



Youth at Risk – the Need for Sexual Health Education in Schools

Background



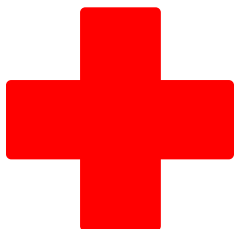
In 2007, the Washington State Legislature found that “young people should have the knowledge and skills necessary to build healthy relationships, and to protect themselves from unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV infection.

The primary responsibility for sexual health education is with parents and guardians. However, this responsibility also extends to schools and other community groups. It is in the public’s best interest to ensure that young people are equipped with medically and scientifically accurate, age-appropriate information that will help them avoid unintended pregnancies, remain free of sexually transmitted diseases, and make informed, responsible decisions throughout their lives.”

As passed in 2007, the Healthy Youth Act provides guidance to districts that choose to provide sexual health education. Sexual health education can be defined as “the provision of information about bodily development, sex, sexuality, and relationships, along with skills-building to help young people communicate about and make informed decisions regarding sex and their sexual health” (Advocates for Youth, 2014).

Since 2007, youth in Washington and across the nation have experienced significant increases in rates of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), particularly chlamydia. Many youth also report experiencing sexual coercion and sexual violence. These trends suggest that more must be done to protect the health and wellbeing of our youth.

STDs – A Silent Epidemic



Young people ages 15–24 represent 25% of the sexually active population but acquire half of all new STDs (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018).

The rate of reported cases of chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis

increased for both sexes among adolescents (15–19 years) and young adults (20–24 years) from 2012 to 2016 (CDC, 2018). In Washington, STD rates increased during that same period by 7% among 15–17 year olds and 26% among 18–19 year olds (Department of Health, 2018).

Sexual Coercion, Sexual Violence, and Relationship Violence

A nationally representative survey of adults done in 2010–12 found that approximately one in three (36.3%) women and one in six (17.1%) men reported experiencing some form of sexual violence in their lifetime. Among women who had been raped, 41.3% reported that they first experienced rape before the age of 18 (Smith et al., 2017).



1 in 3
girls are victims of sexual violence before they graduate

1 in 6
boys are victims of sexual violence before they graduate

“The rates of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) experienced by Washington youth are increasing at such a fast rate that it is now a health crisis. Students are also reporting high rates of sexual violence and coercion. Research tells us that with a fact-based comprehensive sexual health education where students build skills related to communication and safety; STD, pregnancy, and sexual violence rates decrease.”

–Chris Reykdal, Superintendent of Public Instruction

In Washington state, 12.3% of 8th graders, 18.9% of 10th graders, and 25.2% of 12th graders have been forced into kissing, sexual touch, or intercourse when they did not want to. Female students who identify as multi-racial experience higher rates of victimization than their white counterparts (2018 Healthy Youth Survey).

A new Healthy Youth Survey question introduced in 2018 shows that 24.6% of 8th graders, 31.1% of 10th

graders, and 31.4% of 12th graders have seen someone around their age pressure someone else to kiss, touch, or have sex when they did not want to (Healthy Youth Survey, 2018).

In 2018, 5.8% of 8th graders, 9.5% of 10th graders, and 10.4% of 12th graders had their activities limited or were threatened by someone they were dating (2018 Healthy Youth Survey).

School Safety and the Need for Inclusive Education

Schools nationwide can be hostile environments for a distressing number



of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) students. The overwhelming majority of these students routinely hear anti-LGBTQ language and experience victimization and discrimination at school. As a result, many

LGBTQ students avoid school activities or miss school entirely (Kosciw et al., 2018).

Compared to students in schools without an LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum, LGBTQ students in schools with an LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum were:

- less likely to hear “gay” used in a negative way often or frequently (51.5% vs. 74.7%);
- less likely to feel unsafe because of their sexual orientation (41.8% vs. 63.3%) and gender expression (34.6% vs. 47.0%); and experienced lower levels of victimization related to their sexual orientation and gender expression (Kosciw et al., 2018).

In Washington state, 11.7% of 8th graders, 9.1% of 10th graders, and 7.4% of 12th graders reported being harassed in the past 30 days because someone thought they were gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Healthy Youth Survey, 2018).

Comprehensive Sexual Health Education – The Evidence



84%

of self-identified Republican and Democrat parents and guardians support sexual health education in high school

Parents and guardians overwhelmingly support sexual health education, with more than 93% placing high importance on sexual health education in both middle and high school – regardless of political affiliation. At least 84% of parents and guardians that identify as Republicans or Democrats support the inclusion of a wide range of topics in high school,

including puberty, healthy relationships, sexual orientation, abstinence, STDs, and birth control. More than 78% of parents and guardians support teaching those topics in middle school (Kantor & Levitz, 2017).

Research has repeatedly found sexual health education that provides accurate, complete, and developmentally appropriate information on sexuality, including risk-reduction strategies and contraception, helps young people take steps to protect their health, including delaying sex, using condoms or contraception, and being monogamous (Advocates for Youth, 2014).

National research assessed the impact of sexuality education on youth sexual risk-taking for young people ages 15–19 and found that teens who received comprehensive sex education were 50% less likely to experience pregnancy than those who received abstinence-only-until-marriage education programs (Kohler et al., 2008).

Undergraduate women who received sexual health

education before college that included instruction in how to say no to sex (refusal skills training) were half as likely to have been assaulted in college. Students who received abstinence-only instruction did not have significantly reduced experiences of campus sexual assault (Santelli, et al., 2018).

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2016) lists comprehensive sexual health education as one of several evidence-based approaches to reducing sexual violence.

Comprehensive sexual health education promotes social and emotional competencies that contribute to academic achievement, reduced risk-taking, and healthy relationships (Future of Sex Education, 2016).

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