

## Sexual Health Education Planning Project

The Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health's (ICAH) Sexual Health Education Planning Project (SHEPP) was designed to create a vision for the future of sexuality education in Illinois. Over the course of 15 months, ICAH engaged nearly 500 people in statewide strategic planning sessions to answer key questions necessary for designing Illinois-specific approaches to sexuality education. Leaving behind the simplistic sex education program labels of *abstinence-only*, *abstinence-based*, *comprehensive sex education* and the like, ICAH adopted a neutral term of *sexual health education* and then convened stakeholders to discuss its importance and potential structure, accessibility, staffing, and resources.

Planning with stakeholders occurred during several events across the state: a daylong language session; 90-minute roundtable discussions on language, roles, and resources; and a two-day summit in Springfield focused on turning the findings and discussions into statewide recommendations. Most of the report focuses on those recommendations.

Furthermore, ICAH and the Ford Foundation convened more than 70 stakeholders from Illinois and across the U.S. for a two-day conference *Community and School Partnerships for Sexuality Education: New Directions for Advocacy, Policy, and Practice* in October 2009. Participants shared information about model teaching training programs and community schools in Chicago; highlighted emerging strategic partnerships between communities, advocates, and schools; explored shared values and challenges among sexuality education organizations, teachers' unions, and the social movements for reproductive justice, reproductive rights, community schools, and LGBTQ rights; and at the end, began developing an education reform agenda for Illinois and the U.S. that includes sexuality education.

Overwhelming support exists for a comprehensive, responsible approach to sexual health and sexuality education. The report is meant to be a guide for policy makers, educators, elected officials, advocates and others who are interested in creating a comprehensive plan for transforming sexuality education in Illinois. The full report is available at [www.icaah.org](http://www.icaah.org).

## Current Opportunity for Sexuality Education

In December 2009, Congress signed into law an omnibus-spending bill that eliminates all spending for abstinence-only-until-marriage programs and redirects the funding to a Teen Pregnancy Prevention Initiative for evidence-based and innovative programs. The new initiative, with \$114.5 million in funding, will be administered by the newly created Office of Adolescent Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services with a mandate to support "medically accurate and age appropriate programs."

Illinois can capitalize on the overall shift in federal funding towards evidence-based sexuality education. An opportunity exists for Illinois to set new standards and invest in innovative models for policy and practice that are not dictated by funding and ideology but rooted in communities, sound judgment and science.

## Recommendations for Illinois

The report makes recommendations in seven areas:

### Policies and Funding

- Abstinence-only curricula are used more in Illinois schools than any other approach. This is the result of a historical imbalance in funding.
- Pass the Reproductive Health and Access Act (H.B. 6205) as well as local school board policies.

- Revise the Illinois School Code.
  - Current
    - “Abstinence until marriage as the expected standard”
    - “Honor and respect for heterosexual monogamous marriage”
  - Proposed
    - Abstinence could be replaced with “reasons for not having sexual intercourse and skills for being abstinent.”
    - Heterosexual marriage should be broadened to include “lifetime commitments” (the commitments people make to share their lives together).
- All teachers—current and entering—should be trained in sexual health. Currently, little oversight exists as to who teaches sexual health education topics. Integration of sexuality and sexual health instruction into existing teacher training courses would enable topics to be covered in multiple settings and reinforce human sexuality as a natural part of human development. Such integration also would alleviate the need for additional certification requirements.
- Explore collaborative private funding structures to create grants.

### **Administration and Monitoring**

- Currently, no coordinated entities exist to monitor the sexual health education policies and practices within Illinois.
- Set up systems at state, regional, and local levels to administer, monitor, and sustain sexual health education

### **Media**

- The media is the most effective system for portraying positive images of sexuality and conveying health messages to adolescents.
- Youth can help shape the media’s influence on sexual health through direct input and using their consumer power.

### **Statewide Training Program**

- Strengthen coordination of providers to improve practice, which would decrease rates of STIs and other risk factors reported by the Youth Risk Behavior Survey.
- Prepare all individuals who encounter children and youth with up-to-date information and access to resources in order to foster healthy sexual development using consistent messages and common language.
- Develop a model to assist local communities to implement and integrate comprehensive sexuality education curricula and strategies in school-, community-, and family-based settings to enhance sexuality literacy.
- Long-term investment in a coordinated training program would positively impact graduation rates and college completion rates by developing curricula that increases school attendance and test scores.

### **Local Structures, Policies and Roles**

- ICAH has developed a three-phase model for how different districts can implement sexuality education at the local level, meeting schools and communities at whatever “phase” they are at and helping people move through a “step-by-step process” towards full implementation and monitoring.

### **Messages and Language**

- The language currently used for describing sexuality education is as inconsistent as the personal experiences people have with their own sexualities.
- A standard comprehensive language is needed—one that does not conjure judgment of individuals but rather relays facts in a neutral and helpful way.

### **Definition, Values, and Standards**

- A common definition for sexuality education, standards and values to guide sexuality education is needed.

*Created February 2010*