

# Fresno Unified looks to restore sex education

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Listen up Fresno high schoolers: sex education could soon be coming to a classroom near you.

Fresno Unified officials are talking about restoring sex education across the city's high schools under a plan that would add lessons about sexually transmitted infections, contraception and healthy relationships.

At the district's school board meeting Wednesday, trustees took up a proposal that would bring back all those topics by January. They didn't take a vote and the issue will likely get more discussion this summer or fall.

The measure comes after local organizations like teen health group Fresno Barrios Unidos and the ACLU of Northern California urged district administrators to restore the lessons. It's also on the heels of legislation that's passed the state Assembly and is winding through the state Senate that would make comprehensive sex education mandatory in middle and high schools.

If the bill becomes law, it would mark a huge shift in what's required of California public schools.

Fresno students already get the absolute basics. State law currently requires middle and high schools to provide education about how to prevent HIV/AIDS.

But schools are not mandated to offer "comprehensive" sex education, or age-appropriate, unbiased, medically accurate information. To be comprehensive, students must learn about abstinence, sexually transmitted infections and contraception.

Fresno County has the state's fourth-highest rate of teens with chlamydia and gonorrhea infections, a figure that's consistently 20%-25% higher than state averages.

Fresno Unified's plan would use a curriculum called Positive Prevention Plus to teach those topics.

Local health advocates who attended Wednesday's meeting praised the curriculum and said they were encouraged by the district's effort.

Socorro Santillan, executive director of Fresno Barrios Unidos, urged trustees to partner with organizations like hers to help teach students. The group already has programs for parents and has taught workshops at some high schools.

Others who attended, like UCSF Fresno resident Dr. Janae Barker, said it's a matter of public health.

Barker said she's constantly witnessing teens who repeat their mistakes: they never learn about safe sex and prevention and wind up contracting syphilis or getting pregnant. Among a group of at-risk teen girls she's worked with at Fresno High, she said, "it was amazing the things they didn't know. There are kids in that class, two of which are currently pregnant, one who is on her second pregnancy."

Fresno high schools used to have a class called Sociology for Living, a health and life skills class that was axed for budget and other reasons in 2011. It was at one time a graduation requirement and taught students about some sexual health topics and about marriage and family issues.

In 2011, school board members found a compromise to cut the class, but retain the subjects students were taught. That may have happened for a while, but school officials said this spring that comprehensive sex education is no longer offered.

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UCSF Fresno resident Dr. Janae Barker, who is working with a group of Fresno High at-risk teen girls

Public health officials and community health organizers have been scratching their heads asking why sex education wasn't restored earlier. 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, Fresno Department of Public Health statistics show. Clovis and Central unificeds are next on the list.

At the meeting, trustee Carol Mills said she hopes the district will move sooner than later to bring sex education back into both the middle and high schools. She's talked to middle school nurses who have told her about eighth-grade girls becoming pregnant, a fact Mills said is almost "incomprehensible, although I know it exists."

Many of the trustees said schools can't alone be expected to turnaround such dire statistics. But overall, most were supportive of the plan.

Trustee Brooke Ashjian, who attended the meeting via conference call, questioned whether students would learn about lesbian, gay, bisexual and other sexual orientation and gender issues. He also questioned whether traditional relationships and marriage values would be taught.

Those questions will likely be hashed out in future board discussions.

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