The Power of Words. How Abstinence Made its Way Into Our Schools.

It really is remarkable. Who would have thought that one word could make it so far into the education of our youth? One little word.

In my previous blog, "The Importance of Words. How Sex Ed Is its Own Worst Enemy" I spoke to the effect the words sex and ed have had on limiting our ability to teach our youth about reproductive health. With those two words, reproductive health education came to a standstill in the public school system. But this is not the case with the word abstinence.

Let's go back to 1981. It was the Reagan era and abstinence only until marriage programs were being funded by the government. The goal of these programs was to teach our youth to say no to sex. There were a lot of ways this was implemented. There were virginity pledges, purity pledges, and even events where fathers would give their daughters rings to put on their left hand as a show of dedication to their ideals of waiting to have sex until legally married. Lots and lot of money was given to these programs, which persisted long after Reagan. The most heavily funded years were 1996-2006. By the year 2010, abstinence programs received over $1.5 billion dollars. That's a lot of purity rings. The most startling part about all of this is that the abstinence programs were not vetted. A study done by Mathmatica Policy Research (2007) showed that youth receiving abstinence only education versus those that received no education in this topic did not fare better. In fact, youth receiving no education fared as well or better than those receiving abstinence only education. So how could something with no proven history of effectiveness work its way into our school system and get great funding too? Simple. One word. Abstinence.

It is so easy to talk about abstinence. Lots of people could get behind it. Teachers really didn't need to know anything about reproductive health. They just had to know how to teach kids to say no to sex. One of the easiest ways to do this was through shame. We started telling our youth that those who had participated in sex (by sex I mean penis in vagina sex) were less than those who did not. Our youth were told shaming, fear based things like, "If you have sex you will get a disease and die," or, "If you have sex, no one will want you later," or my favorite, "Having sex before marriage will ban you from heaven." At this point, abstinence became a moral compass and was no longer a tool our youth could use when trying to navigate the waters of sexual exploration.

But then we may ask what harm could possibly come by using this word? One of the most insidious was the overemphasis on traditional heterosexual intercourse and the ignorance regarding all other sorts of sexual contact. Because of this, many of our youth, from middle school to college, believe that "abstinence-approved" sex does not include oral, anal, or touching, and believe they are free to engage in those behaviors and still honor their purity pledges. After all, they still have their "V" card. The tragic consequences have been seen with high numbers of unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases.

This is where I have to hand it to the abstinence-until-marriage programs. They made it happen. They received funding, were welcomed into school districts, and became a household word almost overnight. All without having to prove that their curriculum was effective. They did this because their system, their idea, was not complicated, and most importantly, they stood together. Their message was simple. They didn't disagree on what to call it or what the general message should be. They were united.

Sex ed? Not so much. Educators in this field kept calling it sex ed even though it was turned away time and time again. It didn't matter that we were not making progress. What mattered was we were going to call it sex ed because that is what it had been called for decades. Forever, actually.

Perhaps we should take a page out of the playbook of abstinence only education. Perhaps they are on to something. Maybe simplifying the title was a great idea. Abstinence education didn't call it "Moral Compass Time," or "Don't Put a Penis in Your Vagina curriculum." Nope. That might have offended someone and they didn't want the risk of that happening. They picked one word. One simple word. They hid behind the cloak of this word for decades. So in just a very short time, (in relation to sex ed) abstinence has become more well known than reproductive health. And even though abstinence doesn't even begin to cover all the topics of reproductive health, it still ranked higher and was picked more often than sex ed. And yet, it is ineffective.

So if this one little word could make it into the school system and change the face of reproductive health education, perhaps we should take a page out of abstinences play book. Maybe, just maybe they have shown us that words really do matter. Let’s work on getting reproductive health education into the schools instead. We just need to come up with a catchy word.

One label. One concept. Only this time the curriculum will be effective.