

FACT SHEET

STRATEGIES TO BUILD SUPPORT FOR HIV-PREVENTION AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION PROGRAMS

There are many strategies individuals can use to build broad-based support for HIV-prevention and sexuality education programs.

This list—the result of a SIECUS needs assessment of over 150 education and health leaders—offers sound advice from professionals in the United States involved in such programs.

Each person was asked: “Are there successful strategies that your agency has employed?”

The list shows that, with a little creativity, everyone has a role to play in supporting HIV-prevention and sexuality education programs for young people.

WORK WITH OTHER GROUPS

- Form a coalition and invite representatives from throughout the community, including colleague organizations, parents, faith communities, and business leaders. Work together on common messages and policy recommendations to key decision-makers. This will result in a strong, unified message and will decrease the likelihood of challenges. (One such coalition schedules time at meetings to write letters to the editor on different issues of concern to coalition members.)
- Seek opportunities to facilitate meetings with other local, state, or national organizations. (Cosponsor meetings when possible.) Groups like the American Cancer Society sometimes cosponsor health programs such as a statewide health education summit or a community health fair.
- Form a committee when reevaluating health, HIV-prevention, or sexuality education curricula. Include people that reflect a diversity of viewpoints: school staff, administrators, business people, parents, and religious leaders. Invite teachers and staff to explain what students are learning.
- Avoid duplicating efforts. Whenever possible, coordinate activities such as educational programs.
- Actively involve the state Parent Teacher Association (PTA). Consider offering HIV/AIDS workshops at its convention. Publish newsletters or brochures for its local presidents and school principals. (The National PTA publishes an *HIV/AIDS Education Kit* available from state chapters.)

- Seek the involvement of local and state public health agencies. Ask for representatives to make classroom presentations, to provide support to HIV-positive students, to conduct inservice training for teachers, and to work with peer educators.

DEVELOP MODELS

- Develop model comprehensive school health education sites within your state that include HIV-prevention and sexuality education components. Staff at these sites can provide teacher training to other communities on how to implement a comprehensive program.
- Focus on providing a model of technical assistance and support for schools. Balance public policy efforts with support for those who are trying to provide HIV-prevention and sexuality education within the current environment.
- Clearly define the terms that refer to curricula (i.e. “abstinence-based,” “abstinence-only,” “fear-based,” or “comprehensive”). Be consistent.
- Emphasize the big picture when referring to specific components of a comprehensive program. Talk in terms of comprehensive health programs that include HIV-prevention *and* sexuality education instead of just the HIV-prevention or sexuality education components.
- Seek out culturally competent programs. Use models (and educators) that work within specific cultures.

PROVIDE UP-TO-DATE INFORMATION

- Develop policies and written guidelines for guest speakers. Make certain they understand district/agency policy regarding the discussion of topics and understand the parameters of their presentation and how to handle questions from students that go beyond these parameters. If speakers are not experienced in working with students, make certain a staff person helps them develop age-appropriate material. Arrange for a staff person to attend the presentation.
- Develop a resource library for health educators. Include curricula, audiovisuals, and the latest data and research.

- Send packets of information on comprehensive health education, including HIV-prevention and sexuality education, to all libraries. Include materials for students, teachers, other school staff, and parents.
- Help improve a teacher's knowledge, skill, and comfort level by teaching her/him how to build parental understanding and support for HIV-prevention and sexuality education. Whenever possible, collaborate with other agencies and local colleges/universities to provide training. Consider offering continuing education credits as incentives.
- Invite medical students or doctors to talk to teachers and older students about their experiences working with people living with HIV or AIDS.

ENGAGE THE MEDIA

- Work proactively with the media. Mail press releases, try to place articles in newspapers, and respond to editorials if a constructive debate seems possible.
- Appoint a staff person to handle media requests if your agency does not have a public relations department. Make certain all staff keeps this person informed to better anticipate hot spots and respond quickly to media requests.
- Arrange for the media to contact your public relations department staff for assistance. (This staff can help prepare responses before you go to the media.)
- Make certain that the local media is acquainted with health education programs and issues. If specific materials are contested in the community, acknowledge that challenges are inevitable. Remind the media that good curricula are developmentally appropriate and based on sound research.

BUILD COMMUNITY SUPPORT

- Help community-based organizations understand the intricacies of working with schools so the programs they develop are responsible and realistic.
- Work with school administrators. Make them aware of the support in your community for school-based comprehensive health education programming, including HIV-prevention and sexuality education. Encourage them to support the work their teachers are doing in these areas.
- Conduct community-wide polls and focus groups to see what information community members want in the local school-based health education curriculum.
- Arrange for PTA and community representatives to attend teacher and administrator training sessions if appropriate.

ORGANIZE PUBLIC MEETINGS

- Arrange to have an experienced meeting facilitator—ideally someone perceived as neutral, with no stake in the outcome of the meeting.

- When planning the agenda, consider the audience. Meeting planners should closely assess the program and prepare to address issues of concern.
- Anticipate differences of opinion. Make certain the facilitator respectfully involves people with all viewpoints. Let people with children in the public schools speak first, followed by taxpayers living in the community, and finally, people from outside the district, if there is time.
- Set time limits for speakers. Ask for testimony in advance.

PREPARE FOR CHALLENGES

- Take inventory of the materials distributed by your organization. Know the content and how people interpret it.
- Do not make assumptions about who will support your efforts. Many do not reach out to religious organizations because they do not expect support. In reality, many “institutional” positions do not always play out on the local level.
- Meet with those who are resistant to comprehensive programs to find areas of common ground. Whenever possible, work on these areas and agree to disagree on others.
- Learn as much as you can about those who challenge comprehensive programs in your community—get on mailing lists, attend meetings/trainings, ask questions.
- Learn and practice conflict resolution skills. Role-play situations involving development of a consensus.

INVOLVE PARENTS

- Build parental understanding and support for health, HIV-prevention, and sexuality education programs. Inform parents in advance of classes. Schedule a parent preview night. Encourage parental involvement.
- Serve as a resource for parents. Help them acquire skills to become involved in their children's education.
- Schedule an evening parent education series. Include diverse topics related to health issues, including “Talking to Your Children about Sexuality.” Widely publicize the series, including mailing announcements to the homes of parents.
- Schedule a one-day retreat for middle-school students and their parents. Focus on communication skills between students and parents, including the discussion of sexuality issues. Encourage their involvement in the planning process.
- Publish a monthly newsletter for parents on child and adolescent health. Include book reviews and resources. Encourage parental involvement in the newsletter.
- Create “health knapsacks” for young students to take home to their parents. These are especially useful for parents who can't attend all school functions. Include reading materials and suggestions for parent-child activities.