Reasons for Policy Preference
We identified four clusters of reasons for parents' stated policy preferences. The first cluster comprised reasons that referred to the positive consequences of the preferred approach or to the negative consequences of the approach that was not preferred (e.g., "Because abstinence can help them avoid diseases, it's better that they wait" and "It is important that they know all the information so that they can protect themselves from disease"). The second cluster consisted of reasons that focused on the importance of providing full and complete information to adolescents (e.g., "Because information is power, they'll be able to make better-informed decisions" and "They should know both sides, both views, so they can be prepared for anything"). The third cluster encompassed reasons that referred to the inevitability of adolescents' eventually having sex (e.g., "You can teach abstinence, but human nature says they will sooner or later have sex anyway" and "You can't stop kids from having sex"). The final cluster included reasons based on approval or disapproval of actions, often with reference to religious beliefs or moral principles, but without any mention of potential consequences (e.g., "Because of my philosophy of life—I get it from the Bible—there is a moral absolute, and in my mind abstinence is right" and "It's up to the parents to talk about abstinence, and schools shouldn't be involved. That is a moral deal, and schools should teach only facts, not morals").

We combined the first three clusters of reasons into a category labeled "pragmatic," whereas the final cluster was labeled "absolutist." Overall, 88% of parents gave pragmatic reasons. Parents who preferred comprehensive sex education overwhelmingly provided pragmatic reasons (94%), while the majority of parents who preferred abstinence-only education provided absolutist reasons (64%—Figure 4).

DISCUSSION
Consistent with previous national and state-level studies on this topic,1–6 this study found that a substantial majority of California parents surveyed preferred approaches to sex education that included instruction on how to prevent pregnancies and the spread of STDs for students who decide to have sex. This support was high across all regions of the state, and across all subgroups examined. Furthermore, 96% of parents supported teaching about birth control pills, condoms and other types of protection by the time students were in high school. An equally large majority supported teaching about abstinence.

These findings show that survey respondents overwhelmingly supported approaches that were consistent with the state’s education code on the provision of sex education. At the same time, they were nearly unanimous in opposing key components of the federal funding program that requires the teaching of abstinence-only until marriage and prohibits instruction in or promotion of the use of contraceptive methods, regardless of grade level.22,23

This survey found uniformly high levels of support for comprehensive sex education across the state’s five regions, which exhibit considerable political and demographic variability. This finding, combined with the strong feelings and voting behavior considerations reported by parents, should allay the fears of some school districts that have not complied with the education code partly because of the perception that high levels of support for sex education are limited to large coastal metropolitan areas. The uniform support across regions—along with the high levels of support across categories of race and ethnicity, age, household income, education, religious service attendance and ideological leaning, as well as self-identification as a born-again or evangelical Christian—demonstrates the breadth of support for comprehensive sex education in California, and the generalizability of these results to geographically and demographically diverse areas.

The popular sociological literature reinforces a common belief that the sex education debates largely involve a clash between conservatives and liberals.29,30 For example, sociologist Kristin Luker describes abstinence-only education supporters and activists as conservatives with religious-based opposition to sex outside of marriage, while describing comprehensive sex education supporters as hedonistic liberals having mostly factual concerns about sexual behavior.30 Luker’s distinction might be viewed as representing a conflict between absolutist values (protected, trade-off–resistant, deontological values based on rules concerning behaviors) and pragmatic values.