A New Direction for Sexual Health in Schools

Some educators believe sex ed for youngsters should also include sexual health services.

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In the United States, sexual health education in schools has always been a controversial issue. Now schools that teach fifth graders and up in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) system are mandated to provide sexual health services—including dispensing menstrual hygiene products and condoms—to students who want them, according to new policy guidelines from the CPS Board of Education adopted at the end of 2020.

An article in the Chicago-Sun Times reported that the Chicago Department of Public Health will allot condoms—at no cost—to elementary schools (250 prophylactics) and high schools (1,000 prophylactics) in the district.

Young people have the right to accurate and clear information to make healthy decisions, and they need access to resources to protect their health and the health of others as they act on those decisions," Kenneth Fox, MD, the CPS's chief health officer, told the news outlet. "When you don't have those protections and don't make those resources available, then bad stuff happens to young people. You have elevated risks of sexually transmitted infections, of unintended pregnancies, and that's very preventable stuff.

School educators were required to undergo special training so they could discuss the program with parents. One sex ed expert at the Chicago Women's Health Center predicted that many parents would disagree with the program's recommendations. She stressed that it would be incumbent on CPS to explain the initiative's goals to the adults, which is that schools will essentially act as community health centers where students can find sexual health information and resources if they want them.

Currently, three types of sex education programs are offered in U.S. schools: abstinence-only or abstinence-only until marriage (also called sexual risk avoidance), abstinence-plus and comprehensive.

Abstinence-only programs stress that teens should abstain from sex and provide no information on contraceptives to prevent diseases and unintended pregnancies. Abstinence-plus programs also encourage abstinence but include particulars about contraception. Finally, comprehensive sex

education discusses abstinence as the failsafe way to avoid sexually transmitted diseases and unintended pregnancies but also teaches youngsters that sex is a normal and healthy part of life and offers students information to help them make the best decisions for themselves.

The best way to help adolescents make responsible decisions about their sexual activity and health is to give them comprehensive sex education," says Natalie Blanton, a PhD candidate and researcher at the University of Utah, who is also a community sex educator.

Although most of my students are already sexually active, most have never had a proper sex ed course. Their information about sex usually comes from peers and from social media and sexually explicit content on the internet," Blanton observes. "The students I teach frequently express concern about their lack of basic knowledge—and similar deficits in U.S. education about sexual health have been well documented in research studies.

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