

Classroom sex ed a no-brainer for Minnesota parents

Kids learn a lot at school, but only some of it in the classroom. So maybe that's why, contrary to what the family values crowd would have you believe, most Minnesota parents support comprehensive and medically accurate sex education in the schools.

A [new, statewide survey](#) (PDF) coming out of the University of Minnesota shows 89 percent of parents polled support an all-inclusive approach to sex education and think curricula should include teachings about abstinence, birth control and prevention of sexually transmitted diseases.

Such results seem ready to silence those thundering voices we journalists, and likely legislators as well, hear screaming for abstinence-only sex ed [in our schools](#).

Only 10 percent of the 1,605 parents of children ages 5 to 17 interviewed for this study felt students should be taught abstinence exclusively.

Are you listening, legislators?



Survey results could influence lawmakers, educators

Copies of the survey are being distributed to lawmakers and educators. That's significant, considering Minnesota currently has no dedicated state funding for sex education or statewide instruction standards. No sex ed class is required for high school graduation.

The survey makes a strong statement, according to Marla Eisenberg, lead investigator for the study and assistant professor in Pediatrics and Adolescent Health at the 'U.' Quoted in a university news release, Eisenberg said support was "strong and consistent across all types of Minnesota parents. It didn't matter where they lived, how much education they'd had, what their income level, faith or political orientation was — a large majority of Minnesota parents want their children to receive this information at school."

"It's very unusual to find that kind of convergence of opinion across groups and districts," said Michael Resnick, one of the four Ph.D.s who oversaw the study, which was conducted in each of the state's eight congressional districts. That's right, phone interviewers looked for equal numbers of parents of kids in each CD. When you've got a potentially hot potato topic, you handle it in a political way.

"We know," Resnick said, "policy-makers are very keen on knowing what is going on with their constituents." Resnick is a professor and director of the Healthy Youth Development-Prevention Research Center at the 'U,' one of 33 academic centers funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The survey, conducted by Resnick's center in collaboration with the Center for Adolescent Nursing, seems to dispel any conservative misperceptions legislators may have about parents' — make that constituents' — views on sex education.

Times are a-changin' on sex views, researcher says

Times are changing, according to Resnick. "The landscape on this topic is really shifting," he said. For instance, the "no-sex-until-marriage" strategy is losing favor. Seventeen states, including Minnesota, have said no to federal funding that requires an abstinence-only approach. Those educational programs tried so far do not work, Resnick said, citing a recent study by Mathematica Policy Research Inc., a 35-year-old group that specializes in social policy problems.

In the Minnesota study, parents' support for broad-based sex education programs ranges from a low of 86 percent in the 6th District, which includes Anoka, Stillwater and St. Cloud, to a high of 94 percent support in the 1st District, which includes Mankato and Rochester.

Sex education offerings in Minnesota schools vary by district and by school, dictated by local decision-makers.

"Yet," according to Linda Bearinger, a study author and director of the Center for Adolescent Nursing in the University's School of Nursing, "we have all the capacity that we need to be offering high-quality, medically

accurate sex education to all young people. We have remarkably skilled health teachers and a Department of Education that really understands how to effectively train health teachers."

Debra Bernat is the fourth author of the study, published in the April [Journal of Adolescent Health](#). Publication in the professional journal comes only after experts have reviewed the hypothesis, information-gathering and analysis techniques and declared them valid.

A majority of parents also said middle school is the most appropriate time to teach children about such topics as healthy relationships, the responsibilities of raising children, reasons for not having sex, information on sexually transmitted diseases, sexual orientation, abortion and sexual abuse.

Here's detailed look at surveyed parents

The study was conducted between September 2006 and March 2007. The parent sampling is "similar" to the Minnesota parent population, according to a survey fact sheet. Other stats on who was surveyed:

- 73 percent are females and 27 percent males;
- 96 percent are white and 4 percent people of color;
- 55 percent are Protestants, 32 percent Catholics and 13 percent other or no religion;
- Political orientations vary from 10 percent very conservative to 8 percent very liberal;
- Education ranges from 14 percent with a high school diploma or less to 34 percent with bachelor's degrees and 16 percent with graduate degrees;
- And more than 90 percent respondents make \$40,000 a year or more.

Resnick's wish? "I hope the results will lead to a shattering of assumptions and ... legislators making decisions based on evidence."