



STATE OF TENNESSEE

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Are Tennessee's family life education programs effective?

NASHVILLE, TENN. – While teens' decisions on whether to have sex are influenced by many factors, educators and communities attempt to positively influence teen sexual decisions and behaviors through family life education programs.

A new report by the Comptroller's Office of Education Accountability, "*Family Life Education in Tennessee*," explores the effectiveness of these programs.

A survey of Tennessee's 136 school districts reveals that family life education curriculum varies widely across the state. Most districts focus on reducing teen pregnancy rates, reducing sexually transmitted diseases and promoting sexual abstinence. However, school districts use a variety of materials, and over 75% of respondents use volunteers to teach family life education classes.

"Only 1/3 of the school districts who responded to the survey actually train their family life education teachers," said Jessica Gibson, senior legislative research analyst. "Even fewer districts monitor or evaluate their family life education programs so parents and teachers cannot really tell if programs are effective or even accurate."

In addition, the State Department of Education and the State Board of Education provide only minimal guidelines or professional development to help family life teachers. State curriculum standards offer a framework for teaching family life education, but the Department does not provide guidance for putting the standards into practice in the classroom.

The Comptroller's report finds that other states have succeeded in reducing teen pregnancy rates with coordinated statewide efforts that included education, healthcare, health access and community collaboration to make teen pregnancy reduction a priority.

In Tennessee, teen pregnancy is on the decline. Between 1999 and 2004, teen pregnancies dropped 24 percent, yet teens are still engaging in risky behavior.

In an average class of 30 Tennessee high school seniors, 69 percent have had sex, according to the Tennessee Department of Education, *Youth Risk Behavior Survey* in 2005. Centers for Disease Control data ranks Tennessee 8th worst in Chlamydia rates, 13th worst in gonorrhea rates, and 12th highest among AIDS rates in the nation.

In 2006, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen pregnancy estimated Tennessee's teen childbearing costs to be \$181 million in 2004 alone.

The Comptroller's report recommends that the General Assembly more clearly define the goals of family life education and require that school districts use medically accurate materials. The Department of Education should provide school districts with technical assistance and evaluation tools.

On a local level, school districts should provide professional development training for family life instructors, as well as guidance for teachers to put health and wellness curriculum standards into practice in the classroom.

"Family Life Education in Tennessee," is available on the Comptroller's website at www.comptroller.state.tn.us.

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