Future of Sex Education

We are delighted that the American School Health Association (ASHA) has chosen to focus its 82nd annual conference on adolescent sexuality. This topic is timely for both the school health professionals and the young people they serve.

Answer, at Rutgers University, is a national organization dedicated to providing and promoting comprehensive sexuality education to young people and the adults who teach them. "Comprehensive sexuality education" encompasses a wide range of topics, including anatomy; self-esteem; how to start, manage, and end dating relationships in healthy ways; maintaining sexual boundaries; finding alternatives to risky sexual behaviors; understanding sexual orientation and gender identity; avoiding too-early pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases; and much more. Usually, school-based sexuality education is the responsibility of health and/or physical education teachers. Although many of these professionals have extensive knowledge about and experience in teaching health, most have received little to no training on human sexuality education.

States throughout the nation vary widely in their requirements for and restrictions on school-based sexuality education. According to the Guttmacher Institute, only 20 states and the District of Columbia require some kind of sex education in schools. States that do have sexuality education policies have no accountability standards—there are few to no procedures in place to determine whether sexuality education mandates are being met. Depending on the state, teachers are often left to their own devices to find age-appropriate teaching materials, develop lesson plans, and teach a subject area without any guidance. They need much more than policies and mandates—they need our help and support to extend the important work they do into the area of human sexuality.

This is where organizations like Answer and ASHA come in. From decades of experience, we know well that teachers need:

- Professional development—like the ASHA conference and in-service trainings for teachers, administrators, and parents alike.
- Resources—like Sex, Etc. Answer's sexuality education magazine and Web site, by teens and for teens, which teachers can use in their classrooms to teach about sexuality.
- Collaborative opportunities—such as inviting sexuality education organizations to partner with schools to garner support from parents and other key community stakeholders for age- and developmentally appropriate sexuality education.

Specifically, Answer is a part of a new collaborative effort, the Future of Sex Education, with 2 other national organizations, Advocates for Youth and the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States. Together, we are working to create a national strategic plan to enable local school districts and state departments of health and education to obtain the tools, training, and resources they need to promote sexual health for all young people nationwide. Contact Answer to receive more information about this important initiative!

Developmentally speaking, sexuality is the cornerstone of adolescent life. Sexuality issues affect adolescents’ interpersonal relationships, attention span, school performance, general health, and their very futures. Sexuality education must, therefore, be a priority for school health professionals. We salute ASHA for recognizing this unquestionable fact and look forward to supporting its members in any way we can.

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