Guidance in Identifying State and Local Laws and Policies Regarding Health and Sexuality Education

Introduction

In September 2008, Pal-Tech entered into a cooperative agreement with the Abstinence Education Division of the Family and Youth Services Bureau to help Community-Based Abstinence Education (CBAE) programs increase school partnerships by highlighting the overlap between their programs and state and local health and sexuality education guidelines and regulations.

Finding and interpreting relevant state and local regulations and guidelines, or standards, is a challenging yet useful step to aid you in building partnerships with schools. This is particularly true for public schools due to the restrictions on appropriate spending of government funds, so it is to your benefit to understand both the laws and policies that they operate under. This tip sheet identifies online sources of information about state and local government agencies, laws, and policies that may shape your approach to working with schools.

Digging in to state and local policy

State education laws, policies, and offices

States have the discretion to set sexuality and health education law (as long as it complies with federal law). While some states have complex laws that address significant content components, other states develop much less specific laws or no laws at all, in which case they follow Federal law. A state education agency (SEA) or state department of education can help you navigate the laws and provide additional information on schools. For a list of all SEAs, see http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/ccseas.asp.

A summary of each state's laws and standards are available until September 29, 2010, on the School Partnership Project (SPP) section of the abstinence education grantees T/TA website at http://abstinence.pal-tech.com/resources/index.cfm?subSec=83&id=714. On this web page you'll links to documents explaining laws, policies, and content standards.

The standards for each state are also spelled out in a program alignment grid, which is a table detailing state law provisions. We encourage you to complete the table by entering elements of your program that fulfill each requirement listed. The completed program alignment grid is a great promotional tool that will help you demonstrate to schools the many ways in which your program aligns with state standards.

To analyze laws yourself, you may want to search your state legislature's web page. Most state legislature websites have keyword searches so you can search specifically for legislation on sexual health and abstinence. A list of all state legislatures is here: http://www.tcag.com/connect/consider-this/advocacy/legislature-links. On most sites you can also set up bill tracking notifications to receive email updates of legislative progress on topics of interest.

Local education laws, policies, and offices

At the local level you may need to navigate county, school district, and city guidelines. Counties or parishes can be found by searching the National Association of Counties website: http://www.naco.org/Counties/Pages/NACo_FindACounty.aspx.

County education departments and boards provide support services and act as intermediaries between states and school districts. Independent cities, which are not part of a county, will have an education office or board that can be found on the city's website. Boroughs can be similar to either cities or counties, depending on their makeup, and have the ability to create policy. They may have educational offices at the borough or district level.

Familiarizing yourself with local school districts is of foremost importance because many states refer content decisions to the districts rather than creating state legislation. A school district, or local education agency (LEA), may take a variety of forms. Some school districts may contain one each of primary, middle, and high schools within a specific city only, whereas others may be composed of K–12 schools across several rural towns or even counties. A variety of school district types are defined on the Districts section of the Wikipedia School District page: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/School_district.

Individual school districts can be found online at http://www.greatschools.org/schools/districts/Hawaii/HI. To find a school district not in Hawaii, select your state from the "Show me school districts in a different state" dropdown list. Click on a school district's name to bring up an information page with a link to the district's web page.

School boards direct and formulate local sexuality education policy either independently of or in conjunction with a county, city, or school district (or their equivalent). You may be able to access local school boards through your state's school board association at http://www.nsba.org/MainMenu/SchoolBoardPolicies/StateSchoolBoardsAssociationPolicyServices.aspx. If information is not available there, a Google search should locate it.

Preparing to reach out to school decision makers and advocates

School decision makers include principals, boards, and district staff. School board members are elected by the community or appointed, so they will understand local political and social leanings and may be an asset to your program. Advocates in schools are often teachers, nurses, and counselors. Before scheduling a meeting with decision makers or advocates, be sure that you understand the state laws and any additional LEA, school district, county, and/or city standards relevant to your program and how your program aligns with these standards. In states without formal sexuality or health education laws, you can use the processes described above to contact local offices that will be able to provide you with regulations that apply to your program, if any exist.

In addition, SPP's *Common Local Practices, Policies, and Procedures for Partnering with Schools* TA piece provides tips for partnering with the local education community. http://abstinence.pal-tech.com/assets/File/Broaden_the_Reach_Project/SPPCommonLocalPractices.pdf

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