The Battles Over Sex Education:
History, Politics, and Practice

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Research Questions

- What social and cultural shifts from the 1960s to now caused policy changes in sex education in the United States?
- To what extent do current sex education programs and policies indicate parents’ desires for their children’s education and to what extent do they reflect political controversy?
- What federal funding is Connecticut receiving and what does this reveal about Connecticut’s sex ed programs in relation to the rest of the country?
Significance

- Sex education is an important aspect of public health
  - 40,000 new cases of HIV every year
  - 50% in people under the age of 25

  ("Coordinated School, 2006")

- The Department of Education realizes the need for
  STD/HIV education
  - In 2005, 91% of high school students in Connecticut reported having been taught about AIDS/HIV in school

  (State Profile 2005, p. 3)
Definitions

- **Abstinence-only**: Teach adolescents to abstain from sexual activity outside of marriage
  - No mention of contraception except with regard to failure rates

- **Comprehensive**: Stress abstinence while also discussing contraception, masturbation, abortion, and homosexuality
Thesis

- The victory of abstinence-only over comprehensive sex education reflects immense social and cultural shifts throughout the United States and these changes are reflected in the sex ed policies utilized by Connecticut. While abstinence-only remains the most frequent type of sex education all over the country, this does not reflect the majority opinion of parents with children receiving such education.
Methods

- Mostly secondary sources
- Conducted historical and archival research
- Relied on Connecticut curriculum frameworks
The Battle Begins

- Began in the beginning of the 20th century

- By the 1920s, a general consensus emerged that too much emphasis on disease was improper preparation

- In the 1950s, focus shifted towards family living

- Sex became much more visible to youth in the ’60s, and SIECUS (Sex Information and Education Council of the United States) was born
AIDS Changes It All

- Sex education became much more visible as a defense in the AIDS epidemic
- Marked an important dividing line in the Right Wing’s approach to sex education
- AFLA (Adolescent and Family Life Act) passed in 1982 and reauthorized in 1984
- Title V in 1996 allocates $50 million in federal funds every year to states with rigid abstinence-only sex education programs
A Parental Perspective

- The majority of parents nationwide contend that they would prefer more comprehensive sex education.

- 67% of adults agree with the statement “money should be used to fund more comprehensive sex education programs that include information on how to obtain and use condoms and other contraceptives.”

- 76% believe masturbation is appropriate.

(“Public Support for”, 2004)
Then why abstinence-only?

- Conservatives and the Christian Right are more powerful

- Historically, the discourse around sex has been uncomfortable and shameful

- AIDS epidemic and teenage pregnancy support abstinence
Connecticut

- Does not require sex education, but if it is provided it must be abstinence-only
- Receives Title V funding
  - In 2005 received $330,484
- Focuses on 4 sections of abstinence education
- Parents are allowed to excuse their children from sex education
- Parents are in accord with national research
  - 75% believe schools should teach both abstinence and contraception (“Speak Out”, 2006)
Frameworks

- Represent sex education as less important than other objectives
- There are some religious connotations
- Language suggests that students will be provided with information but not shown how to use that knowledge
Conclusion

- While the battle continues, advocates for comprehensive sex education are now on the defense
- The government has a clear stance
- Connecticut's policies and practices reflect national trends
References


