



Sex Education Parent-School Collaborations are Essential

*By Barbara Flis, Parent Action for Healthy Kids
www.parentactionforhealthykids.org*

Parents are the primary educators when it comes to teaching their children and adolescents about abstinence and sexuality. That is why it is essential that parents and schools work together to ensure that consistent messages reach our youth. The most important predictors of the current and future health status of our young people are consistent messages from home, school, and community coupled with knowledge, skills, and the belief that one can use the skills to change one's life.

When it comes to sex education, most parents do want a school district's help in teaching their children. Seventy-eight percent of Michigan parents, in a *Your Child Statewide Survey of Parents* (May, 2004, EPIC MRA), thought that sex education should be taught in schools. Parents realize there are many health risks associated with sexual activity including HIV, other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and unintended pregnancy. Parents don't feel equipped to do the job alone.

In 2004, Michigan's sex education laws became even more supportive of families. Sex education lessons delivered in Michigan classrooms must be approved by an advisory committee with members representing health professionals, clergy, educators, students and parents. Half of the advisory committee membership must be parents. Parents bring a unique perspective to the committee, and schools need their expertise now more than ever.

Michigan's sex education laws allow for local control. That means that each school district can decide whether or not to teach sex education. Those districts that do teach sex education (the majority) determine the grade levels where it is taught, the length of the curriculum, and to a great extent the content of lessons. Sometimes parents worry that teaching about HIV/STI and pregnancy prevention will lead to more teen sex. This is not the case. Research shows that when students are armed with information and skills, they are more likely to make healthy decisions when it comes to sex and abstinence.

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Parents often assume that sex education is being taught early and often. This is not always the case. School administrators need to hear from parents about what they would like to see included in their districts' curriculum.

Parents are a powerful influence. Last year an involved parent discovered that sex education had been dropped from the district's curriculum. This parent understood the law and quietly and persistently challenged the large suburban student district on its decision. Within several weeks, the district had reinstated sex education. One parent positively impacted the lives of more than 15,000 students!

Parents, here are some things that you can do:

- ❖ Contact your local school district to see if you can serve on the district sex education advisory board
- ❖ Encourage your district to survey parents and find out what topics they want to be taught at specific grade levels. A sample survey is on the web <http://www.emc.cmich.edu/hiv/Guide/images/AppendixA.pdf>
- ❖ Let your lawmakers, school board members, administrators, and teachers know that you think sex education is important.
- ❖ Set up workshops for parents on the importance of talking with their child about abstinence and sexuality.
- ❖ Provide the newsletter editor and web master of your school district with articles that will help parents in their role as primary sexuality educator.
- ❖ Write a letter to the editor expressing your point of view on sex education

Michigan Laws and Policies

www.emc.cmich.edu/hiv/milaw

Links to State and National Organizations

www.emc.cmich.edu/hiv/links

Parent Involvement Resources and Articles

www.emc.cmich.edu/hiv/parentinvolvement

Books to consider

www.advocatesforyouth.org/publications/frtp/resources.htm#books