

Reducing Barriers to the Delivery of Sexual Health Education and Sexual Health Services in Florida's Public Schools

Summary

Florida's 2015 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) data show 57% of 12th graders reported having sexual intercourse at least once. This demonstrates a significant number of students are putting their health and academic success at risk by becoming pregnant or contracting an STD. Is there support in Florida for abstinence-plus and comprehensive sexual health education and sexual health services in public schools that could assist with reducing negative health and academic outcomes associated with sexual risk behavior? District level surveys in small, rural, as well as large, urban school districts, demonstrate a high level of community support for these types of sexual health education and sexual health services for secondary students in Florida public schools.

Issue/Challenge

Among school district leadership in Florida, there is often perceived lack of community support for sexual health education, particularly policy and curricula that is abstinence-plus or comprehensive. Also, there is doubt concerning provision of sexual health services in school clinics. Florida State statutes support these types of policies, curriculum and services in school districts. In addition, weighted data from the 2013 Florida Child Health Callback Survey, conducted by the Florida Department of Health, demonstrates 80.3% of parents in Florida support grade-level appropriate sexuality education. Florida school districts are under local control and are most heavily influenced by local data. Leadership in school districts need county specific, weighted data that will assist them with making data driven decisions. Such data can inform decisions concerning the type of policy, curricula and student health services which reflect local values and concerns, and prevent HIV/STDs and teen pregnancy.

Intervention/Solution

Through a grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Preventions Division of Adolescent School Health, Florida's School-Based HIV/STD and Teen Pregnancy Prevention Project contracted the University of North Florida's Public Opinion Research Laboratory to gather weighted data. The Research Laboratory conducted phone surveys in seven Florida school districts to measure the degree of support for sexual health education and sexual health services in public schools. Districts were selected for the survey effort due to their participation as partner districts in Florida's School-based HIV/STD and Teen Pregnancy Prevention Project. Those surveyed included: Brevard, Columbia, Lee, Liberty, Manatee, Orange and Pasco. The surveys were conducted in both English and Spanish. A sample of the polling universe was selected through the use of Random-Digit-Dialing methodology for both landlines (26.9%) and cell phones (71.3%), and the list of numbers was provided by Scientific Telephone Samples. Upon reaching individuals, respondents were selected who were 18 or older.¹

Results/Impact

Concerning sexual health education, the clearest finding across all of the data is the striking similarity of opinions regarding the support for the provision of sexual health education in the school districts. Despite wide differences in party identification, median household income, population density and racial make-up, the counties' aggregate opinions are supportive of this education being provided in public schools.² Below are examples of survey questions and data illustrating the level of support for sexual health education in the seven school districts:

- How important do you think it is to have sexuality education as a part of the middle school curriculum? **77% - 83.8%** believe it is very important or somewhat important.
- How important do you think it is to have sexuality education as part of the high school curriculum? **88% - 92.2%** believe it is very important or somewhat important.

- Which of the following statements comes closest to the way you feel about sexuality education in public schools? **79.4% - 89%** said “Schools should promote abstinence and teach young people about birth control and safer sex practices.”³

Regarding sexual health services being provided in secondary schools, the support is over 50% and up to 81.6% among community members. Examples of survey statements and data from across the seven school districts are listed below:

- Please tell me if you support the following health services being available in high school: Testing for STDs/HIV. **72.0% - 81.6%** strongly support or somewhat support
- Please tell me if you support the following health services being available in high school: Treatment for STDs/HIV. **66.0% - 74.3%** strongly support or somewhat support.
- Please tell me if you support the following health services being available in middle school: Testing for STDs/HIV. **50% - 67.9%** strongly support or somewhat support.
- Please tell me if you support the following health services being available in middle school: Treatment for STDs/HIV. **53% - 61.9%**⁴

The availability of this data to school district leadership has resulted in revision of curriculum, policy development and delivery of sexual health services in the participating districts. Examples include:

- Brevard County School District – Survey data was provided to the School Health Advisory Council. The data guided decisions related to revisions in middle and high school curriculum and discussions concerning delivery of sexual health services through mobile clinics to secondary students. Currently, Brevard County removes the YRBS sexual risk behavior questions when the survey is conducted in the district. Data from the public opinion survey is being used to support efforts to include the sexual risk behavior questions.
- Manatee County School District – Survey data was provided to the School Health Advisory Council and school district leadership. The data is being used to support decisions being made by the School Based Health Clinic Task Force. The Task Force is preparing to present plans to the school board during the 2017-2018 school year for a pilot project to provide comprehensive health services in up to two high schools in areas of high need in the county.
- Lee County School District - School Health Advisory Council Members used the district data to support the development and passage of the first written school policy regarding comprehensive health education which includes sexual health and disease prevention education. Also, data from the community survey was used to support the decision to open a school health clinic providing comprehensive health and sexual health services to students enrolled in the Lee Adolescent Mothers Program during spring of 2017.

The changes that have occurred in Brevard, Manatee and Lee County School Districts have the potential to positively impact the health and academic achievement of 133,774 secondary students in Florida.

Sustainable/Success

With continued support from the Centers for Disease Control and Preventions Division of Adolescent School Health, the Public Opinion Survey will be conducted in at least two additional Florida school districts during the 2017-2018 school year. It is the intent of Florida’s School-based HIV/STD and Teen Pregnancy Prevention Project to assist school district leadership with information that will inform their decisions concerning curriculum and services that will improve student health and academic achievement.

Citation

1, 2, 3 and 4 *Community Values Survey: Family Life Education and Comprehensive Health Services for Secondary Students*, 2015, 2016, 2017. Authors Michael M. Binder, Ph.D., Andrew C. Hopkins, MPA, Kendall Durante, Colleen Hampsey, MPA, Charlene Stainfield, BA. The survey reports are available upon request from the University of South Florida’s Healthy Schools Project (850) 245-9952.