



## **Putting Teens At Risk: A Report on Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Programs in North Carolina Schools**

### Executive Summary

Young people need and deserve complete, accurate, and culturally and age-appropriate information about their reproductive health, including abstinence, pregnancy prevention, and sexually transmitted disease (STD) and HIV/AIDS prevention. Sexuality education in public schools is one way to impart important information and skills for students to delay sexual intercourse and to use safer sexual methods when they do not choose to abstain. In North Carolina, this is particularly crucial due to the following alarming statistics<sup>1</sup>:

- NC has the ninth highest teen pregnancy rate in the US.
- In FY 2001-2002, teen pregnancy cost NC over one billion dollars.
- As of 2000, NC had the highest birth rate in the nation for Latinas ages 15-19.
- NC has the 7<sup>th</sup> highest rate of gonorrhea infection and the 18<sup>th</sup> highest rate of chlamydia infection in the US.
- Nearly half of all new STDs, including HIV occur in youth between 15-24 years of age.

Research has repeatedly shown that the most effective way to ensure that young people have the necessary skills to prevent unintended pregnancy, resist peer pressure, correctly and consistently use contraceptives, and prevent and treat STD/HIV infections is to provide them with comprehensive sex education.<sup>2</sup> Conversely, abstinence-only-until-marriage curricula that communicate false and misleading data about condoms and contraception harm North Carolina teens. According to a recent study by researchers at Yale and Columbia Universities, 88 percent of teenagers who pledge to remain abstinent before marriage break that pledge, and when they do have sex, they are less likely than other teens to use condoms or be tested for STDs.<sup>3</sup>

A joint report by the NC Department of Public Instruction and the NC Department of Health and Human Services found that the overwhelming majority of North Carolina

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<sup>1</sup> *North Carolina State Advisors on Adolescent Sexual Health*, Dept. of Public Instruction, Dept. of Health and Human Services, Office of Minority Health and Health Disparities.

<sup>2</sup> The Alan Guttmacher Institute, *Sex Education: Needs, Programs and Policies* (Apr. 2004).

<sup>3</sup> H. Brückner and P. Bearman, *After the Promise: the STD Consequences of Adolescent Virginity Pledges*, 36 *Journal of Adolescent Health* at 271-78 (2005).

parents, 90.5 percent, support sexuality education programs in public schools, and further, 88.9 percent of parents believe it's important for sexuality education programs to include information about the effectiveness and failure rates of birth control methods, including condoms.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, North Carolina law charges the State Board of Education with the task of evaluating abstinence until marriage curricula and developing and maintaining "a recommended list of one or more approved abstinence until marriage curricula," which must include "factually accurate biological or pathological information that is related to the human reproductive system."<sup>5</sup>

NARAL Pro-Choice North Carolina and the ACLU of North Carolina examined the sexual education curricula of Cumberland, Guilford, New Hanover, Wake, Robeson, and Buncombe counties. Several factors were considered, such as whether the curricula are medically and factually accurate, and whether they meet the NC Healthful Living Statute. We are concerned that three abstinence curricula currently used in Cumberland and New Hanover counties and possibly in other areas of the state, *Me, My World, My Future*, *Choosing the Best*, and *Sex Respect*, fail to give accurate information to teens regarding how to prevent pregnancy or STDs. Additionally, both *Choosing the Best* and *Me, My World, My Future* have been identified by a congressional report as having scientific errors and distortions.<sup>6</sup> Misinformation in these programs is particularly disturbing given that in 2005, 15,956 North Carolina teens between the ages of 13 and 19 were infected with an STD,<sup>7</sup> and in 2004, 18,615 North Carolina girls between the ages of 10 and 19 became pregnant.<sup>8</sup>

## **Cumberland County**

Cumberland County is an area of concern because of its high rate of teen pregnancy (32<sup>nd</sup> highest in NC) and high rates of infection for chlamydia, gonorrhea and syphilis. NARAL Pro-Choice North Carolina and the ACLU of North Carolina examined Cumberland's curriculum, which includes *Choosing the Best Path*, *Choosing the Best Life*, and *Parents, Teens and Sex: The Big Talk Book*, a companion guide for parents to *Choosing the Best*. All of these materials contain medical and factual inaccuracies. For example, *Parents, Teens and Sex: The Big Talk Book* understates condom effectiveness by falsely equating actual use of condoms with perfect use, stating that "[w]hen used by real people in real-life situations, research confirms that 14 percent of the women who

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<sup>4</sup> See N.C. Department of Health and Human Services et al., *North Carolina Parent Opinion Survey of Public School Sexuality Education October 2003* at v-vi (Feb. 2004).

<sup>5</sup> N.C. Gen. Stat. § 115C-81(e1)(4).

<sup>6</sup> United States House of Representatives, Committee on Government Reform-Minority Staff Special Investigations Division, *The Content of Federally Funded Abstinence-Only Education Programs* (Dec. 2004) (available at <http://www.democrats.reform.house.gov/Documents/20041201102153-50247.pdf>).

<sup>7</sup> See N.C. Department of Health and Human Services, *North Carolina HIV/STD Quarterly Surveillance Report: Vol. 2005, No. 4* (Jan. 2006) (available at <http://www.epi.state.nc.us/epi/hiv/pdf/vol05no4.pdf>) (reporting that teens ages 13-19 accounted for 12,007 cases of chlamydia; 3,844 cases of gonorrhea; 29 cases of syphilis; and 76 cases of HIV in 2005)

<sup>8</sup> See N.C. Department of Health and Human Services, N.C. State Center for Health Statistics, *2004 North Carolina Total Resident Pregnancies* (2004) (available at <http://www.schs.state.nc.us/SCHS/data/pregnancies/2004/totalpregnc.pdf>).

use condoms scrupulously for birth control become pregnant within a year.”<sup>9</sup> In fact, for couples who use condoms “scrupulously,” the failure rate is only 2% to 3%.<sup>10</sup> Contrary to CDC data,<sup>11</sup> *Choosing the Best Path* and *Choosing the Best Life* dangerously leave the impression that condoms are ineffective in protecting against gonorrhea, chlamydia, and syphilis.<sup>12</sup>

According to Cumberland County’s health curriculum coordinator, teachers stress failure rates of condoms because “you are promoting sexual activity if you give instruction [on condom use].” However, the National Academy of Sciences’ Institute of Medicine concluded that sex education and condom availability programs in schools do not increase sexual activity among teenagers.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, Cumberland’s approach to condom information conflicts with North Carolina law and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction’s Standard Course of Study, which require that “Any instruction concerning the use of contraceptives or prophylactics shall provide accurate statistical information on their effectiveness and failure rates for preventing pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, in actual use among adolescent populations. . . .”<sup>14</sup> By focusing on failure rates, and ignoring effectiveness, Cumberland County is acting inconsistent with North Carolina law.

In addition to inaccurate statements about condom effectiveness, *Choosing the Best Path*, tells students that a long list of personal problems and mental health concerns—including isolation, jealousy, poverty, heartbreak, substance abuse, unstable long-term commitments, sexual violence, embarrassment, depression, personal disappointment, feelings of being used, loss of honesty, loneliness, and suicide—“can be eliminated by being abstinent until marriage.”<sup>15</sup> There is no scientific support for these assertions, however.

Finally, *Choosing the Best Life* presents biased statements about gender as fact. For example, the curriculum teaches that “[g]enerally, guys are able to focus better on one activity at a time and may not connect feelings with actions. Girls access both sides of the brain at once, so they often experience feelings and emotions as part of every situation.”<sup>16</sup> Not only are statements like this biased and misleading, they are

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<sup>9</sup> B. Cook, *Parents, Teens and Sex: The Big Talk Book, 10 Steps to Empower Your Teen to Choose the Best*, 39 (2002).

<sup>10</sup> See J. Trussell, *Contraceptive Failure in the United States*, *Contraception*, 89-96 (Aug. 2004); World Health Organization, *Effectiveness of Male Latex Condoms in Protecting Against Pregnancy and Sexually Transmitted Infections* (June 2000) (available at <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs243/en/>).

<sup>11</sup> See Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Male Latex Condoms and Sexually Transmitted Diseases* (Jan. 2003) (available at <http://www.cdc.gov/nchstp/od/condoms.pdf>).

<sup>12</sup> B. Cook, *Choosing the Best Life*, Leader Guide 21, 25 (2d ed. 2003); B. Cook, *Choosing the Best Path*, Leader Guide 18 (2d ed. 2004).

<sup>13</sup> Committee on HIV Prevention Strategies in the United States, Institute of Medicine, *No Time to Lose: Getting More From HIV Prevention*, 118 (Monica S. Ruiz et al., eds. 2001).

<sup>14</sup> N.C. Gen. Stat. § 115C-81(e1); North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, *Healthful Living Standard Course of Study and Grade Level Competencies K-12*, 47, 65 (2000).

<sup>15</sup> *Choosing the Best Path* at 19.

<sup>16</sup> *Choosing the Best Life*, Leader Guide at 7.

inconsistent with North Carolina’s constitutional and statutory guarantee that “equal opportunities shall be provided for all students” in the state’s public schools.<sup>17</sup>

### **New Hanover County**

New Hanover County uses several curriculum materials that contain problems similar to those found in Cumberland County. For example, *Me, My World, My Future*, which New Hanover County uses in some of its 6th and 7th grade family life courses, teaches students that condoms are only 69 percent effective in preventing the transmission of HIV during heterosexual sex.<sup>18</sup> In support of this statistic, the curriculum cites to what it terms “[a] meticulous review of condom effectiveness” reported by Dr. Susan Weller in 1993.<sup>19</sup> However, Dr. Weller’s study has been widely discredited, and in 1997, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services stated that “FDA and CDC believe this analysis was flawed,” reiterating that contrary to Weller’s data, “condoms offer an extremely high degree of protection against HIV, other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and unintended pregnancy.”<sup>20</sup> Despite clear medical consensus on condom effectiveness,<sup>21</sup> the teacher’s guide for *Me, My World, My Future* alarmingly and inaccurately equates using a condom with holding a loaded gun to your head in a game of Russian roulette, stating further that “[c]ondoms do not prevent pregnancy, STD’s or AIDS; they only delay them. Theoretically, the longer one relies on them, they will fail and the ‘game’ is over.”<sup>22</sup>

Like *Me, My World, My Future, Sex Respect*, also contains inaccurate information about contraception. For example, *Sex Respect* teaches students that “[t]here is still some uncertainty about how effectively even a latex condom protects against the virus [HIV].”<sup>23</sup> Further, the curriculum tells teens that chemical forms of birth control may affect a woman’s future fertility, a patently false statement.<sup>24</sup>

Both *Me, My World, My Future* and *Sex Respect* inappropriately enter the abortion debate in a non-neutral manner, and both contain biased and inaccurate information about abortion procedures. For example, *Me, My World, My Future* inaccurately teaches that undergoing an abortion increases a woman’s future risk of sterility, premature birth, and tubal and cervical (*i.e.*, ectopic) pregnancies.<sup>25</sup> In fact, a leading obstetrics textbook teaches that “[f]ertility is not altered by an elective abortion,” and that most abortions in the United States do not result in premature births or subsequent ectopic pregnancies.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> N.C. Const. Art. IX, § 2; N.C. Gen Stat. § 115C-1.

<sup>18</sup> Teen-Aid, Inc., *Me, My World, My Future, A Student Guide for Junior High School* 141 (1993).

<sup>19</sup> *Id.*

<sup>20</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Background on the Weller Study* (Jan. 1, 1997) (available at <http://www.aidsinfo.nih.gov/aprs/release.aspx?an=A00351>).

<sup>21</sup> See *Male Latex Condoms*, *supra* note 11, at 2, 4 (stating that “latex condoms provide an essentially impermeable barrier to particles the size of STD pathogens”); see also N.C. State Advisors on Adolescent Sexual Health, *The State of Adolescent Sexual Health North Carolina*, Attachment C (2005).

<sup>22</sup> *Me, My World, My Future*, Teacher’s Guide at 215.

<sup>23</sup> C. Mast, *Sex Respect, The Option of True Sexual Freedom*, Student Workbook at 67 (2001).

<sup>24</sup> *Id.* at 42.

<sup>25</sup> *Me, My World, My Future*, Student Guide at 157.

<sup>26</sup> F. Gary Cunningham et al., *Williams Obstetrics* at 877 (21st ed. 2001).

“Sex Respect” contains biased claims about abortion, including the statement that “[a]bortion is not the best choice . . . because it unfairly penalizes the baby for the bad decision the baby’s parents made,” and the suggestion that instructors utilize “a speaker from a pro-life crisis pregnancy organization [to] come and talk about the risks of abortion and the benefits of adoption.”<sup>27</sup>

Finally, in addition to problems with its presentation of condom effectiveness, *Sex Respect* presents gender stereotypes as fact. For example, it includes the statement that “[a] guy who wants to respect girls is distracted by sexy clothes and remembers her for one thing. Is it fair that guys are turned on by their senses and women turned on by their hearts?”<sup>28</sup> As discussed previously, biased statements like this one are inconsistent with the guarantee of equality contained in North Carolina law.<sup>29</sup>

### Conclusion

Students in Cumberland and New Hanover Counties, and possibly in many other North Carolina counties, are unfairly being taught misinformation in their sexuality education classes. Condom effectiveness is underestimated through false statistics, abstinence is promoted with grandiose promises of well-being and happiness, the abortion debate is commented on in a biased fashion, and gender stereotypes are presented as fact.

As advocates for medically accurate, age-appropriate sex education in the schools, NARAL Pro-Choice North Carolina and the ACLU of North Carolina strongly recommends discontinuing the use of *Me, My World, My Future*, *Choosing The Best*, and *Sex Respect* in North Carolina schools, and a full review of all North Carolina sexuality education curricula. This will ensure that state statutes are met, and that students receive high-quality health education that will provide them with important information and skills to delay sexual intercourse and to use safer methods when they become sexually active. Only when young people have complete, accurate, and reliable information can they make informed and appropriate decisions about sex and their reproductive health.

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<sup>27</sup> *Sex Respect*, Teacher’s Manual at 7, 110.

<sup>28</sup> *Sex Respect*, Student Workbook at 94.

<sup>29</sup> N.C. Const. Art. IX, § 2; N.C. Gen Stat. § 115C-1.