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Review of Zogby Survey Conducted on Behalf of the National Abstinence Education Association

Background

Faced with a significant and growing body of evidence that abstinence-only programs are ineffective and a waste of taxpayer dollars, abstinence-only-until-marriage advocates have undertaken a major lobbying and public relations campaign to protect the significant federal (and state) funding these programs receive. This campaign knowingly relies on misleading—and sometimes outright false—information that disguises the true nature of both abstinence-only and comprehensive sex education programs in order to influence public opinion, public policy and public funding.

In May 2007, the National Abstinence Education Association (NAEA) released a [survey conducted on its behalf by Zogby International](#) that purports to show broad public support for abstinence-only education and much weaker support for comprehensive sex education. However, the survey cannot be taken at face value as a legitimate public opinion poll, nor should its findings be cited as accurately representing public opinion:

Misrepresenting the nature of the poll

- A Zogby International spokesperson has acknowledged that the survey is **not a public opinion poll, but rather a message-testing poll**,¹ designed to help the NAEA shape its public arguments by testing the public's reaction to a number of different messages (some of them distorted, biased or factually incorrect, as outlined below). This has not, however, stopped the NAEA from consistently misrepresenting the survey as a genuine opinion poll.²

False and misleading descriptions of abstinence-only education

- The survey **relies on outright falsehoods** in its representation of abstinence-only and comprehensive sex education, **and contains leading questions** designed to **steer respondents toward desired answers**.
 - The survey gives respondents the **false impression that abstinence-only sex education programs provide balanced and complete information about contraception**, including an “age appropriate discussion of contraceptives” and information on “condom usage skills.” For example, see these two descriptions of abstinence-only programs from the Zogby survey (emphasis added):

“5. Abstinence Education permits an **age appropriate discussion of contraceptives** within the context of promoting abstinence as the healthiest choice.”³

“20. If you knew that typical Abstinence Education Courses place a **higher emphasis** on building healthy relationships, bolstering self worth and self-control, **rather than on condom usage skills**, would you be [more likely/ . . . /less likely] to support teaching Abstinence Education in place of Comprehensive Sex Education?”^{3(p. 6)}

- **Both descriptions of abstinence-only education are patently false.** Abstinence-only curricula do not contain any “age appropriate discussion of contraceptives.” They also do not feature any information at all about “condom usage skills” (which the above description wrongly implies receive at least some emphasis in abstinence-only curricula).

In fact, **guidelines governing federally subsidized abstinence education programs clearly stipulate** that for unmarried persons of any age, **the behavior that must be promoted “exclusively” is abstinence.**⁴ Any positive discussion about contraceptives or the benefits of contraceptive use is forbidden as tantamount to encouraging contraceptive use or even promiscuity. In practice, federally funded abstinence-only **programs have the choice of either not discussing contraception at all, or only talking about it in negative terms.**

- An analysis by the Heritage Foundation, which strongly supports abstinence-only education, makes clear this posture toward contraception is a hallmark of all “authentic” abstinence-only education programs (emphasis added):

“In keeping with their mission, **authentic abstinence curricula allocate zero percent of their content to promoting contraception.** . . . When authentic abstinence programs discuss contraception, it is typically to emphasize that it offers imperfect protection against STDs and pregnancy . . .”⁵

False and misleading information on comprehensive sex education

- The Zogby survey also implies—falsely—that educating teens about how to protect themselves once they become sexually active encourages teens to have sex because the abstinence message gets “lost.” For example, see the two questions from the Zogby survey below (emphasis added):

“11. Do you [strongly agree/ . . . /strongly disagree] that promoting and demonstrating condom usage in sex education class **encourages sexual activity among teens**?”^{3(p. 3)}

“17. Do you [strongly agree/ . . . /strongly disagree] that the importance of the wait to have sex message in Comprehensive Sex Education **ends up**

being lost when some of these programs demonstrate and encourage the use of condoms and other forms of contraceptives?”^{3(p. 5)}

- Once again, the **premise of both questions is demonstrably untrue**. The research literature strongly shows the opposite: Comprehensive programs that **include information about both abstinence and contraception do not lead teens to have sex, but rather have been shown to achieve both delayed sexual initiation and improved contraceptive use when teens do initiate sex**. In contrast, programs that promote abstinence-only largely have not been found to be effective in achieving either outcome.⁶

What the public really thinks about sex education

- **Americans strongly support comprehensive sex education that both promotes abstinence and prepares young people to protect themselves when they do initiate sex**—and they overwhelmingly oppose the extreme abstinence-only-until-marriage approach promoted by the NAEA. For example, a November 2006 article on “Public Opinion on Sex Education in US Schools” from the *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine* reports the following:

“Approximately 82% of respondents indicated support for programs that teach students about both abstinence and other methods of preventing pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Similarly, 68.5% supported teaching how to properly use condoms. Abstinence-only education programs, in contrast, received the lowest levels of support (36%) and the highest level of opposition (about 50%) across the 3 program options.”⁷

- Even the NAEA’s own survey, deeply flawed as it is, documents the public’s broad support for including instructions on how to use contraceptives in sex education curricula. (This finding, which was *not* mentioned by the NAEA in any of its materials highlighting the Zogby poll, also illustrates why the organization feels that it has to disguise the fact that abstinence-only programs do not allow for any information on how to use condoms and other contraceptives):

“14. Do you [strongly agree/ . . . /strongly disagree] that learning to correctly use contraceptives, including condoms, is best for your child’s health and future?”^{3(p. 4)}

- **Almost 80% of parents queried by Zogby agree (and close to 60% agree strongly) that learning how to use condoms and other contraceptives correctly is in the best interest of their children**, while fewer than 20% disagree (and only about 13% strongly). And they do so even after having been intentionally misled to oppose comprehensive sex education during many of the previous 13 questions.

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- ¹ Jarvik E, 2 polls, opposite opinions on sex ed: teaching of abstinence backed—as is comprehensive course, *Desert Morning News*, June 3, 2007, <<http://www.deseretnews.com/dn/view/0,1249,660226355,00.html>>, accessed July 23, 2007.
- ² Robbio P and Scheiderer T, Parents prefer abstinence education 2 to 1: Zogby survey shows dramatic shift in attitudes once parents understand differences between abstinence and comprehensive sex education, National Abstinence Education Association, May 3, 2007, <http://www.abstinenceassociation.org/newsroom/pr_050307_parents_prefer_2to1.html>, accessed July 23, 2007.
- ³ Zogby Survey and Responses, p. 2, http://www.abstinenceassociation.org/docs/zogby_questionnaire_050207.pdf, accessed July 23, 2007.
- ⁴ Dailard C, Administration tightens rules for abstinence education grants, *The Guttmacher Report on Public Policy*, 2005, 8(4):13, <<http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/tgr/08/4/gr080413.html>>, accessed July 23, 2007.
- ⁵ Martin S, Rector R and Pardue MG, *Comprehensive Sex Education vs. Authentic Abstinence: A Study of Competing Curricula*, Heritage Foundation, 2004, <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Welfare/upload/67539_1.pdf>, accessed July 23, 2007.
- ⁶ Kirby D, *Emerging Answers: Research Findings on Programs to Reduce Teen Pregnancy*, Washington, DC: National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2001, http://www.teenpregnancy.org/resources/data/report_summaries/emerging_answers/, accessed July 23, 2007.
- ⁷ Bleakley A et al., [Public opinion on sex education in US schools](#), *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, 2006, 160(11):1151–1156.