



Science or Politics?

George W. Bush and the Future of Sexuality Education in the United States

❖ Background

The American Medical Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the National Institutes of Health, the Institute of Medicine, the Office of National AIDS Policy — all recently issued reports highlighting the scientific research in support of comprehensive sexuality education, education which includes information about **both** abstinence **and** contraception.

Congress, ignoring this science, allocated over \$300 million since the fall of 1996 to fund unproven abstinence-only-until-marriage programs that **exclude** information about condoms and contraceptives for the prevention of teen pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

As Governor, George W. Bush championed abstinence-only-until-marriage programs in Texas. As a presidential candidate, Bush promised to increase federal funding for abstinence-only-until-marriage programs.

As President, is Bush poised to reject the scientific evidence on what really works with teens and sex?

❖ Politics or Science?

“It’s very important to understand the power and promise of abstinence education.”¹

—Presidential candidate George W. Bush, September 2000

“Current research findings do not support the position that the abstinence-only approach to sexuality education is effective in delaying the onset of intercourse.”²

—THE AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION, 1999

“We are aware of no methodologically sound studies that demonstrate the effectiveness of curricula that teach abstinence as the only effective means of preventing teen pregnancy...Credible evidence is lacking to show the effectiveness of abstinence-only programs. Additionally, there is mounting evidence suggesting that these programs are generally ineffective.”³

—Brian Wilcox, Ph.D., Center on Children, Families, and the Law, University of Nebraska

[As President] “My administration will elevate abstinence education from an afterthought to an urgent goal.”⁴

—Presidential candidate George W. Bush, November 1999

“...It is a matter of grave concern that there is such a large incentive to adopt unproven abstinence-only approaches.” Particularly since “the effective programs identified to date provide information about safer sex, condoms, and contraceptives, in addition to encouraging abstinence.”⁵

—OFFICE OF NATIONAL AIDS POLICY, SEPTEMBER 2000

More than eight out of 10 Americans believe young people should be given information about protecting themselves from unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases.⁶

—Hickman-Brown public opinion poll, 1999

***Bush pledged to increase federal funding [for abstinence-only-until-marriage programs] to at least \$135 million a year.*⁷**

—*The Washington Post*, June 1999

“The Committee believes that investing hundreds of millions of dollars of federal and state funds over five years in abstinence-only programs with no evidence of effectiveness constitutes poor fiscal and public health policy. ... Congress, as well as other federal, state and local policymakers, [should] eliminate requirements that public funds be used for abstinence-only education.”⁸

—THE INSTITUTE OF MEDICINE, OCTOBER 2000

Seven out of 10 Americans oppose federal funding to promote abstinence-only-until-marriage programs that prohibit teaching about condoms and contraception for the prevention of unintended pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, and sexually transmitted diseases.⁶

—*Hickman-Brown public opinion poll*, 1999

“It [abstinence-only-until-marriage education] hadn’t been given a very good chance, but it’s worked when it’s tried. That’s for certain.”⁹

—Presidential candidate George W. Bush, November 1999

“None of these studies [on abstinence-only programs] found consistent and significant program effects on delaying the onset of intercourse, and at least one study provided strong evidence that the program did not delay the onset of intercourse.”¹⁰

—NATIONAL CAMPAIGN TO PREVENT TEEN PREGNANCY, 1997

Eighty-four percent of Americans agree that preventing HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases are public health issues and should be left to scientists and experts, not to politicians.⁶

—*Hickman-Brown public opinion poll*, 1999

“It seems like to me the contraceptive message sends a contradictory message. It tends to undermine the message of abstinence.”¹¹

—Presidential candidate George W. Bush, July 1999

“Proponents of abstinence-only policies argue that providing information about contraception or providing condoms to adolescents sends a mixed message to youth and may promote sexual activity.” However, “expert panels that have studied this issue, have concluded that comprehensive sex and HIV/AIDS education programs and condom availability programs can be effective in reducing high-risk sexual behaviors among adolescents. In addition, these reviews and expert panels conclude that school-based sex education and condom availability programs do not increase sexual activity among adolescents.”⁸

—THE INSTITUTE OF MEDICINE, OCTOBER 2000

Among adolescents who reported sexual experience prior to the study, those in the safer-sex intervention [the intervention that **included** information on contraception and abstinence] reported less frequent sexual intercourse, thus providing evidence contrary to the belief that sex education increases sexual activity.¹²

—*John B. Jemmott, Ph.D., Dept. of Psychology, Princeton University*, 1998

More than eight out of every 10 Americans **reject** the idea that providing sexuality education that includes information on both abstinence and contraception will encourage sexual activity.⁶

—*Hickman-Brown public opinion poll*, 1999

“The folks that are saying condom distribution is the best way to reduce teenage pregnancies obviously haven’t looked at the statistics.”¹³

—Presidential candidate George W. Bush, November 1999

“...Two trends have contributed to the declines in teenage birth and pregnancy rates. First, the long-term increase in the proportion of teenaged women who were sexually experienced leveled [off]... In addition, among sexually experienced teenagers who used any method of contraception, condom use increased substantially.”¹⁴

—CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION, 1997

“Although sexual abstinence is a desirable objective, programs *must* include instruction in safer sex behavior, including condom use. The effectiveness of these programs is supported by strong scientific evidence.”¹⁵

The National Institutes of Health, 1997

“All adolescents should be counseled about the correct and consistent use of latex condoms to reduce risk of infection.”¹⁶

American Academy of Pediatrics, January 2001

Recent analyses by the prestigious Alan Guttmacher Institute found that 75 percent of the decline in teen pregnancy rates is due to improved use of contraception.¹⁷ A policy brief concluded that, “to sustain the downward trends in teenage pregnancy rates, it will be necessary ... to integrate the conclusion [that improved contraceptive use can make, and is making, a big difference] into policies and programs.”¹⁸

—*The Alan Guttmacher Institute, 2000*

“Given the weight of scientific evidence demonstrating the efficacy of safer-sex interventions and the absence of clear and compelling data demonstrating a significant and consistent treatment advantage for abstinence programs, it is difficult to understand the logic behind the decision to earmark funds specifically for abstinence programs. Unfortunately, much of the public health policy debate appears to have been ideologically motivated rather than empirically driven. However, no matter how widespread, politically viable, or popular a program may be, efficacy in preventing and modifying behaviors associated with ST[D]/HIV must remain the primary criterion by which programs are changed.”¹⁹

EDITORIAL: PREVENTING SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTIONS AMONG ADOLESCENTS: A CLASH OF IDEOLOGY AND SCIENCE. *JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION*, MAY 1998

❖ Texas’ Recent Record

“I have seen what works in my state: raise expectations, measure progress, insist on results [and] blow the whistle on failure.”²⁰

—Presidential candidate George W. Bush, 2000

- ❖ Under Governor Bush, Texas spent over \$10 million on abstinence-only-until-marriage education. Bush allocated nearly \$6 million in state funds, well over the \$3.7 million state match required by the federal allocation of \$4.9 million.^{21,22}
- ❖ In Texas, 220 teen females aged 15 to 19 become pregnant *every single day*.²³
- ❖ Texas’ **teen pregnancy** rate is 113 per 1,000 teen females aged 15 to 19. Only Nevada, California, Arizona, and Florida have higher teen pregnancy rates.²³

- ❖ Texas has the *second worst* **teen birth** rate among 15- to 19-year-old females, ranking 49th out of 50 states. Only Mississippi has a higher teen birth rate.²⁴
- ❖ Texas ranks *dead last* in the decline in teen birth rates among **15- to 17-year-olds**, ranking 50th out of 50. Between 1991 and 1998, the teen birth rate in this age group dropped by more than 21 percent in the United States as a whole; Texas' rate declined by only 10 percent.²⁴
- ❖ Texas ranks *second to last* for the decline in the teen birth rate among **15- to 19-year-olds** during the same time period, ranking 49th out of 50.²⁴
- ❖ While Texas ranks 15th out of 39 states in the decline in the birth rate among **15- to 19-year-old African American teens** (30.4 percent), Texas' decline in the birth rate for **Caucasian teens aged 15 to 19** is the sixth smallest recorded in any state (12.5 percent). Texas' birth rate declined by only 3.5 percent among **Hispanic teens aged 15 to 19** compared to 12.3 percent nationwide.²⁴
- ❖ Texas has an extremely high number of reported STD cases – accounting for about 10 percent of all reported cases of chlamydia and gonorrhea in the country.²⁵
- ❖ Texas' chlamydia rate is 319 per 100,000 population, ranking 44th out of 50. Texas' gonorrhea rate is 167 per 100,000 population, ranking the state 40th out of 50.²⁵
- ❖ Texas ranks 46th out of 50 states for the number of people living with HIV/AIDS.²⁶

Written by Marcela Howell and Ammie N. Feijoo, January 2001

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