

Let's Talk About Sex Ed

When I was growing up, married couples on TV shows slept fully clothed and in twin beds. Sex was not a topic of polite conversation in my home or limited universe. Like most of my fellow teens, I was too terrified to have sex. Times have changed. Today, 7 in 10 Texas teens will have sex by the 12th grade. Less than one-third of their parents will have talked to them about sex prior to the fact.

I'm not demonizing parents. I happen to be one. Most parents just don't know when or how to talk to teens about sex. Most teens don't talk to us because they worry we'll misinterpret their motives. At the community level, where the negative effects of teen pregnancy hit hardest on the economy and the public coffers, the silence is deafening. Ironically, adults and teens both agree that more open and honest conversations would deter teens from engaging in sex. And study after study shows that when adults provide better information, kids make better decisions.

You don't have to be a parent of teens to care about teen parents. Teen parents cost Texas taxpayers more than \$1 billion per year. The odds are against them becoming productive adults and assets to their communities. And the damage doesn't end there. Their children are more likely to be under-achievers, run afoul of the law, and become teen parents themselves. Nationally, Texas ranks fourth in teen births and second in repeat births to teens. This is not the path to prosperity for our state.

Texas may not seem to have much in common with California, but we do - nearly the same demographics. Logically, we should have the same teen birth rate, but California's is almost half that of Texas. If this were a teen problem, don't you think the rates would be the same?

What has to change among Texas adults is our willingness and ability to talk to teens about sex. Business and civic leaders need to put teen pregnancy on the public's radar screen, emphasizing the connection between teen pregnancy and community prosperity. Parents need to talk early and often to their kids. Taxpayers need to insist that any sex education programs offered to teens are proven effective - and there are effective home-grown programs in Texas.

Unfortunately, a bill now before the Texas Senate (S.B. 521) ignores effectiveness and instead targets for extinction programs provided by anyone who isn't a school district employee. Many of the best programs - those that teach responsible decision-making, discuss healthy relationships, and encourage high personal expectations - are offered by hospitals, universities, and non-profits. The litmus test on sex education programs should be whether they actually reduce teen sexual activity and pregnancy, not who provides them.

This stealth attack on sex ed cleverly counts on the forgetfulness that is a hallmark of adolescent behavior. It requires parents to receive a notice 14 days before human sexuality programs begin, and that written consent (also known as “opt in”) be returned to the school before a kid can participate. Second, the notice can’t be sent with any other notices. For school districts starved for funding by the last Legislature, the 14-day requirement, tracking consent forms as they trickle in, and sending stand-alone notices to all parents may simply be insurmountable barriers.

Texas already has a reasonable law on the books. It leaves decisions about teaching human sexuality in the capable hands of local school boards, who make these decisions with advice from School Health Advisory Councils and parents. Current law allows parents to “opt out” if they don’t want their kids to participate. In Texas parlance, it ain’t broke.

Every generation has an obligation to prepare the next. The stakes are high. Poverty, crime, school failure, and the quality of our workforce all have links to teen pregnancy. Sadly, the country bold enough to send a man to the moon 44 years ago still lacks the courage to talk to teens about sex. And S.B. 521 makes a bad situation worse for the 77% of Texas parents who believe that providing sex ed in schools is essential. Our kids deserve better, and it’s time adults deliver.

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