discussing sexual assault in meaningful and helpful ways. One program, for example, includes a detailed discussion of consent, clarifying that “a person who is drunk, drugged, unconscious or mentally disabled is not legally able to consent to sexual contact.”

Sexuality education in the vast majority of Texas classrooms seems to assume all students are heterosexual and LGBTQ+ people are irrelevant or do not exist.

Very few school districts and sex education programs address unique health and relationship issues relevant to lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/queer/other youth. Some school districts have policies that explicitly bar such discussions. One district superintendent said he discourages teachers from discussing sexual orientation because of fear that teachers will discuss their own personal feelings about the topic. The few districts that do include LGBTQ+ issues typically focus on bullying and HIV/AIDS. Transgender and gender-queer issues get almost no discussion, except occasionally when terms are defined.

Texas students learn little but misinformation about abortion in sex education classes.

Abortion is one of the most common and safest medical procedures in the United States, but it is a rare topic in Texas sex education classrooms. Brief mentions are typically accompanied by misinformation and messages focused on shame and fear. More concerning: so-called “crisis pregnancy centers,” which are not medical facilities but rather exist solely to oppose abortion, remain a growing resource for sex education in Texas schools.

Positive signs

The percentage of school districts taking an abstinence-plus approach to sex education has increased along with the introduction of new evidence-based and evidence-informed programs. In addition, some officials in school districts that don't teach sex education indicated in communications with our researchers that they are looking for ways to add it back into the local curriculum.

Scope of the Study

This report is based on a survey (using requests under the Texas Public Information Act) of a representative sample of the state's non-charter, public school districts with high schools. The full report includes a detailed review of the research methodology and sample construction, including information requested from the sampled districts.

About the Texas Freedom Network Education Fund

The Texas Freedom Network Education Fund supports research and education efforts that promote religious freedom and individual liberties.