



## Debate's Over: We Need Abstinence and Contraception

Two cheers. That's it. The news that teen birth rates continue to decline is tempered with a couple of nasty realities.

- Among 31 developed countries, only Romania and Bulgaria have higher teen birth rates than the United States.
- Arizona's teen birth rate for girls aged 15-19 is significantly higher than that too-high national average, according to a new report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

There's a lot of work left to do.

But the CDC report shows the importance of continuing efforts that began in earnest in 1991 when teen birth rates peaked and a variety of federal, state and local efforts was launched to influence the attitudes and actions of teens.

The dramatic 57 percent drop in teen birth rates from 1991 to 2013 amounted to 4 million fewer births to teenage girls.

The drop in births to teens is a result of decreased sexual activity and increased use of contraceptives by those who are sexually active, according to CDC researchers.

In other words, the debate is over. Curbing teen pregnancy is not a choice between teaching abstinence or contraception. It takes both.

Every state and all races and ethnic groups showed a decline in teen birth rates. But some states did better. New Hampshire's birth rate was the lowest, at 13.8 per 1,000 in 2012.

Arizona's teen birth rate was 37.4 per 1,000 in 2012, between Bulgaria's 41.7 and Romania's 35.2.

Last year, 45.4 percent of high-school students in Arizona said they were sexually active, according to the

National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. That's also too high. A message about the value of waiting is important.

But consider this: 82.5 percent of those who were sexually active said they used contraception the most recent time they had sex. They listened to clear, comprehensive information about how to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

It's important for kids to hear that one-two punch. First: Wait. Second: If you don't wait, use protection.

In Arizona, there is no mandate for sex education in schools. A bill to require schools to provide medically accurate, complete and age-appropriate sex education never got out of committee last year.

Less than a third of Arizona high schools teach how to prevent sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy, according to the CDC's 2012 School Health Profiles. The national median was 76 percent.

Twenty-two states and the District of Columbia require public schools to teach sex education, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. New Hampshire has curriculum guidelines that include information on how to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, as well as making it clear that abstinence is the "most effective prevention method."

In addition to the personal costs to young women whose education is often ended by pregnancy, teen births are costly to society. The CDC cited research showing that in 2010, reduced teen birth rates saved taxpayers \$12 billion in government-funded health care, child welfare and higher incarceration rates for teen mothers.

Attention to this problem brought results, but we need to do more to teach kids the benefits of waiting and the precautions to take if they don't.