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WASHINGTON, D.C. – There's a metaphor for sex that teachers around the country like to use. It involves a piece of tape, stuck on and then ripped off the arm of every student in the class. Because tape is a temporarily cohesive agent, it gets dirtier and loses its stickiness after only a few arms. The tape in this metaphor is meant to represent virginity (almost always a woman's), and the lesson is that the more people you get "stuck" on, the dirtier and less valuable you become.

The tape metaphor is only one in a slew of shame tactics some sex educators use to scare students out of having sex outside of marriage, and it's only one in a slew of shame tactics I heard about while visiting with a group of young people who are working to eliminate those metaphors from the classroom.

This past weekend, the 16th annual Advocates for Youth Urban Retreat (http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/blogs-main/advocates-blog/2531-the-2015-urban-retreat) attracted students between the ages of 14 and 25 who are dedicated to improving the state of sex ed in the U.S. In an effort to turn a terrible, patchwork-y (http://fusion.net/story/188424/sex-ed-and-condom-instruction-in-america/) sex education system into a well-funded, cohesive one that actually works, 115 youth activists from all over the country gathered in Washington, D.C., to learn how to fight back against a system they know is failing. For five days, the young activists attended seminars to prepare them for a day of lobbying on Capitol Hill, seeking support for a bill called the Real Education for Healthy Youth Act (http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/publications/publications-a-z/2074-the-real-education-for-healthy-youth-act), or REHYA.

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Democrats first introduced the sweeping sex ed bill (<http://thinkprogress.org/health/2013/02/15/1602441/comprehensive-sex-ed-bill/>) back in February 2013, aiming to provide federal funding to schools and institutions that want to teach comprehensive, evidence-based, medically-accurate, LGBT-inclusive sex education. Or, in short, the kind of sex ed that's non-discriminatory and proven (<http://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/oah-initiatives/evaluation/federal-led-evaluation/index.html>) to work. REHYA has been introduced in the House and will be introduced in the Senate by Cory Booker (D-NJ) later this year.



On Monday, the big group of 115 broke out into smaller groups of four or five, organized by state so that constituents were meeting with representatives and senators from their home states. Each small group had assigned roles for each lobby meeting—there was someone to introduce REHYA, someone to take notes, and someone to give a personal anecdote from their own sex ed experience. These stories, while mostly tragic, were the most profound part of the day.

Teens and young college students who'd just spent five days in a safe atmosphere, surrounded by likeminded people—and who identified me as a safe, likeminded person—told me stories of self-harm and self-hatred, spurred by lessons taught to them in sex education classes. They told me how experiences with sexual assault, molestation, sexuality, and dating violence were made worse by teachers who told them sex—even when you don't want it—will ruin you. They told me about the tape metaphor, and other metaphors that are all meant to illustrate the single most important lesson of the deeply flawed sex ed curriculum that's taught in so many schools (<http://fusion.net/story/188424/sex-ed-and-condom-instruction-in-america/>): Sex is only correct when it happens between a woman and man who are married.

“If someone wants to use a condom with you, it’s less likely that they actually love you.”

- Haley Smith, 18, on what she learned in class

If we already knew the nation's sex ed system, with its inconsistencies and hyperlocal policies, was bad, it's much worse than we thought. Students from Alabama, a state that doesn't require sex ed—but does require that medically accurate information be provided when it is taught—told me how that doesn't always happen. Foster Noone, a college student from Alabama, recalled a condom lesson from one of these “medically accurate” sex ed classes.

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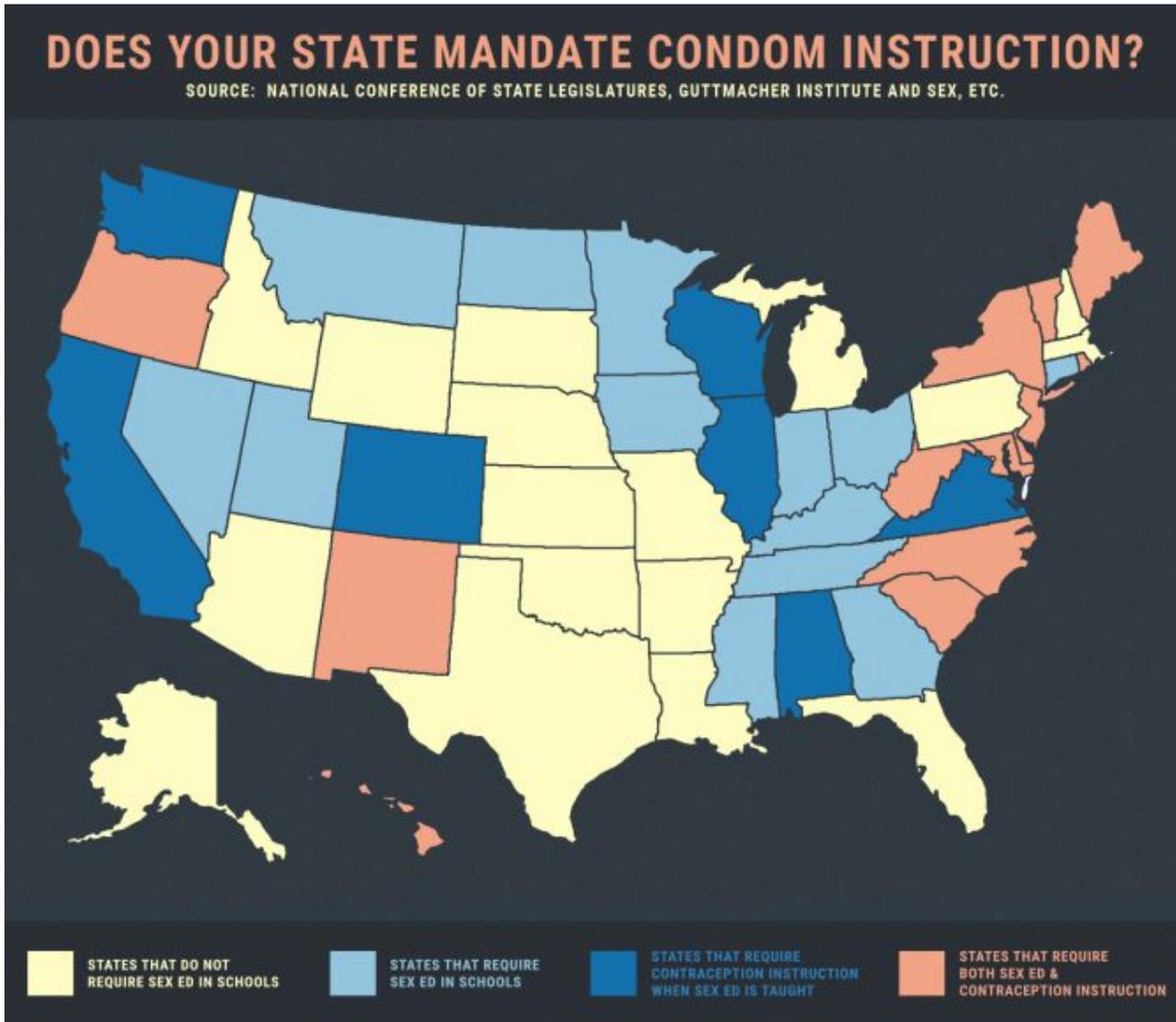


"The teacher told us condoms didn't work," Noone told me. "She did this thing where she brought in a rubber glove—she had lovely acrylic nails—and she put a finger of the glove on and pulled it down and stuck her nail through the end of the glove and was like, "This is thicker than a condom, so why would you trust a condom?"

Haley Smith, an 18-year-old high school senior from Louisiana—a state with no sex ed requirement—told me about how her sex ed teacher gave the term "barrier method (<http://www.acog.org/Patients/FAQs/Barrier-Methods-of-Birth-Control-Diaphragm-Sponge-Cervical-Cap-and-Condom>)" a whole new meaning. The teacher told her that a condom "detracts from, like, the closeness of two people, so if someone wants to use a condom with you, it's less likely that they actually love you," Smith said. "Even now, I'm 18 years old and I still have weird feelings about using condoms during sex because of that message that's always in the back of my head, even though it's not accurate."

What schools are teaching teens about sex will h...

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*America's sex ed system is a mess.*

FUSION

A college student from Texas named Sara Porcheddu told me about how she had to sign virginity pledges at her public school in both 6th and 9th grade. "When they pass it out, they say, 'You don't have to sign this if you don't want to, but we encourage you to sign it,'" she said, "but everyone signs it anyway." Students from several states told me their sex ed teachers were brought in from crisis pregnancy centers (<https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/pregnancy/crisis-pregnancy-centers>) to give two-day cram sessions about sex, and how those teachers made kids who'd already had sex admit to it by raising their hands in class. Everyone had a different story. All were equally terrifying.

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 Passing legislation that regulates what can and can't be taught in sex ed classes is one way to prevent more students from having experiences like Foster's and Haley's and Sara's. So on Monday, the group of young activists dressed in business formal broke out into their small groups and spent the day inside House and Senate building offices, trying to convince Republicans and Democrats alike to support REHYA. While most offices wouldn't allow a reporter to sit in, I was able to attend the Texas group's meeting with senator and presidential candidate Ted Cruz, or really, with Cruz's communications director, Rachel Slobodien.

The group of mostly teenaged students took a deep breath before walking into the office. Inside, they sat down at a long, wooden conference table to deliver their well-rehearsed pitch to Slobodien, who occasionally nodded but was otherwise quiet. They talked about REHYA, how it would benefit Texans, and how it might align with some of Cruz's own policies. The person who was designated to give a personal anecdote gave a personal anecdote—it all seemed to go very well. But Slobodien was predictably unresponsive. The group wasn't surprised. Disappointed, but not surprised. They left Cruz's office without taking any of the free candy Slobodien offered.

“There's power in every story, and it has power to change laws.”

- Justin Lofton, 23, Mississippi

The group at this year's Urban Retreat represented a diverse sampling of the young people who are being underserved and hurt by bad sex education—from LGBT students and victims of assault to students who wished they'd learned the truth in school and couldn't talk to their parents about sex. Their stories were varied, but their motives for coming to the retreat were the same. These young people don't want future generations to have to find out the truth about assault, condoms, HIV, sexuality—whatever—the hard way.

Justin Lofton, a 23-year-old college junior from Mississippi—a state that stresses abstinence and teaches that homosexuality is unlawful (<http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/01/states-sex-education-gay-marriage>)—told me that coming to the Urban Retreat forced him to revisit his personal struggles with sex ed, and how the messages he internalized from his own class spurred mental health issues throughout high school. That's what happens when you grow up without the right information or resources for help. It'd been an emotional weekend for a lot of people. But Justin was glad he came—he sees value in sharing that story with lawmakers who have the ability to change the system.

“Developing your story, that's really what this whole thing's about, because our stories are so important,” he told me. “To me, the biggest thing is making it right. This really made me cope with things I tried to put behind. There's power in every story, and it has the power to change laws.”

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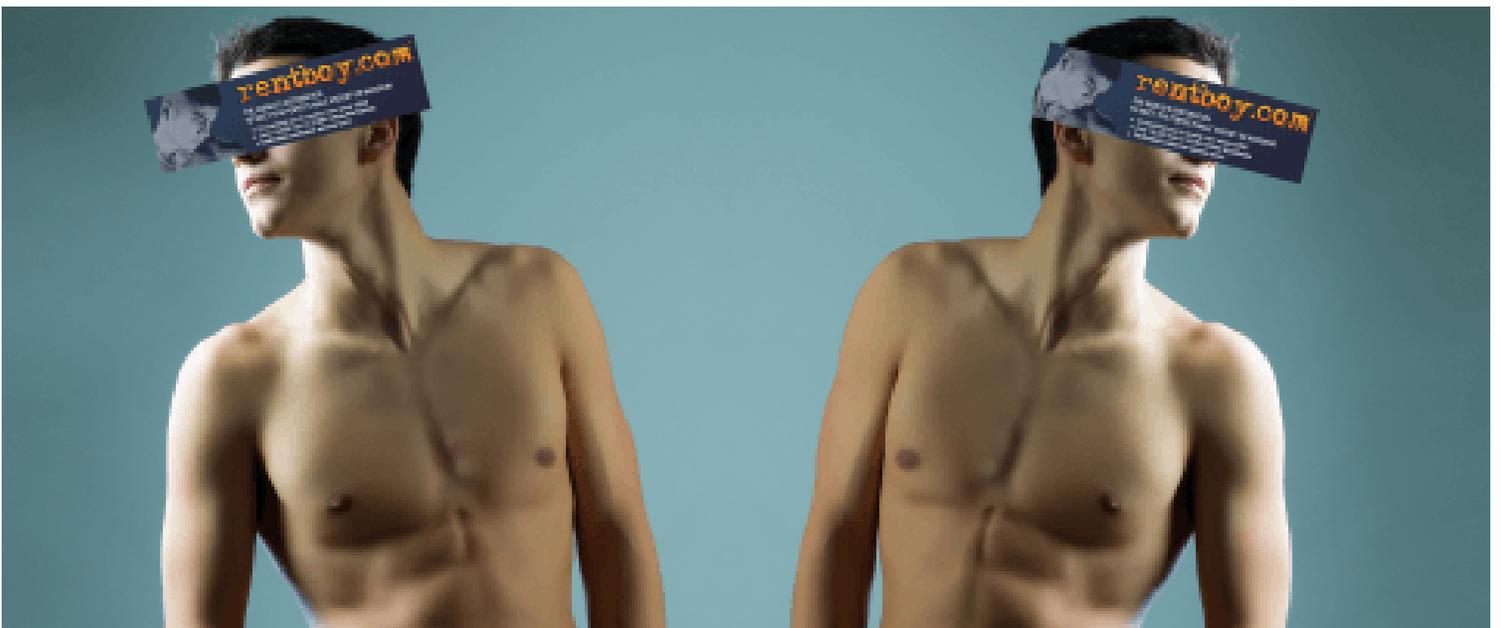


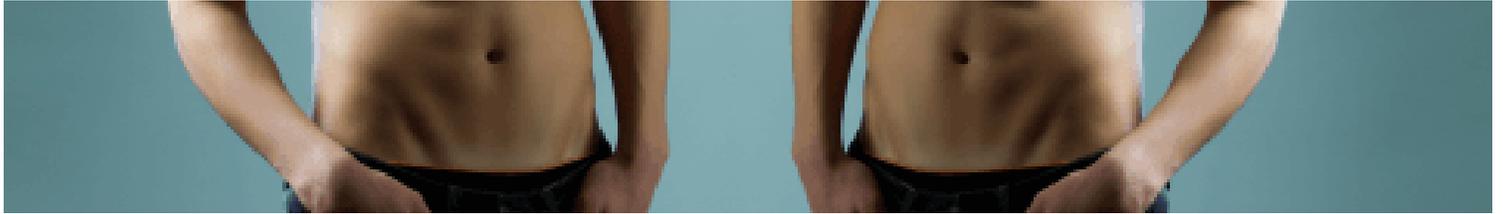


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