

# WebMemo



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## The Case for Maintaining Abstinence Education Funding

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The President's budget for Fiscal Year 2010 would eliminate abstinence education funding. The Obama Administration has instead requested the creation of yet another comprehensive sex education program, the "Teen Pregnancy Prevention" program. The House of Representatives has included this request in their annual appropriations bill that is now moving through Congress.

According to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), in FY 2008, HHS spent \$4 on programs that promote "safe sex" and contraception to teens for every \$1 spent on abstinence education.<sup>1</sup> Congress should resist the President's request to fund another comprehensive sex education program for teens and instead maintain abstinence education.

**The Push to Reduce Teen Pregnancy.** The 1996 welfare reform bill placed a renewed focus on reducing the number of out-of-wedlock births and teen pregnancies. Abstinence education funding was included in this legislation to help accomplish this important mission. Organizations receiving grants from this program were committed to teaching "the social, psychological and health gains from abstaining from sexual activity" and that "abstinence from sexual activity is the only certain way to avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease (STDs), and other associated health problems."<sup>2</sup>

According to the Centers for Disease Control, between 1995 and 2002, the out-of-wedlock birth-rate for teens ages 15–17 years old dropped an astonishing 30 percent and 12 percent for teens ages

18–19.<sup>3</sup> However, over more recent years the rate for 18–19 year olds has increased slightly by 5 percent, indicating that a renewed focus should be given to reaching this population.

**The Research and Evidence.** Studies have shown that abstinence-based programs have effectively reduced sexual activity and delayed the initiation of sexual activity. For example, the latest evaluation, which examined seventh graders in northern Virginia, reported that, one year after the program, students who received abstinence education were half as likely as non-participants to initiate sexual activity.<sup>4</sup> This result accounted for the existing background differences between program participants and non-participants. That is, the evaluation compared near-identical students except for their participation in the abstinence education program.

A 2008 Heritage report analyzed 21 different studies done on abstinence-based education programs. It found that in 16 of the 21 reports there were statistically significant positive results in delaying early sexual activity and initiation.<sup>5</sup> Of these studies, 15 examined abstinence programs whose primary message was teaching abstinence, while six of the studies were on virginity pledge programs.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/Research/Abstinence/wm2562.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/Abstinence/wm2562.cfm)

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Of the virginity pledge programs, five reported positive findings.<sup>6</sup>

The research also suggests that teens who remain abstinent have higher academic achievement.<sup>7</sup> Analyzing a large nationally representative sample of youths, a Heritage study found that compared to sexually active teens, those who remained abstinent through high school were 60 percent less likely to be expelled from school, 50 percent less likely to drop out of high school, and almost twice as likely to graduate from college.

Abstinent teens also report better psychological well-being than their peers who are sexually active, and girls, in particular, appear to benefit from delayed sexual activity.<sup>8</sup> Reduced sexual activity decreases teen exposure to sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), reduces their risks of having children out of wedlock, and improves their emotional and mental health.

**Parental Support for Abstinence Education.** A Zogby poll in December 2003 found that 96 percent of parents said they want teenagers to be taught that abstinence is best. Seventy-nine percent said they want young people taught that sex should be

reserved for marriage or in an adult relationship leading to marriage.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the poll showed that “93 percent of parents want teens taught that the younger the age an individual begins sexual activity, the more likely he or she is to be infected by STDs, to have an abortion, and to give birth out of wedlock.”<sup>10</sup>

These are all themes and messages woven throughout abstinence education programs. Teens are taught about all of the possible consequences of engaging in sexual activity, including the risks of contracting a STD, heightened chances of depression, lower academic achievement and greater chances of teen pregnancy and out-of-wedlock childbearing. They teach life and relationship skills and help lay the foundation for personal responsibility.

Comprehensive sex education programs often claim they include a message of abstinence. However, the manner in which it is presented is often downplayed and given little attention or focus. These programs do not focus on teaching personal responsibility, building character, or developing strong decision-making skills. Instead they presume teen sexual activity and convey that protected sex is

1. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, “Health and Human Services Funding for Abstinence Education, Education for Teen Pregnancy and HIV/STD Prevention, and Other Programs That Address Adolescent Sexual Activity,” December 16, 2008, at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/08/AbstinenceEducation/index.shtml> (July 21, 2009).
2. Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, Public Law 104–193, at [http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=104\\_cong\\_public\\_laws&docid=f:publ193.104.pdf](http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=104_cong_public_laws&docid=f:publ193.104.pdf) (July 24, 2009).
3. Stephanie J. Ventura, “Changing Patterns of Non-Marital Childbearing in the United States,” May 2009, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, at <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db18.pdf> (July 23, 2009).
4. Stan Weed *et al.*, “An Abstinence Program’s Impact on Cognitive Mediators and Sexual Initiation,” *American Journal of Health Behavior*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2008), pp. 60–73.
5. Christine C. Kim and Robert Rector, “Abstinence Education: Assessing the Evidence,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2126, April 22, 2008, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Welfare/bg2126>.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Robert Rector and Kirk A. Johnson. “Teenage Sexual Abstinence and Academic Achievement,” paper presented at the Ninth Annual Abstinence Clearinghouse Conference, August 2005, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Abstinence/whitepaper10272005-1.cfm>; Joseph J. Sabia and Daniel I. Reese, “The Effect of Sexual Abstinence on Females’ Educational Attainment,” *Demograph* (forthcoming).
8. Denise Hallfors *et al.*, “Which Comes First in Adolescence—Sex and Drugs or Depression?,” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, Vol 29, No. 3 (2005), pp. 163–170; Joseph J. Sabia and Daniel I. Rees. “The Effect of Adolescent Virginity Status on Psychological Wellbeing,” *Journal of Health Economics*, Vol. 27, No. 5 (2008), pp. 1368–1381.
9. Robert E. Rector, Melissa G. Pardue, and Shannan Martin, “What Do Parents Want Taught in Sex Education Programs?,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1722, January 28, 2004, at [www.heritage.org/Research/Abstinence/bg1722.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/Abstinence/bg1722.cfm).
10. *Ibid.*

a safe and acceptable alternative to abstinence. The Zogby poll found that only 7 percent of parents think the message of contraception should receive more emphasis than abstinence.<sup>11</sup>

**It Just Plain Works.** Abstinence education equips today's youth with the knowledge of the positive benefits of delaying sexual activity and decision-making skills to help them achieve their future goals. Before cutting federal funding for abstinence

education programs, policymakers should revisit the original argument for supporting abstinence education—reducing rising teen pregnancy and unwed births—and consider all of the evidence that indicates its effectiveness.

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11. Shannan Martin, Robert Rector, Melissa G. Pardue, "Comprehensive Sex Education vs. Authentic Abstinence: A Study of Competing Curricula," Heritage Foundation *Special Report*, August 10, 2004, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Abstinence/abstincereport.cfm>.