

The Right to an Education
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The youth in Alachua County deserve a significantly higher standard of sexual education than they currently receive. There are many programs in place to help teenagers deal with the consequences of sexual activity, such as Loften High School's ACCEPT program which provides free childcare for teenage mothers during the school day to allow them to further their education. These initiatives should be applauded. However, there are few organizations effectively attempting to educate students and prevent teen pregnancy and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. This lack of education leaves our students vulnerable to a plethora of threats stemming from sexual activity.

Teenagers are often deleteriously affected by unsafe sex. According to the American Social Health Association, one in four teens contract an STD, or sexually transmitted disease, each year. Even more appallingly, the United States of America has the highest teen pregnancy rate in the industrial world. According to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 41.9 out of every 1,000 girls in the United States between the ages of 14 and 19 gave birth last year. In Florida, 45.2 out of every 1,000 girls within this demographic carried a pregnancy to term. Many might wonder what the abysmal teen pregnancy rate in Florida, or the alarming rate at which STDs are contracted by teenagers, has to do with freedom of speech. This complicated educational and societal issue relates to many of the most basic rights and freedoms. Sexual education is currently a battleground between a student's right to information, parents' rights to raise their children in the manner they deem fitting, the freedom of speech of educators, and, fundamentally, the inalienable right of any citizen, regardless of age, to control his or her own body. However in Alachua County, a conservative fear that discussing sex will encourage students to engage in risky behaviors and will enrage parents is triumphing over the well-being of students. As a result, we are failing to provide our students with the information they need to make healthy decisions.

Currently, the health education students receive in Alachua County is, like health education throughout most of America, focused on abstinence. In fifth grade, students take a short, two week course on health and human development. This course details the changes individuals experience during puberty, explains how children are conceived, briefly discusses the development of a fetus within the womb, and ends. Due to the delicate nature of the subject matter, the vulnerable age of the students, and the possibility of angering parents, schools usually do not provide any further sexual education prior to high school. Students are not provided with adequate information about the possible repercussions of sexual activity. They are not instructed in the use of contraceptives, leaving them poorly

equipped to deal with sexual situations. Further information regarding sexual health is not provided until students take HOPE, a physical education and health class, at some point in high school. However, students enrolled in either the International Baccalaureate or the Cambridge programs are exempt from this curriculum requirement. Due to this exemption, a percentage of the students in Alachua County do not participate in any sexual education course after fifth grade. Even the students who do take HOPE are provided with the information they need too late for it to truly have an impact.

Comprehensive sexuality education, in contrast to the aforementioned courses, addresses the level of risk involved with various sexual activities and explains how to avoid these hazards. This type of sex education covers a wide array of topics ranging from the proper use of contraceptives to discussions about what constitutes a loving, respectful relationship. Students are encouraged to ask questions and become fully informed about all aspects of human sexuality. Contrary to what many believe, comprehensive sex education does not encourage sexual behavior. It merely seeks to inform students fully so that they can make educated decisions. The goal of the program is to prevent youth from engaging in risky sexual activity. However, as it is recognized that many teens will engage in sexual behavior, educators focus primarily on lowering the risks associated with sexual activity and the use of contraceptives rather than didactically emphasizing abstinence.

Nearly 48% of adolescents have sex during high school according to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, including 32.8% of 9th graders. This statistic clearly demonstrates that comprehensive sex education is needed before high school, when many teens become sexually active, and that abstinence-only education is unrealistic. Though detailed information pertaining to sex is not suitable for elementary school aged children, it is clearly vital to ensure that young teens are well informed. A curriculum presented in middle school or the beginning of freshman year could be highly effective. Schools should have the ability to teach materials pertinent to the health and well being of their students, just as students should have equal access to this type of information. Previously it has been assumed that the majority of a student's sexual education could be left up to their parents. Clearly, this method of at-home education combined with school-based abstinence-only programs is ineffective.

Our ignorance will not protect us—in fact, it is nothing but harmful. Teenagers today live in a culture inundated with sexual imagery and awash in gross misconceptions about sexual activity, sexually transmitted diseases and contraceptives. We cannot let our children wander blindly through this morass, especially during the tempestuous years of adolescence. We, as a community, have thus far unequivocally failed to guide them. We have failed to provide them with the information they so desperately needed to protect themselves and their bodies. We have failed to inquire into a faulty system fearing that we will disturb tradition and offend others. Worst of all, we have failed to trust that our children,

when properly informed, are capable of making an intelligent, moral decision to either abstain from sexual activity or practice safe sex for the sake of their own health and the health of their potential partner. We have failed our children, but we can change. By providing them with a full understanding of reproductive health issues and continuing the programs we have already implemented to help sexually active teenagers, we can truly support our youth. By explaining the dangers of sexual activity and the proper use of contraceptives, we can prevent pregnancies, STDs, and other risks associated with sexual activity. Though we cannot completely eliminate these hazards, we can provide our youth with the tools necessary to combat them. We must do all we can to protect our children, their bodies, and their rights. Even if that means no longer shielding them from the truth.