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Abstinent without Abstinence-Only

With the majority of the nation's schools opting for an abstinence-only approach to educating students about sexual health, you won't find too many youth like me. What I mean when I say this is that you won't often hear from someone whose taken an abstinence pledge, that's also had and openly advocates for a comprehensive sexuality education curriculum. Because of this, more people tend to focus on the fact that I've taken the pledge and when they don't see a ring on my finger, after glancing at my hand, ask why I'm not wearing one. The question is one I expect; it's only natural for someone to wonder why I, out of every other person they've met or seen that has taken an abstinence pledge, have chosen not to wear one. The Jonas brothers are quite open about their pledge and Jordan Sparks threw herself into a media blitz to show people what the ring means to her. I really can't speak for the Jonas Brothers or Jordan Sparks, but I can speak for myself. And what I'll tell you is that it was my comprehensive sexuality education that encouraged me to make my own personal pledge and is the exact reason I don't need to wear a ring.

Since the fourth grade, I've been lucky enough to have had a comprehensive, age-appropriate sex-ed curriculum. I should probably make it clear that I have not been learning about sex since I was nine. As I said, it was age-appropriate, which means only topics that were deemed consistent with and/or did not exceed the developmental stage of the children in the class were discussed. In a duration of two weeks, my fellow classmates and I learned the names of my body parts, how those parts are different than a boy's, what changes my body would be going through, and how to never be afraid to ask a question when I was unsure about what was happening to me. From this, I gained enough self-assurance to go to my mother with questions. In turn, using her policy of "if you're old enough to ask, you're old enough to know," my mother sat me down and proceeded to give me the sex talk.

The well-rounded and honest foundation I received in my childhood not only helped me feel more comfortable when I moved into more serious subject matter in the Cleveland Metropolitan School Districts high school program, but it also protected me in ways that most people would not initially recognize. What some don't realize is that when children aren't taught about the medically accurate terms for their body parts, when you don't allow them to identify and understand what is and what is not appropriate touching, (topics that are covered in CMSD's comprehensive sexuality curriculum), you are allowing these children-- *your children*-- to become victims. You are giving a predator the chance to take advantage of your child because they can't say: I know what you're doing and you shouldn't be doing it.

But what if your son or daughter could say that? What if you as their parent, the primary individual responsible for their safe and supportive upbringing, gave them the knowledge and tools to protect themselves? Knowledge about what it means and takes to have positive body image, understand sexual orientation, effectively communicate their emotions and values, be in healthy relationships, and to plan for a successful future and a family? Tools that could safe-guard them from STIs, HIV, unwanted teen pregnancy, eating disorders, sexual predators, domestic violence, or even not

graduating? All the while supporting and promoting the idea that abstinence is still the safest and best policy?

This knowledge and these tools would carry over from their developmental years on into adulthood. Adults, young adults, and teens alike would be familiar with all the ways they should be protected; they would possess the maturity and confidence to tell their partner, *I'm not going to take this step with you yet because I don't believe we've reached that point in our relationship*. Imagine teens, college students, and grown men and women all over the country saying that! Imagine generations young and old willingly and subconsciously taking a pledge because they want to be healthy, thriving members of society; because they want to ensure a chance at a bright future; because they don't want the legacy of humanity to be marred by a negative ratio. Imagine what the world would be like. What your world could be like.

You see, I didn't take the pledge because of religious beliefs or because someone pressured me into it. On the contrary, unlike abstinence-only programs, the comprehensive curriculum does not have a pledge component. I took the pledge on my own outside of the program because it was what *I* wanted to do. Because I want to stand up against diseases that are turning our world's youth into coffin percentages; I want to get the chance to grow into a healthy young woman; I want to wait for that someone I truly care about. And I don't wear a ring because I don't have to. I know that when the time comes, some ring won't tell me what the right decision is. I'll make the best choice for me based on the comprehensive foundation I've received; a foundation that has given me real facts, real options, and real confidence to be a responsible young adult. I'll make good decisions on my own and I'll never fall victim to a predator, sexually transmitted disease, or stereotypical statistic.