



Why Free To Be Is Wrong To Be Taught In Our Schools

Sebastopol parent Robert Edmonds was shocked when his son came home from junior high in 2006 and reported that presenters in his science class had distributed a pledge form to abstain from sex until marriage. Edmonds called the school, Brook Haven Middle School, to learn more, and discovered that the presenters of the Free To Be curriculum provide abstinence-only education, and did not include lessons on contraception or effective use of condoms.

“We all want our kids to hold off sexual activity until they’re mature and ready. But I also want my sons to have access to medically accurate, unbiased information. I want them to learn healthy and responsible behavior,” said Edmonds.

He may have been the first parent from Sebastopol to raise his concern with the ACLU, but he is not the first to be concerned about the damaging effects of abstinence-only programs. Since his initial phone call to the ACLU of Northern California, organizer Alicia Walters has been meeting with parents, youth and other community groups to ensure that young people are receiving information about their sexual health that is based on science, not ideology.

Free to Be was established in Santa Rosa as a program of Catholic Charities of the Santa Rosa Diocese. In 2007, it became an independent non-profit corporation. Its purpose is to teach abstinence-only education to students in grades 7-12. The group claims to have taught in almost all of the middle and high [schools in Sonoma County](#).

ACLU-NC contacted Free To Be and asked to review its curriculum but one was never provided. Only through a request to Petaluma schools was a copy obtained of what was being taught and the methods used.

[California law](#) is very comprehensive and requires that all sex education be medically accurate, free of bias, and comprehensive, including age-appropriate information about abstinence, condoms, sexually transmitted infections and contraception in grades 7-12. Included in this law is the requirement that students be taught that abstinence is the only certain way to avoid unintended pregnancy.

California Comprehensive Sexual Health and HIV/AIDS Prevention Education Act has two primary purposes:

1. To ensure that sexual health and HIV/AIDS prevention education provide a pupil with the knowledge and skills necessary to protect his or her sexual and reproductive health from unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs);
2. To ensure that sexual health and HIV/AIDS prevention education encourage a pupil to develop healthy attitudes concerning adolescent growth and development, body image, gender roles, sexual orientation, dating, marriage and family.

Public schools in California are prohibited from using abstinence-only curricula.

On May 5, 2009 the Sonoma County Office of Education notified all Sonoma County School Districts that Free To Be violated state law and should not be taught in public

schools.

On June 3, 2009 Staff Attorney Margaret Crosby and Sex Education Policy Director Phyllida Burlingame of the ACLU of Northern California sent a [letter](#) to all 40 of Sonoma County school districts requesting that they send written confirmation that abstinence-only instruction currently provided in some junior and high schools by Free To Be will be discontinued starting in the 2009-2010 school year.

A recent [study of Free To Be's curriculum](#) by the Public Health Institute found numerous inaccuracies in what students were being taught and many failures to follow California law.

Some of the specific problems with the curriculum include:

- Presentation of medically inaccurate and misleading information about sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)

- Presentation of misleading information about the effectiveness of condoms in reducing the risk of STD transmission and preventing unintended pregnancy

- Omission of any information on the effectiveness and safety of FDA-approved contraceptive methods to prevent pregnancy

- Misrepresentation of the physical and emotional consequences of sexual activity

- Focus on marriage as the universal committed relationship, failing to acknowledge other types of committed relationships, either homosexual or heterosexual

- Use of negative, fear-based tactics to discourage premarital sexual activity

The effort to uphold California law and make sure young people receive a quality education about their sexual health is crucial. In a time when teen pregnancy is on the rise for the first time in a decade, we must provide our young people with all the information they need to make healthy decisions. We all want young people to wait to have sex until they are mature and ready. Abstinence-only programs are designed to shame young people and provide misinformation about condoms do not give them the tools they need for when that day comes.

The nationwide debate over how to educate our young people about their sexual health would seem to simply be a matter of politics. Even though a study published in the April 2008 *Journal of Adolescent Health* showed that students who received comprehensive sex education were half as likely to become pregnant as compared to students who received abstinence-only sex education, the Bush Administration ignored this and other studies that showed the ineffectiveness of abstinence-only programs, and chose to spend millions of dollars to fund them anyway. But these programs can have dire effects beyond politics. In our time meeting with parents and youth, we have heard numerous stories that illustrate just how detrimental these programs are: a young woman who received instruction by Free To Be then contracted an incurable STD because she didn't know how to protect herself. Or the young man who felt isolated and ashamed of his sexuality while being taught an abstinence-only until marriage curriculum; a teen who became pregnant after receiving abstinence-only instruction.

We urge all Sonoma County school districts to adopt comprehensive sex education curricula and follow the direction of the Department of Education and stop allowing abstinence-only educators to put our teens' health in danger.

If you are interested in making sure the students in this county receive only accurate sexual education, contact us at 765-5005 or email Alicia Walters at awalters@aclunc.org. Help circulate [petitions](#) calling upon all Sonoma County school districts to ensure that all sex education provided to students meets the requirements of California law.