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Media contact: Soo Ji Min
office: 312-427-4460 x225, mobile: 312-671-0612
email: sooji@icah.org

New Report Released on the State of Sex Education in Illinois

Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health calls for the end of abstinence-only-until-marriage programs in the state

CHICAGO – The Washington, DC-based Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) released a new report this week detailing the state of sexuality education programs offered in public schools across the country. While SIECUS notes an overall shift in the federal government’s treatment of sex education (moving away from the unsuccessful abstinence-only-until-marriage programs in favor of more comprehensive, evidence-based programs), the state of Illinois still has a long way to go. We couldn’t agree more.

“The SIECUS report reaffirms the fact that Illinois youth are systematically denied access to appropriate, effective sexuality education,” said Soo Ji Min, executive director of the Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Youth, an advocacy organization focused on adolescent sexual health and parenting. “Teaching sex ed is optional in Illinois schools, and the schools that do teach it are required by law to teach abstinence until heterosexual marriage as the expect standard for all students.”

No coordinated entities exist to monitor sexual health education policies and practices within Illinois, and there is little oversight regarding teachers of sexuality education. “Abstinence-only-until-marriage programs have been proven ineffective, time and time again,” Min continued. “By teaching adolescents that their only responsible option is abstaining from sex until marriage, we miss a major opportunity to teach them how to protect themselves from unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.”

Forty-four percent of female high school students in Illinois and 52 percent of male high school students report having had sexual intercourse, and Illinois ranks 7th in the nation of reported AIDS cases among youth, 8th in reported cases of gonorrhea among 15- to 19-year olds, and 13th in reported cases of Chlamydia. Among 2007 US County rankings, Cook County ranks first in reported cases of adolescent gonorrhea, second in Chlamydia, and fourth for syphilis. Gonorrhea and Chlamydia are significantly under-diagnosed and under-reported. That said, young women ages of 15-19 have the highest Chlamydia rate, with black females in that age range having the highest rates of any group. The rate of reported Chlamydia is almost eight times higher for black females than white and almost three times that of Hispanic females. The rate of primary and secondary syphilis has been steadily increasing over the past seven years.

According to the SIECUS report, the Illinois government and community organizations received nearly \$8 million dollars in federal abstinence-only-until-marriage programs in 2009. While Congress recently allocated \$50 million per year for five years for abstinence-only-until-marriage funding through health care reform, a great deal of funding for these initiatives has been cut. In contrast, federal funding newly has been dedicated to a Teen Pregnancy Prevention Initiative for evidence-based and innovative programs that take a comprehensive approach to sexuality education.

“It’s time for Illinois policymakers to mandate that if schools are teaching sex ed, they must include age-appropriate, medically-accurate content that is relevant to all young people, said Min. “The health and safety of Illinois adolescents is at stake.”

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The Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health, in partnership with youth, advocates sound policies and practices that promote a positive approach to adolescent sexual health and parenting. Visit www.icah.org to learn more.