Missing the Mark

Christine Soyong Harley, CEO of the U.S. Sexuality Information and Education Council, urges schools to address HIV in an opinion piece titled "Give Young People the Sex Education They Deserve." Below is an edited excerpt.

September 30, 2019 By Christine Soyong Harley

When it comes to sex education in the United States, we are failing. Less than 40% of high schools and only 14% of middle schools across the United States meet the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's essential requirements for sex ed. When it comes to addressing HIV within those classes, we are missing the mark.

For example, in North Carolina, state law forces educators to teach that a "mutually faithful monogamous heterosexual relationship in the context of marriage is the best lifelong means of avoiding sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS."

Sadly, North Carolina's mandate is not unique. The Trump administration has poured millions of dollars in federal funding into this abstinence-only approach all across the country. These programs, now being called "sexual risk avoidance," withhold information about condoms and contraceptives and, instead, feature shame-filled lessons that exclusively aim to prevent young people from having sex.

These programs should be providing young people with medically accurate information about HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Instead, they peddle misinformation about the effectiveness of condoms, leaving the impression that condoms can't protect against STIs and HIV (despite the fact that they can, and do).

Studies have shown that students who receive abstinence-only lessons are as likely as their peers to become sexually active before marriage but less likely to use condoms and contraception.

If these programs mention HIV and other STIs, it's often associated with a display of terrifying close-up photos of extreme outbreaks. This approach is not only irresponsible, but it downright endangers young people's health.

We need to stop using HIV as a way to scare young people away from sex. Instead, we should provide them with honest and objective information about HIV prevention and treatment so they are as informed as possible when they do choose to become sexually active.

When we give young people accurate, inclusive and empowering sex ed, we can help eliminate the stigma surrounding sexuality—and HIV in particular. Imagine if young people learned early on that no, you cannot, in fact, get HIV from a toilet seat. Or that anyone can get HIV, not just certain people. Or that people who are living with HIV can manage their viral load to a point where they are incapable of transmitting HIV to anyone.

Fortunately, there is some progress when it comes to adequately addressing HIV in sex ed. For example, in 2018, the Fairfax County School Board in Virginia passed a measure to teach high school students about pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) as part of the school system's family life education curriculum.

And while we're hopeful that other communities are working to make similar advances across the country, we need to do better. The federal government should prioritize and fund programs that teach young people accurate, up-to-date information about HIV as part of their sex education.

At SIECUS (Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States), we work to advance sex ed policies at the federal, state and local levels. That's because policies dictate what can (or cannot) be taught in the classroom. And people can take action to understand their community's sex ed policies and take the steps needed to change them for the better. Check out our Community Action Toolkit to learn how.

Education is an effective method of prevention. Let's use this back-to-school season as an opportunity to tell schools nationwide to provide young people with the sex ed they not only need but have a right to receive.

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