

Survey of local authorities reveals unhealthy confusion surrounding sexual health messages in schools, says national family charity

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The Healthy Schools Programme is being used as a vehicle to impose a liberal and permissive type of sex education on pupils in many parts of the country, according to a report published today by national charity, Family Education Trust.

Responses to the Trust's survey of all 152 local authorities in England reveal considerable levels of inconsistency across the country with regard to the manner in which the Healthy Schools criteria and guidance are being interpreted and applied in relation to the delivery of sexual health messages in schools.

Although the majority of local authorities recognise that schools are entitled to decide for themselves which external agencies they invite to contribute to their sex and relationship education programme in theory, there are significant differences in the level of local authority prescription in practice.

According to the report, *Unhealthy Confusion*, some authorities are taking an overly prescriptive approach and insisting on policies and practices that are not required by law or by the Healthy Schools criteria.

Family Education Trust director, Norman Wells remarked:

‘It is very concerning to find some local authorities insisting that primary schools teach sex and relationships education as a condition of receiving the Healthy Schools award, when primary school governing bodies are free to decide whether or not to teach sex education after consultation with parents. Primary schools that make a principled decision not to teach sex education should not be stigmatised and denied a sought-after award for that reason. There is nothing inherently “unhealthy” about a primary school that decides not to teach sex education.’

The contribution of external agencies that provide instruction on the use of condoms was welcomed without qualification in secondary schools. However, several local authorities expressed caution regarding agencies that emphasised the benefits of saving sex for marriage and addressed the limitations of condoms as a means of protection against sexually transmitted infections.

A significant minority of local authorities stated that external agencies that presented a 'saved sex' message could be used in a Healthy School only if they were 'balanced' by other options or viewpoints. No local authority expressed any such reservation or qualification in connection with the contribution of external agencies teaching about condom use, however.

Norman Wells commented:

'It is deeply disturbing to find so much confusion and ignorance among local authorities about the extent to which condoms provide protection against sexually transmitted infections. Although some local authorities readily acknowledge that condoms have significant limitations and accept that this fact should not be concealed from pupils, others consider it inappropriate to inform pupils of the limitations of condom effectiveness. Such a policy runs the risk of placing some pupils at increased risk of contracting a sexually transmitted infection where they decide to embark on a sexual relationship on the basis of a false understanding that they will be safe provided they use a condom.'

'It is ironic that in some local authority areas, the Healthy Schools Programme is undermining the healthiest messages of all and depriving young people of learning about the physical, emotional and social benefits of keeping sex within a lifelong, mutually faithful marriage.'

As the coalition government considers its policy on sex and relationships education as part of its review of Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education in schools, the Family Education Trust report calls on local authorities to be less prescriptive and to recognise that schools are responsible for determining their policy on sex and relationships education on a local basis, in consultation with parents. Local authorities should therefore respect the position of schools which, after consultation with parents, decide that they would like to use external agencies that emphasise the benefits of saving sex for marriage.

ENDS

Notes for editors

1. The National Healthy Schools Programme was launched in 1999 as a joint initiative of the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) and the Department of Health (DH). The aim of the programme is 'to support children and young people in developing healthy behaviours, to help to raise pupil achievement, to help to reduce health inequalities, and to help promote social inclusion'

2. In order to achieve National Healthy Schools Status, schools are required to meet 41 criteria across four key areas:

- personal, social and health education including sex and relationship education and drug education (including alcohol, tobacco and volatile substance abuse);
- healthy eating;
- physical activity; and
- emotional health and wellbeing (including bullying).

3. From 2006/2007 to 2010/2011, the Department of Health and the Department for Children, Schools and Families jointly invested over £100 million in the scheme, and in early 2010, the Schools Minister, Diana Johnson, reported that 99 per cent of schools were taking part.

4. Central funding for the Healthy Schools Programme ceased at the end of March 2011. Since April 2011, it has been the coalition government's intention that the Healthy Schools Programme will become 'schools led' and will be locally determined according to local needs and priorities to support health improvement and the adoption of healthier behaviours in children and young people. In order to assist schools in the task of continuing to identify, plan and implement health behaviour change, a Healthy Schools Toolkit has been added to the Department for Education website.

5. The present study was prompted by anecdotal reports that some local authorities were advising primary schools that they must provide sex and relationships education beyond the requirements of the science curriculum as a condition of qualifying for the Healthy Schools Award. There were also reports that secondary schools in some areas were being warned that if they used external agencies which stressed the positive benefits of saving sex for marriage or if they had a policy of not referring pupils to contraceptive and sexual health clinics, they would fail to meet the national criteria for the Healthy Schools Award.

6. *Unhealthy Confusion* reports on the findings of a survey of all local authorities in England to assess the extent to which the National Healthy Schools Programme has been used as a mechanism to insist that primary schools teach sex and relationships education and to place secondary schools under pressure to exclude abstinence and pro-life perspectives from the classroom and to put in place referral systems to sexual health services, including abortion providers.

7. The Department for Education launched a review of Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education, including sex and relationships education, on 21 July 2011. The review period is due to close on 30 November 2011.

• **Unhealthy Confusion: *The impact of the Healthy Schools Programme on sexual health messages in our children's education*** is available for free download from the Family Education Trust website at www.famyouth.org.uk