



By Toni Elton and Morgan Jacobus Photo by Max Marucut

# Opinion

## The problem with abstinence only education.

The birds and the bees - a perfectly acceptable explanation to give a curious child before they are able to grasp the idea of sex. But the sad truth is that as mature students with the capacity to understand our reality, we are provided with a sex education that doesn't reach much farther from the sugar coated explanation that we incontestably accepted from our parents at a young age. In order to effectively inform students on sex and how to approach it safely, there needs to be a reform in the way that sex is taught within schools.

In recent years the rate of teen pregnancies has been steadily falling, though the cause of this trend is interpreted differently among people-especially those with opposing views on how sex education should be taught. The Country Health Rankings from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation documented that the teen birth rate in Colorado as of 2018, is 24 births per 1,000 females ages 15-19 as compared to the rate of 30 per 1,000 females in 2017.

"Due to Federal and private money coming into Colorado, access to contraception has been increased," Alison Macklin, Vice President of Education and Innovation for Planned Parenthood of the Rocky Mountains and wife of Spanish teacher Mr. Macklin, said in regards to the cause of these declining pregnancy rates. Yet many still believe that the abstinence education programs implemented in schools are the cause of fewer teen pregnancies.

The same trend arose in 2007-2008 as the overall teen pregnancy rate in the nation dropped two percent. Many link this shift to Congress's allocation of a one billion dollar fund to abstinence only education classes in schools under the George W. Bush administration (2001-2009). But what many people are failing to see is that the connection made between the declining rates and funding of abstinence

education is clearly a post hoc fallacy. Although the funding and changes in pregnancy rates occurred at the same time, they have no significant correlation with each other-and there is research to back this up.

In a Psychology Today article by Michael Castleman, he noted that the "University of Georgia researchers analyzed changes in teen pregnancies by state, and found that as states boosted their emphasis on abstinence-only sex education, teen

**"Some schools choose to use curriculum that is more shame-based..."**

**- Macklin**

pregnancy rates increased. Teens in states that taught about all contraceptive methods had much lower rates of teen pregnancy."

With this evidence stacked up against the effectiveness of abstinence education, it is hard for us to believe that people still deem this method of teaching as effective. Saying that the funding for abstinence only education is the cause for the decline in teen pregnancies, proves to us to be as logical as saying that wearing lucky shoes to a soccer game is directly related to the team taking home the trophy.

Viewing abstinence education as an effective means to prevent teen pregnancies is as childish of an explanation as superstition and luck. In order to truly help students learn about safe sex and attempt to help continue lowering these rates, the curriculum needs to be altered.

After having reviewed the Colorado Academic Standards for sexual education curriculum, we observed that such is heavily abstinence based. In addition to excluding further information about other options, this curriculum also neglects to consider what other sexual orientations than heterosexual need to know.

In detailing the evidence outcomes for sexual health in sex ed, there is a large focus on complete

**"This kind of education has proven to be damaging and alienating"**

**- Macklin**

avoidance of the risk of sexual activity. One of the outcomes is, "Describe how a person can choose to abstain from sexual activity at any point in time, even after having engaged in prior sexual activity (DOK 1-4)." Such an outcome not only discourages early sexual activity, but we also view it as shaming sexual activity, insinuating that participation in such is blatantly wrong, and whomever engages in such ought to revert back to abstinence for their health and well-being. Though there are risks involved, it should be taught how to do such in an appropriate and healthy manner, rather than

suggesting that the practice is fundamentally unhealthy. Other outcomes discuss the pressures to become sexually active, "Appraise internal and external influences and pressures to become sexually active, and demonstrate strategies to resist those pressures (DOK 1-4)." Thus the curriculum recognizes the culture around sex, but rather than discussing it in a shameless way, once again employs the avoidance strategy, and even attempts to

influence students to promote that strategy to their peers. In the portion of the document describing abstinence evidence outcomes, it is written, "Demonstrate ways to encourage friends to remain sexually abstinent or return to abstinence if sexually active (DOK 1-3)."

There is a significant push towards abstinence through sex ed curriculum, not only in how it is taught, but the structure of the course. In Sexuality and Family Life Education, the district indicators and specific content taught in Health at Cherokee Trail High School, abstinence is one of the main focuses, alongside relationships, reproduction, and teen pregnancy/consequences/contraception/STDs. In the document, those are the four outlined topics, with teen pregnancy, consequences, contraception, and STDs being grouped together. Yet, even though that category includes several important issues, the description beneath teen pregnancy/consequences/contraception/STDs is shorter than that of the abstinence category.

The standards clearly spell out a push for abstinence, however, the evidence proves that this method of education is faulty. Instead of continually telling kids not to participate in sex, the curriculum should also add in more information about contraceptives, since that seems to be the main source of the fall in teen pregnancy rates. Simply it can be stated as this - schools, and our society in general, need to be more open when discussing sex in order to keep kids safe. Evading the topic of sex and contraception will not help students approach sexual activity safely and responsibly. It's difficult to escape the culture surrounding sex. Students hear about it on tv, in movies, and even in books, and abstinence is not going to make them stop having sex, but the teaching of using contraceptives may help students for when they are ready to be sexually active.



Alison Macklin is the Vice President of Education and Innovation for Planned Parenthood of the Rockies. She is the author of the book "Making Sense of 'It': A Guide to Sex for Teens (and Their Parents, Too!)" which she hopes will inform parents on how to have open conversations with their kids and be a resource for homosexual teens as well. Photo courtesy of Alison Macklin.