



Kindergarteners and Condoms: The Great American Sex-Ed Debate Heats Up

By Sara Benincasa March 1, 2013

Adolescents receive sex education information in a school in Kinshasa, the Democratic Republic of Congo. This information is difficult to come by in vast swathes of the United States.

The city of Chicago may have stolen the sex education spotlight this week, when news of its new sex ed curriculum for kindergarteners made headlines. But a broader national debate over sex ed is brewing in Washington, D.C, where two competing bills provide two very different takes on how human reproductive education ought to be taught.

On Valentine's Day, Rep. Barbara Lee (D-Calif.), Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.) and 32 other Democrats introduced a comprehensive sex ed bill in Congress. The Real Education for Healthy Youth Act would “provide five-year grants to state and local education agencies, nonprofit organizations and nonprofit or public universities to fund sex ed programs. Priority would go to programs serving communities with high rates of unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease or sexual assault.”

Proponents of comprehensive sex education, which teaches both abstinence and safer sex, say that it positively impacts students and leads to lower rates of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Comprehensive sex ed—as with the Chicago model—can be adjusted to provide age-appropriate messages. For example, a community that chooses to provide its kindergarteners “sex ed” might in practice teach basic anatomy and the concept of good touch vs. bad touch. Older students might learn more about sex and reproduction, but would also learn about setting emotional as well as physical boundaries.

“It’s not just about abstinence and condoms by any means,” says Sarah Audelo, director of domestic policy for Advocates for Youth, which worked on the bill with Lee and Lautenberg.

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Audelo tells TakePart, “[It’s also about] teaching healthy relationships, being inclusive of LGBT students, to have spaces where queer students can see themselves and feel accepted in the classroom. There can be a lot of consequences beyond what people see as prevention of disease.” She calls Lautenberg and Lee “two of our greatest champions.”

The Real Education for Healthy Youth bill contains, among other things, funding for comprehensive sex education for adolescents; funding for comprehensive sex ed for young people in institutes of higher education; funding for teacher training; as well as rules on what kinds of programs the federal government should fund, with criteria ranging from medical accuracy to tolerance for homosexuals and transgender individuals.

While none of the bill’s provisions constitute federal mandates—state governments and other entities would have to choose to participate—some observers object to its scope.

“The federal government shouldn’t be involved in this,” Neal McCluskey, associate director of the center for educational freedom at the Cato Institute, tells TakePart. He insists that the constitution of the United States does not grant the federal government powers regarding school curricula, and adds, “From the broader perspective, this is exactly the sort of thing that tends to kind of rip people apart.”

McCluskey feels there is “not conclusive evidence either way” to support abstinence-only education or comprehensive sex education, and that “in the absence of omniscience, the best thing we can do is let individuals make their own decisions.”

“Why embroil the whole country in a fight over moral issues when you don’t have to?” he asks.

But some conservatives seem as determined as Lautenberg and Lee when it comes to pushing their own ideas of proper sexual education.

Also on Valentine's Day, Illinois Reps. Randy Hultgren, a Republican, and Daniel Lipinski, a Democrat, re-introduced the Abstinence Education Reallocation Act in the House. According to a statement by the National Abstinence Education Foundation (NAEF), the bill "establishes a community-based Sexual Risk Avoidance (SRA) abstinence education program. The program is designed to reinforce the healthy decisions being made by the majority of teens who aren't sexually active...and to empower those who are sexually experienced with skills to choose a healthier lifestyle."

The statement further claimed that Lautenberg and Lee's bill "provides harmful messaging that puts teens at risk by suggesting that condoms make sex safe."