

A Review of 21 Curricula for Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Programs

Kelly L. Wilson, Patricia Goodson, B.E. Pruitt, Eric Buhi, Emily Davis-Gunnels

ABSTRACT: *The authors reviewed the content, methods, and overall quality of 21 curricula used in abstinence-only-until-marriage programs. Only materials designed for use in middle school grades (fifth to eighth) or with middle school-aged audiences (9-13 years of age), which presented the abstinence message in at least 40% of their content, were included. A rating instrument adapted from 2 sets of education guidelines structured the assessment of each curriculum. Four experienced teachers rated each curriculum. Curricula exhibited considerable variability in overall quality ratings. While on average, materials scored a 3.33 on a 1-to-5 scale (1 = Unacceptable; 5 = Excellent), 12 curricula received summative scores above the average, with 4 scoring 4.0 or higher. Eight curricula, however, received a below-average rating. While abstinence materials vary considerably in terms of overall quality, the values and world views underlying this sample of curricula were clear and consistent: those who develop abstinence education curricula value nonsexual antecedents of sexual behavior such as skills (goal setting, decision making, and assertiveness), ideals (fidelity, friendships), and psychological factors such as self-esteem. (J Sch Health. 2005;75(3):90-98)*

Instructional materials such as school curricula shape and organize both content and purpose of educational efforts. Typically, curricula accomplish these educational tasks by presenting only certain topics (in a certain amount) and completely (or partially) neglecting others. Coverage and omission of content communicate to educators and learners what curriculum developers believe is worth spending time to learn and what is too trivial to address. In this manner, content and structure are useful indicators of curriculum authors' values and world views.^{1,2}

Health and sexuality educators have learned much about curriculum authors' world views from systematic content analyses of school-based sexuality curricula. Analysts have documented indicators of nonscientific, biased, or pedagogically unsound values. Some indicators include the inadequate time dedicated to covering specific topics,^{3,4} citing outdated sources,⁵ using noninteractive educational methods,³ omitting basic anatomy information, excluding discussions of sexual orientation and sexual harassment,^{6,8} and reinforcing gender biases in the text or illustrations.^{6,8} Each problem communicates, to learners, well-defined assumptions about factual evidence, gender and sexual orientation differences, and best pedagogical strategies for teaching human sexuality.

This review provides new information regarding sexuality curricula content, as it focuses specifically on materials used in abstinence-only-until-marriage programs. It assesses content, methods, and overall quality of 21 curricula. The review is one component of a statewide, multiphase evaluation of abstinence-only-until-marriage programs in Texas (begun in 2000). Schools, program developers, and evaluators will find such information useful for comparisons, selection, and improved evaluations of abstinence education materials.

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This paper was supported by a contract from the Texas Department of State Health Services.

METHODS

Selection Criteria

Researchers identified curricula for this review in 3 stages: first, by examining abstinence programs' proposals for funding, which included curricula proposed for use; second, by interviewing and surveying program directors and instructors of abstinence education; and third, by searching the Internet and resource lists for other, previously unidentified curricula, in addition to those being used in Texas. This 3-stage process led to the identification and purchase of 64 curricula.

While the review process examined all 64 curricula, this paper details the findings for 21 curricula that met 2 criteria: (1) designed for school-based use with middle school grades (fifth to eighth) or middle school-aged audiences (9-13 years of age) and (2) presented the abstinence message in at least 40% of its content. Researchers excluded from this paper curricula designed for after-school or community-based programs, elementary or high school use, and parents or adult audiences, and curricula that focused/covered the abstinence message in less than 40% of its overall content (for instance, parenting or character education curricula). The decision to focus on materials designed for school-based use and that had at least 40% of the content dedicated to the abstinence-only-until-marriage message was, mainly, pragmatic: materials containing much less than half of their topic focusing on abstinence may not be as useful to Title V programs. The 40% cutoff and school-based standard allowed the inclusion in this review of most of the materials identified and the exclusion of curricula that focused—mostly—on other topics such as parenting or character education.

Rating Instrument

Researchers developed an instrument to structure the assessment of each curriculum. The development occurred in 4 consecutive phases. The first phase consisted of 4 focus groups with abstinence program personnel. Focus groups with abstinence education staff were conducted because they constitute the target consumer group for the reviewed materials, and their viewpoint regarding characteristics of the curricula added valuable insights to the review/analysis. The guiding question for the focus

groups was, "As an abstinence instructor, what do you look for in a curriculum?" Successive phases included adapting 2 sets of educational guidelines for the purpose of the content analysis (the SIECUS' *Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education: Grades K through 12* and *The National Guidelines for Sexuality and Character Education*), pilot-testing a draft version with a small number of curricula, and developing a process to establish interrater reliability of evaluators' judgments.^{9,10}

The instrument comprised 4 sections (Table 1), based on a model provided by Ogletree.¹¹ Table 1 also lists the criteria used for assessment of each component in the instrument. For instance, in section 2A reviewers judged if curricula addressed each of the A-H definition elements "explicitly," "implicitly," or "not at all," while in section 2B reviewers assessed if curricula addressed each concept in an "extensive," "limited," or "absent" manner (Table 1).

Data Collection

Researchers trained 4 experienced teachers to review and abstract each curriculum using the rating instrument. Reviewers were selected based on their experience in school settings and interest in sexuality education. Reviewers participated in a 1-day training in order to ensure that each curriculum was assessed holistically. Assessment of curricula's written, audio, and visual components alongside tools designed for users was included in training. Two reviewers examined each curriculum and merged their findings. While reviewers disagreed regarding some ratings (interrater reliability scores ranged from .31 to .80 for the various instrument sections), they reached consensus on a final rating for each curriculum. Only 2 interrater reliability coefficients fell below .60; 82% of scores were above .60.

RESULTS

The following sections outline curricula characteristics, coverage of the A-H federal definition of abstinence education elements,¹² and scores obtained in the 12 elements/categories of the rating instrument's section 4. The 12 elements appear as column headings in Table 2. Four elements refer to the curricula's content: breadth (key concepts' coverage), depth (subconcepts' coverage), accuracy of anatomy and physiology content, and accuracy/currency of overall content. If a curriculum covered most key concepts listed in section 2, it received a score of "Excellent" for breadth; if it contained most subconcepts (90%) within each key concept listed in section 2B, the curriculum was rated as "Excellent" in its depth. The remaining 8 elements in section 4 relate to breadth and depth of skill-building strategies, methods variety, developmental appropriateness, cultural sensitivity, ease of implementation, availability/quality of evaluation tools, and overall appearance/production quality. Reviewers rated materials on a scale of 1 to 5 on each element, where 1 = Unacceptable, 2 = Inadequate, 3 = Fair, 4 = Good, and 5 = Excellent (Table 2).

Curriculum Characteristics

The 21 curricula were published or revised between 1987 and 2002. Since completion of this analysis, producers of *Choosing the Best* and *Worth the Wait* have indicated that these curricula have been revised or updated. This

paper's findings, however, reflect data from materials that were published or revised prior to 2003.

Curricula ranged in cost from \$27.85 to \$586.25, with an average of \$200. *Love and Life* was the least expensive curriculum in the sample, *Go APE*, the most expensive.

While this report included only curricula designed for school-based use, most also could be incorporated in a variety of settings: afterschool programs, religious youth groups, or religious abstinence programs. All 21 curricula were designed for use with both genders, and none were created specifically for a selected ethnic group.

Most curricula included teacher guidelines, either in a manual or in a guidebook, and required no specialized training to implement the curriculum. Nevertheless, *Wait Training* required instruction prior to purchase of the materials. For additional costs, *Worth the Wait* and *Why kNOW?* offered an optional workshop for instructors.

When assessing a curriculum's main themes, reviewers determined the proportion of content focused on abstinence, pregnancy prevention, prevention of sexually transmitted infection and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, character education/youth development, healthy sexuality, or other. While all curricula in this analysis had at least 40% of their content covering abstinence, those focusing more heavily on abstinence included *Removing the Risk* (90%) and *I've Got the Power* and *Love and Life* (70%). On average, curricula dedicated 48% of their content to abstinence, 20% to character education/youth development themes, 13% to healthy sexuality, 10% to prevention of sexually transmitted infection and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, and 4% to pregnancy prevention.

Coverage of A-H Elements

Through focus groups conducted with program directors and instructors, researchers learned that curricula alignment with the federal definition of abstinence education is a characteristic that program staff purposively examine prior to adoption. This review, therefore, determined to what extent each curriculum aligned itself with the 8 (A-H) elements of the federal definition (Tables 1 and 3). Curricula addressed most frequently in an explicit manner items B and C. Items B and C refer to abstinence as (B) the expected standard for all school-aged children and (C) the only certain way to avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections. Only 1 curriculum explicitly addressed all 8 components: *Me, My World, My Future: Teen-Aid*. Furthermore, more than one half of the curricula implicitly addressed items F and G: bearing children out-of-wedlock can be harmful and alcohol/drug use will increase vulnerability to sexual advances.

Breadth and Depth of Content

Five curricula received a "5" (Excellent) rating for addressing sexuality-related and abstinence-related concepts listed in section 2B of the instrument (Table 2): *Choosing the Best PATH*; *Choosing the Best WAY*; *Me, My World, My Future: Teen-Aid*; *Sex Can Wait: Upper Elementary School*; and *Worth the Wait: 7th Grade*. The average breadth rating was "4" (Good). Three curricula received a "5" rating for depth of content (number of subconcepts addressed): *Choosing the Best PATH*; *Choosing the Best WAY*; and *Sex Can Wait: Upper Elementary School*. On

Table 1
**Assessment of Curricula Used in Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Programs:
Components of the Evaluation Instrument** *(Continued on next page)*

Section 1: curriculum characteristics

1. Title
2. Cost
3. Main themes
4. History (production & revision)
5. Main objective, goal, or purpose
6. Setting
7. Target age groups
8. Target sex/gender
9. Target ethnic groups
10. Theory based
11. Teacher training
12. Available evaluations of curriculum
13. Components
14. Evaluation tools
15. Adaptability
16. User friendliness
17. Philosophy/ideology
18. Proposed context for teaching

Section 2A: coverage of A-H definition of abstinence programs

Definition is addressed: explicitly/implicitly/not addressed

- A) The curriculum has as its exclusive purpose, teaching the social, psychological, and health gains to be realized by abstaining from sexual activity.
- B) The curriculum teaches abstinence from sexual activity outside marriage as the expected standard for all school-aged children.
- C) The curriculum teaches that abstinence from sexual activity is the only certain way to avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and other associated health problems.
- D) The curriculum teaches that a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity.
- E) The curriculum teaches that sexual activity outside of the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects.
- F) The curriculum teaches that bearing children out of wedlock is likely to have harmful consequences for the child, the child's parents, and society.
- G) The curriculum teaches young people how to reject sexual advances and how alcohol and drug use increases vulnerability to sexual advances.
- H) The curriculum teaches the importance of attaining self-sufficiency before engaging in sexual activity.

Section 2B: sexuality-related or abstinence-related content

Concept treatment: limited, extensive, absent

Key concept no. 1: character formation

Identifying and defining values; internalizing values; acting on values; goal setting; decision making.

Key concept no. 2: human development

Reproduction; reproductive anatomy and physiology; puberty; body appreciation, body image, and human sexuality; gender roles; stages of life; sexuality throughout life; sexual identity and orientation; self-esteem.

Key concept no. 3: relationships

Love; friendships; purpose and responsibilities of date; marriage; parenthood.

Key concept no. 4: family

Roles and responsibilities; benefits of the family; changes within the family.

Key concept no. 5: sexual behavior

Sexual urges and desires; abstinence; masturbation; fantasy noncoital sexual behaviors/shared sexual behaviors; intimacy; fidelity; human sexual response.

Key concept no. 6: sexual health

Sexual activity and contraception; sexual activity and pregnancy; sexual abuse; alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use; sexual activity and sexually transmitted diseases; emotional and psychological health; abortion.

Key concept no. 7: society and culture

Sexuality and the law; diversity; sexuality and the media; sexuality and society; sexuality and religion; sexuality and the arts.

Table 1
**Assessment of Curricula Used in Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Programs:
Components of the Evaluation Instrument** *(Continued from previous page)*

Key concept no. 8: personal skills

Communication with friends; handling peer pressure; assertiveness; refusal and cessation skills; goal setting; signing virginity pledges; decision making; communication with parents; negotiation; finding help.

Key concept no. 9: Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) requirements

59 grade-related (middle school or high school) objectives.

Section 3: methodological and procedural characteristics

Pedagogical methods

Use of each method: yes, no

Activity characterized by use of: 1 = symbols; 2 = demonstrations; 3 = skill development; 4 = purposeful experience.

1. Anonymous question box
2. Teacher lecture
3. Large-group discussion
4. Student worksheets
5. Journals/story writing
6. Cooperative learning/small groups
7. Case studies/scenarios
8. Skills practice and rehearsal (role playing)
9. Audiovisual materials
10. Community speakers/involvement
11. Peer helper component
12. Parent/guardian involvement
13. Mentoring component

Procedures

Use of procedure: yes, no

1. Classroom ground rules
2. Same-gender classes
3. Accounts for different learning styles
4. Can be incorporated into classes other than health or abstinence education
5. Main learning domains addressed (cognitive, affective, and skill)

Section 4: evaluation/overall rating

Overall rating: 1 = unacceptable; 2 = inadequate; 3 = fair; 4 = good; 5 = excellent.

1. Breadth
 2. Depth
 3. Anatomy and physiology content accuracy
 4. Overall content accuracy/currency
 5. Skill-building variety (breadth)
 6. Skill-building variety (depth)
 7. Methods variety
 8. Developmental appropriateness
 9. Cultural sensitivity
 10. Ease of implementation
 11. Evaluation (provides evaluation tools)
 12. Appearance/production quality
-

average, the curricula scored a “3” (Fair) for depth of coverage (Table 2).

All curricula (100%) addressed extensively the subconcept “Abstinence.” Most curricula also addressed extensively the subconcepts related to intrapersonal and interpersonal skills: 95% covered “decision making” extensively, followed by 76% of curricula that addressed “handling of peer pressure,” “assertiveness,” and “refusal/cessation skills”; 71% addressed “goal setting.” Additionally, 13 curricula (62%) covered the subconcept “self-esteem” extensively. Conversely, most curricula failed to address the subconcepts “masturbation” (71%),

the “diversity of sexual values and behaviors in American society” (67%), “human development through the life span” (62%), “sexual identity and orientation” (62%), and “the common occurrence of sexual fantasies” (62%).

Anatomy and Physiology Content

Reviewers also analyzed curricula’s accuracy in coverage/presentation of anatomy and physiology content regarding reproduction, contraception, and sexual health. Three curricula (*Me, My World, My Future: Teen-Aid; Sexual Health Today; Worth the Wait: 6th Grade*) received a “4” (Good) rating. No curricula achieved an “Excellent”

Table 3
Curricula's Alignment With A-H Elements of the Federal Definition of Abstinence Education Programs

Curriculum Name	Definition A			Definition B			Definition C			Definition D			Definition E			Definition F			Definition G			Definition H		
	E*	I*	NA*	E*	I*	NA*	E*	I*	NA*	E*	I*	NA*	E*	I*	NA*	E*	I*	NA*	E*	I*	NA*	E*	I*	NA*
A.C. Green's I've Got the Power	■			■			■			■			■			■			■			■		
The Art of Loving Well		■		■				■		■				■			■			■				■
Choosing the Best PATH	■			■			■			■			■			■			■			■		
Choosing the Best WAY	■			■			■			■			■			■			■			■		
Everyone Is NOT Doing It	■			■			■			■			■			■			■			■		
Friends for Teens		■		■				■		■			■				■		■			■		
Go APE	■			■			■			■			■			■			■			■		
Healthy Sexuality		■		■			■				■		■			■			■			■		
Love and Life	■			■			■			■			■			■			■			■		
Me, My World, My Future	■			■			■			■			■			■			■			■		
Postponing Sexual Involvement: Young Teens	■			■			■				■		■			■			■			■		
Removing the Risk	■			■			■				■		■			■			■				■	
Sex Can Wait: Upper Elementary School		■		■			■				■			■		■			■			■		
Sex Can Wait: Middle School	■			■			■			■			■			■			■			■		
Sex Respect	■			■			■			■			■			■			■				■	
Sexual Health Today	■			■			■			■			■			■			■				■	
Wait Training	■			■			■			■			■			■			■			■		
Why kNOW?	■			■			■			■			■			■			■			■		
Worth the Wait: 6th Grade	■				■		■			■			■			■			■			■		
Worth the Wait: 7th Grade	■			■			■				■		■			■			■			■		
Worth the Wait: 8th Grade	■				■		■				■			■		■			■			■		
Total response	17	4	0	19	2	0	19	2	0	14	7	0	17	4	0	10	11	0	3	15	3	17	4	0
Response rate (%)	81	19	0	90	10	0	90	10	0	67	33	0	81	19	0	48	52	0	14	71	14	81	19	0

* E: Explicitly, I: Implicitly, NA: Not Addressed.

in this category. On average, curricula scored “2” (Inadequate) on anatomy and physiology accuracy (Table 2). The following quote is an example of an inaccurate statement:

the outward direction of sperm cells is supported by emphasis on an outward direction in the male’s personality.... The ovum, by contrast, is receptive and inward-directed... the female personality is generally more receptive and inward than the male’s.

Overall Content

To determine overall content accuracy and currency, reviewers analyzed all information provided in the curriculum such as graphics, citation of current research, and theory. *Removing the Risk*; *Sex Can Wait: Upper Elementary School*; *Sexual Health Today*; and *Why kNOw?* received a rating of “Good” (4) for overall accuracy and currency of information. On average, curricula received a rating of “3,” or “Fair,” in this category. *Go APE* and *I’ve Got the Power* received an “Unacceptable” rating in this category (Table 2).

Skill Building

Reviewers also assessed if curricula provided activities to teach a variety of intrapersonal and interpersonal skills such as decision making, communication, assertiveness, refusal, conflict management, planning, and goal setting. Four curricula received “Excellent” ratings in this category: *Go APE*; *I’ve Got the Power*; *Me, My World, My Future: Teen-Aid*; and *Sex Can Wait: Middle School*. Only 1 curriculum provided an inadequate amount of skill-building activities: *Everyone Is NOT Doing It* (Table 2).

Alongside the breadth of skill-building activities, raters judged how comprehensively curricula addressed each skill: how teachers introduced the skill to students, whether it would be taught in progressive steps, whether it would be modeled, whether students would have an opportunity to practice or rehearse the skill in various situations, and whether feedback or reinforcement would be provided.¹² Five curricula scored “Excellent” in this category: *Go APE*; *I’ve Got the Power*; *Postponing Sexual Involvement: Young Teens*; *Removing the Risk*; and *Sex Can Wait: Upper Elementary School*. Regarding skill variety breadth and depth, the curricula’s average score was “4” (Good).

Methods of Instruction

Nine curricula received an “Excellent” rating for attending to students’ diverse needs and learning styles. Reviewers examined if each curriculum presented a variety of instructional strategies, provided key information, encouraged creative expression and sharing of thoughts/feelings/opinions, and developed critical thinking skills. Three curricula (*Choosing the Best WAY*; *Me, My World, My Future: Teen-Aid*; and *Worth the Wait: 7th Grade*) achieved an “Excellent” rating for developmental appropriateness (Table 2).

This assessment also scrutinized curricula for information or activities that expressed bias related to race or ethnicity, gender roles, family type, age, or sexual orientation. Reviewers looked for a variety of social groups and lifestyles in examples, pictures, and descriptions. They also

considered instructional strategies that took into account the cultural and ethnic values, customs, and practices of the target community. Seven curricula presented “Excellent” culturally sensitive information or activities (Table 2). Together, the curricula received an average rating of “4” (Good) on methods variety, developmental appropriateness, and cultural sensitivity (Table 2).

Ease of Implementation, Evaluation Tools, Appearance, and Production Quality

Reviewers also searched for features that made curricula “user friendly.” They assessed whether curricula provided support materials and master copies in a clear, organized manner and whether updating these resources was easy. Six curricula provided “Excellent” features in this regard: *Healthy Sexuality*; *Sex Can Wait: Upper Elementary School*; *Sex Can Wait: Middle School*; *Sexual Health Today*; *Worth the Wait: 6th Grade*; and *Worth the Wait: 8th Grade*. The curricula, on average, scored a “4” (Good) for ease of implementation (Table 2).

Four curricula (*Choosing the Best WAY*; *Removing the Risk*; *Why kNOw?*; and *Worth the Wait: 8th Grade*) received an “Excellent” rating for evaluation tools provided. Reviewers searched for tools or methods to evaluate student knowledge, attitudes, and/or skills consistent with curriculum goals and lesson objectives. Overall, curricula received an average rating of “Good” for quality of student evaluation tools. Seven curricula received below-average ratings in this category (Table 2).

Finally, reviewers assessed general appearance and production quality. Raters looked for curricula that were clearly written, aesthetically pleasing, and likely to elicit student interest. Seven curricula received an “Excellent” rating for these characteristics: *Choosing the Best WAY*; *Choosing the Best PATH*; *Sex Can Wait: Upper Elementary School*; *Sexual Health Today*; *Worth the Wait: 6th Grade*; *Worth the Wait: 7th Grade*; and *Worth the Wait: 8th Grade*. Curricula averaged “4” for appearance/production quality (Table 2).

Summative Rating

As a final step, reviewers were asked to average each curriculum’s scores on the 12 features described previously. The purpose was to generate a single number, reflecting each curriculum’s performance on the 12 categories, thus providing a crude rating for comparison purposes. It is important to bear in mind that 2 curricula with identical average scores might exhibit very different characteristics; the overall summative rating, therefore, does not indicate which curriculum is “best,” nor does it provide information regarding its appropriateness for specific programs. Four curricula received a summative rating of 4 or higher (4.00–4.42): *Choosing the Best WAY*; *Me, My World, My Future: Teen-Aid*; *Sex Can Wait: Upper Elementary School*; and *Sex Can Wait: Middle School*. Thirteen curricula received an overall rating between 3 and 3.99 (Fair). The average summative score was 3.33 (range = 2.42–4.42).

DISCUSSION

These findings suggest considerable variability in overall quality of abstinence education curricula. While the

average summative rating was 3.33 (Fair), 12 curricula received summative scores above the average, with 4 scoring 4.0 or higher. Eight curricula received a below-average performance rating. Low quality ratings echo findings from previously published reviews demonstrating that selected abstinence curricula omit basic content, include misinformation, are biased against specific groups, and require revision.^{13,14}

Among better-quality materials, *Me, My World, My Future: Teen-Aid* provides a curious example of how abstinence curricula are changing in quality as a function of several factors, including (but not limited to) government prescriptions and exposure to the public sphere. In a 1993 manuscript, Whatley and Trudell¹⁵ described the contents of *Me, My World, My Future: Teen-Aid*. The authors stated that the curriculum was “inappropriate for use in public schools,” and cited a lawsuit brought against it in Florida. The suit charged Teen-Aid with violating “Florida state law mandating comprehensive sexuality education” and claimed that the curriculum was characterized by “inaccurate, biased, and incomplete information and presentation of sectarian philosophy.”^{15(pp251-252)} According to this review, curriculum authors revised *Me, My World, My Future: Teen-Aid* in 1998. It is this revised version, which, in contrast to Whatley and Trudell’s findings, received “Excellent” and “Good” ratings in several categories in this analysis (including accuracy of anatomy/physiology content). Moreover, this curriculum was the only one to address all A-H elements of the federal definition of abstinence programs.

Me, My World, My Future: Teen-Aid represents an adequate example of how abstinence education curricula have evolved and adapted (not without significant external pressures, perhaps) to meet the needs of a growing abstinence-related or values industry.¹⁶ Availability of relatively high-quality curricula designed for abstinence education lends credence to the speculation that these materials are part of a booming industry concerned with quality, visibility, user friendliness, and comparatively low-cost production. Development of commercial products for abstinence education has become, by some estimates, a lucrative business, one that has witnessed consistent growth, changes, and adaptations of key messages in order to generate and secure new markets.¹⁷⁻¹⁹ As support for abstinence-only programs increases, continuous proliferation of these materials is expected to become the norm and their revisions, essential. *Me, My World, My Future: Teen-Aid* appears to embody these market-oriented values.

While abstinence materials vary considerably in terms of overall quality, values and world views underlying this sample of curricula are unequivocal and consistent: developers of abstinence education curricula value nonsexual antecedents of sexual behavior such as skills, ideals, and psychological factors such as self-esteem. Observations of how curriculum authors chose to allocate content not dedicated to abstinence or character education are equally revealing of the authors’ values. As previously stated, on average 13% of reviewed curricula content was dedicated to healthy sexuality, 10% to the prevention of sexually transmitted infection and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, and 4% to pregnancy prevention.

Whereas covering all 53 subconcepts listed in the assessment tool is unrealistic and developmentally inap-

propriate, many curricula systematically omitted topics such as diverse attitudes/sexual behaviors, sexual orientation, abortion, contraception, and sexual abuse. These omissions are not unique to abstinence-only educational materials, however. Evaluators of comprehensive sexuality curricula also have documented that controversial or sensitive topics receive inadequate coverage.^{3,5,7,8}

Omissions diagnosed in this review illustrate, nonetheless, a coherent picture. Abstinence-only-until-marriage programs funded by federal monies may not teach topics that are inconsistent with Title V law.²⁰ As curricula designed for these programs conform to standards and parameters set by the federal government, exclusion of specific content areas constitutes, therefore, more less an indictment of the authors’ personal values, than a reflection of present-day conservative political ideals. Far from being the product of subjective choice (as Beyer et al⁸ would have it), inclusion/exclusion of curricular contents reflects, primarily, ideological beliefs, political climate, and market moods.

While the findings of this review are comprehensive and robust, the review also has limitations. The inability to secure all identified curricula coupled with the inherent subjectivity of the evaluation process (despite the use of a standardized tool) did not permit an error-free review process. Time and funding constraints resulted in a second limitation. Although reviewers completed a thorough analysis of each curriculum and merged their findings, results could have been more reliable, and less reviewer bias may have occurred if a third reviewer had been involved.

Such limitations notwithstanding, the strength of this review lies in its comprehensive analysis of both curricula content and quality. Equally significant, this review blended 2 sets of education guidelines for content assessment (1 for comprehensive and 1 for abstinence-only sexuality education) and included program personnel’s expectations regarding characteristics of high-quality curricula. The review’s strongest point, perhaps, is the empirical documentation of abstinence curricula’s core values, supporting the notion that these are not value-neutral products. Curricula characteristics such as coverage of the A-H federal definition elements, a focus on nonsexual antecedents of adolescent sexual behavior,²¹ and omission of important sexuality-related content raise the pertinent question—worthy of notice especially by program evaluators—of whether these materials are, in fact, sexuality education materials. A strong argument could be made that abstinence program goals and strategies (role modeling, service learning, parental involvement, discussions of ethical behavior) mirror more closely the goals and strategies of the current character education movement in the United States, than the purposes and methods of sexuality education.^{11,22,23} While this review suggests provisional answers to this question, further research is required to determine the external validity of the findings. ■

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