

Abstinence-only Education

The Texas Catholic Conference **supports**
abstinence-only education in our public schools.

We are aware of findings that demonstrate that public school sex education curricula vary widely across Texas. Public schools have an enormous responsibility to young people, to their parents, and to society. Programs for sex education or for personal development offered in the public schools are of the greatest importance for the well-being of our young people and of our society. We appreciate the interest in promoting more uniform standards across our state, but it is important that our sex education programs promote the value of chastity. The policy that directs the education of our children in the areas of sexuality, marriage and the raising of families is quite possibly one of the most sensitive and profoundly significant areas of public policy in Texas law. We believe that any course on human sexuality must respect the conscience of the students and the rights of their parents.

A Texas Bishop Speaks:

"The only truly effective prevention of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases is to live a life of chastity. Our children deserve the full support and commitment of the community in their choice to remain abstinent until marriage. Anything less than an abstinence-only approach in our public schools risks denying students the right to receive education and information that respects their dignity."



-Bishop Plácido Rodríguez, Diocese of Lubbock

Church Teaching

- ★ Chastity represents an eminently personal task; it also involves a cultural effort, for there is "an interdependence between personal betterment and the improvement of society." Chastity presupposes respect for the rights of the person, in particular the right to receive information and an education that respect the moral and spiritual dimensions of human life. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2344*)
- ★ The Church, in her concern for man's authentic development, urges him to have full respect for human values in the exercise of his sexuality. It cannot be reduced merely to pleasure or entertainment, nor can sex education be reduced to technical instruction aimed solely at protecting the interested parties from possible disease or the "risk" of procreation. This would be to impoverish and disregard the deeper meaning of sexuality, a meaning which needs to be acknowledged and responsibly appropriated not only by individuals but also by the community. (*Pope Benedict XVI, Caritas In Veritate*)
- ★ Parents have the right to ensure that their children are not compelled to attend classes which are not in agreement with their own moral and religious convictions. In particular, sex education is a basic right of the parents and must always be carried out under their close supervision, whether at home or in educational centers chosen and controlled by them. (*Charter of the Rights of the Family*)
- ★ Faced with a culture that largely reduces human sexuality to the level of something common place, since it interprets and lives it in a reductive and impoverished way by linking it solely with the body and with selfish pleasure, the educational service of parents must aim firmly at a training in the area of sex that is truly and fully personal: for sexuality is an enrichment of the whole person-body, emotions and soul-and it manifests its inmost meaning in leading the person to the gift of self in love. (*Pope John Paul II, Familiaris Consortio*)

Resources

- ★ **Theology of the Body:** "*The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan,*" by Pope John Paul II is a series of 129 Wednesday audiences, which were given between the years 1979 and 1984 (www.theologyofthebody.net)
- ★ **National Abstinence Educators Association** (www.abstinenceassociation.org)

The Texas Catholic Conference (TCC) is the association of the 15 Roman Catholic dioceses of the State of Texas, and is the Official Public Policy Voice of the Catholic Bishops of Texas.

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Early abstinence-only programs have been criticized, and poorly designed research did not show impressive rates of effectiveness. These programs generally focused on the importance of abstaining from sex until marriage and underscored the harmful physical and psychological effects of premarital sex and out-of-wedlock childbirth. According to a recent study by Jemmott, Jemmott, & Fong from the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Waterloo in Ontario (2010), these programs were “not based on an understanding of the motivation of children to have sex or to practice abstinence.” Jemmott and colleagues designed their program using techniques proven to help adolescents avoid risky behaviors like cigarette smoking, drinking and drug use. Classes were conducted in groups of 6 to 12 children, with activities that included listing the pros and cons of abstinence versus the pros and cons of having sex. Jemmott stated, “This activity is in the context of a whole intervention that begins with a consideration of what are their goals and dreams for the future, where do they see themselves five years from now, where do they see themselves 10 years from now.” These activities and other similar ones help young people decide on their own that abstinence is the best choice for them. Other activities included role-playing and games designed to help participants resist peer pressure. Children in the newly designed abstinence-only program were one-third less likely to have sex in the next two years compared with peers in the abstinence centered and comprehensive programs.ⁱ

Limitations of Study Critical of Abstinence-only Education:ⁱⁱ

In April 2007 Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. released the findings of a multi-year evaluation of four Title V abstinence programs funded by HHS. The results of the study showed that students in the program groups were no more likely to abstain from sex than other students. These results have been used by the media and opponents of abstinence education to conclude abstinence education does not work and therefore should not continue to receive federal funding.

- **Unrealistic follow-up length:** According to established researchers in the field of sex education, the follow-up time of 4 to 6 six years after youth enrolled in the program is too long to effectively evaluate program impact of any single program. Most researchers use a 6-24 month follow-up timeframe. Intermediate indicators were not reported that may indicate initial and longer-term success.
- **Age inappropriateness and lack of ongoing reinforcement:** Some program youth were as young as 4th and 5th grade. Program interventions did not continue during the key adolescent years when transition into sexual activity more typically occurs. Message and skill reinforcement throughout these difficult years is essential to any ongoing behavior change.
- **Low participation rates:** One of the four programs, representing over 25% of the entire sample of program youth, had only an 11% participation rate of youth who attended 80 percent of program services, yet all youth who were enrolled were counted as program youth.
- **Non-representative study sample:** The high-risk population used in the study (majority were African American youth from poor, single-parent households) does not accurately represent the teen population in the U.S. Although the results produced no impact on the targeted sample, their results should not be generalized to the entire teen population.
- **Cross-contamination:** The fact that program and control youth were in the same schools and co-mingled socially for almost six years, introduces the likelihood of new values and behaviors adopted by each group merging together over time and eliminating most discernible program effects.
- **Selected programs are not representative of current abstinence programs:** The four programs selected to evaluate in 1999 were early stage abstinence programs and did not have the benefits of themes, guidelines, and promising practices now used by ACF to determine if sufficient abstinence education messaging is being delivered. One program used only a character education textbook as their abstinence education intervention for 9th grade students.
- **Need for a new study:** Therefore another study to correct for these limitations is necessary. A new study is needed with a better design to truly evaluate the efficacy of not only abstinence-centered education programs but contraception-centered programs. Making policy decisions based on the results of Mathematica are not warranted as the results should not be used to reflect overall efficacy of abstinence education programs.

(Last updated August 12, 2010 82nd Legislative Session)

ⁱ “Efficacy of a Theory-Based Abstinence-Only Intervention Over 24 Months” John B. Jemmott III, PhD; Loretta S. Jemmott, PhD, RN; Geoffrey T. Fong, PhD. *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med.* 2010;164(2):152-159. www.archpedi.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/abstract/164/2/152

ⁱⁱ Rejoinder Why Mathematica Study Should Not Be Used To Evaluate the Effectiveness Of Abstinence Education. www.abstinenceworks.com 12 August 2010