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BACKGROUND
The Ford Foundation’s Youth, Sexuality, and Human Rights Initiative brought together six teams to advance the ability of adults to better understand and nurture healthy, informed young people. Each team combined academic research with community organizing and strategic communications to learn how young people understand and act on their sexuality and evaluate how adults support young peoples’ sexual development and education.

The initial cohort of this initiative has critically examined the messages that both youth and adults receive about young peoples’ sexuality and sexual health. Each of the six teams articulated concerns that popular discourse about youth sexuality—especially among policymakers, educators, parents, and other adult decision makers influencing the lives of young people—is often negative, shaming youth who are sexually active and characterizing sexual intimacy as dirty and threatening. Furthermore, young people themselves are often absent from the conversations and decision making that affects their health and wellbeing. Researchers in this cohort found that the absence of positive supports and youth input create a stigmatizing culture that drive negative health and educational outcomes for many youth.

To begin shifting the dialogue about the sexual health of students, the researchers and community advocates in this cohort identified new ways to message and communicate about youth sexuality. Their proposed approaches are more affirming, realistic, and inclusive of the many ways young people think about their health and identities. By developing a positive approach to youth sexuality that challenges the assumptions rooted in messages that shame and stigmatize, this cohort seeks to create a more informed and open discussion that ultimately improves the health and opportunities of young people and their families.
ABOUT THE COHORT

**Crossroads Collaborative** (University of Arizona) - The Crossroads Collaborative brings stories and numbers together through action-oriented research with academics, youth serving organizations, and youth from the community to develop knowledge, increase understanding, amplify youth voice, and shift public discourses on policies regarding youth sexuality, health, and rights.

**Detroit Youth Passages** (University of Michigan) - Detroit Youth Passages examines and transforms the structural conditions that contribute to sexual vulnerability among residentially unstable youth in Detroit to identify what is needed, how to help, and where policy makers and others can make a difference.

**ELAYO** (San Francisco State University) – Partnering with the Health Equity Institute and CaliforniaLatinas for Reproductive Justice, Project ELAYO addresses the urgent need to reframe the current discourse about Latino/a youth sexuality and childbearing through questions such as how young Latinos balance competing cultural and social expectations regarding sexuality, parenting and education. The results will contribute to efforts to reduce negative stereotypes and elevate the social standing of Latino youth.

**Face Value** (A project of the Tides Center) Face Value is a culture change agent working to eliminate stigma associated with being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer. Face Value convenes interdisciplinary teams comprised of academics, advocates, applied researchers and strategists to undertake new social science research to expose the underlying social and psychological root causes of society’s discomfort and disapproval of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people, translating these findings into evidence-based communication and community engagement models.

**Project Safe SPACES** (University of Illinois at Chicago) – Project Safe SPACES investigates why young people harass each other because of gender or sexuality and is developing a research-backed campaign to make schools safer. In addition, the project is investigating parents’ attitudes and beliefs about these issues. By exploring how youth experience and construe such harassment and the social reasoning that affects young people’s judgments about these forms of harassment, Safe SPACES will develop bullying prevention messaging that will move both youth and parents to take action to make schools safer and more welcoming.

**Public Health Institute's Adolescent Sexual Health Policy Project** (University of California, Berkeley, and Planned Parenthood Shasta-Pacifica) – Working to expand the theoretical and empirical foundations of comprehensive sexuality education, the Adolescent Sexual Health Policy Project critically examines the validity and integrity of sexuality education research and its use, and conducts a wide range of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods research on adolescent sexuality, health, and rights.
The Ford Foundation funded this cohort through its initiative for Sexuality, Health and Rights Among Youth in the United States: Transforming Public Policy and Public Understanding Through Social Science Research. The project was established to support and help prepare researchers to advance cutting-edge social science sexuality research that has the potential to engage community partners and shift the discourse on these critical issues for the 21st century.

The author of this report, Ryan Schwartz, is a messaging and communications strategist who helps social change agents spark conversations about emotionally difficult conversations in ways that create empathy, build engagement, and move people to take action for a more just world.
OVERVIEW

The cohort identified a set of core messages that form a shared foundation for a more positive and supportive dialogue about youth sexuality and sexual health. The five messaging themes below create an umbrella for allies working on a range of interconnected topics under the banner of youth sexuality. They are meant to guide advocates, researchers, and educators so that issue-specific messaging builds on and echoes a shared frame and understanding.

Core messages about the sexuality and sexual health of young people:
• Young people are prudent experts about their own wellbeing.
• Understanding the context in which behaviors occur is necessary for influencing those behaviors.
• Talking about sexuality brings students, families, and classrooms together.
• Highlight shared values and experiences before data or policies.
• Shaming sexual activity can be more harmful than the activity itself.

Current mainstream media coverage does not often convey these messages. Data and policy often lead stories, young people are depicted as being naïve and unruly, and conversations about sexuality and sexual health are portrayed as divisive and controversial. To infuse media coverage with the above messages, journalists need support in understanding the nuances of very difficult topics.

Recommendations for a communications strategy include:
• Create a reporting guide for journalists
• Further develop the network of spokespeople who are students, academic researchers, educators, and parents.
• Proactively pitch media in advance of new reporters or data.
• Explicitly discuss race if it is a subtext.
• Create a conversations guide for supporters.
In addition, proponents of a more supportive and affirming approach to the sexual health and growth of young people may want to consider these questions when planning communications such as media interviews, newsletters, public speeches, and op-eds:

Message:
- Do you focus on the context and environment in which individuals act?
- Do you illustrate how young people can be thoughtful, prudent, and inspiring?
- Do you emphasize how conversations can bring people together?
- Do you lead with values, emotions, and common experiences, following up with data and statistics?
- If race might be a subtext, are you explicit about it?

Messenger:
- Has a student provided their perspective?
- Is there youth-produced media that you can include?
- Can a school employee provide a perspective that echoes what you are saying?
- Can someone tell a story of how their perspective developed as they grew to be a supporter of your work?
MESSAGING ANALYSIS

While each team focused on a specific aspect of sexuality research, common threads emerged that have the potential to reframe and refocus conversations about youth sexuality. Taken together, each of the team’s communications form a shared foundation for a more positive and supportive dialogue about youth sexuality and sexual health.

The five messaging themes below create an umbrella for allies working on a range of interconnected topics under the banner of youth sexuality. They are meant to guide advocates, researchers, and educators so that issue-specific messaging builds on and echoes a shared frame and understanding. In this way, a diverse set of projects can work together to create a broad shift in the way adults think and make decisions about the sexuality and sexual health of young people. A common narrative will thus help ensure that short-term, issue-specific victories contribute to long-term, movement wide goals.

Young people are prudent experts about their own wellbeing.

At the unspoken core of many discussions about youth sexuality is the assumption that young people are overly emotional, reactionary, and immature—especially when it comes to sexual health. Aided by understandings of psychology and biology that position youth as not fully developed, this frame leads adults to have a gut instinct—often unconsciously—that young people will put their own wellbeing at risk by engaging in behaviors without considering the possible outcomes of their actions.

In this context, the sexuality of young people is framed as a dangerous impulse that if acted on can lead to a wide range of negative consequences. Presuming that youth act more impulsively than adults, and without considering possible consequences, sexuality education often focuses on repressing sexual desires, while the decision-making process for the policies that affect young people’s sexual health rarely involve young people themselves.

All six teams pointed out the limitations and inaccuracies of this assumption, acknowledging that teens—just like adults—are more likely to make decisions in their best self-interest if they are provided with factual information and honest, open support from peers and the people they look up to. The cohort’s research can help adults better understand adolescent cognitive development and the role they adults can play in fostering meaningful support for young people. Policy change and a shift away from a shaming approach to sexuality can happen only if young people are believed to be sensible actors who can and should make decisions in their long-term self-interest.
Through their research, the six teams highlighted how youth are often nuanced and thoughtful when considering the impact their sexuality has on their lives. ELAYO found that, “The majority of Latino youth [they worked with] had high educational aspirations and reported intentional sexual decision-making linked to future aspirations.” Most of the young people who interacted with researchers were critical of narrow sexuality education programs that fell short of providing the information that young people identified as necessary for living healthy lives. In contrast to those programs, the Public Health Institute’s Adolescent Sexual Health Policy Project articulates a sexual health and rights framework that recognizes youth as holders of their own sexual rights and, as such, due access to comprehensive and accurate information about their sexual health. Through this approach, young people are seen not only as prudent experts about their own wellbeing, but as resources with new knowledge and ways of thinking that are beneficial to both adults as well as youth.

Unfortunately, the frame of a naïve young person is deeply embedded in most adults, especially parents who are reluctant to have frank discussions with their children about sexuality and sexual health. Successfully challenging this frame cannot be done with messaging alone; it depends on a mix of the messenger, the message, and the engagement strategy. Advocates cannot simply tell decision makers that young people are prudent thinkers and decision makers; adults must experience it firsthand.

Storytelling, as a mode of communication, allows adults to personally connect with the depth and insights young people offer about sexuality and sexual health. Short films produced by youth as part of this initiative allow for adults to experience how young people seek knowledge to make informed decisions, weigh possible outcomes to their actions, and evaluate behaviors based on a web of information, contexts, and values. As many of the teams showed, the simple act of young people telling a story can challenge adults’ assumptions about youth and how they navigate sexuality and its impact on their lives.2

Art—from photography to poetry—also helps adult better understand the realities of young people by putting youth perspectives on stage for an adult audience to actively explore and experience. The Crossroads Collaborative writes that, “Poetry slam, among other creative spaces for youth in Tucson provides local and larger possibilities for youth intervention in and disruption of dominant fictions and deficit-driven assumptions about youth knowledge and rights, particularly at the

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2Personal anecdotes alone can backfire if they are too focused on the individual without zooming out to the larger systems that are involved. Storytelling out of context can also make one person appear as an abnormal superstar or lead an audience to question what is wrong with others who aren’t as successful as the storyteller. Learn more about the research into the unintended effects of personal anecdotes: http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/framebytes/framebyte_storytelling.pdf.
intersections of education, racial and economic justice, sexuality, and health.”³ Similarly, researchers at Detroit Youth Passages noted how providing a platform for young people to exhibit and interpret photographs helped adults better understand, relate to, and ultimately take action for the interests of youth.⁴

Challenging unspoken frames and assumptions is difficult to do with words alone, especially when it involves deeply held beliefs about young people and sexuality. ELAYO comments that, “When reflecting on the life of ELAYO, we conclude that the largest lesson learned for adult programmers has been the importance of youth voice…. It is noteworthy that, when given the opportunity, youth are eager to amplify their voices, which are filled with incredible insight and curiosity.”⁵ Messaging that highlights how young people strive to be informed, sensible actors should be combined with opportunities for adults to personally come to the same conclusion. Such experiences can come through poetry, videos, community performances, storytelling, and media interviews with youth. Adults must feel that young people are capable of acting in their best interests before they will be ready to support policy changes and more candid approaches to sexuality education.

**Understanding the context in which behaviors occur is necessary for influencing those behaviors.**

This cohort observed that the dialogue about youth sexuality is often narrowly focused on individuals, blaming and shaming their decisions without considering the contexts, environments, and dynamics that shape those decisions. Research explored how structural and systemic issues—from the resources available to schools and neighborhoods to the reputation of the place one lives in— influence how young people understand and make decisions about their sexuality. Messaging should draw attention to the external factors that shape decisions, especially since such factors are rarely readily apparent.

To incorporate how environmental contexts shape individual behavior, several of the teams suggested describing behaviors with clear and intentional wording that avoids attributing them to personal traits and instead highlights the lived context in

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⁴ [http://detroityouthpassages.org/2013/04/24/photo-voice/](http://detroityouthpassages.org/2013/04/24/photo-voice/)
⁶ A note on jargon: talking about systems or structural factors is a quick way to lose most audiences. Detroit Youth Passages realized they needed to help people experience what is meant by the phrase “structural issues” by using vivid language and personal stories. Detroit Youth Passage’s key message to policymakers replaced the jargon with concrete examples of structural issues: “Lack of employment opportunities and homelessness among youth leads to sexual exploitation.”
which they take place. For example, Safe SPACES and the Crossroads Collaborative suggest using the phrase “bullying behavior” instead of the word “bully” to highlight how harassment is a behavior that everyone can be involved in instead of a character flaw of an individual. Young people can participate in bullying behavior in one context and be the target in another. Ending school harassment thus requires addressing the entire social environment in which bullying behavior happens instead of identifying and punishing specific individual perpetrators.

Likewise, Detroit Youth Passages suggests using the phrase “people who earn money for sex” instead of “prostitute” or “sex worker” to focus on the socioeconomic context that leads to this particular form of income. Using descriptions that highlight the broader context of behaviors allows issues to be framed as social problems requiring social solutions, and helps audiences open up to the powerful personal stories that can drive social change.

Detroit Youth Passages identified another unique way to zoom out from individuals to their environments: show how diverse behaviors among a range of populations can be attributed to a similar context, environment, or policy. The team found that gang violence, sexual violence, and exchanging sex for money often occur among residually unstable youth who spend time in the abandoned buildings of Detroit. By building a coalition among those groups, Detroit Youth Passages encouraged decision makers to understand how such behaviors are the result of citywide problems with the safety of vacant spaces and the residential stability of youth, problems that can be solved through new policies and community involvement.

Sense of place also shapes young peoples’ identities and their actions. In studying how young Detroiter experience the symbolic degradation of their city, Detroit Youth Passages suggests that negative representations of place be added to the environmental factors that should be considered when investigating the way young people understand and act on their sexuality. Expectations about what happens in “my neighborhood” or “my school” influence how young people evaluate their actions. Such observations can be combined with messaging about making sure all communities (schools, neighborhoods, etc.) are given a fair chance to succeed.7

Even the way adults characterize the behaviors of young people can be refocused on environmental contexts. ELAYO suggests using the phrase “uninformed decisions” instead of “bad decisions” to zoom out from the individual to the wider environment in which young people learn about their sexuality. This cohort found that communicating about information access is important because of just how few resources about sexual health are for many young people. In a content analysis of popular sexuality education websites for young people, the Adolescent

7In fact, framing research about racial disparities suggests messages about fairness of place do more to build support for progressive policies than messages about fairness between individuals: http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/PDF_race/disparitiesmessagebrief.pdf
Sexual Health Policy Project observed that the majority of websites providing sexual health information to teens presume a heterosexual, female audience, with a scarcity of discussion on sexual diversity, gender, or violence. Inaccurate or misleading information was also a common occurrence on the sites. More research needs to be done to fully understand what information young people are getting online when they seek sexual health information on their own.

Furthermore, videos created by youth involved with both The Crossroads Collaborative and ELAYO show that young people seek the information they need to be healthy and are actively kept from relevant information—and even put in danger—by limiting access to education about sexual health. ELAYO writes that, “Many youth want to defy the negative stereotypes and are working hard to become successful in their lives despite the many structural challenges they face.”

Showing the resiliency of youth, and their desire to grow in healthy, positive ways despite challenging environments or contexts can also help refocus conversations on the role of adults in providing supportive learning environments.

Talking about sexuality brings students, families, and classrooms together.

This cohort challenged a popular assumption that conversations about sexuality are divisive, an attitude that leads to resistance to addressing sexuality in education or public policy. School leaders often feel that sexuality education is important, but shy away from the topic to avoid a debate in their communities. The Crossroads Collaborative interviewed several teachers who said they were scared to implement lessons that included people of diverse sexual orientations or gender identities because of a possible backlash that could affect their jobs and safety.

Yet, the teams that researched community attitudes found that sexuality education was not as divisive an issue as many assume. Safe SPACES found that parents in Illinois overwhelmingly support providing young people with information about a spectrum of sexuality topics. Parents very clearly identified 18 topics—from STDs to sexual violence—as important and appropriate for their children to learn by the time they leave middle school. Corroborating this idea, the Adolescent Sexual Health Policy Project found a high level of support among parents for condom education and availability in classroom settings. This study also demonstrated that increased information and education for parents on condom effectiveness might further increase support for condom education and availability in schools.

Similarly, Safe SPACES found that while Illinois parents saw themselves as being responsible for educating their children about sexuality, they frequently endorsed sharing this responsibility with teachers and school staff. Safe SPACES writes that,

“These findings challenge assumptions that parents are key barriers to a more comprehensive sexuality curriculum and, instead, show us how they may more accurately be perceived as supporters and potential advocates.”

In addition to enjoying broad community support, conversations about sexuality can also develop trust and connections between peers. ELAYO suggests that learning about health and sexuality issues together as a peer group helps students develop community in the classroom. They reported that many young people feel more connected to each other after having such conversations, a feeling that has been shown to improve school climates, decrease classroom disruptions, and promote learning and academic achievement.

The Crossroads Collaborative also found that any mention in the classroom of people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender resulted in students of all sexualities and gender identities feeling safer and more included at school. The team wrote, “Implementation of LGBTQ-inclusive lessons promotes greater feelings of student safety, health and well-being,” noting that during difficult discussions, students find ways to work together as a community to address prejudice and harassment.

Parents also need to understand how frank, open conversations about sexuality can create closer bonds between them and their children. Bringing families and communities together by discussing awkward but salient issues such as youth sexuality should build on the conversation model developed by the Breakthrough Conversation project initiated by the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund to address stigma associated with people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. This model emphasizes creating authentic connections and shared understanding through open dialogue about common values and experiences.

Highlight shared values and experiences before discussing data or policy.
Conversations about the sexuality of young people are full of triggers that can cause people to shut down, stop listening, and become defensive. In such a mindset, change is impossible; audiences will hear what they want to hear, dismissing information that does not fit their view and embracing what does. If audiences feel that the status quo is unacceptable, and they feel hopeful and trusting of a proposed solution, they are more likely to rationalize it as the best course of action, no matter

9 Moving Past Assumptions: Recognizing Parents as Allies in Promoting the Sexual Literacies of Adolescents through a University-Community Collaboration [unpublished]. Stacey S. Horn, Christina R. Peter, & Timothy B. Tasker, University of Illinois at Chicago.
what the data says. If instead they feel fearful, angry, or distrustful, no amount of logic, data, testimony, or information will change their mind.

To be effective, communications must thus first establish an emotional connection by highlighting shared values and experiences. Messaging about youth sexuality needs to be rooted in values and relationships that are familiar to target audiences. Highlighting common ground allows for people to see themselves reflected in the conversation, and creates conditions for constructive dialogue. Only once that emotional connection is made should data be offered in easy to understand ways.

This cohort identified a set of common values that can be highlighted when talking about issues related to youth sexuality: respect; honesty; self-confidence; opportunity; education; determination; dignity; success; health; safety; wellbeing; family; and community.\(^\text{12}\) In addition to drawing attention to these values, messaging should remind audiences of the common experiences people share as they grow and mature.

Finding that common ground has been particularly difficult when discussing sexual orientation. Face Value found that straight people express some level of tolerance and sympathy toward lesbians and gay men—especially those they know personally—but struggle to identify with the experiences, feelings, and motives of people who are gay or lesbian. Even supporters of political equality feel a disconnect between their own lives and the lives of people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

Face Value’s research confirmed that many Americans have never had a direct, personal conversation with a gay or lesbian person about their experiences as a sexual minority, and the lack of opportunity to have these types of conversations is contributing to much of the confusion and disconnect that many straight people have about gays and lesbians. Their work suggests that building support for issues related to young people and sexuality will require not just a broadcast message but active conversations between the people involved.

Indeed, the conversation model developed by Face Value integrates values-based language with opportunities for genuine listening. They write, “Our most revealing – and hopeful – finding was that many straight people, when given an opportunity to participate in a structured, safe and respectful conversation, are willing to talk about lesbians and gays, especially those they know personally; and these conversations can actually begin to reduce people’s disapproval and discomfort with lesbian and gay people.”\(^\text{13}\) Other advocates working on issues related to sexuality and young

\(^{12}\) ELAYO identified a set of values that have the most resonance with Latino parents: dignity, health, family, and education.

\(^{13}\) From Equal Rights to Equal Lives: An action plan to end stigma against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people [unpublished]
people can benefit from developing similar conversation models that guide supporters through meaningful and transformative conversations with their friends and family.

**Shaming sexual activity can be more harmful than the activity itself.**

This cohort learned that punishing and stigmatizing young people for being sexually active often lead to greater negative outcomes than the activity itself. This was most apparent among the pregnant teens interviewed by ELAYO, which reported that young mothers are excluded from school and opportunity even when they passionately want to continue education. California Latinas for Reproductive Justice—the community partner or ELAYO—writes, “In the case of pregnant and parenting youth, educational institutions are creating systemic conditions that prevent youth from graduating and preparing for college, both unintentionally and intentionally.”

This research was also echoed by The Crossroads Collaborative, who found in a review of research that, “Even now, many schools violate Title IX mandates and teen mothers are pressured to leave school” even though researchers “find that pregnancy can motivate women to return to problematic schools in order to ‘make it’ for their children.” Pregnant and parenting teens are often shamed out of their schools and educational settings, resulting in a loss of opportunity for both them and their families.

Negative consequences are heightened when sexual activities are also criminalized. Detroit Youth Passages found that young people who enter the juvenile justice system lose access to opportunities and face decreased social mobility, driving a cycle of continued negative outcomes including violence and poverty. Messaging should thus highlight the dangers of a shaming approach to youth sexuality through a lens of success, opportunity, and dignity while additional research should investigate the impact shaming messages about sexuality have on young peoples’ decisions and behaviors.

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15 https://mcclellandinstitute.arizona.edu/sites/mcclellandinstitute.arizona.edu/files/Crossroads%20Connections%20Vol.%201%20No.%203.pdf
MESSAGING FOR SPECIFIC AUDIENCES

In addition to suggesting the above message themes, this cohort identified recommendations for communicating with various audiences invested in the wellbeing of young people. The following sections highlight audience-specific messaging strategies that can drive a more inclusive and supportive approach to youth sexuality.

Students

Much of the research conducted by this cohort explored how young people evaluate decisions and behaviors related to sexuality. Through surveys, interviews, focus groups, and arts-based inquiries, this cohort identified values and messaging that can motivate young people, drive behavioral change, and help students be stronger advocates for their own health and education.

Research found that young people see themselves as resilient and optimistic, with the ability to create fresh solutions to the problems they face in the world. To that end, many students respond positively to hopeful messaging that describes them as a new generation with the potential for greater understanding and cooperation than the generations before them. Students contribute ways of thinking that not only can solve the problems they face, but can benefit the adults in their lives as well. Messaging to young people should elevate stories that show how this is possible.

Yet optimism alone cannot motivate youth, and both Detroit Youth Passages and Crossroads Collaborative found that young people—when expressing themselves through art—combined optimism with messages of determination and constructive rebelliousness. Communications targeted to youth should reflect a similar tone and voice. For example, ELAYO found that negative stereotypes often form a useful point of reference to remind youth that they are stronger than the assumptions made about them. In this sense, adults can help young people reframe negative messages and stereotypes about them, using an affirming, positive message that harnesses young peoples’ rebelliousness and determination to drive a desire for social change.

For students, it is also important to specifically reference the contexts in which behaviors take place. Young people evaluate behaviors based on their context, and are motivated more by underlying values than overly prescriptive rules. For example, Safe SPACES found that young people do not make blanket judgments about the acceptability of bullying behavior and sexual harassment. Teasing a friend or making fun of someone to elicit a laugh were seen as less wrong than insulting someone to hurt their feelings. Messages that treat all teasing the same are thus not likely to resonate with young people, who may be dismissive of an overly simplistic message that does not fully reflect their own experiences.

A similar evaluation process was found by Detroit Youth Passages, who learned that young people judge the morality of economic activities that are illegal—such as theft
and exchanging sex for money—by their context; sometimes they can be the right thing to do. Thus, communication needs to be concrete and specific when describing certain behaviors, taking into account motivations and context. Simple statements about the “rightness” or “wrongness” of certain activities will fail to resonate with most students.

This cohort’s research also points out the need for messaging to avoid jargon and instead be concrete about specific actions and behaviors. For example, messaging to young people should avoid phrases that do not have clear meanings, such as “bullying.” The Crossroads Collaborative found that, “Bullying happens for many reasons, but youth report not always being aware of when it is occurring. Once youth are made aware of bullying, however, they are often motivated to stop it in their school.”16 Instead of assuming that young people grasp what bullying looks or feels like, adults should use specific examples of the behaviors they are referencing, such as “making fun of someone’s appearance to hurt them.”17

Finally, Detroit Youth Passages also corroborated recent adolescent research that youth have a strong sense of independence and may sometimes hesitate to ask adults for support if there is a competing feeling of wanting to avoid being a burden. Future research may wish to explore this further, but communications should not assume young people will ask for help if they realize they need it. Messaging should highlight how valuable it is for adults to hear the honest opinions of young people and how speaking up is the first step to creating positive change.

Parents
This cohort recognized the need for more research into how parents think about the sexual health and education of their children. The Adolescent Sexual Health Policy Project found that many parents and other caregiving adults are uncomfortable or lack confidence in talking about sexuality with their children and would greatly benefit from various types of support and education. When they do discuss sexuality with their adolescents, parents tend to focus more on the risks of sex than how to develop a safe and healthy sexuality. Parents need more culturally appropriate materials to help facilitate parent-child communication about sexuality. Such materials should emphasize how conversations about sexuality can bring families together and that sexuality is a normal part of a child’s healthy development. It may be useful to point out that many young people have thought about these issues and can articulate their concerns and beliefs if approached in a supportive, respectful way.

16http://mcclellandinstitute.arizona.edu/sites/mcclellandinstitute.arizona.edu/files/Crossroads%20Connections%20Vol.%201%20No.%201.pdf
17The Crossroads Collaborative defines bullying behavior as: “aggressive words or actions that are intentional and emphasize an imbalance of power. Most often, bullying is repeated over time.” http://mcclellandinstitute.arizona.edu/sites/mcclellandinstitute.arizona.edu/files/Crossroads%20Connections%20Vol.%201%20No.%201.pdf
Many parents may be quick to dismiss information they think is not relevant to their family. They may assume their children are not sexually active, identify as straight, or know how to take care of their sexual health. Messaging should thus focus on all students and families and avoid narrowing in on smaller groups that parents do not readily identify with. For example, parents may have a hard time relating to the concerns of youth who are pregnant or who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender if they feel that such issues do not affect anyone in their immediate family. Messaging should thus highlight how creating positive and supportive environments improves health outcomes for everyone, and how slurs negatively affect all students regardless of actual identities. For example, the Crossroads Collaborative found that all young people feel safer at school when LGBT issues are included in the curriculum.\(^\text{18}\) Such studies should be prominent in messaging to parents to help them connect to issues they may not readily identify with.

This cohort also found evidence that expressing sexual health issues as “rights” can affect parental support. The Safe SPACES researchers found parents who strongly approved of schools ensuring safe environments for LGBT youth were less approving of a right for students to form student clubs or take same-sex dates to school events. Parents favored the idea that students have a right to be protected at school, but were not as supportive of a right to fully participate in school activities.

In focus groups with parents, the Adolescent Sexual Health Policy Project similarly found that parents conceptualized rights for young people as guidelines, but were concerned that granting such “rights” erodes the ability of parents to control the information that young people receive. The Crossroads Collaborative highlighted a law in Arizona that establishes a parent’s bill of rights, including the right to direct the upbringing, education, health care and mental health of their children. One young person wrote, “Though it emphasizes parents’ rights, the bill takes away young peoples’ rights to take authority in their own sexual health education.”\(^\text{19}\) A focusing on “rights” can thus backfire by creating a tension between parents’ rights and the rights of youth and advocates.

**Educators**

Teachers feel overburdened and this cohort found that educators resist comprehensive sexuality education primarily because of concerns about workload. Many teachers see education as zero-sum—teaching some content means not teaching other content—especially in the context of standardized testing. In this sense, educators see comprehensive sexuality education in opposition to teaching what is tested to evaluate their performance. Messaging to educators must thus highlight how teaching comprehensive sexuality education can drive academic


\(^{19}\) http://mcclellandinstitute.arizona.edu/sites/mcclellandinstitute.arizona.edu/files/Crossroads%20Connections%20Vol.%201%20No.%202.pdf
achievement in other areas and support the creation of school environments more conducive to learning.

Even if teachers are motivated to implement comprehensive sexuality education, they often don't know how. The Crossroads Collaborative points out that the burden of self-implementation can derail great policies and curricula. Any communications to educators must thus present comprehensive sexuality education as practical and rewarding. In this case, the most trusted messengers are likely other teachers themselves.

Finally, the Crossroads Collaborative found that teachers often resist implementing comprehensive sexuality education because they fear resistance from parents or community members. Yet, this cohort showed that opponents of school-based comprehensive sexuality education are a vocal but small minority, while supporters tend to be less motivated and less vocal. These data, along with data that highlight how most parents believe teachers have a role in health and sexuality education, should be incorporated into messaging to educators.

Even so, educators will need support to overcome a fear of a group of well-organized, conservative, opposition. Organizations may want to consider addressing that fear head on by acknowledging it directly with messaging that helps overcome such hesitations. For example: “All parents will appreciate the close community that develops by making sure no family feels excluded, even the one or two that might complain at the beginning.” Instead of tiptoeing around possible controversy, messaging should inoculate against the immediate reaction most educators have to opening the door for the disruptions possible by a couple of parents on a mission, no matter how overwhelming support may be.

**Policymakers**

Traditionally, messaging for policymakers has focused on data about the safety of young people or the financial benefits of prevention versus treatment. To add to this, this cohort has shown that majorities of parents of all faiths and political affiliations support comprehensive sexuality education. Policymakers need to see these polls and be reminded that a few vocal opponents do not represent the majority of their constituents. Messaging should inoculate against those opponents similarly to the above strategies for educators.

Policymakers also need to better understand how and why to involve youth in their decision-making processes. The Crossroads Collaborative pointed out that school is the primary place where most young people interact with their government. Yet, youth said they see authorities as looking at them from afar, creating decisions without engaging them in the process. When given the opportunity, however, young people at poetry slams were eager to explore, address, learn, and teach about government and political systems. Inviting policymakers to engage youth in performance spaces and at school is one way to highlight how policymakers can
create new avenues for young people to engage with their government and political systems.

**Other movement partners**
Messing to other movement partners should promote the combination of research, community advocacy, and strategic communications that made this initiative unique. This cohort was able to use ethnographic and participatory research to better understand and deepen networks with young people and their communities. This is especially needed because many programs that work with youth, such as youth employment centers, need training to better understand the structural factors that affect the youth that could benefit from their services. As Detroit Youth Passages found, partners in youth development often recreate frames and discourse that end up hurting the populations they serve. In addition, assumptions about parent-child interactions, and whether there even is a parent or guardian present, drive misunderstanding and social isolation of many youth.

Messaging to other partner organizations should highlight the benefits of research collaborations in identifying and challenging unspoken assumptions that may hinder organizations from better fulfilling their missions.

**Conclusion**
This initiative made clear that a new framework is needed to advance conversations about the sexual health—and healthy sexualities—of young people. While the six teams of this cohort all studied different subject areas, a common set of themes emerged with the potential to broadly create a more accurate and supportive conversation in which young people are respected and listened to. The above messaging strategies are designed to be incorporated into issue-specific communications so that researchers and advocates across the movement reinforce each other’s framing and echo each other’s calls for a more affirming approach to supporting young people as they mature.
MEDIA ANALYSIS

As a follow-up to the above messaging analysis, a small, focused media scan investigated how mainstream media stories about students and their sexual health reflected the themes advocated by the researchers and community advocates in this cohort. The media scan identified how young people were included in stories about them, and if they were included, how they were portrayed. The scan examined how topics around sexuality and sexual health were framed, and if the focus of the story was on individual decisions or environmental influencers that shaped the outcomes covered in the story. The overall intention of the media scan was to provide an overview of how mainstream media reports on these issues, and to identify promising examples of how reporters can be supportive, accurate, and nuanced about the young lives they write about.

This media scan builds off the main messaging themes identified by the cohort, evaluating the extent of which these themes are presented in mainstream media coverage. Those themes include:

• Young people are prudent experts about their own wellbeing;
• Understanding the context in which behaviors occur is necessary for influencing those behaviors;
• Talking about sexuality brings youth, families, and classrooms together;
• Highlight shared values and experiences before discussing data or policy; and
• Shaming sexual activity can be more harmful than the activity itself.

Methodology

100 articles were compiled from US news sources in the Lexis-Nexis database, dating from 2012 and 2013. Search terms focused on a combination of a keyword representing youth (e.g. young, youth, student, school, teen, child) and a keyword representing sexuality (e.g. sexuality, sexual health, sex, sexual education). Initial search results were refined by the specific topics researched by teams in this cohort to ensure the research sample matched the full breadth of work undertaken as part of this initiative. Additional search terms included:

• sexual education, sex ed, sexuality education;
• pregnancy, parenting, motherhood, fatherhood;
• health, STD, contraception;
• prostitution, sex for money, johns;
• harassment, bullying; and
• gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer.

To evaluate how these themes were included in media coverage, this media scan asked several questions of each article:
• How are young people characterized and are they quoted?
• Does the article narrowly focus on individual decisions, or is there a discussion of environmental factors that influence behavior and health outcomes?
• Are conversations about sexuality portrayed as divisive or controversial?
• What is the problem identified in the article, who is to blame, and who is the hero?
• What are the roles of schools and educators?

In addition, the media scan identified which news outlets reported on these issues, geographical areas in which they are located, and the topics usually covered by the reporter.

To supplement the media scan, several movement leaders who regularly monitor how media cover issues related to the sexuality of young people were interviewed. The author of this report thanks those that took the time to share their observations, including:

• Rachel Cooke, Advocates For Youth
• Elizabeth Toledo, Camino PR
• Jenni Kotting and Tiffany Pryor, Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health
• Elizabeth Curwen, Spitfire Strategies

Where is the conversation?

Discussions about the sexuality of young people are rarely front-page news. Instead, the above movement leaders who were interviewed for this project pointed to online blogs as the primary source of commentary about young people and sexual health. The Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health keeps track of news stories about these issues, and indeed most of their content was originally published online.²⁰ Websites such as Jezebel, Huffington Post, Feministing, and Think Progress offer dedicated space to explore daily news stories through a lens of reproductive justice.

While blogs dedicated to these issues are hosting the bulk of commentary, parenting blogs are also beginning to cover issues about sexuality and sexual health. Jenni Kotting from Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health said, “Recently, parent bloggers have had a voice in either establishing or denying that young women are temptresses and young men have uncontrollable urges.”²¹ Whether blogs are focused on parenting, celebrity gossip, or politics, they are conduits for discussions about young people and their sexual health far more often than mainstream traditional media. The sporadic nature of stories that appeared in the Lexis-Nexis search of major daily newspapers (as outlined above) confirms that the sheer volume of content is heavily skewed toward online sources.

²⁰ http://paper.li/ICAH/1361919169
²¹ Personal interview
This creates a barrier for advocates who hope to shift the way Americans think about young people and their sexual health: blogs tend to engage a polarized and homogenized audience. Pointing to studies that highlight the rarity of cross-references between blogs of different political leanings, Cass Sunstein (formerly of University of Chicago Law School) writes, “Because of self-sorting, people are often reading like-minded points of view, in a way that can breed greater confidence, More uniformity within groups, and more extremism.” 22 Such a caveat to online discussion is echoed in a review of political blogs undertaken for the Canadian Parliamentary Review: “While often interesting, political weblogs tend to contribute to the thickening of preexisting relationships and affinities rather than generating new ideas or fostering democratic deliberation.” 23 It is likely that for a topic as emotionally charged as the sexuality of young people, such self-sorting is usual practice. Those who feel strongly that students should be encouraged to have open, frank conversations about sexuality find like-minded views on the blogs they choose to read. Those who attempt to repress or hide such discussions from young people are further encouraged to do so by the blogs they read.

Thus, even though online blogs house most of the conversations about the sexuality and sexual health of young people, they do little to change opinions or shift cultural views. Instead, media with a broader reach—such as daily and community newspapers—hold a greater potential for transformation. Coverage by traditional media may be viewed as more trustworthy than online content, and is often linked to specific policies in one’s own community, which can be viewed as more relevant and engaging. While mainstream media coverage of these issues is rare, when such stories do appear they can have a huge impact on community conversations, personal opinions, and public policy. Thus, the rest of this discussion focuses on stories of the sexuality and sexual health of young people found in major and community newspapers.

What sparks the conversation?

While blogs offer an opportunity for authors to discuss trends, personal experiences, and current events, mainstream media is catalyzed to report on youth sexuality only when there is a more concrete news hook. In most of the articles reviewed during this media scan, that hook was the release of new statistics and data, including rates of STD prevalence, pregnancy, sexual assault, and the presence of student clubs such as Gay-Straight Alliances. These stories often compared local statistics to national data or reported on national trends and studies with an alarmist tone. For most of these stories, the release of new reports by public health

agencies (and less often universities) triggered local reporting on issues related to youth sexuality.

The second most frequent reason for the articles reviewed in this scan was a change in policy or a proposed change in policy, either in schools or the criminal justice system. For education and local politics reporters, the most common policies discussed were sexuality education / abstinence education, the provision of contraceptive to students, and school policies concerning issues related to sexual orientation or gender identity. For criminal justice reporters, the most common policies discussed concerned the treatment of young people under the age of eighteen who exchanged sex for money. Policy discussions were often framed in terms of statistics, as proposals to change policy often came about because of the release of new data.

Finally, local newspapers often reported on promising new programs, such as mentoring or education initiatives launched by community organizations, new public health campaigns, or school programs to engage youth and parents in the development of “life skills” such as decision making, risk reduction, and communication. Stories about community programs were often more hopeful and optimistic than stories based in statistics, although they did not always offer a more nuanced exploration of the factors that influence behaviors and health outcomes.

These three themes accounted for nearly all of the articles reviewed during this media scan. They also pose a significant barrier for advocates hoping to highlight more personal stories that elevate shared values and common ground. Stories that highlighted new data often focused on the numbers and completely omitted the personal stories that readers could relate to. This was especially true for statistics about teen pregnancy and STDs—such articles rarely moved beyond the numbers to discuss the experiences and emotions of the people involved.

On the other hand, articles about data concerning students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender often contained personal quotes and stories, although those stories often began by identifying the student as a minority, otherizing their stories from the mostly heterosexual audience reading them. If one of the main importing messaging themes identified by this cohort is to emphasize shared values and experiences before discussing data, much work needs to be done connecting local mainstream media reporters to the people whose experiences illustrate the impact of the numbers emailed in press releases.

Similarly, articles about policy were nearly unanimously polarizing, highlighting potential controversies and using war-related metaphors such as policy battle or fight. Again, such articles rarely included the personal stories and experiences that show the complexity of how people judge and evaluate policies related to youth sexuality; back-and-forth arguments were detailed in simple one-liners and sound bites. Not a single article interviewed a person who felt conflicted about policy issues, a person who could share their complex reasoning about their concerns, and
the journey they’ve taken to come to a decision. This cohort hopes to show how talking about sexuality brings youth, families, and classrooms together, but in order to do so, mainstream media needs to tell the stories of how conflicted adults have learned how to find common ground in these discussions.

The most promising type of coverage concerned innovative programs and initiatives to engage young people and the adults who care for them in meaningful conversations. Stories about such programs usually contained personal stories, and rarely portrayed efforts as divisive or political. By grounding their reporting in real experiences—instead of data or sound bites—these reporters were able to convey some of the key messages identified by this cohort. As such, it may be useful to tie communications about data or policy to actual related programs offered by schools and community organizations.

The events that precipitated mainstream media coverage about youth sexuality issues were quite different than those reported on by blogs, which often highlight extreme examples with high shock value. For example, Jenni Kotting and Tiffany Pryor from Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health routinely monitor online content and find that two types of stories often generate lots of online discussion even though they are rarely published in mainstream media. The first concerns extreme parenting, such as fathers who publicly shame or embarrass their daughters for being sexually active or expressive. The second concerns young celebrities, such as Miley Cyrus, who are sexualized in popular media or make headlines for acting provocatively.

As more and more parenting blogs begin covering issues related to the sexual health of young people, there is a need to promote stories of everyday families having meaningful, supportive dialogue. These stories—along with the programs engaging young people and the adults who influence them—hold the most promise for the type of media coverage this cohort hopes to generate. If the media conversation about young people and sexuality is to shift, we must help content producers see the value of writing about the everyday efforts that are making a difference instead of the typically alarmist and divisive stories about data, policy, or extreme events.

Who is being interviewed?
It should not come as a surprise to many of the researchers and advocates in this cohort that young people are not often quoted in stories about their own lives and health. Instead, mainstream media speak to “experts” such as school nurses,

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educators, employees of government agencies, or the leaders of community
organizations and churches. Elizabeth Toledo from Camino PR said, “Sometimes
reporters who jump into these conversations don’t understand the nuances of
sexuality education funding and research, and who is an expert and who is not an
expert.”

Only about 40% of the articles reviewed in this media scan quoted young people,
and those that did rarely quoted more than one student. The lack of youth voice was
especially noticeable in articles about STD rates, sexual violence, and dating abuse.

There is however a more promising trend in articles about students who are lesbian,
gay, bisexual, and transgender: every single one reviewed for this media scan
quoted a student. Youth who have strong feelings of identity associated with their
sexual orientation or gender identity may be more likely to be outspoken on the
issue, and the presence of student clubs such as Gay-Straight Alliances may make it
easier for reporters to connect with young people. Other movements related to
youth sexual health issues can benefit from learning about how reporters connect
with these youth, and how community advocates can act as a conduit to connect
reporters to young people instead of speaking for them.

The most prominent adults who were quoted were community advocates, such as
pastors, volunteer activists, and staff of organizations such as Planned Parenthood
or statewide coalitions against domestic violence.

Articles that quoted such adult advocates were less likely to include a quote from a
young person, unless the story was about young people who are lesbian, gay,
bisexual, or transgender. Furthermore, articles that quoted adults instead of youth
were also more likely to portray the topic as divisive or political, even when the
reporter did not interview an advocate representing an alternative point of view.

Others adults who were quoted less frequently than community advocates included
specialized school employees such as nurses, counselors, and social workers, as well
as employees of public health agencies. Parents and guardians were rarely quoted;
their perspectives were present in only eight percent of the reviewed articles.
Parents and guardians were most involved in shaping stories about dating or sexual
violence, and advocates for other issues should further develop parent
spokespeople who can act as trusted messengers for other adults, especially those
who are conflicted about issues related to youth sexuality.

**How are young people portrayed?**

There is a considerable range of characteristics that were used to portray young
people in these articles. In some articles, young people were described as
empathetic, prudent, and determined to breakthrough the barriers they faced. Such
articles quoted students who spoke about being underestimated, observed school programs where it was clear students cared about their futures, or quoted educators who were impressed or inspired by their students.

In others, youth were depicted as abusive, sneaky, and foolish. Some articles sensationalized how little adults know about their children’s’ lives, building distrust of young people. For example: “When talking to the teenage girls in delivery more than half admit they became pregnant in their home either while their parents were working and sometimes when parents are in the other room watching television.”

At other times, articles depict young people as naïve, purposefully ignoring lessons about sexual health because they don’t believe anything can happen to them.

On average, young people were portrayed as vulnerable and naïve. About one third of the articles cast a more negative light on young people while about a quarter were more positive than average. Of the articles that characterized young people in admirable, inspiring ways, 95% quoted a student. Of the articles with the most unfavorable depictions, only 15% interviewed a young person.

Young people need to be seen as capable and prudent if advocates are to be successful in creating more affirming and open approaches to supporting young people’s sexual health. Building public support hinges on creating an image of students who can be trusted to discuss complicated issues. When people get an image of students as unruly or short-sighted, they simply won’t support the recommendations of many progressive advocates. While quoting young people is not guaranteed to result in a positive portrayal, it is clear that doing so often does contribute to an overall image of young people that is more conducive to being pragmatic and thoughtful.

**How are environmental contexts framed?**

One issue this cohort focused on is how social and environmental factors affect young people and their behaviors. Blame and shame approaches often narrowly focus on individuals and the decisions they make without mentioning the context in which people live. Yet those external contexts—such as homelessness, access to educational opportunities, and sense of place—all have considerable influence on how someone perceives the choices available to them.

Overall, articles focused on individual decisions without providing a deep context about the environment in which those decisions were made. This was especially true for articles about teen parenting or dating violence. For example, one article highlighted that, "If a student ... can communicate their limits and have decision-

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25 Sex education in the ECISD may change soon, Odessa American, 3/26/12
making skills, they’re going to have better outcomes.”26 Similarly, another article highlighted a new pregnancy prevention program that wanted to ensure that “youngsters...will learn about goal-setting and making positive choices.”27 If only learning how to set goals could reverse the impacts of underfunded schools and neighborhoods!

On the other hand, there were a couple of excellent examples of providing environmental context and asking questions about the social determinants for health outcomes. Articles that provided this context often quoted academic researchers. For example, one story made a point of saying, “Teen pregnancy is a symptom of poverty...” because teen parents often “feel they have little chance of advancement.”28 However, these promising articles also lacked the personal stories that illustrate in concrete ways how individuals are affected by their environments. More attention should be given to telling personal stories that also widen the lens on these issues.

There was little correlation between the type of frame and who was quoted, how young people were characterized, or how divisive an issue was portrayed to be. Even when community advocates were interviewed, the frame could still focus solely on individuals—a missed opportunity by those who can be more strategic about their messaging. Movement coordinators and funders should help community advocates, especially those working at a local level, integrate messages about environmental influences on young people.

**Does reporting focus on controversy?**

School districts and public agencies often tiptoe around issues of young people’s sexuality and sexual health for fear of sparking a heated community debate. Press that highlights controversy around these issues can often stall efforts to implement new programs or approaches by putting school leaders on the defensive. Such coverage can also shift attention away from the personal stories of young people to a never-ending conflict fueled by strong-willed advocates. Coverage of controversies often beget more controversies, while stories about common ground can spur more positive conversations.

Many of the articles only highlighted support for efforts to support young people and their sexual health, and avoided mention of controversy or debate. There were slightly more articles that never mentioned controversy than there were those that did. The most controversial issues concerned sex/health education and topics that include students who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. Articles that covered

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26 Sex ed: Parents can be key, but teachers play an important role. Bowling Green Daily News, 5/13/12
28 Teen pregnancy is poverty’s offspring. Baltimore Sun, 4/16/12.
dating abuse, parenthood, and the legal treatment of young people who exchange sex for money were more likely to show a united community in support of educational and outreach programs.

No geographic region of the United States was more likely to have articles that highlighted community divisions than others. There was also no correlation between how divisive an issue was portrayed and whether it was characterized as a problem due to individual choices or social contexts. However, articles that quoted a school employee were less likely to portray an issue as controversial. Advocates may want to better equip school employees to be spokespersons, especially because they may be seen as more trusted authorities who can determine what is in the best interest of students and families. Quoting a parent or student had little correlation with how an issue was characterized.

How was coverage influenced by race?
Overall, race and ethnicity were rarely mentioned in the reviewed articles. Only 10% of articles characterized a specific community or person being quoted by their race. When race was mentioned it was usually in context of differences in statistics about teen parenthood, sexual abuse, or STD rates. Such mentions usually lacked context, categorizing statistics by race without including any additional context or interviewing someone who could provide a more meaningful perspective. While statistics about public health issues are often broken out by race when they are published, the authors of those studies may want to include newspaper-ready quotes that provide substantive context along side the numbers.

When race was included in news coverage not about statistics, it also completely lacked context. For example, in a story about a mentoring program one reporter wrote, “McCaskill, a mental-health counselor in Raleigh, said he joined the mentorship program because he wanted to help young black males learn how to be a man and how to treat women.” There is no additional discussion of race in the article, but the reader is left to imagine only black men when reading subsequent facts about dating violence.

The one article that provided any sort of context for statistical differences between racial groups attributed the variation to cultural differences:

Work to prevent teenage pregnancy might be most challenging in the Hispanic population, in which the birth rate is the most highest. Neemeyer [A director of an organization to support teenage mothers] said a reason for that could be because of cultural differences. "For a lot of our kids, their moms were a mom at their age," she said.

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29 Mentor program for boys helps end violence against women, Raleigh News & Observer, 6/25/13
30 Platte’s teen mom rate above state percentage, Columbus Telegram, 2/5/12
None of the articles that mentioned race also included information about poverty, distressed neighborhoods, school funding, or any other environmental factor that many researchers and advocates highlight when discussing disparities.

While the inclusion of race in these articles was often problematic, so too might be the absence of race. New messaging research suggests that for issues where race is an unspoken subtext—such as education, health, or social welfare—advocates need to explicitly talk about race to win public support. If the topic is avoided, people will be affected by unconscious biases, creating their own image of an issue. If however, race is consciously addressed, people’s better values can be surfaced and they can break through us-versus-them mentalities to support socially and politically contentious issues.

**How do reporters portray the role of schools?**

Throughout all of the articles, reporters consistently portrayed schools as having a responsibility to provide safe learning environments and the information and skills necessary to live a healthy life. Nearly all of the coverage presented schools as part of the network responsible for raising children and emphasized the need for schools to explicitly address health and sexuality issues. Many reporters explicitly referred to the role of schools as providing health education, creating safe environments free of harassment, and helping young people understand the potential outcomes of their behavior. Not a single article suggested that schools should have no role in providing information about sexual health. Given wide recognition that there is a network of people responsible for teaching students about sexuality and sexual health, recognizing this shared responsibility may be a great leading message that connects with broad audiences.

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31 Drew Western, Unpublished Research for Public Interest Projects
STRATEGY RECOMMENDATIONS

Comparing the media scan to the cohort’s recommended messaging shows that there is a lot of opportunity to better engage reporters who cover issues related to the sexuality and sexual health of young people. Given the infrequency of reporting on this topic, the authors of stories are usually uninformed of the nuances articulated by researchers and community advocates, and may be prone to writing for shock value instead of meaningful conversation.

With the right materials, however, journalists can create informed stories that illustrate the complex web of factors that influence young people’s behavior (including socioeconomic contexts). With the right connections, they can portray young people as capable and resilient thinkers who can act in their best self interest. The following recommendations draw on successful media framing efforts from other movements that have helped journalists create deeper, more knowledgeable stories about difficult issues.

Create a guide for journalists.
As a next step for the movement to create a more supportive and affirming approach to the sexuality and sexual health of young people, funders and advocates should create a short guide for journalists who may find themselves reporting on these issues for the first time. That guide should contain at least:

• A short primer on terminology;
• A short explanation—written by an academic researcher—that explores how contextual factors influence the behavior of young people;
• A few examples of personal stories from students, parents, and school employees that zoom out to those contextual factors;
• Suggestions for finding and interviewing young people and school employees;
• Statistics that illustrate environmental influences, promising trends, and the common ground people share about these issues.
• Examples of reporting that shows the depth of these issues; and
• Tips for accurate headlines.

Similar guides have been successful in other movements. In the early 2000’s the Rhode Island Coalition for Domestic Violence changed how reporters covered domestic violence issues, the terms they used, and who they interviewed by creating and distributing a short journalist guide.32 A guide for reporting on young people’s

sexuality and sexual health can draw on that guide, as well as similar guides for reporting on reproductive health issues and rape and sexual violence. Such a guide about reporting on sexual and reproductive issues for young people could help ensure more accurate coverage, especially since mainstream reporting on these issues is often written by political or government reporters with very little experience with public health or young people.

The guide can be distributed throughout the movement to community organizations, academic researchers, and funders. It can be sent broadly to education and public health reporters, and promoted by journalism influencers such as the Education Writers Association, Association of Health Care Journalists, and Columbia Journalism Review.

Further develop the network of “experts” we want to see: students, academics, educators, and parents.

When students are quoted in newspaper articles, they are more likely to be depicted as prudent, intelligent, and inspiring people. Many young people have worked with journalists covering lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender issues in schools, and the LGBT movement highlights how to support connections between students and reporters. Local stories about bullying and harassment were much more likely to quote a student than stories about sexual health, parenthood, or sexuality education. Organizations that emphasize youth involvement and develop partnerships with young people and schools have helped ensure the voices of young people are included in the stories that are told about them.

But just being able to refer a journalist to a student is not enough to ensure that the student is respected or that their story is well framed. Young people should be encouraged to think about why they want to tell their story, and what they hope happens as a result of doing so. Students should be encouraged to tell their personal story while also widening their perspective to the environmental contexts that affect them. The youth media produced by this cohort is a great example of such storytelling in action.

Students should be supported in pitching their media to local news outlets, and encouraged to pursue other opportunities such as writing letters to the editor,

33 http://www.dvonlineguide.org/en/
partnering with youth media outlets, and engaging directly with reporters when they see themselves misrepresented in the media.  

In addition to students, researchers and educators need to be the go-to experts on issues relating to the wellbeing of young people. Both groups often have access to communications staff who have existing relationships with the reporters most likely to cover education or public health; such connections should be more proactively leveraged to insert well-informed perspectives into the press.

Another underutilized perspective comes from parents. When parents are quoted, it is often because they are for or against a policy or program. Instead, parents should be encouraged to discuss common ground and shared values. Parents should also be urged to share stories of their journey becoming more supportive of comprehensive discussions about sexuality and sexual health. Such stories resonate with people who might feel conflicted and can be beneficial for building public support. Finally it is important to point out that experts should all have a network of other types of spokespeople to share with journalists—researchers should know parents and students; parents should know school staff and researchers; etc.

**Proactively pitch media in advance of new data.**

While it is important to highlight the personal stories and experiences behind statistics, many news articles only report on the numbers. Advocates need to get in front of such reporting about data. In advance of the release of data, advocates should frame the issue for journalists, share personal stories with them, and connect them to spokespeople.

In a sense, supporters of this movement should develop an editorial calendar to keep track of when they can expect a related story and—before it hits—when they should reach out to reporters. For example, there are regular reports that are data-heavy: youth STD rates from the CDC, Youth Risk Behavior Survey results from local school districts, and teen pregnancy rates from public health agencies. In the weeks before the expected release of those reports, advocates and researchers should connect with local reporters, provide context and stories, and share contact information for other students, parents, and educators.

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If there is a subtext about race, name it.

Many public health statistics are subcategorized by race and ethnicity, and those differences are what get published in news stories. Race is often mentioned without providing context, and readers are left to speculate with their own imaginations and biases. At other times, the story about how race affects the issue is terribly framed, blaming cultural differences for disparities in health and education outcomes.

New messaging research\(^3^7\) suggests that there are vast improvements in public support for issues when racial subtexts are explicitly named. Doing so shifts the listener into a more cognitive perspective, helping them recognize and challenge unconscious biases. Bringing up race also allows the message to address underlying tension and pivot from talking about “them” to talking about “us,” as a way to remind audiences of common values and aspirations.

If there is any room for the audience of a story to perceive an issue through a racial lens, lean into talking about it. Provide additional context for differences in outcomes and challenge stereotypes before widening the lens to what this information means for all of us as a connected society.

Create a conversation guide.

Talking about issues related to the sexuality and sexual health of young people might possibly be one of the most taboo conversations for adults to have—either amongst other adults or with young people. If the topic is not avoided altogether, it is often sensationalized with shocking examples from pop culture and outlandish celebrities. In the lack of meaningful conversations, sometimes the most extreme opinions are what get air time. Yet, numerous surveys show that the vast majority of adults believe that schools have a role to play in having frank, comprehensive conversations about sexuality with students. How can supportive parents talk with other parents about that role?

Face Value and the Breakthrough Conversations Project\(^3^8\) initiated by the Haas Jr. Foundation have explored conversation models for talking to people who are conflicted about LGBT issues. Their models revolve around illustrating common experiences and values, being understanding and affirming, and strategically messaging difficult topics to help prevent people from being defensive. Similar conversation models can be developed for talking with adults about the healthy sexual development and growth of young people.

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\(^3^7\) Drew Western, Unpublished Research for Public Interest Projects

\(^3^8\) [http://breakthroughca.com/sites/default/files/Breakthrough_Workbook%20final.pdf](http://breakthroughca.com/sites/default/files/Breakthrough_Workbook%20final.pdf)
CONCLUSION

Yes there are barriers to shifting the conversation about the sexuality and sexual health of young people. But those barriers can be overcome with strong, strategic communications. Emphasizing shared experiences and common values can remove much of the tension adults may feel about these issues. Telling stories and providing examples of how students are prudent and capable of having difficult conversations can challenge the unspoken assumptions many adults have about young people. And providing journalists with the perspectives they need to understand a highly nuanced topic can shift the entire focus of their reporting.

These ideas are contained in the following questions, which you may want to consider when planning communications such as media interviews, newsletters, public speeches, and op-eds:

Message:
- Do you focus on the context and environment in which individuals act?
- Do you illustrate how young people can be thoughtful, prudent, and inspiring?
- Do you emphasize how conversations can bring people together?
- Do you lead with values, emotions, and common experiences, following up with data and statistics?
- If race might be a subtext, are you explicit about it?

Messenger:
- Has a student provided their perspective?
- Is there youth-produced media that you can include?
- Can a school employee provide a perspective that echoes what you are saying?
- Can someone tell a story of how their perspective developed as they grew to be a supporter of your work?