



Working 4 You: College Campuses Prepare Action Plans to Prevent Teen Pregnancies

In November, Working 4 You took a look at how the state approaches sex education in local school districts, and found that what is covered and how varies by school district. KARK was invited to sit in on a working group with college administrators and the Arkansas Department of Higher Education as they put together an action plan to address unintended pregnancies under a new law passed in 2015.

Last fall, students on UALR's campus described their experiences with sex education and what they did or didn't learn.

"Still to this day I don't really understand how pregnancy works," said Spencer Sullivan.

"No one was ever answering any questions," Kaylen Presnall said. "They just turned to abstinence. It felt like the easy answer."

"I think there are still questions teens have," freshman Torrance Bell added. "And honestly, I think it will lead them to turn to porn to figure out how sex works and what happens."

In March, college educators didn't have many positive thoughts when it came to describing what first came to mind when they thought about students' unintended pregnancies. Decisions, change of plans, challenges, shock and obstacles were some of the words that popped up during the word association exercise at the Clinton School of Public Service.

Roughly two dozen college administrators were packed into a classroom at the Clinton School to touch on resources and techniques the colleges might use to fulfill a mandate set forth in a law passed in 2015.

"It's about keeping our students in college. We want them to go to college and attend all the way through," said Angela Lasiter with the Arkansas Department of Higher Education.

State Representative Deborah Ferguson, D-West Memphis, proposed a bill requiring all public two and four year colleges to have an action plan to address unintended pregnancies on campus. The bill passed and became Act 943. The first semester those action plans are expected to be in use is Fall 2016.

Ultimately, each school has to decide how it will approach the issue, but the Arkansas Department of Higher Education has partnered and coordinated with the National Campaign to End Teen Pregnancy to offer resources like online lessons, fact sheets and Bedsider.org, in part due to a lack of funding to implement the changes.

"I think that to mandate that they all do it and give them a roadmap to achieve those things is very important," Ferguson said.

In November, Working 4 You highlighted how sexual education can vary widely between local school districts. Sex education isn't required to be taught, but if it is abstinence is encouraged as the primary focus.

"I would certainly advocate for us having something on the high school level, but for right now this was more legislatively attainable," Ferguson said.

Arkansas ranks dead last in the country when it comes to teen birth rates. What we know about teen pregnancies in Arkansas, based on CDC data, is that roughly 75 percent of those are occurring in 18- and 19- year-old females who may or may not have been taught how to prevent pregnancy if they're sexually active. Nationally, 61 percent of women who enroll in community college and then get pregnant, fail to complete their degree.

In looking at how the department is suggesting talking to college students, a franker discussion regarding contraception, while including abstinence, comes to the forefront.

"Students don't know as much as we think they might and not as much they think they might," said Andrea Kane, Vice President for Policy and Strategic Partnerships with the National Campaign to End Teen Pregnancy.

When asked if she believed there was a correlation between students perhaps not being fully informed about sex and birth control and then leaving their parents' households, St. Rep. Ferguson said she had no doubt those circumstances play a role in the number of teen pregnancies the state experiences.

“Absolutely there is a correlation, because a huge percentage of those who get pregnant in college, it’s within the first three or four months,” she said. “What we would really like to see is greater use of long-acting contraception. We have seen states like Colorado see real success with that. The pill simply isn’t as reliable and easy to use for teens, who may be less responsible than their older counterparts.”

Colorado did implement a program to offer long-acting contraception to women for free. Between 2009 and 2013 the state’s teen birth rate and the number of abortions both decreased by about 40 percent. The effort was privately funded through a grant from the Susan Thompson Buffett Foundation, and the state has since failed to approve the appropriations to continue the program.

But Ferguson believes the strides Colorado made through access to reliable contraception show that changes are possible if women are informed and reliable methods are accessible.

“It’s possible to have real long-term benefits from the program,” she said. “It means a lot of savings to the state. Seventy percent of the births in Arkansas are funded by Medicaid. So, not only are we saving tax dollars but when Colorado implemented a similar program they had a 35 percent reduction in abortions. So, I tell people it’s one of the most prolife things you can do is to address unplanned or unintended pregnancies in teenagers. That doesn’t even account for the human factor of really producing more well-educated, responsible parents in the long run.”

According to CDC data, 65 percent of Arkansas 12th graders surveyed reported they’d already had sex, and nearly 50 percent were currently sexually active. Roughly 35 percent of all high school students (9th–12th grades) reported they had already had sex.

For Sheila Upshaw, practical nursing program chair at University of Arkansas Monticello Crosssett, her time working with students and patients in this age group leads her to believe teens aren’t necessarily getting the message on how to prevent pregnancy.

“Sometimes when you ask the question are you having sex, they say yes. Are you using birth control? No. Are you wanting to be pregnant? No. They just don’t make the connection,” Upshaw said.

Upshaw’s been teaching for nearly 20 years, and she’s excited to see the discussion be incorporated not only into curriculum but also addressed at orientations and first-year experience courses.

“In our program, we have the ability to address these issues when we cover OBGYN,” Upshaw said. “So, we’re able to address it more readily. But for students, even if they have had sex education, they’re probably not going to remember all of it. So, I think it’s a good idea to just start from square one.”

What campus action plans will look like will vary by school, with the legislation leaving out clear-cut requirements about what is covered or how. But more information, rather than less will likely be a feature according to Lasiter regarding the resources provided to campuses across the state.

“The idea is to give our 18-, 19-, and 20-year-olds the availabilities out there and let them make educated decisions on what’s best for them and their partner,” she said.

While more information might be making it into the hands of these college students, it remains to be seen what, if any, revisions to the amount of information high school students will receive in Arkansas schools before they’re out in the world on their own.