Take Back Sex Education

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Take out your bananas and condoms: It is time to talk about sex education in schools, or rather the lack thereof. According to the American Civil Liberties Union, millions of dollars are being funneled into abstinence-only sexual education, regardless of the fact that these programs do not work and that 85% of parents would prefer a comprehensive sexual education for their children (ACLU, 2008). The time has come for the federal government to defund these programs that violate the Title IX rights of girls to an equal public education. In the place of these destructive programs, Congress should pass The Real Education for Healthy Youth Act and overturn the Title V provisions of the Affordable Care Act.

The point of Title IX is to ensure that girls and women are not discriminated against in federally funded education programs, such as those offered in schools and colleges (Kay & Jackson, 2008). Yet, Legal Momentum (as cited in Kay & Jackson, 2008), working in conjunction with Harvard University, found that abstinence-only programs actively discriminate against girls by purposely withholding information that could protect them against an unwanted pregnancy. Since only females can become pregnant, withholding this important information is considered sex-based discrimination. Furthermore, the Legal Momentum and Harvard team found that these programs reinforce negative stereotypes about both girls and boys. These programs place an undue burden on girls to reject the advances of their testosterone-laden male peers, while the boys are given a free pass to be ruled by their hormones (Kay & Jackson, 2008). These troubling tropes fail to address that many people, regardless of their gender, have sexual feelings, and even in the midst of overwhelming evidence that these programs violate the Title IX rights of students, they continue to be funded by the federal government.

The biggest impediment to stopping federally funded abstinence-only education is the existence of Title V Section 510, which passed in 1996. To receive Title V federal funding, a program may not tell youth about contraceptives or condoms, except when discussing the failure rates of such methods (Trenholm, Devaney, Forston, Quay, Wheeler, & Clark, 2007). The Obama administration and Congress quietly allowed Title V to expire in 2009, opening the door to newer, more comprehensive sexual education programs to receive federal funding (SIECUS, 2011). However, as part of a compromise to convince Republicans to pass the Affordable Care Act, Title V was reinstated despite the fact that, since 1996, numerous studies have shown the dangers of abstinence only programs (Stanger-Hall & Hall, 2011). Now in addition to the funds set aside specifically for evidenced-based comprehensive sex education, the federal government also provides up to 50 million dollars a year for abstinence-only programs (Stewart, 2012). This includes a program in Texas that supports the dangerous notion that the rhythm method is the most effective

form of contraceptive. This is a gross misuse of an act that is designed to protect women and give them supports, such as free birth control (Stewart, 2012). Congress should not be in the business of politicizing the health of America's youth.

Supporters of abstinence-only programs advocate that abstinence is the only way to prevent an unwanted pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections (STI). Although this may be true, there is substantial evidence that teens rarely follow this advice (Stewart, 2012). On the contrary, researchers Stanger-Hall and Hall (2011) from the University of Georgia found a strong correlation between teen pregnancy and abstinence only education. The study also found that teen girls who were taught abstinence only are more likely to get pregnant than their peers who received a comprehensive sex education. In fact, the US leads the developed world in teen pregnancy, which is not a race we want to win (Health Research Funding, 2014). Furthermore, Columbia University researcher McKeon (2006) found that 88% of teens who plan to stay abstinent until marriage fail to do so. They are also less likely than their peers to seek STI testing and less likely to use contraceptives during sex (McKeon, 2006).

Congress can rectify this dire situation before the start of the next school year by passing the Real Education for Healthy Youth Act, which was introduced to Congress in 2013 and is currently in committee. The Real Education for Healthy Youth Act would only give federal funds to programs that accurately explain how to prevent STI and unwanted pregnancy with the use of birth control, condoms, and other contraceptives, thereby supporting the rights of girls to a discrimination-free education. This act would support the rights of LGTBQ students to have access to correct information about gender identity and same sex relationships. The Real Education for Healthy Youth Act also includes language that would only give federal funding to programs that discuss how to keep from becoming a sexual aggressor and a rapist, which is something that disproportionally affects boys (Library of Congress, 2013). Withholding that information from boys could be considered a violation of their Title IX rights. The year is no longer 1996, and the way we teach our youth about sex needs to reflect the lessons we have learned over the past twenty years.

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