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“Comprehensive” Sexuality Education in Arizona Schools: Searching for a Clearer Understanding of Policies and Practices Regarding Sexuality Education

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Research consistently shows that youth need accurate and evidence-based sexuality education to make informed decisions about their sexual behavior[1], health[1,2,3], and relationships[3]. Schools are a key place to deliver information about sexuality and sexual health, as research shows that reducing health risks is related to academic success[5,6]. Yet both the approaches to and the quality of sexuality education range widely in schools[7,8]. To shed light on the current state of sexuality education in Arizona, we conducted interviews with administrators, staff, or teachers from school districts that include middle and high schools.

The first goal of this research project was to assess the state of sexuality education in Arizona school districts. Among those who offer sexuality education in schools, we also assessed whether school districts used published curricula; whether they had policies about topics to be covered as well as who makes decisions about content; and what barriers they identified to implementing sexuality education.

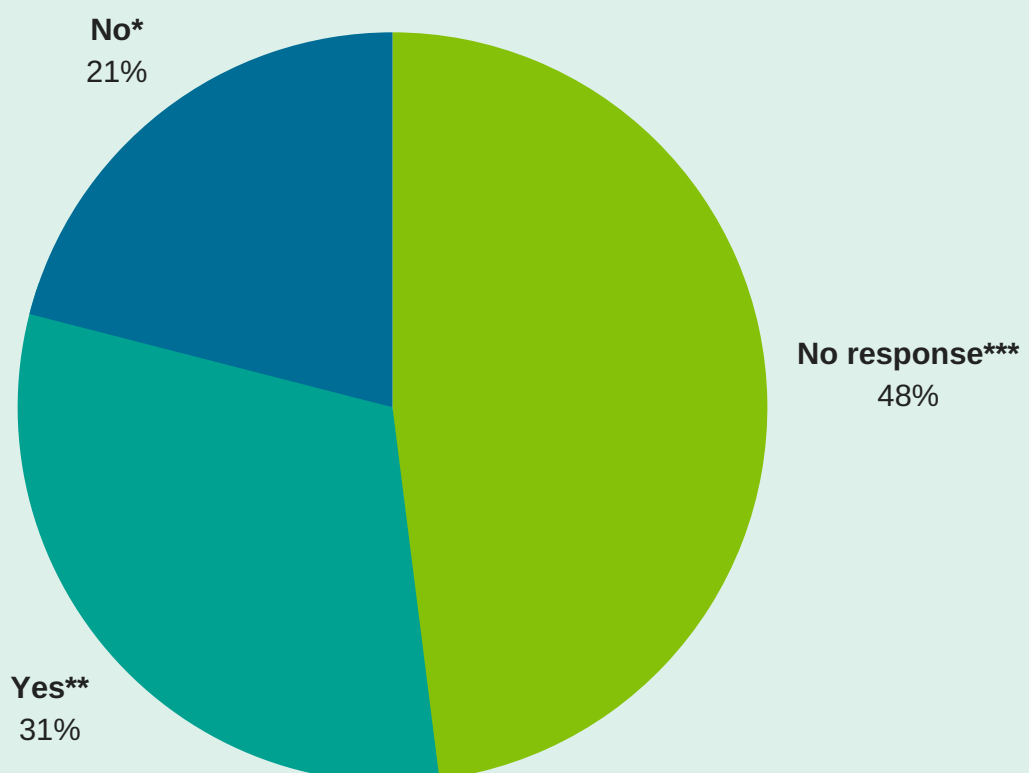
Key Findings

1. Only 31% of Arizona school districts verified that their schools provide some form of sexuality education: After contacting all 179 districts in Arizona, only 52% (93 districts) responded with information about their sexuality education programs or policies. Of those that responded, 55 districts provide some form of sexuality education in their schools.
2. Among districts that provide sexuality education, most districts use curricula and/or policies to guide the content of sexuality education.
3. Most students in Arizona do not receive evidence-based comprehensive sexuality education. Districts that offer comprehensive sexuality education range widely in the topics covered.
4. Some school districts identified barriers to providing sexuality education in their schools. Notably, many of these barriers can be addressed through state or local leadership; funding; and partnerships with community organizations.

Finding 1: Only 31% of Arizona school districts verified that their schools provide some form of sexuality education.

Out of 179 districts in Arizona, almost half gave no response or provided no information. We were only able to verify that 55 districts (31% of all districts in Arizona) provide sexuality education: these 55 districts are the focus of this report (see Figure 1). Of the school districts that implement some form of sexuality education, 35 (64%) provided in-depth responses to our questions – that is, responses beyond a simple “yes” or “no.”

Figure 1. Does your school district provide sexuality education to students?



*No (38 districts)

**Yes (55 districts)

***No response to interview requests (86 districts)

179 Districts

Finding 2: Among districts that provide sexuality education, most districts use curricula and/or policies to guide the content of sexuality education.

The 55 districts that implement sexuality education use a variety of approaches to guide the content to be covered, including the use of curricula, policies, or a combination of both. Notably, there is a wide range of cost for published curricula; depending on goals and needs, costs for training and materials may be expensive. Specifically, 21 districts use a published curriculum, 10 use an unpublished curriculum, and 15 districts have both a standard curriculum and a district policy. Few (3) school districts rely solely on a policy to guide sexuality education content. Of the remaining 6 districts, 4 do not use a published curriculum or have explicit policy regarding what should be taught, and 2 have no explicit policy and were unsure whether schools use a curriculum.



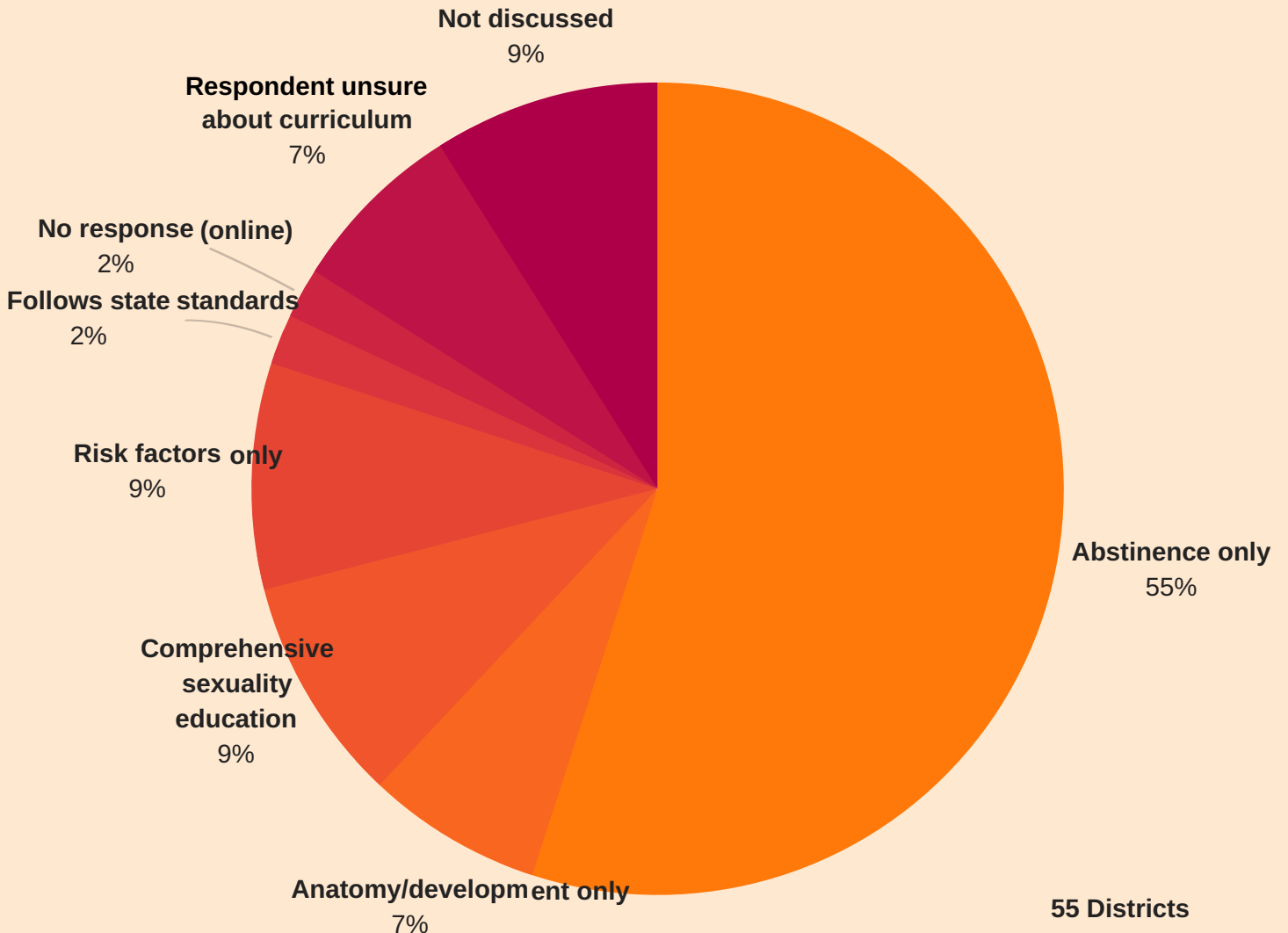
**Approaches to sexuality education:
Definitions (Future of Sexuality
Education, 2012)**

- **Abstinence-Only Programs:** Programs exclusively focused on refraining from all sexual behaviors. They do not necessarily put a condition on when a person might choose to no longer be abstinent.
- **Abstinence-Only-Until Marriage Programs:** Program focused exclusively on refraining from all sexual behaviors outside of the context of a heterosexual marriage.
- **Comprehensive Sexuality Education:** Sexuality education programs that build a foundation of knowledge and skills relating to human development, relationships, decision-making, abstinence, contraception, and disease prevention. Ideally, comprehensive sexuality education should start in kindergarten and continue through 12th grade. At each developmental stage, these programs teach age-appropriate, medically accurate information that builds on the knowledge and skills that were taught in the previous stage.
- **Evidence-Based Sexual Health Education:** Provides students with the skills and resources that help make informed and responsible decisions.
- **Medically-Accurate:** Grounded in evidence-based, peer-reviewed science and research.

Finding 3: Most students in Arizona do not receive evidence-based comprehensive sexuality education.

Although we did not specifically ask about the content of districts' sexuality education programs, information emerged organically in 50 interviews. Thirty districts implement abstinence-only programs: this accounts for more than half of the 55 districts that provide sexuality education (see Figure 2). Only 5 districts provide comprehensive sexuality education. Nine districts solely provide information about risks associated with engaging in sexual activities or about anatomy and human development. In one interview, the respondent indicated the school district follows state standards (Arizona State Board of Education Administration rules on sex education R7-2-303). In some interviews, respondents provided more information about their curriculum; for example: "[We use] an abstinence-based curriculum where students are told that the only sure way to avoid pregnancy or STDs is to abstain. If students ask a question not relating to the curriculum/PowerPoint, the instructor will tell them to talk to parent/physician (usually about contraception)." This response illustrates how strictly some districts adhere to abstinence-only curriculum, although this quote may not be representative of all "abstinence-only" districts.

Figure 2. What topics are covered in sexuality education programs in your district?



Arizona State Board of Education Administration rules on sexual education–R7-2-303.

Districts that stated they are “following the state standards” are referring to State Board rule R7-2-203. This rule pertains to the adoption and format of implementation of curricula (e.g., boys and girls must be separated for sexuality education from Kindergarten through 8th grade). It also requires that information be medically accurate and “promote’ abstinence as the best choice. However, this does not mean that only abstinence can be taught. School districts are “locally” controlled and therefore can decide to include information about condoms, contraceptives, and other topics.

Among districts that provide sexuality education, there was a range of approaches for determining what curriculum or approach was used. For example, one respondent elaborated on the development of curriculum in their district: “A curriculum map is developed by the district, and teachers are allowed to supplement the material.” In another instance, outside agencies determine the curriculum: “Since an outside source gives the lessons, there is no district policy on what topics should be covered” (this respondent indicated that the curriculum does cover STDs, reproduction, and is abstinence-based).

Who decides what sexuality education material to use?

Thirty-three (33) districts provided information about the curriculum or approach used for sexuality education. In these districts, decisions were made by:

- District administrators – 13
- Individual teachers – 8
- Administered by non-school district agencies (i.e., State/county health department, Arizona Youth Partnership) – 4
- School administrators (i.e., principals) – 3
- District and school administrators – 2
- Arizona Department of Health Services – 1
- Community-based committee – 1
- School nurses – 1

Finding 4: School districts identified barriers to providing sexuality education, but many of the barriers can be addressed through state or local leadership, funding, partnerships with community organizations.

A number of school districts identified barriers to providing sexuality education. These included:

- Lack of federal and state funding (5 districts)
- Students perceived as too young for sexuality education (5 districts)
- No state requirement to provide sexuality education (4 districts)
- Lack of access to current and relevant curriculum (3 districts)
- Opposition to sexuality education by parents and community members (1 district)

Conclusion

Half of the school districts in Arizona did not respond to requests for information about sexuality education in their schools; school district administrators appear to have little knowledge about – or are unwilling to discuss – sexuality education in their schools. Additionally, there is no state mandate to provide sexuality education in Arizona. The decision to offer this to students is therefore left up to school district governing boards. Only 55 districts – approximately one-third of all school districts in Arizona – are known to provide sexuality education in schools. The quality of sexual health education that a student in Arizona receives is also dependent on their zip code. Notably, there are numerous barriers to implementing sexuality education in Arizona schools, including a lack of support or mandate to teach sexuality education, and a lack of available funding to do so. Findings from this study suggest there is dramatic variation across districts in approaches to sexuality education, with few students receiving comprehensive sexuality education. Additionally, educators may lack the support necessary for developing and implementing curricula.

Recommendations

- Encourage school district implementation of age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education programs at all grade levels
- Use the National Sexuality Education Standards proposed by the Future of Sex Education (FoSE)[8] to guide age-appropriate curriculum selection and implementation
- Encourage professional development for teachers
- Build partnerships with community-based organizations that have expertise to provide high-quality, evidence-based sexuality education in school settings
- Provide funding from state departments of health and education to school districts to provide comprehensive sexuality education
- Build partnerships with Arizona foundations and philanthropy to support organizations and schools that provide comprehensive sexuality education
- Work with the state legislature to improve laws and policies regarding sexuality education

About the report: This report was conducted by researchers at the University of Arizona and the University of Texas at Austin as part of Planned Parenthood Arizona’s Sexual Health and Responsible Education (SHARE) initiative. Between 2014 and 2016, members of the research team contacted school districts about their sexuality education programs. We asked to speak to the person most knowledgeable about sexuality education curriculum in the school district; we conducted telephone interviews and offered the option of completing a survey online. After extensive efforts, just over half of the districts (93 districts, 52%) responded to interview requests. We interviewed respondents from 88 school districts (5 districts completed the online surveys). We received no response to interview requests from 81 districts (45%). Additionally, respondents from 2 districts hung up on phone calls, and respondents in 3 districts provided alternate contacts who did not respond to interview requests. We interviewed superintendents, administrative assistants, curriculum directors, principals, teachers, and school nurses.

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The Frances McClelland Institute for Children, Youth, and Families is housed in The John and Doris Norton School of Family and Consumer Sciences, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at the University of Arizona. The institute serves as a catalyst for cross-disciplinary research dealing with children, youth, and families.

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