

## The truth about Free to Be

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Last year, the organization Free to Be educated 3,400 youth in 38 public and private schools and other venues throughout Sonoma County. This year, Free to Be is banished from many of the public school classrooms where it has had an active presence over the past 18 years.

Why? Because the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), which prides itself as a defender of the right to free speech, has threatened public school districts with litigation if they allow Free to Be into their health classes. The ACLU asserts that Free to Be is a "just say no" organization that does not comply with the California state education code and that Free to Be provides inaccurate and biased information.

These claims are false.

Free to Be is in full compliance with the education code of California; six legal opinions maintain this fact. The code requires teaching the "value of abstinence" and "that abstinence is the only certain way to avoid pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases," as well as "respect for marriage and committed relationships."

Free to Be is an integral part of the requirements of comprehensive sex education (CSE) in California. Sonoma County schools that opt to teach comprehensive sex education provide students with information on sexual reproduction, sexually transmitted diseases and the importance of contraception. Many of the schools invite Free to Be to cover the abstinence requirements of the code.

Free to Be educational curricula provide teens with important health information to strengthen their communication skills, build healthy and fulfilling friendships, establish personal boundaries and develop a positive vision for their lives.

As a prevention-focused effort, we teach skills to reduce risk-taking behaviors and inform students about the option of sexual abstinence until

marriage. We also spearhead activities to create a support system for teens who choose to live an abstinent lifestyle.

Free to Be is a model for positive youth development. Students named the program, helped to develop the curriculum and the topics for the panels, present the educational components of Free to Be to their peers, and are included in making key organizational decisions.

The option to postpone sexual activity is difficult for teens to hear above the current cultural din. One public school teacher recently stated that "the Free to Be teen panel presents an important and always omitted perspective about sexual choices teens have." Many teens tell us they are relieved to learn that statistics show 52 percent of 9th-12th graders have not had sex.

After hearing Free to Be's youth educators share their stories, a public high school student said, "I thought that only teens who had sex could have a social life in high school."

Another teen shared, "I learned how to tell my boyfriend what I'm comfortable with and what I don't feel comfortable doing." Parents, teachers, principals, superintendents, and medical practitioners praise Free to Be. An independent evaluation of our curriculum is under way, and the medical accuracy of our materials is documented annually by the federal Department of Health and Human Services.

Free to Be is a nonsectarian organization that is non-judgmental and respectful of every student's right and ability to make his or her own decisions. The ACLU continues to intimidate our school districts with threats of litigation if they utilize Free to Be.

If in fact the ACLU "defends individual rights and liberties," why would it silence a message that most adults and teens agree is the healthiest message we can provide?

For more information about Free to Be, go to [www.free-to-be.net](http://www.free-to-be.net).

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