

Comprehensive Sex Ed Doesn't Do Better than Abstinence Ed When Measured by Same Standards, Institute Says

WASHINGTON, DC (May 13, 2009). A sex education researcher reported in a Congressional briefing on April 29th that when measured by the same standards of effectiveness, comprehensive sex education programs in America's classrooms do not show more evidence of success than abstinence education programs. This conclusion contradicts recent claims made by journalists and Congressional representatives that abstinence education is a proven failure.

The findings of Dr. Stan E. Weed and colleagues at the *Institute for Research and Evaluation* (IRE) highlight the debate between two different sex education strategies. Abstinence education encourages youth to adopt healthy lifestyles and avoid sexual activity, while focusing on positive relationships and preparing for future opportunities and family life. Most comprehensive sex education (CSE) programs place a major emphasis on sexual decision-making and condom instruction/promotion but the emphasis on abstinence varies widely, with many programs giving it only passing mention.

Dr. Weed reported the results of their review of 119 studies of sex education, comprising 20 years of research by social scientists in the U.S.¹ Previous reviews of these studies have generally used low standards to determine program effectiveness (e.g., improvement on any behavior, for any subgroup, or for any time period). Even using such standards, IRE found that in school/classroom-based settings 44% of abstinence programs had improved rates of teen abstinence, while only 36% of CSE programs had improved some measure of condom use. No school-based CSE programs were found that increased consistent condom use for more than three months.

Since the purported advantage of CSE is that these programs can increase both abstinence and condom use (among the sexually active), IRE examined whether there were programs that succeeded at both. While 44% of the CSE studies showed improvement in abstinence, there weren't any school-based CSE programs that demonstrated increases in both abstinence and condom use for the target population (two had subgroup effects), thus showing no real advantage over abstinence programs.

IRE then analyzed these school-based programs according to what it considered to be more meaningful standards of effectiveness: 1) Did the program increase teen abstinence or *consistent* condom use? 2) Did this behavior change occur for the target population and not just for a subgroup of students? 3) Did the effect last at least one year, that is, from one school year to the next? Applying these criteria, IRE found that a higher percent of school-based abstinence programs were effective than CSE programs: 36% vs. 25%.

This review contradicts recent claims made in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and a Congressional letter circulated by Rep. Paul Hodes (D-New Hampshire) that abstinence education has failed while comprehensive sex education has been successful. Dr. Weed expressed surprise that the lack of evidence of CSE success in schools had not been reported: "Research evidence does not support the widespread distribution of comprehensive sex education in the schools or the elimination of abstinence education as a viable prevention strategy."

¹ [http://instituteresearch.com/docs/Another_Look_at_the_Evidence_\(IRE,_05-13-09\).pdf](http://instituteresearch.com/docs/Another_Look_at_the_Evidence_(IRE,_05-13-09).pdf)

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