Demonstrating Credible Evidence of Effectiveness for Abstinence Education

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I. Program providers need to show credible evidence of Abstinence Education effectiveness to decision-makers

A perception that abstinence education (AE) is ineffective and/or harmful can deprive program providers access to venues for their programs and funding to implement them. Some legislators and school boards have proposed eliminating AE because they believe two common misconceptions:

- a. That research has proved abstinence education is a failed strategy,
- b. That AE reduces condom use by sexually active teens, putting them at greater risk for STIs and pregnancy.

II. How Do You Define "Effective"?

A. Whether a prevention strategy is viewed as effective is in part determined by how "effectiveness" is defined.

- Two types of effectiveness criteria:
  1. Standards for the quality of the research evidence
  2. Standards for the quality of the program outcomes

B. A prominent example of criteria for effectiveness is found in What Works 2010: Curriculum-Based Programs That Help Prevent Teen Pregnancy, by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. According to What Works 2010 (WW2010), 10 effective prevention programs have shown credible evidence that they "reduce teen pregnancy rates, increase contraception use, or delay the onset of sexual activity."

1. WW2010 used the following criteria for the quality of the research evidence:
   - Included baseline and follow-up data (for at least 3 months)
   - Measured impact on behavior
   - Included at least 75 youth in both the treatment and the control groups
   - Used sound statistical analyses
   - Used an experimental or quasi-experimental evaluation design

2. WW2010 used the following criteria for the quality of the program outcomes:
   - Improved rates of teen pregnancy, contraception, or sexual isolation
   - For any subgroup of the intended population
   - For at least 3 months after the program began

Programs that produced these results were designated as effective by WW2010.

III. Recommended Criteria for Program Effectiveness

This poster builds on the WW2010 definition of effectiveness. We recommend criteria that are informed by the broader field of prevention program effectiveness and a concern about the practical impact of program outcomes.

1. Criterion for the quality of the research evidence:
   - Measured outcome behavior at baseline & at least 12 months after the program’s end
   - Included at least 75 youth in both the treatment and the control groups
   - Used a peer-reviewed experimental or quasi-experimental study
   - Used sound statistical analyses, including controls for baseline differences

2. Criterion for the program’s outcomes:
   - Improved the behaviors or indicators shown to be most protective for teens, abstinence, consistent condom use, pregnancy, or STIs
   - Impacted the intended population (not only subgroups of the targeted audience)
   - Produced effects that lasted at least 12 months after the program’s end

Programs that meet these criteria are more likely to be effective at protecting teens.

IV. Applying Recommended Criteria of Effectiveness to What Works 2010 Programs

1. The What Works 2010: Curriculum-Based Programs That Help Prevent Teen Pregnancy program’s criteria are too narrow to capture the breadth of the adolescent health and behavior literature.

2. The following programs met the recommended criteria:
   - Parent Training and Service-learning Programs
   - Community or Clinic-based Programs

Summary

Using these criteria, the evidence for the effectiveness of abstinence education appears to be similar to the evidence for the effectiveness of other types of pregnancy prevention programs.

VI. Conclusions

1. Credible research evidence demonstrates that Abstinence Education can produce substantial and sustained reductions in teen sexual initiation.

2. Research also shows that Abstinence Education does not reduce teen condom use.

3. This evidence can help program providers demonstrate to decision-makers that Abstinence Education is a viable prevention strategy for protecting youth from the negative consequences of teen sexual activity.

References