

# Comprehensive Sexual Health Services in School-Based Health Centers: Strategies and Messages to Overcome Community Resistance



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## Introduction

In 2011, the Colorado Association for School-Based Health Care (CASBHC) published a position paper, *Providing Reproductive Health Services in Colorado's School-Based Health Centers*, to promote the delivery of comprehensive reproductive and sexual health services. The position paper concluded:

“the services provided in each school-based health center depend upon the age of the students served, documented need, community resources, available funding, and local school district policy. Where there is a significant documented need among adolescents for comprehensive reproductive and sexual health services, school-based health centers should meet those needs.”<sup>1</sup>

High-quality, evidence-based comprehensive reproductive and sexual health services delivered to young people in school can provide the education and skills necessary to make informed decisions about delaying sexual activity and using contraception for those who are sexually active.<sup>2</sup> This results in a decrease of sexually transmitted infections and ensures that pregnancies are planned and wanted.<sup>3</sup> These services include sexuality education, behavioral risk assessment, counseling, pregnancy testing, contraception or referral for contraception, and diagnosis and treatment of sexually transmitted infection (STI).

A majority of the school-based health centers (SBHCs) in Colorado that serve adolescents currently offer comprehensive services as part of a “whole child” approach to wellness and academic success. However, whenever the subject of sexual health, including contraception, is raised, different opinions and approaches are usually expressed. How messages are framed when the intent of the services is communicated can either help garner support or push away potential allies.

This resource was created to give new or existing SBHCs encouragement and guidance when encountering community resistance to offering comprehensive sexual health services.

## Community Resistance

When a SBHC offers sexual health services, community resistance can occur. Resistance is a natural response when a person feels that his or her current beliefs, values, and priorities may be threatened. Understanding this response will help SBHCs address an individual or group's concerns.

It is important not to think of resistance as a barrier, but to remember that it is a form of communication. The SBHC's role is to understand the concerns and take action to facilitate conversations that help solve the issue or demonstrate that the concerns are unfounded.

Interestingly, studies show that even where there is a lack of sexuality education, there is widespread public support for it.<sup>4</sup> Health and medical associations have formally endorsed comprehensive sexuality education in schools, including the Society for Adolescent Medicine, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Medical Association, the American Psychological Association, the National Association of School Nurses, and the American School Health Association.<sup>5</sup>

Comprehensive sexuality education should include more than information about sexual behavior. Topics should address concerns about body image, relationships, abstinence, mutual consent, gender identity, sexual orientation, sexual attitudes and values, contraception and sexually transmitted infections. The goal is to promote general health and well-being in a developmentally appropriate way. This discussion should start in kindergarten and build upon itself each year through high school.<sup>6</sup>

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1 <http://www.casbhc.org/Publications/Policy%20Briefs/Reproductive%20Health%20Position%20Statement.pdf>

2 <http://www.apha.org/policies-and-advocacy/public-health-policy-statements/policy-database/2015/01/23/09/37/sexuality-education-as-part-of-a-comprehensive-health-education-program-in-k-to-12-schools>

3 [http://www.researchgate.net/publication/232930981\\_School-based\\_sex\\_education\\_is\\_associated\\_with\\_reduced\\_risky\\_sexual\\_behaviour\\_and\\_sexually\\_transmitted\\_infections\\_in\\_young\\_adults](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/232930981_School-based_sex_education_is_associated_with_reduced_risky_sexual_behaviour_and_sexually_transmitted_infections_in_young_adults)

4 <http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/journals/3916707.html>

5 <http://www.siecus.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=Page.ViewPage&PageID=1193>

6 <http://www.plannedparenthood.org/educators/implementing-sex-education>

Besides sexuality education, the SBHC provides a variety of services that are part of standard health care, not separate or exclusive. SBHC staff should stress the importance of the wellness model and that SBHCs treat the whole body, including the reproductive system. When seeking parental consent, make all services part of the general consent so that each patient's care is all inclusive.

Preparation of messages in advance is important. SBHCs must set the stage as much as possible when first offering sexual health services so that if community resistance occurs, strategies are in place. Before opening a new SBHC, the administrator should meet with the superintendent to understand who can or must approve offering these services. The SBHC team should work closely with someone who is rooted in the school and community, perhaps the principal or assistant principal. Meeting with parents who have children enrolled in the school is paramount. A parent-lead initiative will give strength and show a united front.

## Creating Productive Messages

Communicating messages in a negative way may heighten the issue. Instead, create positive messages and discuss how youth are part of the solution, not the problem. Focus on what can be accomplished by providing comprehensive services to adolescents, such as increased academic success.

It is important to remember that not everyone is a health professional. Keep messages simple and use accessible non-technical language. Involve youth in the creation of your messages and focus on the larger context, rather than small details.

There are two types of messages, primary and secondary. "Primary messages appeal to people at a moral level and can often be agreed upon by everyone. Rather than emphasize words like 'sex', 'reproductive health', or 'contraception', frame the message in a way that avoids hot button words and conveys a value that more people can relate to, using concepts such as family unity, educational success, opportunity, and health equity."<sup>7</sup>

The Colorado Association for School-Based Health Care's *Adolescent Reproductive Health Toolkit* suggests that framing a teen pregnancy prevention program as a way to improve graduation rates can be much more effective than promoting a reproductive health program that provides free condoms to teens. Other examples in the toolkit include:

- Reducing unintended teen pregnancy increases the chances that all children will get a good start in life.
- Teen pregnancy prevention helps reduce persistent child poverty and builds strong families and communities.
- We all want our children to be ready when they face the responsibilities, complexities, and compromises that intimate relationships bring.
- Preventing unintended teen pregnancy gives more students the opportunity to graduate and succeed in life.

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7 <http://www.casbhc.org/Publications/Technical%20Assistance/Adolescent%20Reproductive%20Health%20Toolkit/Community%20Engagement.pdf>

Secondary messages are audience specific and are tailored to address worries and to avoid typical obstacles and controversy. Below is an abridged version of secondary messages taken from the toolkit:

Concern	Tailor Message
Offering contraception at the SBHC undermines my right and role as a parent.	Parental consent is required for a student to access services at the SBHC.
Providing information about and access to contraception send the message that sex is okay.	Young people need to hear BOTH to postpone sexual activity AND to protect themselves from sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy if they choose to become sexually active.
My children receive information and support from me and don't need it from someone and somewhere else.	Providing comprehensive services helps protect all students, especially those who don't have strong support from their parents or do not feel comfortable discussing sexuality with their parents.
The SBHC is going to influence the child's decision about when to have sex.	The SBHC provides medically-accurate, age-appropriate health information, but it is the role of the parent to discuss values and expectations about sex.
Children do not need this type of health care, just the basics.	Sexual health care <i>is</i> basic health care. Assessing for risk of pregnancy, STIs, and sexual abuse are part of the basics of adolescent health care and are critical to protecting the adolescent's health and safety; these services are part of the national standard for adolescent health care practice.
It is the parent's responsibility, not the school's, to provide access to comprehensive reproductive health services to students.	It is the responsibility of the entire community to ensure young people are receiving information and services that help them develop healthy habits which will be taken into adulthood.
If these services were provided, the school would receive a lot of phone calls and complaints.	While there may be a few vocal people who do not agree with our plan, the majority of parents support providing comprehensive services.
Abstinence is the only way to solve teen pregnancy and STI transmission.	Abstinence works best if used correctly and consistently, but safer sex is better than unprotected sex.
Making contraceptives available increases sexual activity.	Research consistently confirms that access to contraception does not increase sexual activity.

It is unlikely that you will convince those who adamantly oppose your approach. Rather than focus on that group, you will be far more successful if you can build relationships with people who agree with your approach, who may have small concerns, or who are simply unaware of your efforts. Initially it is best to communicate one-on-one.<sup>8</sup> Often supporters are not vocal, so it is important to seek their assistance and ask them to be open about their views. If it becomes necessary to have a meeting about the issue, or make a presentation to the school board, it is important to gain an understanding of the audience views beforehand, have supportive parents and students present, and have information and statistics available to ease concerns. Remember to use credible research to back your point when necessary.

## Encountering Resistance

The following strategies will help the SBHC to be prepared if controversy occurs.

### Strong Community Advisory Committee

Most SBHCs have a Community Advisory Committee. Make sure the committee includes people who support age-appropriate and evidence-based programs and at least one expert in adolescent reproductive and sexual health.

### Create and Prepare Materials

Concerns will vary so create a variety of materials for specific audiences. Parents, the press, legislators, community businesses and teens will be interested in and/or concerned by different aspects of offering sexual health services in the SBHC.

Educational materials should:

- Be short, easy to read and to the point
- Explain the need for sexual health services
- Address common questions, concerns and misinformation about providing services
- Include national, state and/or local statistics, such as rates of sexual activity, lack of access to medical care, rates of pregnancy, reported AIDS and STI cases
- Contain research and other facts that rebut expected criticisms
- Include supportive media coverage of the issue such as a newspaper clipping or editorials

### Plan for Media Inquiries

Despite efforts to keep a low profile, sometimes approval is needed from the school board or a community group. Hopefully, this process will go smoothly, but SBHCs should be prepared for controversy and resistance. Occasionally, the local media may get involved. Look into whether or not the SBHC's medical sponsor has a person who handles media inquiries. Gather SBHC leadership and parents, with the support of the school, to discuss talking points so that everyone is on the same page.

Discuss a media plan and prepare a press information packet to help with communication.

Press information packet should contain:

- Basic background material on the SBHC and the services that are provided
- A summary of the SBHC services and description of the Community Advisory Committee
- Background, such as fact sheets, on adolescents and AIDS, STDs, sexual activity and pregnancy rates
- Favorable press coverage of similar services at other SBHCs
- Information on how these services address the needs in the community

When someone from a media source calls, direct him or her to a dedicated spokesperson at the SBHC. It is important to respond to these calls quickly, making a few points and citing research and facts.

## Parents as Spokespersons

More often than not, parents are advocates for their children receiving sexual health education about delaying sexual activity and information about safer sex including the use of condoms and contraception.

Identify and train parents to be representatives of the services offered in the SBHC. Acknowledge that sexual education is a lifelong process and that what is offered at the clinic is meant to support the discussions at home.<sup>9</sup>

If parents are willing to speak at meetings, provide messages, resources and support. Offer the following suggestions:

- Remember to speak from your heart and your own experience
- Decide what you most want to say and then practice how you will say it. Have a friend, family member or colleague ask sample questions to help you rehearse
- Expect difficult questions. It is always okay to say you don't know the answer to a question, or that you don't want to continue
- Be a good listener. Maintain eye contact. Ask questions to clarify what others are saying. Restate what you think you heard to check meanings and interpretations
- Recognize that people hear others through the words they say, the tone and inflection of their voices and their body language

We hope that this resource is useful as you work to increase access to comprehensive reproductive and sexual services in your SBHC. We applaud your courage and your effort to ensure that Colorado's children and youth have access to the care and information they need to make healthy, informed and responsible decisions.

## Resources

The Community Action Kit: <http://www.communityactionkit.org>

The Community Tool box: <http://ctb.ku.edu/en/about-the-tool-box>

The Guttmacher Institute: <https://www.guttmacher.org>

The National Association for Community Health Centers Media Toolkit for Health Centers: <https://www.nachc.com/toolkit-online.cfm>

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy: <http://thenationalcampaign.org>

The National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health: <http://www.latinainstitute.org/en>

The Society for Adolescent Medicine's White Paper on Abstinence-Only Education: [https://www.adolescenthealth.org/SAHM\\_Main/media/Advocacy/Positions/Jan-06-Abstinence\\_only\\_edu\\_policies\\_and\\_programs.pdf](https://www.adolescenthealth.org/SAHM_Main/media/Advocacy/Positions/Jan-06-Abstinence_only_edu_policies_and_programs.pdf)

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9 <http://www.parentsunited.org/parents-in-action/communicating/speak/spokespersons/>