



Youth Parliament
MAKING OUR MARK

**Plymouth Youth Parliament
Sexual Health and
Relationship Education
Report
2006**

A Foreword



I am very pleased to be invited to write a foreword to this report. There is no doubt that effective Sexual Health and Relationship Education is essential for the well being of our young people.

I am delighted that the Plymouth Youth Parliament chose to take on such a challenging subject. This is an area where I am sure that young people themselves are best placed to report on what works, and what doesn't, and I wish the campaign every success to achieve consistent, high quality teaching.

Linda Gilroy MP
Plymouth Sutton

Plymouth Youth Parliament SRE Campaign 2006

The Plymouth Youth Parliament is a part of the UK Youth Parliament. The UK Youth Parliament is a non-party political organization, for 11-18 year olds, that seeks to provide young people with a voice and representation within the British democratic society that is often refused due to young people's age. UKYP involves young people in political processes, and ensures they achieve the highest quality of life available to them and adherence of their rights such as is adopted by the Government on the basis of documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The elected members of UK Youth Parliament for Plymouth (as well as other MYP's across the UK) have a duty to their electorate to bring to attention those issues affecting their lives and development. Research and consultation with young people over the past few years has identified "Sex and Relationships Education" as a key area of concern for young people in Plymouth, as well as the rest of the UK, and requires considerable change. On this basis, Plymouth Youth Parliament has chosen SRE as a key manifesto issue for 2006.

The MYP's for Plymouth have collated information from across the city which has formulated in this report- the catalyst for a citywide SRE campaign. The work of the Plymouth MYP's is supported by a wide scale campaign on SRE, currently in affect across most other UKYP constituencies around the UK.

The campaign is ambitious in its objectives and proposals. However, with the support of the LEA and the strong and prevalent feeling amongst young people we (the Plymouth MYP's) feel that if implemented and supported effectively it should be possible and efficient, and will have a significant impact upon Young People's quality of life the opportunities offered to them and their educational needs.

What is SRE?

All schools in the country should offer Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) from the primary years onwards. However, because of the political and cultural sensitivity of the subject, the content of the classes is not defined in the national curriculum. This lack of structure is seen by some people as ludicrous due to the view that SRE is just as important as Maths or English.

Reproduction and the human life cycle are obligatory topics in science lessons, but the content of Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) classes are determined by each school. Not only can PSHE classes potentially bypass the certain aspects of SRE, it is a subject that many secondary teachers find difficult to teach because it has not had the status of an examinable subject. It is perhaps the teaching style and relationship that can worry teachers because this is not a subject where the knowledge and answers are to be found in a text book.

In setting its own curriculum for SRE, schools should “reflect parents’ wishes” as well as “the culture of the community they serve”. Clearly, this allows schools in many areas to avoid sensitive issues around sexual health.

However the government’s guidance does clearly state that SRE must be “inclusive of all pupils”, and that “the objective of SRE is to help and support young people through their physical, emotional and moral development.” The non-compulsory guidance document, produced by the government, suggests that teachers should be able to deal supportively and sensitively with questions involving sexual health.

The Conservative government in 1988 led to misunderstanding and a fear of mentioning sexuality in the classroom. Even after the repeal of the Act in July 2003, its legacy has lived on in many educators’ minds. Many schools have delayed developing policies on teaching sexuality issues or on challenging homophobic bullying.

Both the Department for Education and Skills and Local Authorities have issued regular reassurances about the legitimacy of this kind of work. Nonetheless some schools still have great misunderstandings around sexual health education, and teachers are often aware of their own lack of knowledge and skills to deal with the issues appropriately.

Within SRE, schools have to provide a large amount of information to pupils on a wide range of topics, from puberty and the reproductive process to safer sex and preventing unwanted pregnancies. Information for gay pupils is rarely seen as a priority.

Campaign Outline

Our aim is to develop a campaign that will result in the LEA in Plymouth providing compulsory, consistent and standardised Sexual and Relationships Education that is of a high quality and taught by qualified SRE teachers.

We want this SRE to be implemented by trained and specialist professionals in all schools (state, religious denomination, specialist and private) so that it is more available and understandable, for young people, regardless of sex/gender, ability orientation and preference. We believe that this will help to protect young people from the dangers of ignorance and vulnerability so that they maybe more informed and assertive. This we believe is highly important in a city such as Plymouth, due to the extremely high teenage pregnancy rates which we experience in the area.

Our intention is that the objectives and implemented systems that will occur from the campaign will be strongly supported by outside efforts from the voluntary, private and social sectors, such as through youth development (therefore targeting hard to reach groups). This integrated and co-operative system offers the provision of additional materials. This will support efforts in schools and offer a foundation of knowledge to those outside of education.

From this campaign, we hope for the development of system to be put into place throughout the city. This system will need to include strategies for the adherence and implementation of compulsory, consistent, standardised, high quality SRE that is accessible and understandable. This SRE will also need to be taught by trained professionals, specialist in their subject and confident with the issues, acknowledging their sensitivity and the influence that the SRE programme may potentially have on a person's character and development.

SRE must be taught through an interesting curriculum that is relevant for both primary and secondary levels of education. We have a duty to the rights of all people aged 0-25, with SRE an important part of personal development in schools and in the future within youth groups, once the curriculum for SRE is effective in schools. This will cumulatively result in a society that is more open towards the concepts of sex and relationships and more accepting of individual identity, where people are not afraid to ask for help and are aware of the emotional, mental and physical wellbeing of all people so that we do not face a similar crisis in the future.

We propose that the basic concepts of relationships are introduced as early as four, and that there is understanding to be confident in yourself and who you are, with SRE slowly developing from here as appropriate to age and understanding in accordance with other areas of the curriculum, so that the education is progressive and consolidated. We do however, identify that the sensitivity of this issue means that it should be treated with respect and acknowledgement of different beliefs and cultures and so this is open to negotiation.

We aim for this campaign to be heard, discussed and acted upon in terms of the early stages of a plan and councilor's/Local MP's discussion by the end of the UKYP term in January 2007.

Campaign for change within schools and colleges

| Current System | | | Proposed System | |
|----------------|--|--|--|--|
| AREA OF SRE | OPERATION | IMPACT ON YOUNG PEOPLE | OPERATION | IMPACT ON YOUNG PEOPLE |
| Teaching | Teachers are not always specifically trained, and may lack knowledge, or ability to enthuse young people. They can often feel uncomfortable teaching the subject, creating inconsistency within regions/schools. | The inconsistency creates lack of knowledge within young people, which leads to increased STIs and teenage pregnancies. Poor teaching may produce lack of interest in SRE. | Specifically trained teaching staff employed and shared by several schools in one area (paid for through the LEA). Better and more innovative resources. | A better general awareness of sex and relationships, which will lead to a decrease in STIs and teenage pregnancies. To promote maturity within students. |
| Assessment | There is no formal compulsory system for assessing SRE. | Teaching of SRE is not consistent across different areas and schools, making it difficult for young people to properly understand every aspect of SRE. | SRE should be assessed and enforced by OFSTED, and also could offer accreditation for the students who study it. | Helps track the progress of schools, and ensures that all students receive the same level and standard of SRE. This will offer a reason to attend the classes. |
| Curriculum | A part of citizenship, but SRE itself is not compulsory or standardized. Some schools do not follow the curriculum (especially in some schools where it contradicts with their faith). | Students receive different SRE depending on the attitude of the school they attend. The level of learning varies, so there are students who have gaps in their education. | Compulsory, standardized curriculum, covering a number of issues, starting from primary school. | Ensure that all students obtain the same level of SRE, in order to decrease STIs, teenage pregnancies etc |

Campaign for increased and standardised information

Using the MYPs' influence in society and with Local Government, we will lobby for the provision of resource packs that contain standardised information to ensure that these packs provide:

- Information for all ages
- The information will be distributed throughout youth centres and schools
- The legal side of sexual relationships
- Relationship information in general
- LGBT issues should be included
- Websites and help lines
- Local clinics information
- Safety of sex - including information about contraception and sexual transmitted infections.
- A quiz on STI's so people can decide how much they know.
- Highlighting the relationship between effective SRE and Life Planning.

This will be done by forming links with primary and secondary schools along with agencies and clinics; we will do this to gain publicity and support for our campaign. MYPs will make contact via letters and phone calls, and will request meetings with key policy makers and obtain the support of the young people that we represent.

Based on the response to the letters and meetings we will work with other young people to influence change in our local areas.

On a national level, UKYP will seek a joint meeting with Lord Andrew Adonis at DfES and Caroline Flint MP at Department of Health in January 2007, at which MYPs will present examples of the different ways in which SRE is being delivered in their schools. They will also use their evidence to justify the reason why SRE should be compulsory.

Evidence

We have gathered evidence to back up our report from various influential and important people. By doing this we aim to prove that the campaign for improved SRE teaching within Plymouth is justified and also strongly supported by key individuals. In addition, we have produced a survey which was completed by over 150 young people in the city. The results prove that the current system is far too inconsistent.

Although we were expecting the standards of SRE to be poor, we thought that there would be a noticeable difference in standard between the various schools in the city. In particular we expected religious denomination schools to have poorer standards than state schools for example, however we were shocked to find that in every single school, standards were severely lacking.

Professional's views

Dr Riley

Dr Riley currently works in Genito Urinary Medicine at Leicester Royal Infirmary and has been a GP with over 20 years experience.

The following quote is his view on young men and SRE.

“So even though the men are well educated, boys that might catch AIDS or HIV will have to wait until they are men (20-30 years old) to get the education they needed, which they could get from a very early age but now it is too late.”

He then went on to talk about the importance of young people's early education saying, *“In my opinion it is critical that young people have SRE from a young age.”* Moreover in reference to himself he said that, *“Our generation has let go and left it to teachers, we all need to step back and look again at the fundamental stages of teaching SRE. It is also down to the parents of young people.”*

The doctor went on to answer a question about the influence of the media,

“The media would be a good way of going about this - many people get information from magazines as far as I know. There are no campaigns in magazines directed at adults.”

Dr Riley was confronted by a girl in the consultation group who said, *“Whenever you start thinking of SRE, you come up with some much deeper issues, and you need to think about it in more detail. Being an Asian girl, the implications of being pregnant or getting an STI when parents are informed are massive.”* This evoked a detailed response about culture from the doctor.

“SRE has remained fairly biological in schools. This is one way of teaching sex, but not the best way. It is often difficult for untrained members of the community to talk about sex, this includes some doctors and teachers. SRE teachers need to be comfortable talking about sex.”

“There is still a stigma associated with sexual health clinics. This needs to be addressed through greater awareness of the problems caused by STIs. We should not relate sex with infection and disease. Safe sex is perfectly healthy.”

“There is not enough support in schools and colleges to deal with the emotional and physiological effects of relationships, sexual or otherwise.”

Dr Richard Taylor MP

Dr Taylor is an independent MP who is a member of the Select Committee for Health. The Health Committee suggested in a report that SRE should be compulsory and most importantly, assessable by OFSTED.

“Young people’s views are absolutely essential and need to be got out into the open. This is not being done adequately enough. There are good resources that are not being used.” – This proves that the quality of the teaching requires much improvement.

“The huge problem is money. Sexual Health Services (SHS) and Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) has a shortage of money. Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI’s) are low on a list of priorities, yet there has been a rise in sexually transmitted Infections (STI’s) in the last two years.”

“All kids should have Sex Education lessons. Good parents like to know what happens to their kids. Religious groups may not agree. I feel they do not have the right to disagree.”

“The amount of education received is hard to control. If given education early on, people would know what was right and what is wrong. They need to pick it up from the right sources. The National Health Service (NHS) should make all advice equal and easily accessible. Again, it is the problem of funding and the ‘Funding Formula’. Rural areas are very often under funded”

“The more education delivered earlier, the better. I agree that parents should not have the right to withdraw their children from Sex and Relationship Education. Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) is crucial. It is not just about sex, the relationship matters too.”

Gary Rowland LGBT London

Gary Rowland, is the London LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bi and Transsexual) Youth Officer, and his evidence helped us to understand the problems that arise from the lack of LGBT information available in SRE. As UKYP believes in equal opportunities and rights for every person, his evidence helped us to incorporate LGBT information within our plan of action for the future:

“There is no LGBT information in SRE lessons.”

“There is a bill going through parliament called The Civil Partnership Bill which will give LGBT the same rights e.g. Not to be refused a hotel room for two men.”

“If SRE had LGBT taught in it then the rates of homophobic crime could be reduced due to understanding.”

“The relationship side of SRE should be taught from a young age so young people become more aware of the realities of life.”

“Schools should treat being homophobic as a crime not bullying, SRE lessons could show how peoples feeling effect whether they are LGBT.”

“Parents should not be allowed to choose if a child is taught SRE it should be the child’s decision.”

SRE Survey Results (for an example of the survey, see page 11)

“How well informed do you feel about sexual health?”

- Out of the 160 young people who completed our survey, only 28 felt that they were extremely well informed about sexual health.
- Out of these 28, only 3 were from single faith schools
- ¼ of the people asked were unsure about how much they knew

“Name 3 forms of contraception”

- Only 83 of the 160 could name 3 forms of contraception
- Only 2/3 of people at single faith schools could name 3 forms of contraception

“Do you think that there should be a structured and tested SRE syllabus?”

- Out of those that answered, 79.5% believed that there should be a structured syllabus

One young person said:

“If maths and English are considered so important, why isn’t sex education? It affects everyone.”

“Do you think you should be taught more about relationships?”

- Of those who answered, 57% thought that they should be taught more about relationships

One young person commented:

“More emphasis should be put on the relationship part of SRE. We need more emotional education.”

“If you could improve what is taught in school sexual health education, what would you want to change?”

- 61 people said that they wanted better teachers, that were qualified and that explained things more fully, as well as being comfortable with what they were teaching
- 15 people said that they thought absolutely anything would be better than the SRE they receive at the moment
- 30 people thought that they should be taught about homosexual relationships
- 43 people thought they should be learning more about contraception, including how to put on a condom correctly
- 60 people thought they should be taught more about the emotional side of having sex and being in a relationship

Conclusion

Plymouth Youth Parliament is committed to ensuring that each young person across the city receives the same high-level standard of Sex and Relationship Education. We believe that although this is a challenging task, we are willing to commit the time and effort to making our campaign a success. We will strive to create a comprehensive SRE program, in conjunction with the Local Government and LEA, which can be followed in educational establishments and by those in hard to reach areas.

Our ultimate goal is one which is long term. However, through effective and sustained campaigning and distribution of information in the short term we will raise awareness of this serious issue and, in the process; help to improve the lives of young people in Plymouth and across the UK.

Contact details

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