

## The Adoption Option: A Call for Complete and Inclusive Sex, Reproductive Health and Family Life Education Curricula

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In recent years, an increasing number of states and public school districts have elected to provide some form of age-appropriate sex, reproductive health, or family life education to students. Unfortunately, many states' and school districts' curricula omit adoption education, including but not limited to the presentation of adoption as a positive outcome of an unplanned pregnancy. This omission is perplexing given the overwhelmingly favorable attitude the general public holds toward adoption as an outcome of an unplanned pregnancy. More importantly, such an omission runs counter to the oft-stated goal of providing students with accurate and complete information on all options available to them in the case of an unplanned pregnancy, and may even send students the erroneous message that adoption is not a realistic possibility. Finally, it must be noted that the decision to make an adoption placement is often a highly beneficial one for teenage birthmothers. Thus many schools, in their efforts to educate students regarding their options should they be faced with an unintended pregnancy, may subtly steer them away from considering what would may be the right decision for many.

Fortunately, a handful of states have enacted legislation mandating that those school districts that provide sex, reproductive health or family life education to students include adoption education in their curricula. Such education varies somewhat in its content, but typically includes some presentation to adolescents of adoption as a possible and positive outcome to an unplanned pregnancy. Also, family life education curricula for children in elementary school or younger sometimes include adoptive and foster families as examples of normal family forms. The laws and experiences of those states that have made an effort to include the institution of adoption in appropriate public school curricula can serve as examples to those that have not yet addressed this issue.

### Why One Can Expect Widespread Public Support for the Adoption Option in Public School Curricula

American culture is extraordinarily pro-adoption, so it's no surprise that research suggests Americans are well-disposed toward infant adoption as an outcome of unplanned pregnancies. In a recent survey of a nationally representative sample of 2,612 Americans commissioned by National Council For Adoption, 61 percent of respondents agreed with the statement that "For an unmarried woman with an unplanned pregnancy, sometimes choosing adoption is what it means to be a good mother." Twenty eight percent strongly agreed, while 33 percent somewhat agreed. Furthermore, 51 percent of respondents agreed with the statement that "For the child of an unmarried woman with an unplanned pregnancy, adoption is generally a positive option."<sup>1</sup>

At first glance, the fact that a significant minority of respondents did not agree with the two statements referenced above might seem to indicate that adoption is a contentious issue. Thus it is important to note that a majority of those who did not agree did not disagree either. More specifically, only 16 percent of respondents disagreed with the statement that "For an unmarried woman with an unplanned pregnancy, sometimes choosing adoption is what it means to be a good mother." Similarly, only 19 percent disagreed with the statement that "For the child of an unmarried woman with an unplanned pregnancy, adoption is generally a positive option."<sup>2</sup> In many nationally representative surveys, large majorities of Americans have reported a favorable opinion on adoption. Thus, it's reasonable to surmise that the relatively large percentage of NCFCA survey respondents who neither agreed with nor disagreed with the abovementioned statements were more likely expressing an unwillingness to judge a woman's private decision regarding her unintended pregnancy than uncertainty over adoption itself.

1. Wirthlin, Richard B., "American Public Attitudes toward Infant Adoption," in *Adoption Factbook IV*, ed. Thomas Atwood, Lee Allen, & Virginia C. Ravenel, 223-227. Sterling, VA. PMR Printing Company, Inc. 2007.

2. Ibid.

However, an unwillingness to judge a woman's private decision in no way implies an unwillingness to withhold information from her vital to that decision. If anything it implies the opposite, as the desire to see a woman make such an important choice free from the judgments of others stems at least partly from the belief that she is, or ought to be, the individual best able to make that choice. Thus, Americans will most likely welcome the inclusion of the adoption option in already existing sex education curricula as both a reinforcement of a positive social institution and a step toward ensuring that teenage mothers are able to make more informed decisions about their unintended pregnancies.

## The Benefits of Making an Adoption Placement to Teenage Mothers Facing an Unintended Pregnancy

A large number of studies confirm that the decision to make an adoption placement is often beneficial to teenage birthmothers. In 1986, researchers examining nationally representative data from the National Survey of Family Growth concluded that young birthmothers who make an adoption placement are more likely to graduate high school, less likely to live in poverty and less likely to receive public assistance relative to their peers who choose to parent.<sup>3</sup> Other studies looking at data gathered by maternity residences, adoption agencies and prenatal clinics found similar patterns. One study in 1988 which followed a group of nearly 170 adolescent mothers participating in a pregnancy counseling program found that those who made adoption placements were more likely to have completed vocational training and be employed six and 12 months after the birth of their children. Adolescents who made an adoption placement also had higher educational aspirations and were less likely to become pregnant again soon after the birth of their first child.<sup>4</sup> In 1992, researchers following a group of adolescent mothers for two years after the resolution of their unintended pregnancies found that the cohort who made an adoption placement had higher levels of

socioeconomic status and were less likely to engage in risky sexual behavior.<sup>5</sup> Most recently, a study of 592 pregnant teenagers found that four years after the birth of their children, those who had made adoption placements had higher levels of educational attainment, higher rates of employment, and lower rates of subsequent pregnancy relative to those who chose to parent.<sup>6\*</sup>

Teenage mothers facing an unintended pregnancy have a right to know what the available research says regarding how their decision to parent or make an adoption placement may affect the course of their lives. Thus, public schools that take responsibility for informing students of the options available to them in the event of an unplanned pregnancy should also provide their students with information on educational and socioeconomic outcomes for teenagers who make adoption placements relative to those who parent.

## Four Adoption-Friendly States that Mandate the Inclusion of the Adoption Option in Public School Sex, Reproductive Health, or Family Life Education Curricula

According to the Alan Guttmacher Institute, 20 states and the District of Columbia mandate that public schools teach some form of sex or reproductive health education. Of the 30 states that do not mandate that public schools teach a form of sex or reproductive health education, 17 have laws regarding what public school districts that choose to teach sex or reproductive health education must include in their curricula.<sup>7</sup> However, only a handful of states have taken the important step of passing legislation requiring that those school districts which provide sex, reproductive health or family life education – whether as a result of state law or of their own decision – include adoption education in their curricula. Included among these are the Commonwealth of Virginia, the State of Utah, the State of Michigan, and the State of Louisiana.

3. Bachrach, C.A., K.S. Stolley & K.A. London. (1992). Relinquishment of premarital births: Evidence from National Survey data. *Family Planning Perspectives* 24(1):27-48(Jan/Feb).

4. McLaughlin, S.D., D.L. Manninen, & L.D. Wings. (1988). Do adolescents who relinquish their children fare better or worse than those who raise them? *Family Planning Perspectives* 20(1):25-32.

5. Kalmuss, D., P.B. Namerow, & U. Bauer. (1992) Short-term consequences of parenting versus adoption among young unmarried women. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 54:80-90 (Feb).

6. Namerow, P. B., D. Kalmuss, & L. F. Cushman. (1997). The Consequences of placing versus parenting among young unmarried women. *Marriage & Family Review* Vol. 25, No. 3/4 175-197.

\* It's worth noting that while both teenagers who parent and those who make adoption placements for their unintended children typically report high levels of satisfaction with their decision, some studies have found that those who parent are slightly more satisfied with their decision. However, these same studies report no differences between the two groups in overall psychological outcomes.

7. The Alan Guttmacher Institute (AGI), Sex and STI/HIV Education, *State Policies in Brief*. New York, AGI. Oct, 2008.

**The Commonwealth of Virginia** enacted legislation requiring those public schools which provide family life education to include instruction on the “benefits of adoption as a positive choice in the event of an unwanted pregnancy” as part of a holistic curriculum in 2002. State guidelines permit individual school districts that choose to provide family life education considerable leeway in determining in what grade to present the adoption option. However, these same guidelines mandate that those public schools that provide family life education introduce students to the institution of adoption in kindergarten by teaching that families come in a variety of forms, including adoptive families and foster families. They also require public schools that provide family life education to reinforce this lesson in the first grade by including adoptive and foster families in their presentation on the importance of family to a child’s development. Finally, students in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade in Virginia public schools that teach family life education are required to review current state laws and pending state legislation regarding adoption and other issues affecting family life.

**The State of Utah** also amended its statutory code in 2002 to mandate two lessons on adoption to students in public schools in grades 7 – 12 as part of the required state health education curriculum. Under the state’s statutory code, one lesson is to be provided to students while in grades 7 – 9, and the second to students while in grades 10 -12. LDS Child Services and Catholic Child Services in Utah are presently providing these adoption-specific presentations in Utah public schools while the State Office of Education develops its own standardized presentation for licensed teachers.<sup>8</sup> Utah’s core curriculum also includes adoptive families as one possible family form in its lessons to elementary schools students on the importance of marriage and family.

**The State of Michigan** passed a law in 2004 requiring public schools that choose to provide reproductive health education or sex education to include information on how teenage parents can learn more about adoption services in their curriculum. The Michigan Department of Education’s curriculum guidelines require that this instruction include the identification of adoption-related resources, an analysis of the validity of these resources, and a description of how to access these resources.

**The State of Louisiana** passed legislation in 2005 mandating that public middle and high schools must include “adoption awareness,” defined as “instruction on the benefits of adoption for families wishing to add a child, for potential adoptees, and for persons who are pregnant or who have a child for whom they are unable to care,” in their family life education curricula.<sup>9</sup> As the State of Louisiana requires public school districts to teach family life education, adoption education is currently being provided to all public school students in the state.

### Recommendations for States to Improve their Sex, Health and Family Life Education Curricula by Including Accurate Information on Adoption

To date, much of the debate over what to teach students in public school sex, reproductive health and family life education classes has revolved around such contentious issues as abstinence, contraception and extramarital sex. It is deeply unfortunate that the exclusion of the adoption option from so many public schools has gone largely unnoticed, as favorable public attitudes toward adoption suggest that measures ensuring its inclusion would be relatively uncontroversial. More importantly, its inclusion is necessary if public schools are going to provide students with information on the full range of options available to them in the event of unplanned pregnancy, and not steer students away from considering a choice that may well be right for many. As improvements on the current state of affairs, NCFCA recommends the following:

- States that already mandate that public schools provide education on the importance and role of the family to individuals and society should also mandate that public school family life education curricula include adoptive and foster families as common and positive family forms.
- States that permit individual public school districts to choose whether to provide education on the importance and role of the family to individuals and society should mandate that those districts that choose to provide such education include adoptive and foster families as common and positive family forms.
- States that already mandate that public schools provide sex or reproductive health education should also mandate that public schools present the option of adoption as a

8. This information was provided by Frank Wojtech, Health and Physical Education Specialist, Utah State Office of Education (December 2008)

9. *Louisiana Revised Statutes* §17:7(13)(b) (2005), available at <http://www.legis.state.la.us/lss/lss.asp?doc=81172>

positive outcome of an unplanned pregnancy during the course of such education. This presentation should include but may not be limited to education on the benefits of adoption to adolescents facing unplanned pregnancies, the identification of adoption-related resources and instruction on how to access these resources, and an explanation of state laws regarding adoption and birthparent rights.

- States that permit individual public school districts to choose whether to provide sex or reproductive health education should mandate that those school districts that choose to provide such education also present the option of adoption as a positive outcome of an unplanned pregnancy during the course of this instruction. Again, this presentation should include but may not be limited to education on the benefits of adoption to adolescents facing unplanned pregnancies, the identification of adoption-related resources and instruction on how to access these resources, and an explanation of state laws regarding adoption and birthparent rights.

In conclusion, adoption is a time-honored institution that appears in one form or another in nearly every human society. It is also an institution which affects millions of Americans who are either adoptive children or parents, or count those who are among their family members, friends and loved ones. The absence of the adoption option from public school sex, reproductive health and family life education curricula is therefore as conspicuous as it is unfortunate. States must pass legislation to ensure that those public schools that provide such education – either on their own initiative or in compliance with state law – do not shortchange their students by neglecting to inform them that adoption is a viable, positive option in the event of an unplanned pregnancy. Such information can only benefit those receiving it and may make a positive difference in the lives of thousands.