Professor David Wiley and Assistant Professor Kelly Wilson of Texas State’s Department of Health, Physical Education and Recreation, worked in conjunction with the Texas Freedom Network Education Fund and produced the report “Just Say Don’t Know.” This report uses scientific methods to measure the status of sexuality education in the state’s secondary schools and uses evidence-based research to highlight the failure of abstinence-only sexuality education programs.

Their findings have spurred statewide media coverage and discussion on the public health impact of the exclusion of more comprehensive sexuality education programs, as well as various long-term financial problems facing Texas taxpayers as a result of relying solely on abstinence.

Labeling Texas “the flagship state for the abstinence-only movement” (Texas receives the most federal funding for abstinence-only programs in the nation – $18 million...
in 2007), the authors concluded the movement is not only failing to provide adequate information and skills, but Wiley said "some misleading statements are actually damaging" by falsely alleging that condoms are not at all effective against sexually transmitted diseases.

Their research is particularly scathing about School Health Advisory Councils (SHACs). Every school district in the state is required to have a SHAC to provide input to district boards of trustees about health education programs including sexuality education programs. Wiley and Wilson label the overwhelming majority of these, "missing in action." As an example, 82 percent of the districts couldn't produce any recommendation about sexuality education from their SHACs.

Wiley and Wilson point out that almost every Texas school district instructs its students that abstinence is the only 100 percent effective method of avoiding sexually transmitted disease and unwanted pregnancies – period. "While it is true that abstinence is the first and best of all choices, our sexuality education cannot end there," Wiley said. "According to recent research, 52 percent of all Texas high school students have had sex at least once. Providing abstinence as the sole instructional strategy is not addressing the health needs of over half of Texas teens."

Wiley and Wilson write in the report's introduction: "Abstinence-only programs have a stranglehold on sexuality education in Texas public schools. An overwhelming majority – more than 94 percent – do not give any human sexuality instruction beyond abstinence. Additionally, just over 2 percent simply ignore sexuality education completely. What is left is a miniscule 4 percent...that teach any information about responsible pregnancy and STD prevention, including various contraceptive devices."

"Scare tactics," "outdated gender stereotypes" and "unconstitutional religious content" are often part of instructional strategies used to teach sexuality education, they found.

Wiley and Wilson often talk with public school counselors and nurses who must deal with the consequences of inadequate sexuality education information. They point out how shocked they are regarding the range of "false and misleading" sexuality education information they found students receive in the state's public school system.

In their report, the authors note that "we found it interesting that some officials seemed to interpret 'sexuality education' as mostly a 'how to' discussion." As an example, they cited the Central Texas interim superintendent who responded that he represented a small district "with 301 students in grades pre-K to 12. Most of these kids live on a farm or have animals they feed and care for. They get a pretty good sex education from their animals."

"Given that Texas has one of highest teen birth rates in the nation, clearly many of our young people already know 'how to,'" Wiley said. What these young people clearly do not know is information about making responsible decisions with regard to pregnancy and disease prevention – a key component of effective sexuality education programs, Wiley and Wilson reported.

### Abstinence-only programs have a stranglehold on sexuality education in Texas public schools.

In 2006, Texas had the third-highest teen birth rate in the country at 63 births per 1,000 females, an increase from the previous year. The national average for teen births is 41 per 1,000 females. "In short, we're not even close," said Wilson.

Concerns that the present education curricula may actually be damaging is exemplified by a passage in the state's most widely used health textbook that "barrier protection is not 100 percent effective in preventing the transmission of STDs, and it is not effective at all against HPV – the human papillomavirus. Abstinence from sexual activity is the only method that is 100 percent effective in preventing STDs."

The textbook contained no definition of "barrier protection," and the statement "not effective at all against HPV" is, according to Wiley, "an inaccurate statement that is actually damaging," given that HPV left untreated can contribute to cervical cancer. The authors also note that students are often given no information about where to be tested for sexually transmitted diseases.

The costs for teen births have long-term financial effects on taxpayers that extend well beyond health care to costs associated with school dropout rates, poverty and other social issues, the writers report. The costs of teen births are an estimated $1 billion annually for Texas taxpayers.

Parents should play a more active role in imparting values to their children, and schools should be in charge of information dissemination and science, Wiley and Wilson believe. By addressing sexuality as strictly a moral rather than public health issue, they said Texas public schools are creating generation after generation of "sexually illiterate adults."

As a result, a "cottage industry" has grown in the United States, involving private groups that receive public funding to promote abstinence-only programs, which exclude the more comprehensive approach to sexuality education. These programs routinely provide personal opinion as a substitute for facts and use morality in place of evidence-based science, the authors said.

Wiley and Wilson do see a bright light in the state's sexuality education approach, citing the Hays and Fort Worth school districts as districts that adopt programs and policies based on the characteristics of effective sexuality education programs.

To gather their data, the educators relied on the Texas Open Records Act to require districts to provide their policies. Nearly a thousand of the state's 1,031 school districts responded to the legal requirement. Such requests did not sit well with some school district superintendents, who called the Texas State administration to complain in spite of the fact that the project was funded by private funding and not by the university.

Beyond academic reporting on the topics, Wilson and Wiley expressed hope that their groundbreaking report will help shatter the "conspiracy of silence" about this important public health issue and begin the discussion about the financial implications of unplanned pregnancies for taxpayers. ✯