

Sex ed: Any link between what teens learn, how they behave?

By Sharon Jayson, USA TODAY

Another pregnant teenager in the limelight has focused new attention on just how much teens know about sex and when they know it.

This pregnant teen, of course, is the 17-year-old daughter of Republican vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin, and the pregnancy has reignited the national debate over two different approaches to sex education: abstinence-only vs. comprehensive. But as it turns out, there's no systematic tracking of what U.S. schools are teaching kids about sex — and either way, there seems to be little connection between what they're taught and their behaviors, researchers say.

State and local policies trickle down to the individual classrooms. A study of sex education in Illinois public schools published earlier this year found that 30% of those teaching the subject had never received training.

Teens say their schools take a whole gamut of approaches, from neglect to scare tactics.

"There was no sex education in my school," says Rebecca Carroll, 18, of Linden, Tenn. "It was in our book, but when I took it, the teacher completely skipped over the section on sexual health."

Taylor McCleod, 17, a high school senior from Cincinnati, says he learned about sexually transmitted diseases in ninth-grade English class. "They came in with projectors and showed us the diseases. Everybody was a little bit shocked to see the actual pictures."

Bridget Rekow, 18, says her ninth-grade health class in Ellendale, N.D., split into two sections, for girls one semester, boys the next. "One of the females didn't know where babies come from. ... Some were already sexually active. It was a little late for them."

Some teens report a better experience.

Sam Weidman, 18, says his private high school in Hidden Hills, Calif., "definitely did cover a good amount of sex education. It was in biology class, and we spent about one-quarter (of the class) on sex education. Sexual orientation was covered primarily in psychology, but science was really a good class."



GOP vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin holds her son, Trig, as her pregnant daughter, Bristol, 17, and Bristol's boyfriend, Levi Johnston join her on at the Republican National Convention in St. Paul, Wednesday.

Some parents say they count on schools to supplement what they teach their children at home. Marie Kittredge of Cleveland, a mother of four, says her two older kids went through eighth grade in public school, where some sex education was offered.

"I was disappointed and a little bit worried when they went to private school and did not have sex education," she says. "As much as you hope they listen to you as parents, you can't guarantee it."

Some sex education programs preach abstinence-only, while others take a more comprehensive approach, discussing contraception, sexual orientation and other topics. Success in delaying first sex and reducing teen pregnancy is mixed, yet proponents of each cite studies about why their way is best.

Abstinence programs have received more than \$1.5 billion nationally since 1996. According to a new report by the Sexual-

ity Information and Education Council of the United States that examines state-by-state spending for abstinence education, 25 states are now rejecting the money. The state profile found that almost half of the abstinence money goes to Southern states, with Texas receiving the highest amount — \$18.2 million for 2007.

Several studies have questioned the effectiveness of abstinence programs. One often-cited government-sponsored study found that abstinence education programs didn't delay first sex or affect the number of partners or the rates of sexually transmitted disease or pregnancy. Another study, published this year in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*, found that teaching about contraception was not associated with increased risk of sexual activity or sexually transmitted diseases.

The newest review, published in the September issue of *Sexuality Research & Social Policy*, is by Douglas Kirby, a senior research scientist at Education, Training and Research Associates, a non-profit in Scotts Valley, Calif. Kirby, who has studied sex education programs for decades, reviewed studies of nine abstinence programs and 48 comprehensive sex education programs.

He says a couple of the abstinence programs showed “weak evidence” for delaying sex, but most did not delay initiation of

sex. Nearly half of the comprehensive programs delayed first sex, reduced the number of partners and increased condom or contraceptive use. One-quarter of the 48 programs reduced the frequency of sex.

Some aren't surprised by inconsistencies.

“You can't expect that one class is going to undo all the misinformation teens are receiving from the other sources,” says Valerie Huber of the National Abstinence Education Association. “It needs to be reinforced, and parents should be the primary sex educators of their children.”

Says Elizabeth Schroeder of Answer, a New Jersey-based group that favors comprehensive sex education: “For any kind of behavior change or healthy maintenance, it has to be an ongoing program.”

That doesn't always happen.

“A lot of times, parents just don't want to deal with the situation — ‘the talk’ or whatever,” says high school senior McCleod. “They truly believe the best sex education is at school. That's not the case in schools that I know. That's not the case at all.”