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Think sex

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The teaching of sex education in schools is under fire from experts — and students. By Caroline Milburn.

Every month about 20 adolescent boys and girls are invited to the headquarters of Australia's biggest-selling teen magazine in Sydney's city centre for a chat.

The editors at *Dolly* listen intently as each new group of teens talks about likes, gripes and life in general. The sessions, used to help keep the magazine in touch with its 557,000 readers, have produced lively discussions, especially on sex.

But when they talk about sex, little of what they discuss seems to have been covered in their formal sex education classes in school.

Indeed, according to *Dolly* editor Bronwyn McCahon, they laugh at sex education in schools. "It's birds and the bees stuff from textbooks.

They say it's superficial and it doesn't deal with the physical and emotional ramifications of sex," she says.

As teens voice their unhappiness about the quality of school-based programs, their sexual culture is becoming more dangerous and complex.

Adolescents are having sex at a younger age, more often and with more partners. More than half of young Australians are sexually active by 16. Sexually transmitted diseases among 15-19-year-olds are rising.

Australia's teen abortion and pregnancy rates are among the highest in the OECD. About 3000 girls in Victoria aged 15-19 had an abortion in 2002, according to Medicare data and public hospital admissions.

The trends, along with Australia's high abortion rate among adult women, have triggered alarm in Federal Parliament. Earlier this year Democrats leader Lyn Allison and Liberal Senator Judith Troeth called for a national inquiry into sex education to reduce unwanted pregnancies. Senator Troeth says the poor health trends raise doubts about the adequacy of school-based sex education.

"We need to establish what is being taught because no one knows. It's largely left up to individual schools as to what they will teach in the curriculum," Senator Troeth says.

"Some people think it's up to parents to teach but with so many parents being time poor, surely there's a place for schools to prepare students very well for their future lives."

Teenagers believe school-based programs are an important, reliable source of information about sex, according to the latest La Trobe University national sexual health survey of secondary

students from government and private schools.

Yet they want a much more comprehensive approach than the biology and anatomy of sexual health and reproduction favoured by many schools.

There is no mandated, comprehensive sex education policy in Australia's government and private school systems. Most sex education is taught under broad policy documents that set curriculum standards in each sector but leave it up to individual schools to decide the content and detail.

The Victorian Government sets standards for its schools under the Victorian Essential Learning Standards, a policy also used by many private schools. It includes standards such as interpersonal development and health and physical education, under which sexual health can be taught.

But Anne Mitchell, an adolescent health expert at the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, says the policy is too vague and allows schools to get away with doing very little sex ed.

"It's possible for schools to fulfil the sex-ed requirements by teaching a lot of phys ed and nutrition and not very much sex ed," says Ms Mitchell, director of the centre's education unit. "But it's also a national problem. Sex education is incredibly ad hoc. There's no quality control over what is being taught and how."

Most formal programs kick in at year 9. But at recent forums with secondary students held by the not-for-profit agency Family Planning Victoria, teenagers told researchers they wanted sex ed programs at every year level.

Meanwhile, many are using alternative sources to get the type of information they want. Over the past decade the burgeoning teen magazine market has become a de facto sex educator in response to the dramatic changes in teen culture.

Dolly's medical advice column gets thousands of emails each month, many from teen readers wanting to know about sex: is it painful, am I going to bleed, what about herpes and other sexually transmitted diseases?

"We didn't set out to be sex educators and neither did our competition, *Girlfriend* magazine," says McCahon. "But our readers demanded that we do so because they're too embarrassed to ask their teachers, friends and parents."

She is not surprised by findings from a New Zealand study that revealed teen boys get most of their information about sex from porn sites. Viewing adult websites is one of the top three activities that Australian boys spend most of their time doing, according to *Dolly's* youth monitor, a face-to-face survey of 1000 adolescents last year.

IN Melbourne's northern suburbs, a class of 15-year-olds is discussing sexual identity. One scenario involves whether a gay captain of a football team would tell his boss he was homosexual. "He'd be sacked, especially under the new IR laws," says one boy.

The joke gets some laughs, but it underscores a more serious discussion as Bundoora Secondary College teacher Dan Carroll navigates his group of students through topics about sexual differences, social stigma and acceptance.

The faces in the room mirror the city's multicultural heritage. A Muslim girl wearing a headscarf sits next to children from Arabic, Greek, Italian and Anglo-Saxon backgrounds. When they are asked for their opinion, some respond with the natural awkwardness of adolescence. But many are relaxed and willing to contribute to the discussion. The group is luckier than most students in other schools. Bundoora's sex education program is considered by adolescent health experts to be one of the best in Victoria.

The college's teachers devised the sex education program as a compulsory component of the school's health and physical education curriculum. They gave it a catchy title, *Sex, Drugs and Hip-Hop*, to lure student interest and used government-funded resource kits, *Talking Sexual Health and Catching On*, to help develop a classroom manual for years 9 and 10.

Sexually transmitted diseases, relationships, drug education and contraception are covered in lessons that focus on responsible decision-making and clarifying values. Only one parent, a fundamentalist Christian, has objected to the course content and removed their child since the program started more than six years ago.

"The kids love the program," says Sue Muscat, the school's assistant principal, who helped pioneer the course. "There's enormous social pressure on kids to drink, take drugs or have sex.

They want to know how to say no and not be pressured into doing things. You can see kids sitting there in class, girls in particular, feeling empowered to say no to sex or to say they want to stay at the cuddling stage."

Homework for the course often involves students asking their parents for their opinion on an issue discussed in class. The students then write a short appraisal outlining the differences and similarities between their parents' views and their own.

Jonathan Salisbury and Lauren Kallinikos, students in Dan Carroll's class, have noticed an improvement in their relationship with their parents. "Before I started the course I wouldn't have spoken to my mum about some things. I was too shy but now I speak more openly with her," says Lauren.

Author Kaz Cooke is writing a book, *Girls Stuff*, to be published next year, which covers questions girls want answered on diverse topics ranging from body image to study stress. Almost 3000 teenagers nationwide responded to a website, set up by Cooke, inviting girls to email their opinions and questions. Cooke was astonished by the depth of ignorance about sexuality, as well as the large number of schoolgirls who complained about the inferior quality of sex education at their Catholic schools.

"There was a remarkable number of girls who were saying, 'I go to a Catholic school and they don't tell us anything that's useful'," says Cooke. "These girls said their schools weren't giving

them information about contraception that they wanted to know about, they didn't answer their questions and didn't cover topics like abortion or how girls felt about things."

Overall, many of the emailers said their schools provided basic information about the biology of sexual functions and how to prevent pregnancy but very little attention was given to exploring the emotional aspects of sexuality. Even then, despite most emailers saying they knew a lot about sex, their subsequent questions betrayed otherwise.

"They thought they knew everything but then they would ask whether you can get pregnant if you have oral sex," Cooke says. "Parents think that kids absorb sex education from school and the movies but unfortunately that means your child learns about sex from television series like *The O.C.* It's a very fragmented and useless way of learning how things work." Part of Cooke's research for the book involved surveying 830 girls aged 13-15 about where they got their information about sex. Fortynine per cent got their information from friends, 46 per cent got it from schools, 21 per cent from magazines and 19 per cent from home.

Reliance on dubious sources, such as friends, has helped fuel widespread ignorance among teens about safe sexual practices. Adolescent health experts say many teens are unaware of the most common sexually transmitted diseases and that many infections can cause infertility.

In Victoria's Catholic sector, individual schools shape the content of their sex education classes under the umbrella of the Victorian Government's VELS curriculum and a policy document, *Directives in Christian Education in Sexuality*, published by Archbishop Denis Hart in 2002.

Father Brendan Reed, deputy director of the Catholic Education Office's schools division, says the church's theological stance on issues such as homosexuality, abortion and premarital sex does not prevent the topics being discussed in sex education classes.

"We expect that our teachers are promoting that all our students be chaste, but in those same discussions we also discuss such things as sexually transmitted diseases. Teachers would be clear about what the church's position is.

We don't shirk away from that or the discussion of these issues." The policy acknowledges the role for schools in sex education, but it stresses that parents are the best people with whom to discuss sexuality. Father Reed says this is a better approach than caving in to critics who say school programs are not delivering the depth of information that teens want.

"We're victims of a society where so much is delegated to schools — road safety, drug education, sexuality. As soon as there's a major social problem all eyes are turned to schools to do something about it," he says.

`` But is the classroom setting really the most appropriate place to deal with one of the most intimate relationships of the human person? There's a role for schools to educate students in the biology of sexuality. But we would also have parents say to us, `I don't want my son or daughter talking about the intimacies of sexual relationships in a classroom of 25 or 30 15-yearolds with a teacher I don't know'.

Those parents have a point." Religious belief also dominates the delivery of sex education at Victoria's seven Islamic schools. At Springvale's Minaret College, sex education is taught to students in segregated classes for boys and girls. The program stresses the importance of family and monogamous sex within marriage.

It covers physical changes caused by puberty and sexual reproduction. Menstruation is covered in female classes. However, some topics such as premarital sex and homosexuality are not discussed because students are told that such behaviour is prohibited under Islam.

Mohamed Hassan, the college's principal and founder, says students are also not taught about contraception because Islam prohibits premarital sex.

"If you're talking about contraception in a sex education class you're giving a hint that it's all right to indulge in sexual activities providing you have the right contraception to avoid getting pregnant," he says. "We feel there's no need to mention contraception — it's not relevant."

He says students who want to discuss such issues could do so by making an appointment with the school welfare teacher.

Abstinence-only programs have become popular in US schools since the '80s when the federal government decided to funnel money to schools that taught abstinence only. Studies have shown they have not led to the hoped-for reduction in sexual behaviour among teens.

However, programs that promote abstinence within a broader health context that includes information about contraception and sexually transmitted infections have been effective, according to a report released last year by the Royal Women's Hospital, Family Planning Victoria and the Centre for Adolescent Health.

Although content has sometimes been a hot issue in public debate about sex education, teacher training has received less scrutiny. There are no minimum standards or certified courses for teachers of sexuality education in Victorian schools.

And only two classroom resource kits have been funded and released respectively by the Victorian and federal governments.

Debbie Ollis, the author of both kits recommended by governments for middle years students, *Catching On and Talking Sexual Health*, is investigating how teachers are faring in schools. Her surveys of secondary school teachers responsible for delivering sex education to year 9 and 10 students show teachers desperately want specialised training.

Those with 10 and 20 years' experience of teaching sex education in schools told Ms Ollis they had no comprehensive training to teach the subject, either at undergraduate level or once they graduated as teachers.

"We're expecting teachers to cover these sensitive issues without appropriate training — we wouldn't expect that of teachers who teach English or science," says Ms Ollis, a lecturer in education at Deakin University.

"These teachers are worried about stepping over the boundaries and despite their classroom experience they often don't know what the boundaries are. They tend to avoid talking about topics such as sexual diversity because they're worried about homophobic reactions from the kids. They tend to avoid talking about sexual assault because they don't know how to address it appropriately."

The phenomenon of low teacher confidence and expertise leads to mistakes that can alienate and embarrass students. Ms Ollis says some of the best programs involve establishing single-sex classes for some topics and running co-ed classes for others.

"Boys hate talking about menstruation and girls need to discuss those issues," she says.

"People tend to think about sex education as only about sex but it's also about relationships and making decisions about your sexual health. Kids want to talk about breaking up, that's a really big issue for them."

Ms Ollis says sex education is presented overwhelmingly in a negative fashion to prevent disease and pregnancy. She would like to see greater emphasis on teaching students how to have a positive sense of their body and the confidence to resist peer pressure and make safe, responsible decisions.

"There's very little coverage of love, intimacy or desire. It's important that kids understand that intimacy is holding hands rather than necessarily being about penetrative sex. These are the issues that kids are struggling with."

Ms Ollis and other adolescent health experts want Australian governments to learn from nations such as the Netherlands, where age-appropriate sex education classes are taught from prep to year 12. The system has been credited with helping to achieve one of the world's lowest teen abortion and pregnancy rates.

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