

# Being honest with our kids

## Abstinence-only sex education a Texas-sized flop

**W**e need to talk about sex education in Texas.

More than 60 percent of Texas high school seniors report they have had sex. Most say they didn't use a condom the last time they did. Those facts alone make it no surprise Texas has long had one of the highest teen birth rates in the nation. And that's despite being the nation's virtual poster child for abstinence-only sex education.

Clearly, it's time for change — and for teaching the truth.

Let's face it — not all kids have parents who are comfortable talking to them about sex. And it's likely every parent has had the feeling they are the last people their children want to talk to about it.

As a parent, I know this. I remember the eye rolls, the impatient sighs, the nervous efforts to end this conversation as soon as possible. And no matter how much knowledge we have or how open we are to frank conversations, I'm sure many parents realize our kids often think we're dinosaurs — clueless about how the modern world really works.

But young people seek out and absorb information. And we know there are plenty of sources of information about sex, many of them unreliable. Their peers. Smartphones. Sketchy websites.

Public schools can't replace parents, but they can be a safe place where students get sex education that is factual and reliable.

But more than 80 percent of school districts teach abstinence-only or nothing at all when it comes to sex ed. Abstinence-only programs often promote the falsehood that condoms and other forms of contraception don't work and that using them is a "high-risk" behavior. They actually teach young people to be afraid or ashamed of sex. They give students dangerous misinformation about gender stereotypes and sexual assault. And nearly all ignore or, worse, disparage people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.

None of this promotes a healthy understanding of something that, at some point, becomes an important part of the lives of most human beings. And research shows that abstinence-only sex education is an ineffective strategy in persuading young people not to have sex. Texas is Exhibit A.

For the first time in more than two decades, the state's education officials are now overhauling health curriculum standards, which includes standards on sex and sexuality. The State Board of Education



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has begun the process and is set to vote on the new standards next year.

The Texas Freedom Network Education Fund and the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States have developed recommendations for what the new standards should include on sex education. The recommendations, based on decades of research and expert guidance, are available at

[tfn.org/sex-ed](http://tfn.org/sex-ed).

Let's get the "hair on fire" claims you will hear out of the way. Our recommendations don't call for kindergartners to learn about masturbation and oral sex. They don't "indoctrinate" anyone into the "homosexual lifestyle," whatever that means. And they don't destroy the innocence of youth. They simply call for teaching the truth about sex and health — in a fact-based, age-appropriate way.

For example, we recommend that kindergartners learn that every living thing has the capacity to reproduce. Standards in later grades should gradually expand on information about sex and pregnancy. And we recommend that students learn about abstinence, condoms and other methods of contraception and disease prevention by the end of middle school.

We call for teaching students about sexual orientation and gender identity, what that means and that everyone deserves to be treated with *respect*. We recommend that students in high school learn factual information about abortion, a legal, safe reproductive health-care service that one in four women access in their lifetime. And we urge that students learn about the importance of consent and the prevention of sexual assault.

The question before state board members isn't whether students should learn about abstinence. They will. But the truth is that abstinence-only policies are failing Texas students. Young people should learn the information and skills they need to make responsible decisions and lead healthy lives based on facts and their own and their families' values. State board members have the opportunity to help that happen on sex education. They should seize it.

**Kathy Miller is president of the Texas Freedom Network.**