

It didn't matter where it came from. All she knew about relationships were the unhealthy parts. She didn't have much self-esteem and had only witnessed destruction at home.

"At the time I thought I knew it all. But who doesn't at 15?" the 41-year-old says. "I was getting negative attention from somebody who was older than me and I reveled in it."

Before the school year was out, Coccellato became pregnant with her son, who is now 26. She has two other children, including a daughter who is a freshman at Bullard this year.

She adores all her children. But her early entry into adulthood was painful. She had to set her own dreams aside and begin working to support her young son. She didn't make it to college until her 30s.

There's no singular reason why stories like Coccellato's unfold this way.

But Coccellato points to one thread: There was no comprehensive sex education in Fresno when she was in school. "And all these years later, it's the same scenario. The problem continues to go out of control."

In California, where schools are not mandated to offer comprehensive sex education, its history is patchy and difficult to track. The state Department of Education doesn't keep hard numbers on whether districts offer comprehensive sex education, although spokeswoman Tina Jung says the state has anecdotal evidence showing the "vast majority" of middle and high schools do.

The state's fourth-largest district, [Fresno Unified](#), with an enrollment of about 73,000, doesn't.

"Some (parents) are surprised because they think (their children) are getting it. Some will say, 'What can I do for my child to get this?'" says Jasmine Leiva, health educator at Fresno Barrios Unidos, a teen and parent health organization.

It's a point that's been lost amid other education worries, like the deep slashing of state and local budgets during recession years.

Belt-tightening forced Fresno Unified to end its [Sociology for Living](#) health and life skills class in 2011, a course that at the time was a graduation requirement and taught some sexual health topics. In one lesson, students carried around 5-pound bags of flour, a stand-in for an infant. Ending the class caused those who taught it to either switch subjects or retire. Of the 47 teachers who were affected, district officials say 12 were laid off.

Back then, school board members found a compromise to cut the class, but retain the subjects students were taught. The information taught in Sociology for Living would be dropped into other courses' curriculum. HIV/AIDS prevention, which is mandated by the state, became part of seventh-grade science and high school biology. Other information would become part of science and physical education curriculum.

But what resulted was a confusing patchwork that now has leaders of organizations like Fresno Barrios Unidos and ACLU of Northern California shaking their heads. There doesn't seem to be a sense of urgency or concern among administrators to kick-start a sex education program, they say. That's concerning, since Fresno County still has some of the state's highest rates of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.

"We have been told a variety of things from the district about what is actually being taught, which I don't think reflects animus by the district, but a lack of focus on this issue and a lack of understanding about what's happening in the classroom," says Phyllida Burlingame, reproductive justice policy director at ACLU of Northern California.

Administrators in charge of curriculum say comprehensive sex education is not offered. Even so, the district is considering adding it. A [partnership with state education and health agencies](#) signed by Fresno Unified last year may result in a comprehensive sex education curriculum.

“We’re developing the plan and we want the best plan,” says Rosario Sanchez, associate superintendent of curriculum and instruction.

Confusion at the top

Back in 2011, the plan to cut Sociology for Living didn’t come without a fight. Minutes from board meetings several months before the vote show parents, community advocates and students frequently showed up and petitioned trustees to reverse course. [News stories](#) show a shrinking chunk of state dollars was to blame. According to Sanchez, the move was also intended to free up space in students’ schedules so they could take more electives or Advanced Placement classes.

But what happened next has been a head-scratching source of confusion among trustees, parents, students and community advocates.

Memos sent to board members show that students in sixth and seventh grade, and again in high school, were receiving some sexual health information, at least for a while.

What’s taught now is less clear.

Among the trustees, there’s no singular answer.

“That type of comprehensive sex class, that Sociology for Living, they do get that type of curriculum in science and in PE classes,” Valerie Davis says.

Carol Mills says as far as she knows, Fresno Unified has never offered comprehensive sex education. But sixth-, seventh- and ninth-graders are taught age-appropriate versions of the topics that Sociology for Living once offered.

Janet Ryan was aware of a sixth-grade sex education curriculum. Cal Johnson, Luis Chavez and Brooke Ashjian say there’s no comprehensive sex education. Christopher De La Cerda didn’t respond to multiple phone and email messages from The Bee.

Students are puzzled, too.

Chris Hanson, a senior at Roosevelt High who works with Fresno Barrios Unidos, says he received one day of sex education when he was in ninth-grade biology.

He says he “didn’t even think twice about it” until he started doing health advocacy work and realized the gaps in what his peers were learning.

“At my school a lot of other people are not wearing condoms, not getting tested. Some kids don’t even realize this is the information they’re not getting.”

A complex system

[State law](#) is clear on one thing: all school districts are required to provide HIV/AIDS prevention education. And if they decide to offer any sex education, they must follow a [strict set of guidelines](#).

In short, they can’t pick and choose which topics to cover.

To be “comprehensive,” a school must teach age-appropriate, unbiased, medically accurate information. For students in seventh grade and up, they must learn about abstinence, sexually transmitted infections and contraception.

Across California, it’s tough to pin down the number of districts that offer all those topics. The state doesn’t keep a log, but two studies, one from [2003 by the ACLU of Northern California](#), the other in [2011 from the University of California at San Francisco](#), show that statewide, sex education topics are taught at more than 95% of districts.

Advocates point out that not all sex education is created equally. Students in one district may receive three days of instruction, while those in a neighboring district could get three weeks.

That's a problem, says Gabriela Valle, senior director of community education for [California Latinas for Reproductive Justice](#), which is based in Los Angeles.

"Comprehensive sex ed is this idea for them to learn more about themselves and get literally comfortable in their own skin ... it's so critical to decision-making and basic education," Valle says.

"It shouldn't be reliant on what ZIP code you live in or even something more tenuous, like who the school board is or who the superintendent is. And yet it is. The only consistency we have in the state is how inconsistent our access is for our young people."

What should be offered?

Some say this is a critical public health issue. [Statewide data](#) shows that sexually transmitted infections among teens have declined slightly since 2011, which can be explained in part by an aggressive [state campaign](#) to improve teens' access to condoms. But Fresno County still has the [fourth-highest rate](#) of teens with chlamydia and gonorrhea infections, a figure that's consistently 20%-25% higher than state averages. For people of all ages, [Fresno County ranks second](#) for both chlamydia and gonorrhea.

Among school districts in Fresno County, students within Fresno Unified have the highest rates of both infections, says Jared Rutledge, Fresno Department of Public Health epidemiologist. Clovis and Central unificeds are next on the list.

Rutledge says Fresno County's steep poverty rates plus a lack of education about the risks of sex help explain the trends. The high rates make "it even more important that we should be focusing on empowering our school districts."

Yet central San Joaquin Valley school districts are split on whether or not to offer comprehensive sex education. Central and Clovis officials say they offer it. Clovis made headlines a few years ago after the ACLU of Northern California filed a suit alleging the district's instruction was biased and inaccurate. The suit was dropped in February 2014 when Clovis updated its curriculum.

Students at Sanger Unified schools only receive information about HIV/AIDS prevention, just enough to meet the letter of the law, the district's superintendent says.

"I think it comes down to the philosophical beliefs of your board and your community and what they want you to touch in educating students about that," Superintendent Matthew Navo says. "In small school districts, those are much more hot-button topics for parents."

Among those who lead Fresno Unified, there's not-so-subtle tension on the matter.

"I don't believe that the government should be telling you about sex," says Trustee Ashjian, who says mothers, fathers and churches should be the ones teaching children about it. He agrees teen pregnancy and disease need to be addressed but says school isn't the place for those lessons.

It's a complex moral issue, he adds. "I disagree with it in the same way we shouldn't be teaching religion. There (are) so many varied opinions on what's acceptable, from heterosexual to homosexual to all of these different things. How are you going to put that in the school?"

Trustee Davis also says discussions about sex education should start with parents. Another wing, including Trustees Chavez and Johnson, say schools can't excuse themselves from the conversation.

"Those statistics are too high," says Chavez, who used to work for the Central Valley Health Network. "We need to be

working with these nonprofit organizations, we need to develop a curriculum.”

Finding solutions

Behind the scenes, Fresno Unified administrators are working with state health and education officials to come up with a solution. The district has signed a five-year agreement with state officials aimed at reducing pregnancy rates and improving education about birth control, HIV/AIDS and other diseases.

Unfortunately, there’s no money attached, says Sanchez, the district’s associate superintendent. And she isn’t making promises that a comprehensive sex education curriculum will come out of the deal. But “they’ll provide information, service and support. They’ve been side-by-side with us.”

Meanwhile, parent Coccellato is driving forward.

She’s working with Fresno Barrios Unidos on a small-scale effort to bring lessons into Fresno classrooms. She’s visited Sunnyside High and always offers her ear to teens and her own children when they have questions.

“I don’t want them to (have sex). But for God’s sake, if they do it, I want them to be educated,” she says.

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