Legislating Sex: The Influence of Public Opinion on Sex Education Policy in Virginia

Emily Suzanne Rafal
College of William and Mary

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Legislating Sex: The Influence of Public Opinion on Sex Education Policy in Virginia

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in Women's Studies from The College of William and Mary

by

Emily Suzanne Rafal

Accepted for ________________________________
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

____________________________
Leisa Meyer, Director

____________________________
Nancy Gray

____________________________
C. Lawrence Evans

Williamsburg, VA
Legislating Sex: The Influence of Public Opinion on Sex Education Policy in Virginia

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Introduction: Putting Sex Education in Public Schools

Sex education is an inherently personal topic; in everyday conversation, meetings, and classrooms, when the topic of sex or sex education comes up, college students almost always find ways to share their experiences with sex education. The stories range from amusing anecdotes about entertaining lessons to quiet admissions that their school did not teach sex education and therefore they did not know that sexually transmitted infections (STIs) could be contracted through oral sex. Students have a wide array of both experiences with sex education and personal opinions about the best way to teach students about sexual health and sexuality. Students, of course, are not the only population with opinions about sex education. Parents, teachers, school administrators, politicians, and religious leaders, among others, all have vested interests in and vocal opinions about how and what students should be taught in school about sex. And it is precisely because sex education is such a personal subject that these diverse groups have voiced their beliefs. However, sex education policy does not always reflect these opinions. This thesis focuses on the unique influence that public opinion has on sex education policy in Virginia.

The history of sex education illuminates the constant attention paid to public opinion and the influence the public had on policy and implementation. In the nineteenth century, sex education was, for the most part, limited to the advice manuals that proliferated in this time period which “provide[d] their readers guidance in sexual matters, and by extension, in the mastery of the unruly self.”¹ These advice manuals focused on abstinence from sexual relations except when the goal was procreation and even from lustful thoughts, which could be controlled only through self-mastery. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Victorian advice pamphlets focused their

attention on male sexuality because men were thought to harbor dangerous sexual impulses. The ideal woman on the other hand, was not just sexually chaste but removed from sexual desire altogether, so she did not need advice on how to live a pure life.\(^2\) Some late-nineteenth century reformers called for “moral education” that included information about sex and sexuality. These reformers wanted mothers to teach their children that sex was only appropriate in the context of a loving marriage.\(^3\) But, despite the existence of sex advice literature, many young women were poorly prepared for sex in marriage; one study at the turn of the twentieth century showed a correlation between “lack of sexual instruction, distaste for sex, and unhappiness in marriage” and found that some young women thought that kissing or holding hands might lead to conception.\(^4\) Young men, on the other hand, often learned information about sexuality first from their peers, and though these young men frequently reported that their sexual feelings were evil and degrading, many of them also engaged in premarital sex, usually with prostitutes.\(^5\) Through the nineteenth century, formal sex education was confined to the home through pamphlets, other advice books, and parents, which produced a huge lack of useful information for white middle-class young women. Informal sex education, on the other hand, through peers and popular culture, produced a difficult double-bind for young men. Though the methods have changed, the presumption that women and men have fundamentally different sexual instincts has continued to shape the content of sex education in classrooms today.

Vital to how the public came to understand sex education and sexual health around the turn of the twentieth century was the invention of adolescence as a distinct developmental category that encompassed the transition from childhood to adulthood. Psychologist G. Stanley

\(^2\) Ibid., 4-7.
\(^4\) Ibid., 177.
\(^5\) Ibid., 180.
Hall differentiated adolescents, youth that he defined as being between puberty and marriage, from children and adults in his 1904 tome, *Adolescence*. Importantly, Hall was extremely affected by his experiences growing up with strict sexual mores. Because of his upbringing, he believed as a young man “that any one who swerved in the slightest from the norm of purity was liable to be smitten with some loathsome disease,” and thus his definition of adolescence incorporated a call to maintain sexual purity for the new age group that was plagued with sexual desire without a proper venue for fulfillment.\(^6\) The distinction between adolescents and adults was solidified as more and more young people attended school—by 1900, over half of all school-aged children attended school of some sort—visibly separating adolescents from working adults. And, the average age of puberty declined while the average age of marriage rose, creating an even longer, and thus more obvious, period between childhood and adulthood.\(^7\) Adolescence, then, was inherently about sexuality and sexual repression. The advent of adolescence as a developmental stage allowed future reformers and sex educators to focus on a specific population when distributing their information.

At the same time that Hall popularized the idea of adolescence, the field of public health flourished and with it came a campaign for sexual health and morality. At first, Dr. Prince A. Morrow, who published *Social Diseases and Marriage* in the same year that Hall published *Adolescence*, did not focus on young adults in his attempts to rid American society of the sexual immorality and venereal diseases that he thought were linked to other social problems as varied as prostitution and infant mortality. Because his efforts were so focused on the “ignorance and prudishness” that led to high rates of venereal disease (VD), he first sought to educate the adults

\(^6\) Moran, 1-3.
\(^7\) Ibid., 15.
that VD primarily plagued.\textsuperscript{8} Morrow held speaking events across the country in order to garner support and raise awareness about what he considered to be an epidemic of sexual immorality. And, he soon turned to the idea of educating students in schools about the dangers of premarital and extramarital sex because parents were ill-equipped to do so themselves.\textsuperscript{9} In 1913, after Morrow’s death, his American Federation for Sex Hygiene merged with the purity crusader group American Vigilance Association to form the American Social Hygiene Association (ASHA). ASHA placed its efforts in education because its members believed that parents and churches were incapable of understanding the science behind sexual health. The goal of ASHA’s vision of sex education was to eliminate prostitution and other negative sexual practices that were affecting society. Sex education was, at first, aimed at adults but ASHA and others did not see evidence that their programs had made a difference. Public schools at this time were expanding exponentially, so they were a prime site for educating youth about sexual health. In order to gain public support for their programs aimed at adolescents, sex educators had to convince the public that they were not violating innocent minds, but rather that young people were apt to learn about sex from pernicious outsiders; sex educators would, then, arm adolescents with the tools to maintain moral sexuality, exemplified by marital reproductive sex, throughout their lives.\textsuperscript{10} The importance of public support in sex education has not changed since the curricula first entered schools. At first, sex educators entered schools through special lectures that taught students the connection between sexual immorality and venereal diseases. Quickly, though, sex educators realized that these lectures only sparked interest in students and sex education curricula were instead incorporated in already existing biology courses with the goal

\textsuperscript{9} Moran, 29-31.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 40-43.
of reducing sexual curiosity and raising awareness about the ill effects of immorality.\textsuperscript{11} The grounding of sex education in the sciences gave it legitimacy but did not diminish the social hygienists’ goal of teaching morality. The modern idea of including a sex education curriculum in public education directly stems from the social hygiene movement and a new understanding of adolescence, both products of the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century.

The teaching of sex education in public schools did not become popular during the sexual hygiene movement of the early twentieth century. In 1914, only about 1\% of schools taught sex hygiene.\textsuperscript{12} The coming decades saw countless social changes, including a greater understanding and acceptance of sexual pleasure within marriage in the 1920s and 30s\textsuperscript{13} and a greater acceptance of premarital sexual exploration starting in the 1920s.\textsuperscript{14} Starting during World War I and continuing through World War II, social hygienists focused on the consequences of promiscuity and venereal disease infections linked to the wars and did not pursue implementing sex education in the schools despite the discomfort that social changes inevitably cause.\textsuperscript{15} After World War II, however, social hygienists were reinvigorated to pursue educating youth. ASHA’s Dr. William F. Snow expanded the idea of public health to include social and psychological well-being, and in doing so allowed social hygienists and sex educators to use sex education to protect the idea of the family. Family Life Education (FLE) was born out of the call for a curriculum that would reinforce normative ideals of “family” including heterosexuality, premarital abstinence from sexual activities, and female femininity and male masculinity. Sexual health and sexuality were relegated to a small portion of the FLE curriculum, which focused on giving students “information on mental and emotional health, leisure time, socializing, and other

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{11} Ibid., 54-55.
\bibitem{12} Ibid., 61.
\bibitem{13} Ibid., 93.
\bibitem{14} D’Emilio and Freedman, 241.
\bibitem{15} Moran, 122.
\end{thebibliography}
immediate concerns of daily living” in order to prepare the middle 60% of students for their futures. FLE grew out of a concern about the breakdown of the “traditional” family, and while it offered students information about many topics relating to their everyday lives, it was one of the first widely accepted and employed programs that brought sex education into the classroom. ASHA, in fact, purposely de-emphasized the role of sex education in FLE in order to gain wider public acceptance, clearly showing the importance of public opinion in the creation and implementation of sex education curricula. The history of FLE is vital to the understanding of sex education in Virginia because the state still uses the rhetoric of FLE in its health education programs.

Although FLE was the first widely used program that brought sex education to public schools, the implementation of FLE varied across the country. Because the United States is made up of so many different and diverse states and regions, public schools naturally must cater to the specific needs of the school system and demands from its community. FLE was not the only venue for sex education in public schools in the mid-twentieth century, and even where FLE was used the topics covered depended on the school. Family life education was often criticized by public health officials for the lack of attention paid to sexuality and sexual health, and the changing sexual climate of the 1960s called attention to the fact that adolescent sexuality was in need of attention. Public opinion polls in the early 60s showed that over 60% of parents supported sex education in schools. While some schools continued with the goals of FLE, which aimed to protect the “ideal” home structure, some schools developed new curricula that focused more on sexuality and sexual health. These programs purported to give students

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16 Ibid., 139.
17 Ibid., 149.
18 Ibid., 139-140.
19 Ibid., 168.
unbiased information so they could make their own informed decisions about their sexual lives, though teachers often embedded morals in the course by sharing horror stories about premarital sex leading to pregnancy and disease. By the end of the 1960s, however, there was considerable backlash from conservative populations about the inclusion of sex education in schools, especially curricula that did not blatantly dictate “proper” sexual behavior; the campaigns waged by these groups clearly influenced sex education policy. In California and many other states, the opposition to sex education convinced school boards and state legislators to change school sex education policy to offer programs “based on the Bible, century-old textbooks…and the Moral Leadership Program of the U.S. Marine Corps.” These battles over sex education highlight the power that the public, and especially parents, had and still have over sex education policy.

In the 1980s and 90s, the debate over how, when, and where to educate youth about sexuality and sexual health continued. Shaken by the AIDS crisis in the 1980s, many parents, politicians, and sex educators led 41 states to either encourage or require sex education in public schools. Conservative groups continued to condemn sex education programs, leading many localities to adopt programs that endeavored to maintain ideals like abstinence until marriage and “traditional” sex roles that assume, for example, male sexual aggression and female passivity and emotionality. Although by the late 1990s the debates over sex education in schools had shifted somewhat to discussing what to teach rather than if it was appropriate to teach sex education to students, the role of public opinion was enormous. Community members were, and continue to be, active in the debates over sex education because their tax dollars fund public schools, and

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20 Ibid., 171.
21 Ibid., 185.
22 Ibid., 208.
23 Ibid., 212.
therefore believe they have a right to be involved in local school policies. Because the general public favored some kind of sex education but were anxious about young people expressing their sexualities, Republican senators passed the Adolescent Family Life Act in 1981, which funded sex education that promoted the ideals of abstinence until marriage. Current sex education legislation is constantly in flux, in large part due to the changing needs and opinions of communities.

Currently, there are numerous options for sex education curricula, but most fall into one of three categories. The first, abstinence-only sex education “promote[s] abstinence from all sexual activity, usually until marriage, as the only way to reduce the risks of pregnancy, disease, and other potential consequences of sex.” A report requested by Representative Harry Waxman (D-CA) in 2004, and numerous other studies, have shown that many abstinence-only programs contain false information about the effectiveness of contraceptives and the risks of abortion, and rely on stereotypes about white, middle-class masculinity and femininity that look eerily similar to ideal Victorian sex roles. Further, most studies about abstinence-only sex education have shown that these programs are ineffective in reducing premarital sex, one of the main goals of the programs, and actually lead to an increase in dangerous behaviors like unprotected sex. The second type of program, abstinence-plus, highlight the benefits of abstinence until marriage, but also give students accurate information about contraception. The third category, comprehensive

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26 Ibid.


sex education, also offers students accurate information about sexuality and sexual health without the emphasis on abstinence.\textsuperscript{29} Both abstinence-plus and comprehensive programs have been proven effective in promoting sexual health.\textsuperscript{30} Although many abstinence-only sex education supporters and media outlets touted a 2010 study that showed that abstinence education is effective as supporting their ideals, the study, in reality, used an abstinence-plus program that would not have qualified for federal abstinence-only sex education funding.\textsuperscript{31} As I will show, the decision about what kind of sex education to offer in Virginia is heavily dependent on local opinions.

As the history of sex education demonstrates, it was not put in schools accidentally, nor was it connected to morality inadvertently. Starting with Morrow’s assertion that sexual health and morality were related, sex education has consistently involved a normative understanding of an ideal sexuality. The debate over sex education, including what to teach and where to teach it, taps into a “fundamental conflict between significant groups of citizens over core values.”\textsuperscript{32} Decisions about what sex education should teach requires a discussion about what kinds of sexual acts and relationships are morally acceptable. Sex education policy, therefore, evokes this conflict between groups, which is a principle element of what political scientists call morality policy. Morality policy is unlike other types of policy precisely because it draws on ideals that differing groups are often unwilling to sacrifice. In many cases, these “characteristics of morality policy lead to a sort of hyper-responsiveness where policymakers strive to mirror the preferences

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{30} Jemmott, Jemmott, & Fong. 1998.
\textsuperscript{31} Jemmott, John B. III, Loretta Sweet Jemmott, and Geoffrey T. Fong, “Efficacy of a theory-based abstinence-only intervention over 24 months: a randomized controlled trial with young adolescents.” \textit{Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine}. 164 (2010), 152-159.
of their constituents very closely.”

The process of becoming an elected official requires politicians to listen closely to their constituents’ opinions, especially about issues that they deem important, in order to receive the majority of the vote. The importance of values or principles that people involved in policy debates hold to be both important and immutable in morality policy generates public interest and divisive opinions, and therefore political interest, in the issue areas.

Contrary to this understanding of morality policy, I argue that sex education policy does not necessarily reflect public opinion about the issue, nationally or in Virginia. There are many possible reasons why sex education is an exception to morality policy generalizations and I explore them later. However, before delving into how public opinion and sex education policy are interrelated, it is important to understand exactly what is meant by public opinion and how I have measured it. Public opinion polls are only one of many useful ways to look at mass attitudes about specific issues. And, because the responses to these polls can be highly influenced by the phrasing of questions used, they do not always get at genuine public opinions. So, while public opinion polls can be a useful starting place for understanding the views of the public, it cannot be the only tool used. Political scientists Lawrence Jacobs and Robert Shapiro have shown that politicians look to local media to both influence public opinion and to better understand it. Media is often the sole basis of information that the general public has, so “many of the instances of change in public opinion have involved evaluations of particular proposals that elites have been actively and visibly debating.”

Also, views expressed in local newspapers and on television often reflect local opinions because the media both caters to their audience and influences them.

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33 Ibid., 175.
Politicians attempt to frame their debates in order to win over the public, which highlights the need for public support in the creation and implementation of policy. Of course, politicians and other elites influence public opinion through their visible disputes, but their constituents also influence the policy inclinations of legislators. In a particularly interesting use of modern technology, the ability to comment on articles printed online offers people the opportunity to voice their opinions. As philosopher Michel Foucault theorized, it is not just the privileged elite that influence the discourse surrounding sex education and other political issues, but everyone.\(^{35}\)

Public opinion can also be found in the organizations and committees that form in order to influence sex education programs. In order to grasp the nuances of public opinion about sex education in Virginia, I have used all of these different approaches to understanding public opinion.

In depth studies about sex education in general, and public opinion of sex education specifically, have tended to focus on states that are on opposite sides of the political spectrum. Sex education in states like Virginia, which does not mandate a specific kind of sex education curriculum and has not had a highly visible part in the debates about sex education, has been overlooked. However, sex education policy in states like Virginia is more likely to reflect the nuances of public opinion because opinion is so varied by region and because each school system is given jurisdiction over the creation and implementation of sex education. I look specifically at sex education policy in public schools because they have more consistent methods of implementing sex education programs and they are more closely connected to the political process. In the rest of this paper, I plan to explore the various ways that public opinion about sex education influences sex education policy in Virginia. Through interviews with local school

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board members and health educators, a close look at media and the responses to it, and studies of public opinion, I illuminate the complex relationship between opinion and policy.

**Section One: Sex Education Policy and Curricula in Virginia**

*State Sex Education Policy*

Sex education in the state of Virginia has clearly been influenced by the foundation laid by the social hygiene movement and the battles over sex education all over the country in the second half of the twentieth century. The language used in sex education policy in Virginia evokes this history. Specifically, Virginia uses Family Life Education (FLE) as the framework to introduce sex education into public schools, which, as I have shown, has a history of deemphasizing sexual health and sexuality. The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) developed the FLE curriculum in the late 1980s, at a time when debates about sex education were common and widely publicized. These disputes required each side to convince the public that they were right; more conservative community members, often with the help of national evangelical groups like Focus on the Family, argued against sex education or for abstinence-only education, while more liberal community members argued for more comprehensive sex education. Virginia’s curriculum was developed by public school administrators and teachers, individuals from state agencies, parent groups, and non-profit organizations that were involved in family life services. These groups developed a report that was then submitted to the Virginia

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* For the purposes of my thesis, I define “liberal” as an ideology that, in general, promotes social and sexual freedoms, and can generally be mapped on to the Democratic party. I define “conservative” as an ideology that promotes social and sexual restraint and can generally be mapped on to the Republican party.
General Assembly and used in the creation of the state-wide sex education policy.\textsuperscript{38} The collaboration from many different members of the public mitigated the resistance that many school boards across the country saw because the VDOE incorporated many different perspectives in the creation of Virginia’s sex education policy. The VDOE’s inclusion of so many groups was a nod to the importance of understanding public opinion on such a charged topic. In order to avoid any debates that might restrict the creation or implementation of sex education in Virginia, the VDOE used the framework of Family Life Education and took constituents opinions into account when creating their own sex education program.

The Family Life Education program that passed in 1988 granted each school district the right to either create their own curriculum or use the standards set forth by the state to be implemented in the 1989-1990 school year. Each locality could choose what to teach and whether the curriculum would go from kindergarten through tenth grade or through twelfth grade. And, continuing the state’s hypersensitivity to public turmoil, each community was required to form a “community involvement team” to help in the development of the curriculum.\textsuperscript{39} The VDOE also required school districts to give their constituents an annual opportunity to review their sex education curriculum.\textsuperscript{40} VDOE officials clearly understood that each school district not only had its own needs, but would likely have different ideas about what kinds of sex education were best for its students. They even provided an “opt-out” clause that allowed parents to pull their children out of the classroom when the sex education curriculum was taught,\textsuperscript{41} giving parents the ultimate discretion in evaluating the appropriateness of sex education curriculum for their children. The early stages of planning and implementation, from

\textsuperscript{38} Virginia Department of Education, 4.  
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 5.  
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 9.  
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 9.
the state-wide collaboration to the community involvement team, highlight the influence that public attitudes have on sex education policy. The power of public opinion on sex education curricula in Virginia is not an accident; political aversion to public opposition led Virginia civic leaders to incorporate the public in as many areas and stages of sex education policy as possible.

The VDOE standards on sex education curricula have been changed and amended over the past two decades. In 2007, for example, Governor Tim Kaine cut funding for abstinence-only programs by not applying for federal funding and ending state funding for such programs. However, because funding for sex education curricula in public schools is included in the funding for health education programs in general, public schools are still able to offer abstinence-only sex education curricula as long as it fulfills the state requirements. Governor Kaine’s defunding of abstinence-only education was certainly an important public statement of support for more comprehensive sex education, but only directly affected funding for private organizations that offer sex education.\(^{42}\)

The state of Virginia currently requires school districts to include information about any sexual conduct or misconduct laws applicable to units of instruction; mental health education and awareness; the benefits, challenges, responsibilities, and value of marriage for men, women, children, and community; the value of abstaining from sexual activities until marriage; human sexuality; sexuality as an aspect of one’s total personality; human reproduction and contraception, including the benefits of adoption for any unwanted pregnancy; etiology and prevention of sexually transmitted diseases; parenting skills; substance abuse; child abuse; resistance to peer pressure; development of positive self-concepts and respect for people of other races, religions, and/or origins; prevention of sexual assault and the importance of receiving

immediate attention and advice in the event of sexual assault; and the characteristics of dating violence and abusive relationships. Sex education classrooms are also required to be segregated by sex.\textsuperscript{43} This long list of requirements reflects the goals of Family Life Education, which aims to educate students not only about sex but about all aspects of adult life.

\textit{Local Sex Education Curricula}

Although the state requires many specific topics be covered in FLE classrooms, school districts are able to decide how the material is taught. This gives each school district a great deal of flexibility. For example, although Virginia requires schools to teach students about contraception, it does not stipulate that contraception must be presented in a medically accurate light. In fact, the only specific provision regarding birth control is that schools must include the fact that abstinence is the only 100\% effective method of preventing pregnancy.\textsuperscript{44} The discretion given to local school boards and community members about the ways that specific topics are covered creates a great deal of variation in sex education curricula within Virginia. Most school districts in Virginia do not publish their family life education curricula on their websites, but 27 of 141 school districts in the state do. Out of the 27 school districts that provide enough information to tell what kind of sex education program they offer, 16 or about 59\% are abstinence-plus programs while 11 or about 41\% are abstinence-only.\textsuperscript{45} These percentages do not necessarily represent the overall number of abstinence-only and abstinence-plus programs, because the school districts that display their family life education curricula were more likely to be larger school districts. The smaller school districts, which often have only one or two high

\textsuperscript{43} Virginia Department of Education, 10-11.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 32.
\textsuperscript{45} Each school district website was searched for a family life education curriculum, which were then evaluated for content.
schools, are, in general, in more rural, conservative areas.\textsuperscript{46} Still, 41\% represents a sizable minority of schools that employ abstinence-only sex education curricula.

The discrepancies in sex education curricula in Virginia due to state policy affect how students understand sexual health and sexuality. As I discussed earlier, abstinence-only sex education has not been shown to reduce sexual activity and has a negative effect on contraceptive use while students who receive comprehensive sex education are more likely to use contraception. In fact, young adults who take virginity pledges, where students pledge to remain sexually abstinent until marriage and which many abstinence-only programs either support or include, are one third less likely to use contraception when they do become sexually active.\textsuperscript{47} Although Virginia requires sex education curricula to emphasize the importance of abstaining from sex before marriage, many school systems employ abstinence-plus curricula which emphasize abstinence while also giving accurate and (usually) non-judgmental information about contraception and sexually transmitted disease prevention. Thus, some students in Virginia are armed with proper information to prepare them for sexual relationships while others are only offered ignorance.

Students who attend Albemarle County Public Schools in central Virginia receive abstinence-plus sex education. The curriculum opens by saying, “The Albemarle County School Board wishes to state to its students, parents, faculty and administration that abstinence is the best choice with regard to alcohol, drugs, or premarital sex…We wish to make it clear that that is


our standard.”48 However, in the context of the full curriculum, this statement reads like a defense against conservative objections. The high school curriculum, in fact, includes the methods, effectiveness, failure rates, and availability of many methods of birth control including abstinence, sterilization, artificial devices (birth control pill, IUD, condom, foam, sponge, diaphragm, cervical cap, etc), withdrawal, and no method. The curriculum also teaches students about “responsible communication relating to birth control.”49 Of course, the mention of abstinence in the beginning of the document is not the only time the method is addressed. Students are taught that abstinence is the best choice morally, socially, and psychologically and they are taught the “wellness aspects” of postponing sexual activity, problem solving skills, and Virginia state laws in order to encourage abstinence.50 However, students are also given complete and accurate information about contraception and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in order to prepare them for their sexual lives. Albemarle County, which surrounds Charlottesville, is split politically; in the 2009 gubernatorial election, 50.47% voted for Republican Bob McDonnell while 49.40% voted for Democrat Creigh Deeds.51 Although political affiliation is not the only factor that influences public opinion, it does give some insight into what public opinion might be about sex education. In its sex education curriculum, Albemarle County Public Schools attempts to find a middle ground between abstinence-only education and comprehensive sex education.

Like Albemarle County, the Fairfax County school district, located in the Washington, D.C. suburbs of Northern Virginia, is also split fairly evenly politically and employs an

49 Ibid., 32.
50 Ibid., 31.
abstinence-plus curriculum. Students are taught to “identify sexual abstinence as the appropriate choice for adolescents and identify appropriate methods for expressing feelings and affection.”

But, like in Albemarle County, there is also an accurate discussion of contraception and STIs, at least on paper. Unlike Albemarle County, the Fairfax County curriculum also includes discussions about abortion and homosexuality. Though the Fairfax County curriculum could also be classified as an abstinence-plus program, there are obvious differences between this curriculum and the one in Albemarle County. These dissimilarities highlight the fact that even in a similar political climate and with the same guidelines, school districts can include very different topics in their sex education programs.

While there are few politically liberal school districts in Virginia, those that do exist are still bound by the confines of state sex education guidelines, which include the requirement that each program must provide information about abstinence. For this reason, counties like Arlington that are more liberal than the rest of the state have sex education curricula that are very similar to the curricula in Albemarle or Fairfax counties because by necessity, sex education programs in Virginia must be at least abstinence-plus. Arlington public schools, therefore, stress the benefits of abstaining from sex before marriage while also discussing the positive aspects of sexuality, and covering methods of preventing STIs, and unwanted pregnancies. Constituents in liberal school districts like Arlington are less likely to believe that abstinence until marriage is an essential value, but because abstinence-plus curricula are more effective than abstinence-only

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53 Ibid.


curricula and because the state mandates a discussion of abstinence, left-leaning localities have curricula that look much like more politically moderate school districts.

Roanoke County public schools, located in the southwestern part of the state, employs an abstinence-only curriculum. Roanoke is considerably more politically conservative than the other counties discussed above.\(^5^6\) The ninth-grade sex education curriculum in Roanoke includes the “development of healthy relationships, communication skills, medication and substance abuse and sexuality education that focuses on dating and abstinence education” and adds marriage, childbirth, and parenting in tenth grade.\(^5^7\) The curriculum promotes abstinence and gives students the “opportunity” to choose abstinence for themselves by signing a virginity pledge while also teaching alternatives to premarital sex for expressing affection. Students are also taught “the failure rates of birth control,” the “damage of specific STDs,” and “how guys and girls view sex differently, while grappling with the emotional impact of sex before marriage.”\(^5^8\) The Roanoke curriculum does not specify the details of what information is conveyed on birth control and STIs so there is no way to assess the accuracy of the information distributed to students. What is available from the Roanoke curriculum, however, focuses on the negative aspects of contraceptive and disease prevention methods rather than the success rates. Further, the curriculum includes information about the so-called “inherent differences” between male and female sexualities. Roanoke educators’ reliance on the side-effects and unreliability of contraception and on stereotypes of male and female sexualities is commonly found in


abstinence-only curricula and is often what make these curricula ineffective. Obviously Roanoke’s curriculum is vastly different from the abstinence-plus curricula used in Albemarle and Fairfax Counties. Although the abstinence-plus curricula also employ values such as the importance of abstinence until marriage in their sex education materials, Roanoke’s abstinence-only curriculum is entirely reliant on so-called traditional values that are based on perceived gender differences and a religious appeal for chastity. Because Virginia requires input from the community in the creation of sex education curricula, the political differences between the counties, and therefore differing public opinions, likely lead to these differences.

Although the curricula in Albemarle, Fairfax, and Roanoke Counties are by no means entirely representative of all sex education curricula in Virginia, these examples emphasize the huge disparities in what students in Virginia are learning about sex and sexuality because each locality creates their own program. Sex education in Virginia is likely even more varied than just what is used in each school district because each sex education teacher can emphasize or deemphasize any part of the curriculum. In Roanoke, the curriculum specifically accounts for instructor inconsistency by outlining missteps that teachers should avoid. These missteps include “citing personal sexual experience,” “giving ‘secret’ lessons,” “letting personal bias overly influence teaching,” and “keeping your administrator or principal in the dark” as things to avoid in sex education classrooms.59 These tips, which read more as admonishments, are intended to keep teachers from straying from the curriculum, especially because doing so might incite parents and other members of the public. According to morality policy theory, it is particularly significant that the Roanoke curriculum is the only one that includes this advice because the conservatism of the community would likely react most forcefully to a more liberal curriculum.

59 Roanoke County Public Schools, 2009, 22-23.
Despite efforts to quell differences in how teachers interpret and teach sex education curricula, it is easy for instructors to follow their curriculum and still have variation between classrooms. I attended an Albemarle County public high school, and remember having a fairly open-minded sex education teacher. Although I recall abstinence being mentioned as the only infallible method of birth control, I do not remember it being emphasized as the morally correct choice but rather a good choice among other good options. I also remember learning about gay and lesbian families, which was taught without condemnation, and which was not included in the official curriculum but was in our textbook. I do not know what was taught in other classrooms, but clearly my experiences do not perfectly fit the school board approved curriculum. The fact that each classroom has the potential to produce different experiences even when using the same curriculum makes it difficult to categorize what students learn in school about sex and sexuality. However, the creation and implementation of the official curriculum is, in the end, the most important indicator of the influence of public opinion because the public is often not privy to what actually goes on inside classrooms.

Sex educators in Virginia have intentionally engaged public opinion from the start in order to avoid the often debilitating debates that occurred in other states around the country. From state-wide collaboration among many types of residents in the creation of the Virginia Family Life Education program to the community involvement teams necessary whenever a local curriculum is assessed and revisited, public opinion has touched sex education at every stage of creation and implementation. The diversity in sex education curricula around the state is evidence that something generates these differences among localities. I argue that it is the differing mainstream public opinions within each school district that drives these differences, as
supported by the divergent political leanings within Fairfax, Albemarle, and Roanoke counties. However, political leanings and public opinion of sex education do not perfectly correlate, and in some areas there is a divergence between what kinds of sex education the public supports and what is actually employed. This discrepancy is uncharacteristic of other morality policy issues and seems to be driven by politically extreme opinions rather than mainstream views.

Section Two: Public Opinion of Sex Education in Virginia

As shown in the previous section, both state and local sex education policies are required to take into account the varied opinions constituents might have regarding sex education. In this section I analyze what public opinion of sex education in Virginia actually looks like. Public opinion is an extremely difficult factor to measure because people have different levels of knowledge and experience; people who are ill-informed about a particular issue are more easily swayed by the framing of questions. Because politicians and other public figures are bolstered by having perceived or actual public support, issue framing, or the way in which an issue is presented to the public, is an extremely useful political tool. When politicians frame an issue in an advantageous way, public opinion measures often lean in their favor.\(^\text{60}\) In terms of sex education, conservative politicians often frame the issue around the safety and innocence of children while liberal politicians frame the issue around sexual health.\(^\text{61}\) Importantly, framing effects do not only occur in the aggregate public opinion, but also occur at the individual level. This means that the way that politicians and the media frames an issue in a particular region


influences how individuals understand that issue.\footnote{Jacoby, 763.} So, in regions where conservatives are able to control the dominant discourse surrounding sex education, individuals are more likely to view the issue of sex education as having a being dangerous to children.

\textit{National Data}

Obvious issues with framing aside, there are many ways to gauge public opinion. Public opinion polls offer information about general trends in public perspectives, often for large populations. In order to find more comprehensive opinions about sex education policy I have also used academic studies with large samples in which participants answered many questions regarding the details of sex education curricula. There have not been any large-scale studies of public opinion on sex education in Virginia, but nation-wide and state-specific studies provide insight into what Virginians might believe about sex education. Further, because local media have such a powerful influence on the public, I have used media coverage of local sex education debates to understand the diverse ways in which the issue is framed and therefore how the public is likely to respond. Finally, I have used interviews with educators and school board members to gain an understanding of the type of opinions that the people who write sex education policies in Virginia are most likely to hear and consider.

General trends in public opinion of sex education in the United States have changed over the last few decades; in the past fifteen years the debate has shifted from whether or not to include sex education programs in public schools to what the details of such sex education curricula should be. In fact, a 2004 study funded by National Public Radio, the Kaiser Family Foundation, and the Harvard University John F. Kennedy School of Government found that only
7% of Americans do not believe sex education should be taught in public schools, compared to about 30% opposing sex education in the 1960s. The debate over what to teach in schools is also becoming less contentious. In a 2006 study that polled a randomly selected and nationally representative sample of adults, aged 18 to 83, researchers found that there is a general consensus in the United States that abstinence-plus/comprehensive sex education is more desirable than abstinence-only curricula, with 80.4% of people believing that a combination of teaching abstinence and other methods is effective. Further, the same study showed that the majority of respondents support abstinence-plus programs regardless of religiosity. Even among the most religious people polled, 60.3% prefer curricula that teach abstinence along with other methods of protection from pregnancy and STIs. And, 70% of self-reported conservative respondents supported abstinence-plus curricula as compared to 91% of self-reported liberals. In this particular study the researchers use the term abstinence-plus rather than comprehensive sex education and this phrasing likely influenced the results of the study. However, this data shows robust support for curricula that teach more than abstinence.

Because this study was carried out while President G. W. Bush was still in office, federal funding for abstinence-only education was still intact despite the fact that a large majority of people in the United States prefer abstinence-plus programs. Federal funding for abstinence-only sex education began in 1981 with President Reagan’s Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA), which promoted abstinence as a pregnancy prevention method. In 1997, under President Bill Clinton, AFLA was more explicitly tied to abstinence-only education through Title V in the

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64 Moran, 168.


Welfare Reform Act. Title V mandated very stringent regulations in defining abstinence-only education, therefore requiring any abstinence-based programming that desired federal funding to adhere to these strict standards. In 2000, the federal government allocated more money to abstinence-only education through Community Based Abstinence-Education (CBAE) grants. In 2009, the proposed fiscal year 2010 budget was the first in decades to eliminate abstinence-only funding. Federal funding for abstinence-only sex education was, however, reinstated through the healthcare reform bill. The bill allocates $50 million per year for five years to Title V abstinence-only education programs. Although federal funding for abstinence-only education is slowly being eliminated, state support for such programs is not necessarily ending. Governor Kaine did not apply for federal abstinence-only education funding after 2007, but many Virginia schools still employ abstinence-only programs. Despite changes in funding, abstinence-only sex education has a stronghold in many conservative communities, even though the majority opinion might not support the curricula.

Public Opinion in a State Similar to Virginia

The disparity between public opinion and actual sex education policy at the national level also occurs in more conservative states. North Carolina, for example, mandates that all sex education programs be abstinence-only; however, 89% of respondents favored comprehensive sex education over abstinence-only education. In order to reach this statistic, the researchers asked participants about specific topics to be covered in sex education programs and those that supported teaching how to communicate with partners about birth control and STIs, how to use

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different methods of birth control, and how to use condoms were coded as favoring comprehensive sex education. The researchers in this study suggest that “the term ‘abstinence’ has been shown to have a wide variety of definitions among adolescents. No doubt, similar confusion surrounds the term ‘abstinence-only education’ among parents. Arguably, a discussion of support for specific content in sexuality education would be beneficial to constructive public debate.” Not only does abstinence mean something different to many people, but the term is imbued with political implications as well because politicians have used the term to their advantage. By asking about specific subjects, these researchers attempted to avoid framing effect issues by avoiding the politicized terms comprehensive, abstinence-plus, or abstinence-only sex education. In doing so, they likely received opinions that were more internally consistent because the questions were less likely to evoke the political tension surrounding sex education.

The data about public opinion of sex education in North Carolina cannot be simply applied to public opinion in Virginia because the populations of each state are distinct. However, North Carolina and Virginia do have similar racial and socio-economic demographics. According to a Gallup poll, North Carolina is the 8th most religious state, while Virginia is the 16th most religious state. And, in the 2008 presidential election, 52.7% of Virginians voted for Democrat Barack Obama while 49.9% of voters in North Carolina supported Obama. Because in the North Carolina study lower religiosity and a liberal political affiliation correlated with higher support for comprehensive sex education, the demographics of Virginia suggest that should the same study be performed in the state, even higher numbers of people would support

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71 Ibid., 640.
comprehensive sex education. Because Virginia leaves the specifics of sex education curricula up to local school districts, the majority of people in the most conservative districts might still prefer abstinence-only curricula. However, with support for comprehensive sex education in the fairly religious and conservative state of North Carolina reaching about 90%, it is hard to imagine a school district that conservative.

Public Opinion in Virginia’s Media and School Boards

Because there have not been any public opinion polls or academic studies performed specifically in Virginia, I used local media as one way to assess the majority opinion about sex education. Media influences what communities know about sex education, and so influences their informed opinions. Most of the articles written in Virginia about sex education in the past few years have focused on changes made to sex education policy, from Governor Kaine’s decision not to apply for federal abstinence-only sex education funding\(^75\) to a Henrico County high school’s decision to host an abstinence-only speaker.\(^76\) Editorials and letters to the editor to newspapers are most likely to both influence and reflect public opinion. Even in the most conservative areas of Virginia, such as Roanoke, the opinions expressed in these types of articles are most often in support of more comprehensive sex education. In *The Roanoke Times*, Shanna Flowers writes, “When it comes to teen sex, there’s ideology and there’s reality…Abstinence is a message teens should hear, but they need to know about contraception, too.”\(^77\) Although Kaine’s defunding of abstinence-only education did not affect Roanoke policy, it allowed for heightened awareness about the issue. In Richmond, a local high school that hosted an abstinence-only


\(^{77}\) Flowers, *The Roanoke Times*.
speaker stirred controversy. A *Richmond Times-Dispatch* editorial suggests that abstinence-plus programs are the most appropriate because “Schools shouldn’t be afraid to teach young people right from wrong. They also shouldn’t be afraid to arm them with the facts.” Few local newspapers printed articles that promoted abstinence-only curricula as the best or most effective programs.

Online media is particularly relevant for understanding public opinion because it allows readers to comment on their reaction to articles. These comments cannot be taken to represent the opinions of the entire population of the community, but they do represent some local perspectives and can suggest what the majority of people in that area are likely to believe. In response to an article in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* about the abstinence-speaker at a Henrico high school, those commenting debated about which methods were most effective and appropriate for high school students until 161 comments had been left. Many of the remarks suggest that abstinence speakers are not problematic in and of themselves, but they took issue with fact that the speaker conveyed medically inaccurate information, such as that condoms cannot protect against Chlamydia. Some online comments supported the idea that abstinence-education is not only the best kind of program, but that “Many of those who object to this are just frustrated that another point of view will prevent them from getting their hooks into confused teens.” Although there were many viewpoints represented among these 161 comments, the overwhelming majority argued that teaching about abstinence is important but that teaching it without also presenting methods of contraception is harmful. On a *Roanoke Times* editorial

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supporting the federal government’s decision to defund abstinence-only sex education, all nine of the comments support abstinence-plus or comprehensive sex education.\textsuperscript{80}

In an article in the Hampton Roads area’s \textit{Virginian-Pilot}, two of the four comments did not address the issues raised in the article. However, one commenter wrote, “The problem here is that a few families’ beliefs are keeping our state’s children from learning about contraception and preventing STDs.” On the other hand, another respondent asserted that

\begin{quote}
We don't need to teach children how to have sex, we need to teach the obvious ramifications of having sex and why to wait. I don't have a problem teaching and providing graphic representation of STD symptoms and effects. I don't have a problem impressing upon young girls that "WE" are not pregnant, YOU are.\textsuperscript{81}
\end{quote}

Although proponents of abstinence-plus or comprehensive sex education are not always above using specious arguments, inaccurate information, and relying on gender stereotypes, abstinence-only advocates seem to be more likely to use these tactics, just as in the actual curricula themselves. The majority of comments on local newspaper articles support abstinence-plus or comprehensive sex education, and although this cannot confirm what the majority of opinions regarding sex education are in the areas that these articles and comments come from, they do represent some opinions in those areas. The collection of comments cannot suggest what the majority of people in those areas believe, but they are extremely telling.

Along with public opinion polls, academic research, and media, I have used interviews with school board members and educators in order to gauge public opinion about sex education in Virginia. I was surprised by how many people involved with sex education were not only willing to talk to me about their experiences, but were rather candid about any difficulties their school district has had with engaging community opinion while devising their curriculum. I was


\textsuperscript{81} Kate Wiltrout, “Measure to Expand Sex Education Rejected by Virginia Senate.” \textit{The Virginian-Pilot}, February 6, 2008.
fortunate enough to speak with nine school board members and two educators. Although anecdotes from these educators and school board members may not be entirely accurate or represent the whole community, they do provide insight into how the people in charge of creating and implementing sex education curricula in each school district perceive public opinion and how they integrate it into their programs. These interviews also revealed which types of people were most likely to be vocal about their opinions, and therefore more likely to influence the sex education curriculum in their school district.

Many of the people I interviewed said that there has been little controversy surrounding sex education since the initial implementation in 1987. The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) requires each school district to allow community members to review the FLE curriculum each year.\textsuperscript{82} Annually, each school board gives community members a variety of ways to express their opinions on the sex education curriculum. In Harrisonburg, the school board invites members of the community to attend their meeting and especially reaches out to the groups that have opted out of the program in the past. In Loudon County, there is an announcement on the school district website that materials will be placed on public display at the school district administrative offices. The state mandates that constituents’ opinions must be heard, but in many areas there is little public reaction to the call for input from the community. One Loudon County school board member noted that, “most of the time there is little reaction to the ongoing implementation of the curriculum.”\textsuperscript{83} A Richmond school board member made a similar comment, remarking that there has been little public concern regarding the sex education curricula in the district after the initial implementation of the program.


\textsuperscript{83} Interview, February 4, 2010.
Out of all of the districts where I have had the opportunity to interview people involved in FLE, Harrisonburg has had the most ongoing input from people and groups in the community. A school board member in the district noted, “Our area is very conservative and many churches voiced their opinions that they would only tolerate an Abstinence-Based program so that is what we adopted.” Since the initial creation of their sex education curriculum, the Harrisonburg school board has struggled with specific communities, particularly the Russian community. According to the school board member I spoke with, the school board “often invite[s] the groups that usually opt-out. There is good discussion, a few change their minds and opt out of ‘sensitive’ lessons only, but many simply do not change their minds. We ‘agree to disagree.’”

The members of the community who usually opt out or are unsupportive of the curriculum often believe that sex education does not have a place in schools, but should instead be taught at home by parents.

School board members do not hear from a representative sample of the community, so their interviews cannot be used to make generalizations about public opinion in their school districts. But, like the other methods of understanding public opinion I have used, these interviews are extremely telling. The groups that school board members hear from are more motivated to speak out, likely because they hold strong opinions about what sex education should look like. This is certainly the case in Harrisonburg, where churches were outspoken about their support for abstinence-only sex education. On the other hand, many people I interviewed expressed that their community was largely silent about sex education. Despite most people having an opinion about sex education, as can be seen in the national and state-specific

84 Interview, February 3.
85 Ibid.
studies I discussed earlier, many community members do not express their feelings. For some people, this is probably because they believe that the sex education policy is close to what they want. But there are many other reasons that people may be silent about sex education, including a lack of knowledge about the issue and about what is taught in schools. Much of my research suggests that the majority of people in Virginia support abstinence-plus or comprehensive sex education but, according to school board members, it is the abstinence-only supporters who predominantly speak out. How school board members interpret what they hear and what they do not hear from their community is vital to the implementation of sex education policy.

Taken together, national public opinion data, academic studies, local newspaper articles, comments on online articles, and interviews with school board members and educators allow for a breadth of information about what public opinion of sex education in Virginia might be. Because both nationally and in conservative states like North Carolina, studies show that a large majority of people support abstinence-plus or comprehensive sex education programs, it is likely that people in Virginia hold similar opinions. Judging by what people write about in local newspapers and readers’ reactions in online comments, it is likely that the majority of people in Virginia prefer abstinence-plus or comprehensive sex education over abstinence-only programs. However, the majority opinion is often ignored in many school districts in Virginia; the next section will look more closely at how the minority opinion is able to influence sex education policy.
Section Three: The Influence of Public Opinion on Sex Education Policy in Virginia

The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) allows each school district to create its own sex education policy, so each school board must sift through the many options and opinions to implement an appropriate curriculum for their community. Despite widespread support for abstinence-plus or comprehensive sex education, the majority of school districts in Virginia employ an abstinence-only curriculum. This disparity begs the question, does public opinion about sex education influence state and local policies, and if it does, whose opinion counts? As previous sections of this thesis have shown, Virginia policymakers sought out community opinions in order to shape and implement sex education policy. After the initial implementation of the curricula in 1987, however, school board members report very little subsequent feedback from the community. Political scientists disagree about how much influence public opinion has on public policy, and in the case of sex education policy in Virginia, measuring how and to what extent the public shapes policy is complicated. Because sex education policy does not always reflect the majority opinion, it is important to look closely at how public opinion influences sex education policy in the state.

Countless studies have attempted to measure the influence of public opinion on policy, but because most studies have investigated specific federal policies, it is difficult to generalize from these studies to local politics. Paul Burstein addressed the lack of consensus among political scientists about how much influence public opinion has and under what conditions public opinion is most influential by examining the findings of thirty previous studies. He found not only that public opinion makes a substantial impact on policy in over half of the studies he examined, but that in the eleven studies that measured issue salience, “the combination

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of salience and substantive public opinion always has an effect.”

Burstein also discovered that the influence of public opinion on policy increases when interest groups are involved. Although these findings show that public opinion often has a substantial influence on public policy, Burstein also points out that the number of studies used and the small range of issues in his analysis makes it impossible to generalize across all issue areas. Importantly, he discovered that southern states were less responsive to public opinion than northern states. Still, his study does suggest that in some cases public opinion has a significant impact on public policy, especially when the issue is salient and has interest group involvement.

The Local Political Process

School board members have much different political experiences than do federal and state legislators. Although both must garner votes in order to get and keep their jobs, the scope of issues and characteristics of constituencies necessarily make their responsibilities to their voters distinct. School board members, of course, create only education policies, while state and federal politicians work on issues from agriculture to immigration.

School board members not only deal with a smaller range of issues than state and federal politicians, but their election process is also unique. Typically, voter turnout in state elections is much lower in years when only local elections are held. In 2007, only 30.2% of registered voters showed up to vote for Virginia General Assembly members and local offices, as compared to 2008 when 74.5% of registered voters turned out to vote for the U.S. President and a Senate seat. The rational voter theory suggests that people will only vote if the benefit exceeds the

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88 Ibid., 34.
89 Ibid., 35.
90 Ibid., 36.
costs, and political scientists have also argued that limited information reduces voter turnout.\footnote{John G. Matsusaka, “Explaining Voter Turnout Patterns: An Information Theory.” Public Choice 84 (1995), 91-92.} Less media coverage of campaigns in off year elections, less understanding of the role of local governments, less campaign spending, unfavorable voting hours, and many other reasons lead to a lower voter turnout for off year elections. Even when local elections coincide with voting for state or federal positions, “many of the citizens who go to the polls leave part of their ballot blank, typically for obscure local races.”\footnote{Ibid., 92.} In school board elections, candidates do not spend nearly as much money on campaigns as other state or federal candidates and there is less media coverage of school board races, so voters are less likely to be knowledgeable about the candidate. When voters do not have enough information about an office, they are generally not motivated to vote.

The drastic decrease in voter turnout when only local positions are at stake has many implications. Voters in school board elections are often not a representative sample of the population in their district; more educated people, older people, and people of higher socioeconomic status are more likely to vote.\footnote{Ibid., 92.} From the very beginning, school board members may not represent the majority public opinion because an unrepresentative minority voted them into office. Although it is possible that this minority does represent the opinions of the community at large, the characteristics of the likely voter in local elections suggests that they probably do not. School board seats are also often uncontested; in only one of four school board positions in Albemarle County in 2007, for example, were voters able to choose between two candidates.\footnote{Virginia.Gov, “November 6, 2007 Official Election Results.” Virginia State Board of Elections, 2007. <https://www.voterinfo.sbe.virginia.gov/election/DATA/2007/196E44FA-8B19-4240-9A44-737216DA55D/Unofficial/00_003_s.shtml>} When school board members’ seats are uncontested, they have less pressure to
consider public opinion than state or federal politicians because they do not have to appeal to a wide range of constituents with varied ideas and backgrounds to garner the majority of the vote. Even when school board members do have a contested seat, they are only answerable to the unrepresentative minority who turned out to vote for them. Although a school board member may still aim to represent the majority public opinion, it is harder for them to know what that opinion is. For these reasons, Burstein’s findings may not be as applicable to local politics. The influence of public opinion on school board policies likely comes from a different source of pressure than the desire to be reelected. 

The Influence of the Minority Opinion

Despite low participation in school board elections, most of the school board members I interviewed felt an obligation to represent, or at least hear, their constituents’ opinions. Although they solicit public opinion every time the sex education curriculum is up for revision, most school board members reported not hearing often from community members on this issue, especially recently. Because school board members must hear what public opinion is in order to take it into consideration, the lack of public input clearly affects how much influence local public opinion can have on sex education policy. Multiple school board members did note that when they hear from the community, churches, and in particular church leaders, are usually the most vocal. As I have already mentioned, in Harrisonburg the school board adopted an abstinence-only sex education curriculum because the local churches made it clear that they would only support such a program. The overwhelming support for abstinence-plus or comprehensive sex education even from conservative or very religious people suggests that the opinions held by these church members and leaders do not reflect the majority, but the lack of community participation in sex education debates allows these minority opinions to sway school boards.
According to one Harrisonburg school board member, church leaders are the most vocal in meetings regarding sex education policy. She told me that “the Russian church pastor was particularly vocal after our meeting…I have held a meeting with the Russian mothers only but they are afraid to go against their pastor.” Church opinions are the loudest, and church leaders attempt to affect sex education policy by participating in sex education discussions and exerting pressure on their congregation. In Harrisonburg, these non-secular opinions may drown out the majority opinion because church leaders have the power to influence their congregation and because people outside of these congregations are less likely to voice their opinions. This Harrisonburg example only explains sex education policy in that particular school district, but it is not hard to imagine that similar dynamics exist in other communities. Without people willing or able to represent different sides of the debate, school board members are less responsive to the desires of the majority.

The mobilization of interest groups, in this case the most vocal of which are churches, is an important factor through which opinions can be articulated in communities. Political theorists have identified a free rider effect, which states that individuals are unlikely to join or start interest groups if there is little incentive to do so. In the case of sex education, there is little incentive to speak out or form a group if sex education is not a personally salient or particularly important topic. Interest groups are even less likely to form if there is not an “entrepreneur,” or group leader, that is motivated, willing, and has the resources to establish a group. In areas like Richmond and Loudon County, there is little ongoing incentive for community members to actively speak out because the abstinence-plus sex education curricula in these areas do not

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96 Interview, March 15, 2010.
98 Ibid., 120.
represent significant problems for the communities. In Harrisonburg, however, churches are able to tap into ready-made interest groups. They already have group entrepreneurs in the form of clergy and group members in the form of their congregations. The churches not only have the resources to speak out about sex education, but because sex education taps into values held to be highly important to many churches, they also have the motivation to voice their opinions.

Because more conservative areas, like Harrisonburg, are more likely to have churches and other groups that believe strongly in abstinence-only education, these areas often tailor their sex education curricula to meet what school board members believe are their community’s desires. However, the groups that are more likely to mobilize are the groups that hold extreme or minority opinions, especially when the issue is related to morality, because those opinions are central to their belief systems. Further, because these extreme voices are loudest, people both inside and outside of these groups are more likely to believe that their opinions are the majority opinion. Particularly when individuals or groups who hold minority opinions are the only ones speaking out regularly, as in Harrisonburg, these minority opinions are likely to be interpreted as majority opinions. Further, it is in policymakers’ best interest to engage the beliefs and assuage the concerns of these vocal minorities because other groups are unlikely to create further controversy. Because each school board can only take into account opinions that are vocalized, interest groups, like churches, are more likely to influence sex education because they are the most likely to be vocal.

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99 Interviews, February 3 and 4, 2010.
Other Influences

School board members do not live in a political bubble, so local opinions are not the only ones that influence sex education policy. National public opinion data, like the NPR/Gallup poll mentioned in Section II, might have an effect on local sex education policy. However, the minority is not only the most vocal at the local level, but also at the national level. Although many studies have demonstrated tremendous support for abstinence-plus or comprehensive sex education, conservative groups that endorse abstinence-only programs are in many cases able to control media coverage of the issue. Because it is through national media coverage of the issue that local school board members most often understand national public opinion; the media plays an important role in how public opinion is interpreted. For example, John Jemmott’s 2010 study that used an abstinence-plus curriculum would not have been eligible for federal abstinence-only funding, but the media and many conservative groups have used Jemmot’s work to support their contention that abstinence-only sex education is effective. When the study was published, the New York Times ran an article by Tamar Lewin, titled “Quick Response to Study of Abstinence Education,” describing Jemmott’s findings that “only about a third of the students who participated in a weekend abstinence-only class started having sex within the next 24 months, compared with about half who were randomly assigned instead to general health information classes, or classes teaching only safer sex.” The fairly in-depth article only briefly mentions the fact that the study’s authors’ criteria for including particular sex education programs in their research did not require abstinence-only until marriage or note that such programs would not have qualified for federal abstinence only funding until the second to last paragraph.

Unfortunately, after a mainstream and trusted media source like the *New York Times* claimed that abstinence-only sex education works, many people took this message and ran with it without understanding the details of the sex education curriculum that was actually used. Other respected news sources like the *Washington Post* also ran similar stories, although a few news sources like *The Christian Science Monitor* did a good job of highlighting the difference between the abstinence-only program used by many schools across the country and the abstinence-plus curriculum used by most programs in the study.

Using the definitions of sex education curricula that I and many other people involved in sex education use, Jemmott’s study suggests that abstinence-plus curricula are most effective. However, groups like the National Abstinence Education Association (NAEA) and Focus on the Family have used this work to promote harmful and ineffective abstinence-only curricula; both groups claim that this study *proves* that federal funding for their versions of abstinence-only education should be allotted. Although supporters of abstinence-plus or comprehensive sex education like SIECUS and the Guttmacher Institute tried to combat the hype that surrounded abstinence-only sex education after the study came out, the mainstream media did not change its slant or make efforts to clarify their articles. The media plays an important role in

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shaping how the public views sex education. The superficial attention paid by most journalists to the details of the curriculum used in the Jemmott and Fong study is problematic because the inaccurate conclusions of such articles have been used to promote a sex education program that the analysis does not actually examine.

The media does not only influence public opinion as a whole, but also the opinions and policy decisions of school board members. The Harrisonburg County school board member with whom I spoke mentioned the Jemmott and Fong study, saying, “just yesterday, on the news, there was a report out that abstinence-based programs are working. Up to this point, the research was contrary to the new report. It is hard to know what is best for our students.” Although this school board member’s comments suggest that the Harrisonburg school district weighs the different kinds of sex education curricula in relation to different scientific studies available, earlier in her interview she said that the board originally created an abstinence-only program because of pressure from area churches. These contradictory statements highlight a tension between implementing a curriculum that is both proven effective and that the most vocal elements of the public support. The Harrisonburg school board members clearly knew that there were studies that proved abstinence-only sex education was ineffective before the Jemmott study was published, but they did not change their abstinence-only curriculum at least in part due to the demands from churches. If other groups had been vocal about their support for a different sex education program, perhaps the Harrisonburg school board would have been motivated to adopt a new, more comprehensive program. Although it is too early to see how much influence the Jemmott study will have on sex education policy in Virginia and throughout the country, school board members seem to pay closest attention to academic studies when they bolster the programs they already have implemented and match the vocal opinions in their community.

110 Interview, February 3, 2010.
Just as national media can influence local opinions and policy, national interest groups can also influence local policy. The interest groups mentioned above represent different sides of the sex education debate. Despite the fact that over 80% of people support an abstinence-plus or comprehensive sex education curriculum, the interest groups that support abstinence-only education are able to dominate the issue and influence the media coverage of sex education. There are many more groups committed to promoting abstinence-only education than there are that promote more comprehensive programs. Even though groups like SIECUS and the Guttmacher Institute, which reflect the majority opinion, attempt to make their opinions heard, they are drowned out by the sheer number of groups dedicated to abstinence-only education.\textsuperscript{111}

Further, groups that support abstinence-only sex education have much larger operating budgets than do groups like SIECUS and Planned Parenthood.\textsuperscript{112} The resources available to abstinence-only supporters give them the ability, through advertisements, pamphlets, and their mere presence to get their message out and heard. The dynamics of national interest groups mirror that of local interest groups; the groups representing the minority perspective have more resources than those representing the majority. This dynamic creates the illusion that abstinence-only education has more support than it really does and allows groups representing the minority opinion to influence policy on multiple levels.

Throughout this section, issue salience has emerged as a contributing factor to the mobilization of interest groups and the influence that public opinion has on policy. It is difficult to gauge issue salience, but the Kennedy School of Government study on sex education asked some key questions that can illuminate the relative importance of sex education among the public. The survey asked the open-ended question, “What do you think is the most important

\footnotesize\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 71.
problem facing teens today?” and found use of alcohol or other drugs (30%) and peer pressure (16%) to be among the most important. Only 10% of those surveyed mentioned issues relating to sex education, like HIV/AIDS and sex and promiscuity.\(^{113}\) The survey also asked, “If a candidate for school board substantially disagreed with you about how sex ed should be taught in the schools, would this alone determine your vote, or are other issues more important?” They found that 57% of respondents believe that there are other, more pressing issues. So, although sex education is an important issue for some people, it is not the most important one for most. This study cannot definitively show that the people who do believe that sex education is the most pressing issue in education are the vocal minority, but the fact that the people who hold the majority public opinion are not speaking out suggests that sex education is not the most salient issue for them.

Low issue salience is not the only reason people might not speak out about sex education, though it is a vitally important one. Political scientists have shown that the “combative, argumentative, and divisive tone of politics may inhibit public forms of political participation,” especially among people who are aversive to volatile social situations.\(^{114}\) Because sex education debates have often been extremely explosive, people in Virginia may be wary of engaging in such heated debates even if the disputes have not yet been aggressive in their communities. It is also likely that many people simply do not have the time to put into activism, do not know who to approach or how to organize, or do not feel like their opinion will make a difference even if they do speak out. Low issue salience, caution regarding political divisiveness, and lack of time and knowledge regarding activism all likely play a part in the silence of the majority.


Public opinion clearly influences sex education policy in Virginia. However, because the loudest voices do not always reflect the majority opinion, the minority is often more effective in affecting policy than is the majority. The lack of voter turnout in local elections and the fact that many school board seats are uncontested creates an environment where many school board members do not have to appeal to the majority. This in turn allows school boards to appease the vocal minority, especially when the majority does not voice their opinions. The local, influential minority is mirrored at the national level by interest groups like Focus on the Family and the National Abstinence Education Association who, while they represent the minority, are among the loudest voices in the sex education debates, creating the sense that more people support abstinence-only education than really do. When school board members hear from the vocal minority, at both the local and national level, they often assume that they speak for the majority. School board members clearly listen to public opinion, however, the minority groups that support abstinence only programs are often the only ones who speak out.

Section Four: Sex Education Outside the Classroom

Thus far, this thesis has pointed to the fact that majority public opinion does not reflect public policy. If the majority of Virginians desire abstinence-plus or comprehensive sex education while many are getting abstinence-only sex education, most people are not getting the education that they believe is most appropriate and effective. However, school is not the only place that students receive sex education. They can learn about sex and sexuality from their parents, on the internet, from friends, and in a myriad other ways. From the beginning, sex education was placed in schools as a supplement to the information adolescents learn from their parents and other resources. Although sex education policy may not mirror what the public
desires, or what is most effective for students, students may be finding information about sex and sexuality elsewhere.

Sex Education at Home

One Loudon County school board member told me that “Sex education should begin with the family. Our school’s program promotes parental involvement.”115 This statement mirrors a popular argument that parents are the best sex educators. Because the majority of parents prefer abstinence-plus or comprehensive sex education over abstinence-only education, it is possible that parents who live in districts that have abstinence-only programs are supplementing the sex education curriculum with their own knowledge and opinions about sex and sexuality. The Kennedy School of Government study asked parents what topics they had discussed with their children. Between 86 and 88% of parents discussed the biology of sex and pregnancy; how to avoid STIs; issues about becoming sexually active; whether or not to wait until marriage to have sex; and ethical, moral, and religious considerations about sexual activities. The only topic that parents discussed at a lower rate was methods of contraception including condoms, which 71% of parents said they had discussed.116 These numbers are fairly high, and although there might have been pressure on parents to say they had talked with their children about these issues,117 the fact that roughly the same number of parents support abstinence-plus or comprehensive sex education suggests that these same parents are open to discussing these issues with their children. Moreover, 75% of these parents said that they did not discuss these topics as a result of a sex education program their child took part in.118 Perhaps it is

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115 Interview, February 4, 2010.
118 Rosenbaum et al.
because the majority of parents are motivated to discuss sex and sexuality with their children regardless of what they are taught in school that the majority do not spend their efforts challenging sex education policy. In fact, while a large majority of people believe that health classes should have sex education programs built in, 80% also believe parents should educate their children about sex and sexuality.\textsuperscript{119} Parents believe that they can do a better job, or find it important to supplement, the information their children receive about sex in schools.

Unfortunately, most parents are not trained sex educators. Their experiences and opinions may be adequate to instigate useful discussions about abstinence and other moral or ethical considerations regarding sex and sexuality, but without proper training parents are not likely to have complete information about symptoms of STIs and how to prevent them, different methods of contraception, and the many other topics that constitute effective sex education curricula. And, not all parents discuss sex and sexuality with their children. For these reasons, sex education in schools is vitally important. That said, of course, parents should play an important role in their children’s sex and sexuality education. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), “Parents can play a significant role in promoting healthy sexual development and risk reduction among adolescents. Adolescents who feel close to their parents…and talk with them about sex are more likely to delay their first sexual relationship, have fewer sexual partners, and use contraceptives.”\textsuperscript{120} There are many online resources for parents who are unsure about what to discuss and when. Planned Parenthood, the CDC, Advocates for Youth, and many other organizations offer detailed advice about how to approach the subject, which topics are


appropriate for specific age groups, and give medically accurate information about STIs, pregnancy, and contraception.\textsuperscript{121} In Alexandria, Virginia, the Alexandria Campaign on Adolescent Pregnancy (ACAP) offers similar online resources for parents. They also sponsor local outreach events and have a list of many local resources where adolescents can obtain birth control and find out more information about pregnancy, adoption, and abortion.\textsuperscript{122} ACAP is a wonderful resource for parents and youth living in Northern Virginia, because it gives locally specific information. Unfortunately, there are few organizations like ACAP in the rest of the state. There are eight Planned Parenthood sites across the state which can offer great local resources to parents. But, unlike ACAP, Planned Parenthood does not specifically focus on raising parents’ awareness, so parents must specifically seek out the information. Parents can and should seek the tools to present accurate and important information to their children about sex and sexuality, but providing effective sex education in schools is still imperative.

\textit{Sex Education in the Digital Age}

Adolescents can also take advantage of the multitude of information on the internet. The same websites that offer information for parents have sections devoted to teens, with similar information about STIs, pregnancy, contraception, and sexuality generally. However, though the internet can answer many questions teens might have about sex and sexuality, it can also promote myths and stereotypes. Parents are not immune from this problem, though they may have better tools to discern fact from fiction. Another new phenomenon in sex education is to give students the opportunity to text their questions anonymously. ACAP was actually one of the first organizations to run this type of program, which gives students anonymity when asking potentially embarrassing question. Texting questions also allows them to receive direct answers.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{121} A simple internet search yields many informative results. Planned Parenthood also has a great list of links for parents found at http://www.plannedparenthood.org/parents/resources-parents-22721.htm.
\item \textsuperscript{122} Alexandria Campaign on Adolescent Pregnancy, “Parents” <http://www.alexgetreal.com/acap_parents.php>
\end{itemize}
to their questions without having to sift through the many, sometimes contradictory, pages on the internet. The Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Campaign of North Carolina, funded mostly by the CDC, runs a state-wide text line modeled after ACAP’s program.\textsuperscript{123} There has been some backlash to this program in North Carolina; some parents and conservative organizations have taken issue with the fact that it “circumvent[s] an abstinence-until-marriage curriculum,” which is required in the state.\textsuperscript{124} In Virginia, however, the program has received little negative attention. Although these texting programs can be extremely helpful for quick questions or referrals, they are limited in that they cannot give proper attention to grave issues like rape. Texting programs give students answers to the questions they may be too reticent to ask but need the answers to, but they cannot replace the in-depth information that complete sex education programs offer.

Teenagers also receive information about sex and sexuality from the media. Adolescents rank media as an important source of sex education, perhaps “because the media are better at depicting the passion and positive possibilities of sex than its problems and consequences. Despite increasing public concern about the potential health risks of early, unprotected sexual activity, only about one in 11 of the programs on television that include sexual content mention possible risks or responsibilities.”\textsuperscript{125} Although media sources like weekly television shows and movies can be helpful in fostering a healthy and positive view of sexuality, such programming often dangerously ignores the risks of unsafe sex. Other media outlets like magazines aimed at adolescents have included articles about pregnancy and contraception in the past.\textsuperscript{126} While the media does have the potential to give teenagers accurate information about sex in an entertaining

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid.
way, most television shows, movies, and magazines ignore their responsibility to promote safe sex.

Schools are not the only sources of sex education for adolescents, but when sex education programs are held to standards that ensure accuracy, they are the most effective and extensive outlets for sex education. Parents, students, and the media all should be open to discussing sex and sexuality frankly, but because they cannot be held to the same standards to which schools are held, these other sources cannot be solely relied on. Despite the fact that many Virginians are not receiving the abstinence-plus or comprehensive sex education they support, it is possible that these other sources can pick up the slack. However, none of these other methods of providing sex education to adolescents can be held accountable for their accuracy or success, so accurate and effective sex education programs in public schools are still vitally important.

Virginia’s Current Political Climate

Sex education policy is dependent on politics and politicians. The public can and sometimes does influence politicians to write policy that reflects public opinion, but politicians do not or cannot always listen. In 2009, the voters in Virginia elected Republican Bob McDonnell to be the next governor. His conservative ideology and track record is consistent with the ideologies of other politicians who support abstinence-only sex education. Conservative Republican politicians are more likely to support and fund abstinence-only sex education programs than liberal Democrats.\(^{127}\) Although he has not spoken directly about sex education, the political ideology to which he subscribes is very similar to the ideologies of politicians who openly support abstinence-only sex education.

In his campaign, McDonnell used the rhetoric of “family values,” an ideology that draws on values articulated by conservative Christian movements including sexual constraint. Conservative politicians have used a family values ideology to oppose many issues including women’s rights, gay rights, and comprehensive sex education by stating that the promotion of these social justice issues will harm the “traditional” family.\textsuperscript{128} According to sociologist Janice Irvine, the opposition to these political issues within the family values ideology “is consistent with evangelical and fundamentalist communities of discourse. Fundamentalism, in particular, is characterized by an absolute morality in which right and wrong are seen as literally written into the Scriptures.”\textsuperscript{129} Politicians that subscribe to this ideology speak openly about their opposition to gay marriage and abortion, while supporting programs like abstinence-only sex education that uphold their religious principles. In his campaign, McDonnell specifically stated that he believed that marriage was reserved for heterosexual partners and that he was pro-life in the section of his campaign website entitled “Protecting Families.”\textsuperscript{130} In fact, McDonnell’s master’s thesis, which became an important part of the 2009 gubernatorial race, is about how the Republican party can and should use a family values ideology to improve society. He writes that “The vast majority of American children have been educated in the public school system, in which textbooks and courses are increasingly oriented to humanist values and a secular philosophy,” which he cites as a reason for the failure of the American school system and social dysfunction generally.\textsuperscript{131} In the thesis, he also lauds the Adolescent Family Life Demonstration Projects Act of 1981, which provided funding for abstinence-only sex education programs, as an ideal example of legislation

\textsuperscript{128} Irvine, 66.
\textsuperscript{129} Irvine, 74.
that adheres to family values.\textsuperscript{132} His thesis, then, shows support for family values as a whole and abstinence-only sex education in particular, and contempt for a secular education system. Because McDonnell’s thesis is almost twenty years old, it is possible that his ideas have grown and evolved. His continuing support for a family values ideology, however, suggests that he still views abstinence until marriage as the only appropriate choice for adolescents and likely believes that schools are an appropriate place to further this message.

In McDonnell’s proposed 2010-2012 budget for Direct Aide to Public Education, he cut almost $400 million from the state’s public education system.\textsuperscript{133} Perhaps fortunately, he does not mention Family Life Education in the budget, because his political ideology suggests that he would support an ineffective abstinence-only sex education curriculum. Still, these decreases will make it difficult for schools to spend the time and money necessary to reevaluate sex education curricula in light of the changes in federal funding for sex education and the recent studies regarding sex education that have come out. An Arlington school board member lamented that “funding drives the amount of revisions possible,”\textsuperscript{134} so the proposed budget cuts will inhibit any improvements that need to be made to sex education programs. Sex education policy in Virginia does not look like it is going to change in the near future, and that is part of the problem. Although the lack of funding for education is an issue nation-wide, in Virginia the budget-cuts are another road block in reassessing the sex education policy that has not had any major revisions since it was implemented in 1987, despite the numerous articles published about the effectiveness and popularity of comprehensive and abstinence-plus programs. Supplementing school sex education programs with the internet, parental involvement, and other methods is not

\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 31.
\textsuperscript{134} Interview, February 3, 2010.
enough. Sex education curricula should cover as much as possible and be held accountable for its successes and failures.

**Conclusion: A Call to Action**

For the most part, sex education policy in Virginia has not been a topic of intense political and social debate as it has been in other states. Perhaps learning from other localities’ mistakes, Virginia policymakers created and implemented sex education policies that endeavored to placate multiple sides of the issue. Legislators and educators sought, and continue to seek, public input at every step of the policymaking process and include these opinions in their discussions about and creation of sex education policy. Sex education policy should reflect public opinion; however, public opinion has changed since the original implementation of Virginia’s sex education policy in 1987. Media coverage of sex education, academic studies about the effectiveness of different types of sex education curricula, and a changing understanding of teenage sexuality, among many other things, have all influenced the rise in support for comprehensive or abstinence-plus sex education. Unfortunately, sex education policy has not shifted along with public opinion. The state-wide sex education policy has not gone through any major revisions since 1987, and most school districts in Virginia have not modified their curriculum in the past twenty-three years either. Some school districts in Virginia employ sex education curricula that are effective and do reflect the public support of more comprehensive programs. But, unfortunately, many school districts do not. The localities that have abstinence-only sex education curricula are harming their students and ignoring public opinion.
Policymakers are often portrayed as the villains in critiques of the policymaking process. Of course, there probably are some school board members and other policymakers who intentionally ignore both public opinion and evidence that their curricula are ineffective and harmful in order to promote their own interests. However, all of the school board members I spoke with revealed genuine interest in the wellbeing and opinions of the members of their communities. School board members should strive to implement effective policies regardless of public opinion, but politics, even at the local level, can get muddled for many reasons. Funding and time are often allocated to other subjects that are seen as more important, which generally include the academic subjects that are part of Virginia’s standardized testing regimen. Lack of funding is a particularly significant problem in lower-income areas, especially because these are the areas in Virginia that are more likely to have both abstinence-only sex education and a higher incidence of teenage pregnancy. Because the VDOE requires each school district’s sex education policy to be reviewed annually, which means that there is time set aside to modify sex education policy, the biggest hindrance to real change in sex education policy and the reason that sex education policy does not reflect public opinion is the public itself.

Harnessing public opinion can be an incredibly powerful tool for creating change. School board members want to hear from their constituents and represent their opinions, but cannot do so if they do not know how the majority of their constituents feel about sex education. The majority of people are silent about their opinions about sex education, even though improper sex education can have dire and pervasive economic and personal effects on individuals and societies. This silence allows a more vocal minority to voice their support for sex education that is proven not to work, leading to the adoption of abstinence-only sex education curricula in many school districts. Despite fairly widespread support for more comprehensive sex education,
Virginians are not speaking up. Low issue salience, lack of knowledge about sex education policy, and lack of motivation to speak out can be overcome, however, by raising awareness about the importance of accurate sex education policy.

School boards are among the easiest governing bodies to approach. Every school board member in Virginia has contact information on the school board or school system website, including email addresses and phone numbers. School boards frequently hold open meetings that the public is encouraged to attend and offer comment about issues important to them. The dates and times vary across the state, but they are published on school board websites. Each school board also sets up public hearings for the sole purpose of hearing public opinion about specific issues; many school boards across the state set up public hearings about sex education once a year. School boards are organized so that the community has many outlets to have their opinion heard, and school board members are eager to represent public opinion. It is the responsibility of the public to voice their opinions in order to effect change.

Sex education policy in Virginia is one example of how complicated the local political process can be. School board members are influenced by politicians at the national and state levels, by national and local media, and by the amount of time and money that can go into revising policies. The benefit of having a locally based school board, however, is that these policymakers are members of the community and are, for the most part, dedicated to reflecting the opinions and interests of the community. Community members have many opportunities to voice their opinion and school board members have the authority and desire to take these opinions into account. The public can and should push to see their opinions reflected in sex education policy in their school districts.
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