

# Sex education varies across state

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Consequently, different teachers teach different subjects, and some avoid the discomfort of sexual education altogether. The result is sex education that varies statewide — from school to school, and from student to student.

This is evident when students arrive at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, said Pat Tetreault, the university's sexuality education coordinator.

"I think (students' education) really varies, since sex education is not a requirement in public schools," Tetreault said.

While varying in depth and degree from classroom to classroom and school to school, both Tetreault and Tucker believe the sex education students receive before college has one common thread: It is not enough.

## Public schools:

### Silence can reign

With no state mandates guiding school districts on whether to offer sex education or not, students are bound to come away with different sex education experiences, said Julane Hill, a HIV/AIDS consultant for the Nebraska Department of Education.

Nebraska has more than 600 school districts, Hill said. Each district is controlled locally and has its own set of rules.

That means there could potentially be 600 different versions of sex education curriculum, with some schools teaching more and some schools teaching less — a lot less.

"Lincoln Public Schools does a very good job with sex education, while a school 30 miles away from Lincoln doesn't address it at all," Hill said.

Nebraska isn't the only state that doesn't require teachers in each school district to talk about sex in the classroom. Only 19 states and the District of Columbia require schools to provide any type of sex education at all.

Sixteen states, including Nebraska, do not require schools to provide STD or HIV/AIDS education.

Some schools in Nebraska are progressive nationally, providing education on contraception to supplement their abstinence-only education, said Margie Bartle, a community educator at Planned Parenthood.

Other schools teach the same things that have been taught since the 1950s, Bartle said, and that's dangerous.

With the introduction of HIV, the necessity of talking about sex has increased dramatically. At the same time, more people have started speaking out against sex education because they think it would increase the risks of teens having sex, Bartle said.

So some school districts in Nebraska wind up with virtually no sex education, Bartle said.

Other districts with sex education programs may not teach students enough.

Even in schools where students are learning about sexuality, time constraints often prevent students from getting all the information, Tucker said. Students at Lincoln East High School who take a health class get 10 days of exposure to the topic. The class wasn't required until this year.

About a week of sex education once during students' high school careers is not enough, Tucker said.

## The birds and the bees

The states listed below and the District of Columbia require all public schools to teach sex education. States with an asterisk require sexuality programs to include abstinence education.

1. Alabama\*
2. Arkansas
3. Delaware
4. District of Columbia
5. Georgia
6. Hawaii
7. Illinois\*
8. Iowa
9. Kansas
10. Maryland
11. Minnesota
12. Nevada
13. New Jersey
14. North Carolina
15. Rhode Island
16. South Carolina
17. Tennessee
18. Utah\*
19. Vermont
20. West Virginia

Source: National Abortion and Reproductive Rights League

JON FRANK/DN

They can't get enough pertinent information in that brief amount of time.

That can be dangerous when it comes to deciding whether to have sex or not. The less time the word "sex" comes up in the classroom, the less information students are going to have about it.

"The more information you have, the less likely you are going to take that risk," Bartle said.

Tucker agreed. She teaches sex education at Lincoln East during 10 days of a 45-day-long health class.

"That's just not enough."

### College: Time to talk

Tetreault realizes everyday the dearth of serious sexual education in Nebraska public schools.

She estimates that programs sponsored by her sexuality education department reach about 3,000 college

students each year — many of whom have little knowledge of serious sex issues.

While most students attending her programs seem to have the basics of anatomy and HIV transmission down, many aren't familiar with topics such as sexually transmitted diseases and contraception.

This is especially apparent among women taking the contraceptive class offered by the University Health Center, Tetreault said. All women who request birth control pills through the health center must take the course.

"Students who go through the contraceptive class — instantly they will say they have learned something," Tetreault said. "The majority will say it is not a review."

UNL student Jennifer Skala said she noticed students' lack of knowledge on sexuality. She coordinates PERSUNL, a group of on-campus peer sexuality educators, and she plays a game called Keys to Sexual Health during her presentations to students. The game encourages students to talk about different issues related to sexuality.

"People are very receptive to it because they want to actually talk about sex," Skala said. "They've never had that before."

The classroom isn't the only place where students miss out on sex-related discourse. When Tucker asked a health class of 30 students who had talked with their parents about sex, not too many hands went up in the air.

"Only two out of 30 students said their parents talked to them about sex," Tucker said.

*"The condom wasn't helping with broken hearts and with kids being used and with STDs."*

## Abstinence-only education spreading under Title V act

BY VERONICA DAEHN  
Staff writer

A federal grant has changed the face of sex education in some Nebraska school districts — and for the better, some educators said.

The grant, provided under an act called Title V, allots money to organizations for teaching abstinence-only sex education instead of safe sex. Schools can't apply for the grant directly, but private organizations may do so, then channel money to schools.

As a result, Grand Island received grant funds to pay for an abstinence-only sex education curriculum that replaced the school district's former safe sex pro-

gram this year. The old program taught information on contraception and other issues involving sexual activity. Peggy Longmore, Grand Island abstinence education coordinator, said she believed the new program would work better than the last.

"The condom wasn't helping with broken hearts and with kids being used and with STDs," she said about the prevention tactics taught in safe-sex programs.

Since this is Grand Island's first year teaching abstinence, there are no statistics on the program's success. But students will be tracked for four years in order to gauge abstinence education's effectiveness.

"No one has really done good abstinence research," Longmore said. "The people in D.C. want to see where their money's going."

Funding for abstinence-only courses, received under a Congressional act named Title V, became available July 1, 1998. St. Francis Hospital in Grand Island applied for the federal money and then gave it to the school.

Longmore said hospital officials were concerned about the increasing number of pregnancies and STDs, so they contacted the state about possible solutions. State officials suggested applying for Title V.

Norfolk and Alliance public schools also get money for abstinence education through Title V, specifically through its Maternal and Child Health Block Grant, which will provide \$50 million in grant money each year for five years to participating institutions. That grant is essentially welfare reform legislation passed by Congress.

Abstinence education isn't new to parochial schools, which can teach abstinence education based on religion because they aren't state affiliated. That doesn't mean the schools neglect teaching topics such as sexually transmitted disease, though.

Sister Veronica Volkmer, who coordinates health education at Pius X High School in Lincoln, said the school reminded students Catholic doctrine speaks against premarital sex.

"We educate students about their relationship with God," Volkmer said. "Of course we do. But we really try to push the relationship aspect of it. Students need to learn about sexually transmitted diseases, too. There is more to the program than religion." The recent surge in abstinence education in public schools, however, isn't based upon Christian morality. Longmore said Grand

Island schools chose to adopt an abstinence-only education policy, not because of religion, but because of a genuine concern for students' health.

"Their best health is to not have sex," she said. "We're not doing it from a religious stance, but from a health one."

The number of people with sexually transmitted diseases in Nebraska is increasing, Longmore said. One in five college students have had an STD, yet most high school-age kids don't realize how easy it is to contract one. Abstinence is the only sure prevention.

In order to develop the abstinence-only program they wanted to use, Grand Island contacted a company out of Longmont, Colo., called Friends First, which developed a program called Why Am I Tempted, or WAIT.

Mike Worley, executive director of Friends First, said the primary goal of WAIT was to develop a program to combat teen pregnancy and then focus on some of the dangers of STDs.

"Sex in the 1990s is really more of a health issue than anything," Worley said. "We have research that says 1 out of every 5 Americans over 12 have a STD. That's what we're going after."

Founded in 1993, Friends First has spoken to about 40,000 students nationwide, Worley said. WAIT goes into both public and parochial schools, but does not bring any religious doctrine into its training.

Worley said the abstinence curriculum had to work throughout a student's educational journey. In other words, "a one-hour speech on the joys of abstinence isn't going to cut it."

"For there to be a dramatic shift in thinking, there has to be a pronounced period of time over which they're taught. A speech might

change your attitude, but it won't change your mind."

Longmore said about 20 people ranging from family consumer science teachers, school counselors, school nurses and physical education teachers were trained to instruct WAIT classes.

In Grand Island, students are first introduced to abstinence education in seventh grade during a required health class. Longmore said a week and a half of that class was donated to abstinence.

An additional week of abstinence training is required in tenth grade during Institute Week, a week falling between first and second semesters, Longmore said. The only exception is for students involved in band or drama during that time. No other training is required throughout the students' schooling, but a few elective classes are available at the high school.

Longmore said before adopting the current curriculum, her school did not have a set sex education curriculum.

"There weren't many guidelines before," she said. "It was whatever the teacher wanted to teach."

Whether or not Grand Island changed its curriculum because of substantial federal money, Longmore feels it was a wise decision.

"It's best that kids don't have sex."

Senior editor Sam McKewon contributed to this story.

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MIKE WORLEY  
Friends First executive director

## Youth educators:

### Quiet no more

Tucker, Bartle and other educators are taking solid strides to make sure more students will come out of high school with some kind of sex education.

Tucker gladly shares about 25 years worth of tips on talking candidly to students about sex.

"It is my personal goal to encourage more teachers in the district to teach kids more sex education."

Avery said that groups such as Planned Parenthood and the Lancaster County Abstinence Coalition had made themselves available to go into the classroom and to

help teachers educate students.

For the many schools lacking thorough sex education programs, Bartle said, change won't come quickly. It will take some time to change a generation of attitudes that still sees sex education as taboo.

But that doesn't let teachers and administrators off the hook, Bartle said. Both groups can't let their attitudes about sex education get in the way of providing students important information. Instead, schools need to figure out a way to present it and feel comfortable with it, Bartle said.

"Information can be given in the context of the school district's belief system," Bartle said. "Schools can give factual information and make it a

safe environment to ask questions."

Although students can learn about sex and sexuality in college, Tetreault said it was best for them to receive information from teachers, schools and parents before they left home.

"You're better off making informed decisions and realizing you have choices to make rather than having to make choices and being unprepared for them."

The first step toward improving all students' sex education, Tucker said, is something she realized while staring into the bathroom mirror on that first day of teaching sexuality.

"Students want to talk about it. You just have to set it up so they can do it."