

What Do Mississippi Parents Think About Sex-Related Education in Public Schools?

December 2011

■ HB 999

During its 2011 Regular Session, the Mississippi Legislature passed HB 999, which requires each local school board to adopt a policy on sex-related education by June 30, 2012, to implement either an abstinence-only or an abstinence-plus curriculum. The Center for Mississippi Health Policy commissioned Mississippi State University's Social Science Research Center to survey parents of Mississippi public school students to assess their attitudes and opinions regarding the content of and methods for delivering sex-related education in the schools. This Issue Brief summarizes the results of the survey. A detailed report on survey findings can be found on the Center's web site at www.mshealthpolicy.com.

■ Significance

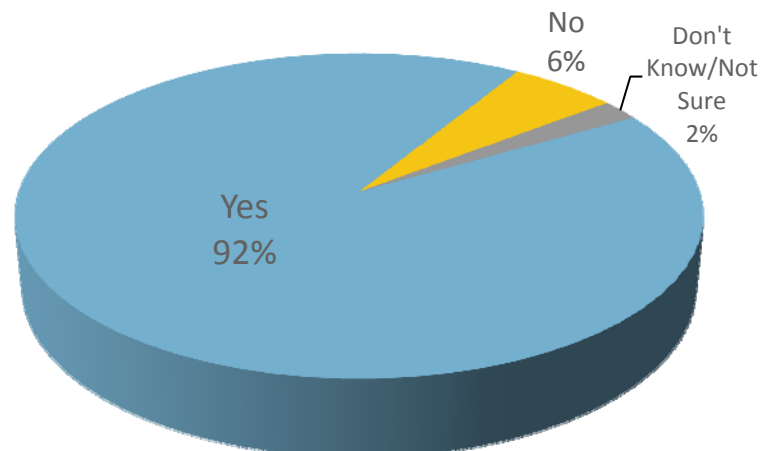
In addition to setting requirements regarding sex-related education in public schools, HB 999 also reconstitutes the Teen Pregnancy Prevention Task Force and revises its duties to include evaluation of the impact of sex-related education policies on teen pregnancy rates. Mississippi has the highest rate of births to teenagers of all states, and data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey indicate high rates of sexual activity among Mississippi youth:

- 44.9 percent of high school students report currently being sexually active (highest of all reporting states);
- 61.0 percent of high school students report ever having sex (highest of all reporting states); and
- 26.2 percent of middle school students report ever having sex.

■ Public Perception

About 92 percent of parents surveyed said that sex-related education should be taught in the Mississippi public school system at an age-appropriate grade level.

Figure 1: Mississippi Parents' Responses to the Question: Should Sex-Related Education be Taught in the Mississippi Public School System at an Age Appropriate Grade Level?



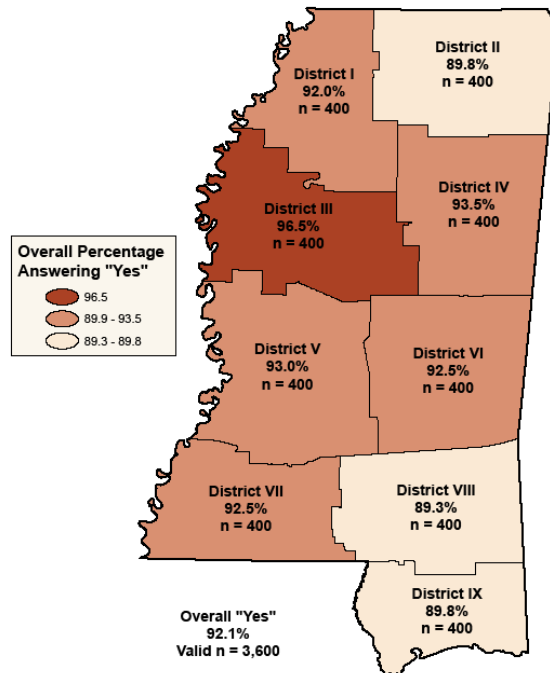
There was some variation in opinion based on demographic characteristics, although at no point for any of these categories did support drop below 85 percent. Support expressed by black parents was significantly ($p < 0.001$) higher than for white parents.

Figure 2: Support for Sex-related Education in the Public School System by Gender, Race, Income, and Education.

Category	Yes	No	Don't Know/Refused
Female	93.5%	4.9%	1.6%
Male	85.8%	9.8%	4.3%
White	87.7%	9.4%	3.5%
Black	97.6%	1.9%	0.5%
<\$20,000	95.7%	3.2%	1.1%
\$20,000 - \$49,999	93.6%	4.7%	1.7%
\$50,000 - \$74,999	87.8%	9.6%	2.7%
\$75,000+	89.8%	6.8%	3.4%
< HS	94.0%	3.9%	2.1%
HS or GED	93.2%	5.1%	1.7%
Some College	91.4%	6.2%	2.4%
College Graduate	92.2%	5.2%	2.6%
Graduate School	89.3%	9.2%	1.5%

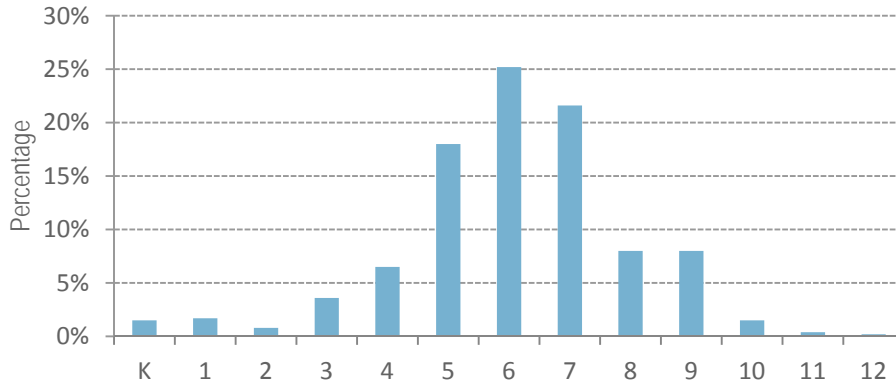
Support also varied by geographic area of the state, with the highest level of support (96.5 percent) in the lower delta region (Public Health District III), and the lowest level (89.3 percent) in the southeastern part of the state (Public Health District VIII).

Percentage of Parents Who Support Teaching Sex-related Education in the Mississippi Public School System 2011



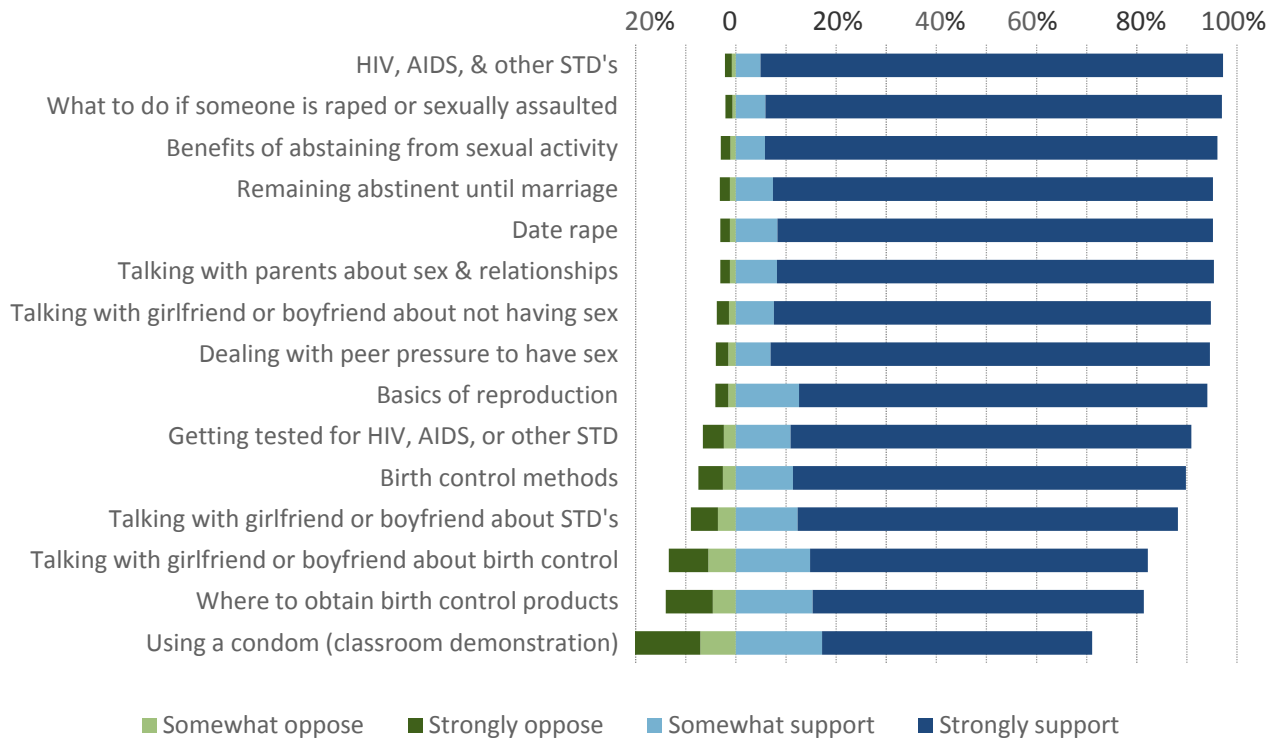
The majority of parents (64.8 percent) thought that sex-related education should first be taught in middle school (grades 5, 6, and 7).

Figure 3: Parent Responses Regarding the Grade Level at which Sex-related Education Should First Be Taught.

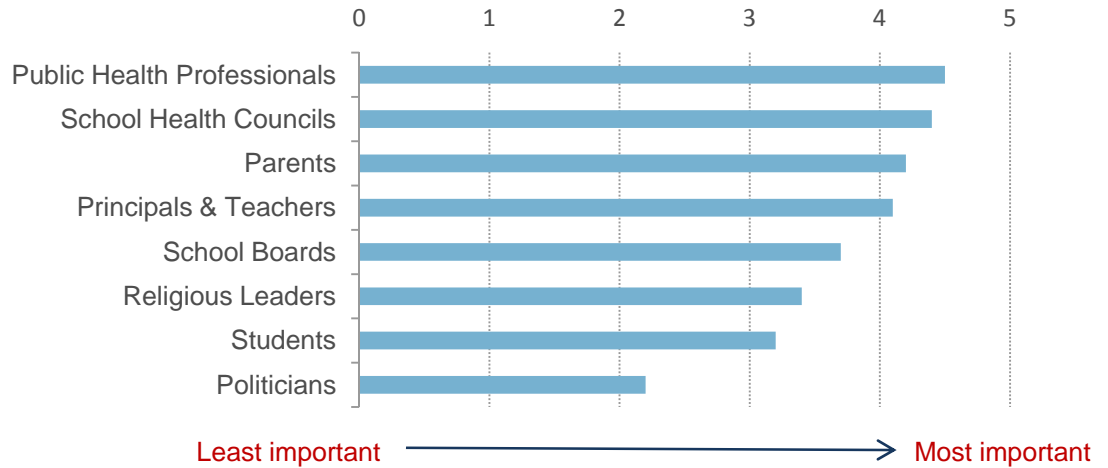


Parents were asked about specific topics that could be included in the curriculum and how strongly they supported or opposed the inclusion of each topic. The majority of parents supported all topics, although in varying degrees. The topic with the least support – how to use a condom correctly through classroom demonstration – was opposed by 22.3 percent of parents.

Figure 4: Parent Support or Opposition to Selected Topics Being Taught in School.



Most parents (61 percent) thought that students should be separated by gender during sex-related education classes. The same percentage expressed the opinion that parents should have to sign a form in order for a student to participate in sex-related education classes. When asked to rate the importance of the type of people or groups who should determine the material to be taught in sex-related education classes, parents rated public health professionals the highest, followed by school health councils.



Policy Implications

Parents overwhelmingly support teaching sex-related education in Mississippi public schools. The majority think the education should begin in middle school, and the curriculum should be comprehensive and determined by public health professionals. They support separating children by gender during sex-related education classes and requiring parents to provide written permission for a student to be included in the class.

Sources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). 1995-2009 Middle school youth risk behavior survey data. Available at <http://apps.nccd.cdc.gov/youthonline>. Accessed on November 9, 2011.

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Miss. Code of 1972 Ann. § 37-13-171 (2011).

Miss. Code of 1972 Ann. § 37-13-173 (2011).



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