

Health Promotion vs. Sex Education: Stonewalling the Survey

As an evaluation researcher currently completing my final reports for the now extinct Community Based Abstinence Education Program known as CBAE, I am perplexed. I have made repeated unsuccessful requests to the Obama administration to get a copy of an important survey conducted in 2008 and funded by tax dollars. Although an executive level report is available at <http://apha.confex.com/apha/137am/webprogram/Paper202612.html>, researchers and the American public need to see the detailed report in order to be able to fully grasp the implications. The National Survey of Adolescents and Their Parents conducted by Abt Associates in 2008, and presented at two conferences in 2009, has important information relevant to the research questions driving the prevention projects which I evaluate. For example, this nationally representative study found that 70% of parents agree with the statement that, "It is against your values for your adolescent to have sexual intercourse before marriage" as well as "Having sexual intercourse is something only married people should do." A majority of adolescents responded similarly.

When I was denied access to the report directly, I exercised my rights as a taxpayer and a researcher, and I formally requested the full report via the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). The Obama administration denied my request again. The administration cited exemption (b) (5) which permits withholding information that is *predecisional and deliberative*. But now, enough time has passed for closed-door deliberations to take place. It is time for openness and dissemination, which is what we expect from an administration that is advocating change in our society. It is time to invite the people in to weigh the facts and have a voice in the type of prevention and health promotion programs offered via school districts and community based organizations.

The second denial from the Obama administration leaves me to reflect on the role of cultural values with regard to prevention science. If we are truly interested in learning how to prevent two critical epidemics currently devastating our country (out-of-wedlock child bearing and sexually transmitted infections), then the nationally representative findings provide momentum and support for accessing cultural values of parents and children which promote optimal health choices for adolescents. I was talking recently to an African American woman who is concerned about out-of-wedlock child bearing in her community. A conversation with her African American student went something like this: student, "I have 120 cousins." When she asked this youth how many uncles she had, her answer was, "three." National statistics in 2006 recorded the highest rates of unmarried births in the history of our country, with 50 per 1000 births to unmarried women (age 15 – 44). Fatherlessness continues to disenfranchise African American and Hispanic communities with high rates of 72 of 1000 to African American women and, 106 per 1000 births to Hispanic women. When prevention programs ignore the effects of fatherlessness in our culture, many disenfranchised communities will continue to struggle. Additionally, from a medical perspective, the promotion of sexual abstinence is the only 100% sure method to avoid contracting a sexually transmitted disease. How many more youth need to contract sexually transmitted infections before we will take health promotion seriously in this country?

But at this point in time, we must ask ourselves: *Is this valuable process being suppressed by those who wish to repress American values in an effort to exert control over sex education offered in the United States?*

I am hopeful that science will prevail and that the Obama administration will release this survey and its detailed findings to the public and encourage us all to examine current health promotion strategies to insure that they are in tune with the cultural needs and values of American parents and their children.

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