

# Parents call for sex-talk balance

## No extreme views in school courses

By Andrea Billups  
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Parents want schools to expand the time spent on sex education classes and are calling on schools to balance their approach, teaching about more than just "the birds and the bees" and sexually transmitted diseases, according to a study released yesterday.

They want schools to teach coping and communications skills and abstinence as well as cover issues such as abortion and sexual orientation, the Kaiser Family Foundation has found.

"We believe the study results challenge both sides of the debate to rethink their positions," said Steve Rabin of the Kaiser Family Foundation in Menlo Park, Calif., who presented the study's findings yesterday in Washington.

The report, "Sex Education in America: A View From Inside the Nation's Classrooms," is based on random surveys of more than 4,000 public school students, their parents, sex education instructors and principals, who were asked about their thoughts and their attitudes toward sex education. Although released yesterday, the survey was conducted between Feb. 2 and May 23, 1999.

Eighty-nine percent of the nation's secondary school students will take at least one class on sex education while in school, with some schools favoring an "abstinence-only" curriculum and others supporting what is called a "comprehensive" course.

While eight in 10 parents surveyed said they want schools to talk about how to use condoms, 94 percent said schools should talk to students about pressure to have sex and the issues associated with becoming sexually active.

"Parents want a balanced presentation," said Ramon C. Cortines, a veteran educator who served as superintendent of two of the nation's largest school districts, New York City and Los Angeles.

He said it was important that educators listen to what parents and students want "so they are not led by extremists of all stripes and politics of the moment."

"Schools play an important role in talking to kids about the dangers and responsibilities of sexual activities," said Mr. Cortines, who serves as the director of the Pew Networks for Standards-Based Reform at Stanford University.

"In the era of AIDS, what our children learn about sex can literally be a life-or-death matter," he said.

Liz Alston, chairman of the Charleston County, S.C., board of trustees, called herself "from the old school" and cautioned that morality must enter into the picture when children are taught about sexuality.

Representing the Charleston County School District, she spoke as part of a panel discussion that followed the survey presentation.

She said in her part of the country, abstinence clubs were becoming increasingly popular.

Many parents, she added, prefer to teach their children about sex at home.

"There are a lot of young people out there who want to say no but everybody says to them 'it's OK,'" she said. "We make it too easy for a student to go the other way."

The survey found that 84 percent of students said abstinence was included in their most recent sex education class; 41 percent said sexual orientation and homosexuality were discussed.

Ninety-eight percent of parents surveyed said sex education classes should teach about HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, while 97 percent said abstinence and what to do in cases of rape or sexual assault should be discussed. Seventy-nine percent of parents said abortion should be a part of the class, while 76 percent said sexual orientation and homosexuality should be covered by teachers.

Sixty-five percent of parents said that when the topic of when to have sex was discussed, students should be told "to wait to have sex, but if they don't, they should use birth control and practice safer sex."

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Thirty-three percent of parents surveyed said students should be told "only to have sex when they are married." Of that 33 percent, however, 86 percent said schools should also teach how students can get tested for HIV/AIDS or sexually transmitted diseases, and 77 percent said they should be taught how to talk with a partner about birth control and sexually transmitted diseases.

A summary of the study can be found at the Web site [www.kff.org](http://www.kff.org).