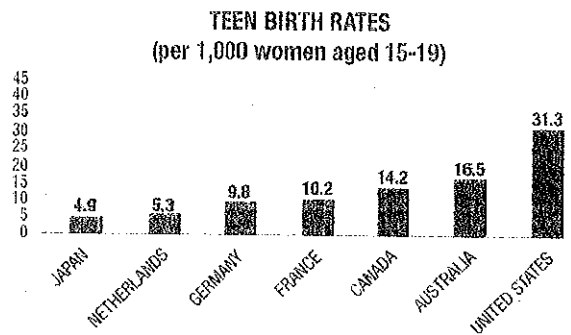


**Sex Education in Montana**

Student Sample PAE

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Sex education in public schools is a highly controversial topic in the United States today. Most people have a strong opinion on what should and should not be included when it comes to this subject, and on what approach is most effective in helping students make good decisions when it comes to sex. This is an especially relevant issue today when sex is such a big part of our media. While teen pregnancy in America today is near an all-time low, the rate of teen pregnancy in America is much higher than in similarly developed countries ("Pregnancy and Childbearing Among U.S. Teens").



The controversy surrounding this issue in Montana and the United States led me to wonder what Montana's laws regarding sex education are, and question how sex education policies affect the rates of unplanned pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) among teens.

The two main approaches to sex education are abstinence-only programs, which stress the importance of abstaining from sex, and comprehensive programs, which recognize abstinence but also teach students about safe sex and the use of contraceptives. During my research, I found that while sex and HIV education in Montana are mandated, meaning that they are required to be taught, the only specific requirement for our sex education classes is that abstinence be covered ("State Policies in Brief: Sex and HIV Education"). Other than that, it appears that Montana public schools are free to make their own choices regarding how they approach teaching sex education. Other states have more strict approaches to sex education.

example, Guttmacher Institute also reports that some states, including Colorado, North Carolina, and Vermont, require teaching life skills in their sex ed classes, covering topics like avoiding coercion, family communication, and healthy decision-making. Other states require including information on sexual orientation, but sometimes require that only negative information about homosexuality be discussed.

As you can imagine, people have a lot to say about this controversial subject. Supporters of abstinence-only programs argue that by including so much information about contraception, comprehensive programs "encourage experimentation" and undermine the message of abstinence (Zeiler). They believe that programs focusing on abstinence, some of which stress the importance of waiting until marriage, teach students that sex is something that should involve love and commitment. While these programs teach students that abstaining from sex is the only sure way to avoid teen pregnancy and STDs, many people do not realize that often, abstinence programs do include information on condoms and healthy decision-making (Clemmitt). One study found that in a group of mostly twelve-year-old African American students in urban schools who participated in an abstinence-only program, only about 33% began having sex in the next two years, compared to 42% who participated in a comprehensive sex education policy. (Clemmitt).

On the other hand, those who support comprehensive sex education argue that abstinence-only policies are unrealistic, and the only way to ensure that students make safe and smart decisions regarding sex is to provide them with correct and thorough information. Many people believe that abstinence-only programs, by stressing abstinence until marriage, do not support diversity among sexual orientation or religious beliefs (Malone and Rodriguez).

Supporters of comprehensive programs also worry that since abstinence-only programs stress

that condoms are not always effective, students will begin to think that they are a waste of time (Clemmitt). A study conducted by the Task Force on Community Preventative Services of the Federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that comprehensive sex education "does reduce the number of teens who have sex and the frequency that sexually active teens have sex, their number of partners, and their risk of STDs," (Clemmitt).

Both of these policies have good points, in my opinion. Abstinence programs are completely right in stressing that the only way to avoid unwanted pregnancies and STDs are to abstain from sex. However, I do see how the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community would feel excluded in these programs. Abstinence-only programs should focus less on the importance of waiting until marriage and more on the importance of waiting for the right person, or the risks involved with casual sex. I also think it is unfair to say that an abstinence-only policy is unrealistic. Comprehensive programs should spend just as much time discussing the option of abstaining from sex as they should spend discussing safe sex, because I can see how so much discussion about safe sex could leave students believing that teen sex is the expected norm. However, I do think that comprehensive sex education should be a component to all programs taught in school. Teenagers do not usually respond well to simply being told not to do something, and if students do not receive accurate information in school about things like birth control, abortions, different sexual orientations, and STDs, many students will never learn the facts about them at all.

Because our sex education laws are so wide open that the topic is sometimes barely even brought up in public schools, I expected Montana to have high rates of unplanned pregnancy and STDs. However, I found that in 2010 Montana was ranked 42<sup>nd</sup> in the United States in number of syphilis infections and 34<sup>th</sup> in chlamydia infections ("Montana - 2010 Profile"). While Montana

does not rank particularly high for STD rates, I was not able to find any studies comparing the rates of STDs strictly among teens, which makes this data difficult to analyze. The same year, Montana's teen birth rate ranked 22<sup>nd</sup> in the country ("Teen Birth Rate per 1,000 Population"). According to Kaiser State Health Facts, the states with the two lowest teen birth rates in 2010 were New Hampshire and Massachusetts, both with a teen birth rate of less than half the national average. Interestingly, both of these states' sex education laws are similar to Montana's, mostly allowing individual schools to decide how to approach teaching sex education ("State Policies in Brief: Sex and HIV Education").

I found it interesting that although the sex education laws were extremely similar in these three states, Montana's teen birth rate was much higher. Perhaps this is because New Hampshire and Massachusetts both tend to be more liberal states, whose teachers would be more likely to include more comprehensive sex education classes when given freedom to cover whatever they felt was important. Montana tends to be more conservative, especially in rural areas where a large amount of our public schools are located. With more conservative teachers, I would expect that more schools in Montana would focus on teaching abstinence. From my personal experience, most of the teachers in my small-town Montana school were conservative, and the sex education we received was about as far from being comprehensive as you can get; however, abstinence was not exactly in the curriculum either. While we were taught about puberty in grade school and about the transmission of STDs in junior high, we never had a sex education class in high school, when it arguably would have been the most beneficial. In fact, an embarrassing majority of my comprehensive sex education came from older friends, magazines, the internet and TV shows – all sources which can be extremely misleading. However, even though sex

education was barely discussed in my school, my friends and I could only recall one instance of teen pregnancy occurring at our school as far back as we could remember.

While studies from both sides of the argument claim effectiveness, Rebecca Maynard, a professor of education and social policy at the University of Pennsylvania, has stated that generally, neither method of sex education has been shown to strongly influence the behavior of teens (Clemmitt). The more I researched on this topic, the more I found myself agreeing with Maynard. However, if the sex education students receive does not affect their behavior, then what does? Perhaps it has to do more with the information about sex that teens receive at home. This is another reason many people do not agree with the comprehensive approach, which teaches teens that parental consent is not required to access birth control; supporters of abstinence programs believe that this information sends teens the message that they do not need to discuss sex with their parents, and parental involvement has been shown to be effective in delaying the sexual activity of teens (Zeiler). However, some teens may not have anyone to discuss sex with, or may disagree with their parents' ideas of sex, and in these instances having a comprehensive sex education class would be important. Other things to look into that could possibly be affecting the sexual behavior of teenagers could be their economic situation, race, or religion.

Even if sex education does not have a huge affect on teens' behavior, I still believe it is a topic that should be taught in school. I think that sex education classes should work harder to incorporate both abstinence and comprehensive programs, and the goal should be making sex education classes as un-politicized as possible. Laws mandating sex education should move towards making sure that every program covers all the facts about students options when it comes to sex, providing equal information on abstaining from sex or having safe sex. If sex

education policies stick to facts instead of attempting to influence students one way or the other, then students will be more informed when it comes to making their own decisions. I also believe more research should be conducted to find out what is effective when it comes to helping teens make good decisions about sex, because the fact that America's rate of teen pregnancy is so much higher than other countries indicates that there must be areas where we could improve. From my research on this topic, I have realized how difficult to come to a conclusion on what is the most effective method of teaching sex education because there are so many conflicting studies and opinions. However, Montana's relatively high rate of teen pregnancy and diverse and lacking sex education curriculum indicate that it is time for a change in our statewide sex education policies.

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