

## DEPED AND THE DEBATE ON SEX EDUCATION: NAVIGATING THE CONTROVERSY IN PHILIPPINE SCHOOLS

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The proposed sex education bill in the Philippines has been the subject of renewed discussions and criticism from various sectors. The Department of Education (DepEd) plays a central role in this discussion, as it seeks to institutionalize comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) in schools, in order to address the growing prevalence of adolescent pregnancies, STIs, and the lack of knowledge among Filipino youth regarding reproductive health. Conservative organizations, however, have opposed this plan, claiming it goes against traditional values. This ongoing dispute emphasizes how crucial it is to confront the difficulties in putting in place culturally appropriate and successful sex education programs in the Philippine educational system.

In fact, comprehensive sexuality education goes beyond basic reproductive health. It is an age-appropriate, culturally relevant curriculum designed to equip young people with the knowledge, skills, and values needed to make informed decisions about their sexual health. According to UNESCO (2018), CSE contributes to reducing risky behaviors, delaying sexual initiation, and improving overall health outcomes for adolescents.

Alarming figures highlight the necessity of CSE in the Philippine setting. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) reported in 2022 that the Philippines has one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates in Southeast Asia. Additionally, the Department of Health (DOH) has expressed concern over the rising cases of STIs among young people. DepEd's initiative to include CSE in the curriculum is a response to these pressing issues, aiming to prepare students for real-life challenges and empower them to make informed choices.

Therefore, to address the controversy, DepEd can pursue a middle-ground approach. Culturally sensitive curricula that respect Filipino values while providing accurate and relevant information can bridge the gap between opposing perspectives. This includes engaging parents, community leaders, and educators in the design and implementation of sex education programs to ensure their content is appropriate and widely accepted.

Additionally, teacher training programs should be established to equip educators with the skills and knowledge needed to deliver CSE effectively. Partnerships with non-governmental organizations and health professionals can also enhance the quality and reach of these programs.

The renewed criticism of DepEd's efforts to implement comprehensive sex education reflects deep-seated cultural and ideological divides in the Philippines. However, the urgency of addressing teenage pregnancies and STI rates cannot be overstated. A balanced and inclusive approach to implementing CSE can provide Filipino youth with the tools they need to make responsible decisions, while also respecting the nation's cultural values. Indeed, through fostering dialogue and collaboration, DepEd can take meaningful steps toward a healthier and more informed future.

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