



Exemplary Sexual Health Education in Alternative Schools

INTRODUCTION

Significant efforts have been made to accommodate the diverse learning needs of students and reduce school dropout rates. By focusing on students' learning styles and needs, so they can be successful in completing high school requirements and beyond. As a result of these efforts, the number of alternative schools, programs, and students enrolled has grown.¹ While alternative schools generally focus on accommodating and supporting students to reach academic success, the health and well-being of students is directly associated to how successful the student can become. Within alternative schools, it is unclear if sexual health education is consistently being provided, despite the fact that these settings serve populations that are at greatest risk of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and unintended pregnancy.² School health programs have proven to have positive effects on academic success, as well as health risk behaviors and health outcomes. When making decisions for students in regards to sexual health education, school leadership staff have some options for sexual health education programs that

can reinforce the goal of improving the self-esteem, individual growth, and social skills of students in alternative schools and programs.

WHAT ARE ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines alternative schools as “schools which serve students who are at risk of not progressing in regular high schools and, as a result, not graduating, as well as students who have already gotten into disciplinary trouble, usually related to drug use or violence.”⁴

The goal of alternative schools and programs is to support students who may not benefit from the traditional school structure. These schools and programs:

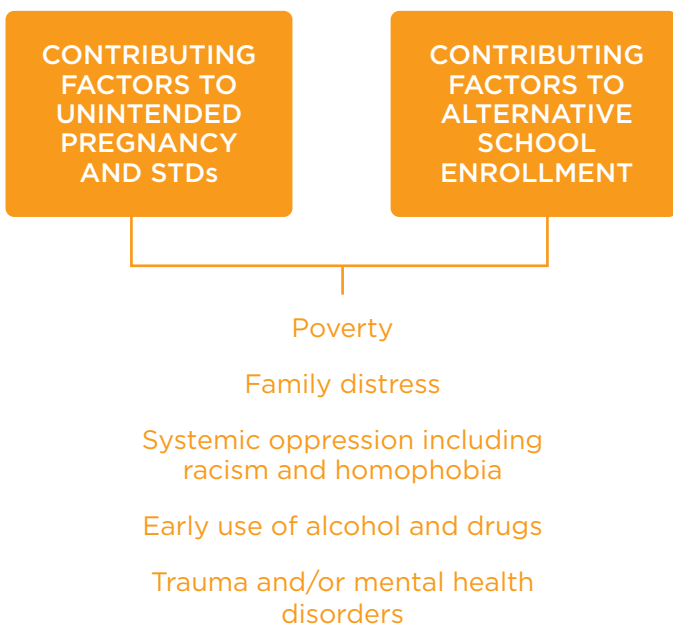
- Provide an alternative to the traditional learning environment for students who may have challenges
- Identify successful alternative education strategies to improve learning opportunities for students.⁵

WHO GOES TO ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS?

Students who attend an alternative school enroll for a variety of reasons. However, most alternative schools focus on students who may be in jeopardy of educational failure. There are several factors that can contribute to a student being enrolled in an alternative school, including: poor grades; truancy; emotional, medical, or social challenges; potential threat to teachers or students; unique learning style; family crisis; young people who have been court adjudicated; or similar factors associated with temporary or permanent withdrawal from school.^{6,7} Further, students who attend alternative school are likely to have dealt or be currently dealing with trauma, and more likely to face structural barriers including poverty and racism.

SIMILAR FACTORS CONTRIBUTE TO ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION ENROLLMENT AND NEGATIVE SEXUAL HEALTH OUTCOMES

There is limited data around the sexual health of students in alternative schools. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), “...higher percentages of Black, Hispanic, Pacific Islander, and American Indian/Alaska Native students attended alternative schools than did their peers who were white or Asian.”⁸ The groups more likely to attend alternative schools are also disproportionately affected by STDs, including HIV, and unintended pregnancy, due to many of the same factors that contribute to their educational challenges and lead to their enrollment in alternative school.^{9,10}



Students who experience STDs and unintended pregnancy may experience greater challenges to achieving academic success.

- Teens experience almost half of the STD cases in America each year –leading to worry and emotional distress, sometimes painful symptoms, and trips to a doctor or clinic for treatment – all of which could impact school attendance and performance negatively.¹⁰
- Teen pregnancy takes a particular toll on school connectedness. It is a major disruption in a teen’s life which makes it difficult to remain engaged in school and active in the school community – leading to lower grades and higher dropout rates.¹¹

SEXUAL HEALTH EDUCATION SUPPORTS EXISTING GOALS FOR ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL SETTINGS

The CDC, National Network of Partnerships in Schools (NNPS), and National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) all support the concept of community, family, and school partnerships in alternative school settings.^{12,13,14} Studies have proven these partnerships to have a positive impact on student academic and behavioral outcomes. Through sexual health education programs, states, districts and schools can support improvement of community and family involvement and can help youth delay onset of sexual activity, reduce the frequency of sexual activity, reduce the number of sexual partners, and increase condom and contraceptive use. Sexual health education programs help by:

1. Maintaining a safe environment- sexual health education programs are designed to enhance the development of the student’s life skills including topics on bullying, healthy relationships, and making informed choices. Administrators and teachers/facilitators can receive training to manage the classroom in a way which promotes learning and discourages mistreatment.
2. Maintaining ongoing professional and staff development- sexual health education programs encourage administrators and teachers/facilitators to gain the knowledge, skills, and techniques needed to not only implement the program but support the growth of the whole child. States, districts, and community based organizations can support the training of parents, teachers, and administrators; they can also provide resources to support the competencies of adolescent reproductive and sexual health.

3. Providing rigorous programs for parental involvement- some curricula encourage parent volunteers for various sessions; some programs also require two-way communication between the parent and facilitator on student progress/ development.

CONCLUSION

Most students in alternative schools have or currently deal with some type of trauma, neglect, or social challenges that increase their likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors that put them at greater risk for becoming pregnant or contracting an STD.³⁵ These results directly impact the individual growth and academic success of this population. States and districts have the opportunity and responsibility to provide students with medically accurate and culturally and developmentally appropriate information to help students reduce barriers and reach their full potential. Sexual health education programs support students to make healthier decisions and evade negative outcomes. By providing sexual health education to students in alternative schools, states and districts support the development and growth of the whole child.

RESOURCES

There are often new developments and information in the sexual health field. A variety of resources exist to help implement sexual health education in alternative schools.

CURRICULA:

The curricula listed have been developed specifically for use in alternative schools.

All 4 You!

A program to prevent HIV, other STD, and pregnancy among students in grades 9–12 in alternative education settings. It was designed to reduce sexual risk behaviors and specifically developed for use in alternative schools serving youth ages 14–18. The program also aims to change key determinants related to sexual risk taking, such as attitudes, beliefs and perceived norms.

FLASH: Special Education Edition

A widely used comprehensive K-12 sexuality education curriculum developed by Public Health Seattle–King County and designed to prevent teen pregnancy, STDs and sexual violence. FLASH is available for elementary, middle school, high school, and self-contained special education classrooms.

Streetwise to Sex-Wise

Provides an easy to use yet comprehensive model for a basic series on human sexuality for high- risk teens. It applies a current state of the art methodology of sexual health education to teens in alternative schools and programs who often have limited academic skills and are resistant to classroom- based learning.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR TEACHERS AND SCHOOL STAFF

Each of the curricula noted above offer professional development opportunities to increase successful implementation of the programs. It is recommended that teachers and school staff seek content and skill building training to keep current with the most up-to- date information. Below are some resources to support teachers and school staff in their professional development:

Answer's Online Workshops

Answer's dynamic and highly interactive online professional development workshops allow learners to set their own pace while learning about teen sexuality. Participants who complete one of the self-directed workshops receive six hours of professional development credit. Online workshops include: SexualityABCs: Abstinence, Birth Control and Condoms; STD Basics: Helping Students Stay Sexually Healthy; LGBTQ Issues in Schools: Celebrating and Supporting Diversity; Boys and Sex Ed: Beyond Statistics and Stereotypes; Sexual Anatomy and Response: Getting Under Your Skin; Pregnant and Parenting Teens: The Basics and Beyond; and Relationship Skills for Teens: Dating, Mating and Deliberating.

Professionals can also contact their State Education Agency's Health Education Coordinator to learn about conferences, trainings, and professional development opportunities.

Parent Engagement in Schools

The CDC's Division of Adolescent School Health (DASH) recently released resources to support parent engagement on HIV/STD prevention.

Promoting Parent Engagement in Schools to Prevent HIV and other STDs Among Teens: Information for State and Local Education Agencies

Strategy Guide for Engaging Parents in School Health, Staff Development Program for Engaging Parents in School Health

National Parental Information and Resource Centers

The [Parental Information and Resource Centers](#) develop resource materials and provide information about high quality family involvement programs to families, schools, school districts and others through conferences, workshops and dissemination of materials. Projects generally include a focus on serving parents of low-income, minority and limited English proficient children enrolled in elementary and secondary schools.

For assistance with training and tailored capacity building support, contact Advocates for Youth:

Advocates for Youth
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OUR MISSION AND VISION

Advocates for Youth champions efforts that help young people make informed and responsible decisions about their reproductive and sexual health.

Through its vision of Rights.Respect.Responsibility.® ("3Rs"), Advocates believes that

- Youth have the **RIGHT** to accurate and complete sexual health information, confidential reproductive and sexual health services, and a secure stake in the future.
- Youth deserve **RESPECT**. Valuing young people means involving them in the design, implementation and evaluation of programs and policies that affect their health and well-being.
- Society has the **RESPONSIBILITY** to provide young people with the tools they need to safeguard their sexual health, and young people have the **RESPONSIBILITY** to protect themselves from unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV.

