

Op-Ed: The Texas State Board of Education should support the 21st-Century Sex Education Curriculum Recommendations (The El Paso Times)

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When the discussion of whether to update the sex education curriculum begins, Texas Education Commissioner Mike Morath should stick to his guns. There are many reasons the Texas State Board of Education should support the commissioner's findings.

One, [we asked for it](#). In preparation for the revision of the health education standards, the Texas State Board of Education requested that Commissioner Morath prepare a study of current health education research and state standards, including national best practices, which would be used as a guide to begin the TXSBOE's process to review and consider revising the health education standards.

Two, we have not reviewed these standards in more than 20 years. There are no standards on record that have gone this long without review or revision based on current best practices. Quite frankly, had we had any other standards go this long without review, we'd be derelict in our duty to Texas parents and students. More importantly, our students and our economy deserve a more sensible and data-driven approach to all content taught in our public schools.

What many refer to as the "abstinence only" law was created in 1995 via [SB 1](#), followed by [SB 283](#) in 2009. The law does not require abstinence to be the only standard our educators can teach. Schools must present it as the preferred choice for unmarried, school-age children and devote more attention to abstinence than any other behavior. Further, schools must teach about contraception and condom use in terms of human use rather than theory. Nothing in the law prohibits anything in Morath's recommendations. More importantly, our students deserve to receive health education based on facts rather than ideology. Texans have long supported local control, and local communities are best suited to make important education decisions reflective of the values and needs of their community.

Texas public education serves [5.4 million students](#); that's one in every five Texans. The fact that Texas is bound by law to teach abstinence as the preferred choice does not disallow us from writing 21st Century standards that allow students to learn about healthy relationships, respecting differing perspectives, and making good choices.

According to [Health and Human Services](#), nearly 50% of Texas high school students are using contraception to avoid unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. Additionally, 23% of our high school students admit they used no form of protection during intercourse, nearly ten points above the national average.

Consider the following:

- Texas ranks fourth in the nation for teen births and first for teens with multiple births;
- 66% of all births (by females under 20) are to Hispanic women;
- 14% of our female high school students reported sexual assaults, also above the national average.

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) take a particularly heavy toll on young people. The Centers for Disease Control ([CDC](#)) estimate that youth ages 15-24 makeup over 25% of the sexually active population and account for half of the 20 million new sexually transmitted infections that occur in the United States each year. Almost 80% of newly reported HIV cases are teenage males.

Texas taxpayers spend \$1 billion every year to assist teen parents with healthcare costs. All the more reason to teach the facts while we follow the law. Commissioner Morath is absolutely on the right track. Let's work together to make sure we serve our students and the Texas economy well.

Houston Chronicle Editorial:

It will be a tough sell for Texas education commissioner Mike Morath to persuade the state Board of Education to update Texas' sex education curriculum for the 21st century, but it's good to see he's trying.

The board over the years has been so rooted in the past that it initially dismissed complaints about textbooks that described Mexicans as lazy and slaves from Africa as immigrant workers. That shouldn't deter Morath; he's doing the right thing.

Morath, a Republican appointee, recommended to the board last week that students begin learning about reproductive and sexual health in age-appropriate ways as early as kindergarten and understand "sexual risk avoidance" by the end of middle school. "Merely teaching health literacy is insufficient to result in behavioral change and positive outcomes," said Morath's recommendation.

He didn't criticize abstinence-only classes, but that preferred approach has left Texas with a teen birth rate that ranks fourth in the nation; 31 births per 1,000 teenage girls compared with 20 births nationally. Abstinence-only is likely also a factor in 23 percent of Texas high school students saying they used no birth control before having sexual intercourse compared with 14 percent nationally.

Teenage births cost Texas taxpayers \$1 billion a year in health care, foster care and lost tax revenue. That's not to mention health care costs that aren't associated with pregnancy. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services says two in five sexually active teenage girls in America has had a sexually transmitted disease that can cause infertility and even death. Effective sex education can reduce that statistic.

More than 80 percent of Texas schools either teach abstinence-only or have no sex-ed classes, according to the Texas Freedom Network Education Fund. Abstinence can be part of a sex

education curriculum, but it shouldn't devalue the importance of contraception. For example, one abstinence program reviewed by TFN described the use of a condom as a complex, six-step procedure rather a simple method to avoid getting an STD.

Sex education should be about facts, not myths meant to scare teenagers from having sex. Besides, the myths don't typically work. More than half of all teenagers in the United States have had sex by age 18, according to the National Center for Health Statistics. Schools providing fact-based sex education courses can help students make wise decisions to protect their health and avoid unwanted pregnancy. Gender identity is another topic that should be part of any comprehensive sex education curriculum. That, too, is likely to agitate some board members. Morath's report recommends students learn in primary grades to "show acceptance of others by respecting differing perspectives, while resisting prejudice and stereotypes."

The commissioner's recommendations will be reviewed by a panel of educators that will make revisions and give that document to the school board for its action. Too often, the board has acted as if its role is to protect students from today's realities by pretending they don't exist. That's reflected in past textbook choices by the board that perpetuate stereotypes that have no place in today's Texas.

Policies of denial won't change unless this elected board hears clearly from Texans that they want their children to have as many tools as possible, including abstinence, to avoid sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies. Look up your board member at wrm.capitol.texas.gov and let him or her know you support policies based in facts and reality — not myths and wishful thinking.