How We Improved Our Sex Education Program

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With careful planning and broad involvement, the Falls Church, Virginia, schools developed a successful sex and family life curriculum.

It began with a general uneasiness. Teachers and administrators felt it. Students felt it. Parents felt it. Something was wrong. Surely something could be improved.

But time passed, and there was no improvement. The problem was the topic: sex education. The program in trouble was the sex education being offered to the fifth and sixth graders.

What was the program? Very simply, it consisted of three films, shown once a year by the public health nurse. The films were "Story of Menstruation," "Girl to Woman," and "Boy to Man." Discussion followed the showing of the films. That is, discussion followed if any of the students had the nerve to ask a question. Otherwise, except for any individual follow-up by teachers and students, the program was over for the year.

The films provided the content and the method of instruction. They were old, stereotyped, dated (clothing styles and so on), and physically deteriorating. To correct the situation the district curriculum council had proposed a solution several years earlier: There should be a K-6 sex education curriculum, correlated with other subjects, but clearly identifiable as a curriculum and taught by the classroom teachers. Nothing happened because there was fear of the controversial nature of the topic, teachers didn't feel particularly competent to teach about it, and there was never enough time.

It was inconceivable that three outdated films could long continue to serve as a curriculum. Nonetheless, it took a tangible, no-going-back event to get movement. The films became so damaged that they could no longer be used and would not be replaced by the public health department. The general sense of uneasiness now had a focus. A decision had to be made. Would there be no sex education for fifth and sixth graders? Would there be a new approach?

First Steps

One of the elementary principals proposed that parents of the then current fourth, fifth, and sixth graders be surveyed to determine what kind of program they thought was needed, supportable, and desirable. The elementary subcommittee of the curriculum council, and the council itself, agreed. The survey form was developed by the

principal in consultation with interested staff members, reviewed and approved by the elementary subcommittee, and distributed to parents. It pulled no punches, explained the situation frankly, asked parents to respond to a list of topics which might be of concern to their children, and promised that if interest warranted, a committee of community people and staff members would be appointed to study and identify an appropriate program.

On the same date that the letters were sent to parents, each elementary school staff member received an information copy and a note of explanation. Teachers were asked to answer parental inquiries frankly and to encourage parents to respond to the survey form.

Twenty-two percent of the surveys mailed to parents were returned.

- Seventy to 80 percent of the respondents felt that their children were concerned about body growth and development, effects of puberty, causes of feelings and attitudes, boy-girl friendship, and the validity of sex information from friends.
- Slightly over half felt that "development of a baby" was of concern to their children, and fewer than half indicated concern about sibling relationships, death, and separation/divorce.
- Over half the respondents felt that the five topics listed above as of most concern to children should be considered for program inclusion.
- Only five of the returned forms indicated any negative responses to the idea of the school providing a family life and sex education program. These parents took the general position that the family, not the school, was the proper place for such instruction.
- Twenty-two parents volunteered to assist in program development.

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Results of the survey were presented to the curriculum council in May. A professional staff committee was authorized and funds allocated.

Program Development

The committee, composed of one teacher from each elementary school, the elementary principal, and a staff member from a nearby university who served as instructional process consultant, worked together during the summer to produce a preliminary proposal that included a philosophy statement, program guidelines, and an overview of the program.

The guidelines called for:

1. Establishment of an environment that is conducive to the growth of serious attitudes toward sexual development;
2. Dissemination of accurate information concerning human physiology and anatomy;
3. Reduction of anxieties over differing rates of physical and emotional maturation;
4. Clarification of student misconceptions and misinformation;
5. Acknowledgment that the family is the basic unit in our society;
6. Recognition of societal, community, and family values and their importance in human development;
7. Encouragement of responsible behavior within the peer group and family.

The curriculum guide was developed as a brief outline of content and materials of instruction organized around four basic concepts:

1. The body is an interrelated whole composed of identifiable systems.
2. The endocrine system of the body influences growth and development.
3. All human beings have developed from a joining of a male spermatozoa and female egg.
4. As people mature, their relationships with family and peers change.

The instructional overview dealt with strategies for instruction of students in the family life and sex education program, and with provisions for meaningful alternatives for students whose parents did not wish to have the school deal with their children on these subjects.

Program Refinement and Approval

When school began that fall, parents who had responded in the spring were invited to a meeting for a report on what the staff had produced. The next step was creation of an expanded committee for refinement of the staff committee

proposals. Membership of this committee included a parent from each school, religious representatives from the area, health and medical professionals from the community, a volunteer consultant involved in the implementation of other elementary-level sex education programs, and the original staff members.

The enlarged committee had three functions:

1. Reexamination of need for the program, including another review of parental responses on the original survey and a review of staff assessment of need;

2. Examination of the proposals by the staff committee; recommendation of changes, additions, and deletions;

3. Recommendation for approval of the program.

After each meeting of the total committee, the staff committee incorporated their recommendations in a revised program proposal. Thus an up-to-date clean copy was available for each total committee session. After five meetings over a three-month period, the total committee recommended approval of the program. The elementary subcommittee and the curriculum council concurred.

As these groups were considering and approving the proposed program and materials of instruction, parents of the fifth and sixth graders were invited to an orientation session. At this orientation, attended by the program development committee, the content of the program was discussed and audiovisual materials previewed.

Following receipt of the proposed program and the accompanying recommendation and approvals, the school board invited the principal to meet with them in executive session to review the processes that had been followed. The board was particularly interested in the involvement of parents in program development and the steps that had been taken to keep parents informed. In February, in open session, the board gave unanimous approval for the program.

Implementation

In the first year, the family life and sex education program was presented only to sixth graders. Interestingly enough, considering that in the survey responses a few parents had indicated objections to the proposed program, *no* parent requested an alternative. On the other hand, some students chose to decline school activities that would have conflicted with their scheduled class in family life and sex education. Questions asked and topics discussed revealed intense interest, woeful lack of information, and a great deal of misinformation. Parents, both at the presession orientation meeting and afterwards, expressed appreciation to the program instructors for their willingness to deal with the students in this area.

The students who participated in the initial offering of the program responded enthusiastically when asked to evaluate their experiences. They suggested using more and better media, and including deliberate instruction on masturbation, homosexuality, venereal disease, contraception, and abortion. The three teachers who presented the program concurred with the student suggestions and recommended that the program be continued. Only nine parents returned the evaluation forms sent to them. All were positive.

This story of one school district's success in the development of curriculum on a controversial topic is offered strictly in a sense of sharing, not of prescription. Communities differ, school systems differ, and procedures will differ. However, in retrospect, the strategic points that seem to have contributed to the resolution of this curriculum problem in Falls Church are:

1. Identification of a tangible need on which to focus general concern;

2. Early validation of staff activity by parental advice and consent;

3. Limitation of initial program to a small audience, a few important concepts, and a select group of developers;

4. Continual reference to the total instructional situation, emphasizing extensions of previously accepted program elements;

5. Rapid upgrading of awareness and skills of proposed instructors;

6. Ongoing feedback to total staff and community;

7. Concurrent attention to alternatives so that no group seemed to be forced into a controversial program;

8. Use of expert opinion both in terms of specific subject-matter and general instructional processes;

9. Use of a leader with both personal interest and general credibility among staff and community.



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