



# Attitudes of Alabama Parents of Public School Children Regarding Sex Education for Their Children in Public Schools

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## Background

- The availability of comprehensive formal sex education for adolescents in public schools has been declining. At the same time, adolescents are increasingly looking up information on the internet to find health information.
- In addition to the social and financial burdens associated with unplanned pregnancy, adolescents in Alabama are at high risk for obtaining sexually transmitted infections (STIs) such as gonorrhea and chlamydia.<sup>1,2,3</sup> In 2015, Alabama was ranked #9 in the country for women in both gonorrhea and chlamydia; and adolescents and young adults comprise the largest age groups among those cases.

## Overview

At the request of the Alabama Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy (ACPTP), Drs. Vaughn Millner and Julio Turrens coordinated work with the USA Polling Group and the ACPTP for the purpose of coordinating a statewide telephone survey of parents in Alabama with children in public schools. The statewide survey was to be a duplicate of a telephone study conducted by USA in Mobile in 2011 by Millner and Turrens.<sup>4</sup>

The purpose of the IRB-approved statewide study was to determine the attitudes of Alabama parents about sex education for their children in the Alabama public school system. A secondary purpose of the survey was to determine if the attitudes of Alabama parents in general were similar to the attitudes of Mobile County parents several years ago. The longitudinal comparison could provide Alabama policy-makers with information relevant to sex education policy decisions.

## Survey Instrument

The survey instrument was a replication of the instrument used in 2011 to survey parents of children in public school in Mobile County. This instrument, an adaptation from a previous phone survey conducted in North Carolina, included 36 substantive items and five demographic questions.

## Interviewing Methodology

A Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewer (WinCATI/CI3) system was used to conduct the interviews and to collect data. The CATI system, developed by Sawtooth Technologies in Evanston, Illinois, recorded call histories and call attempts used by interviewers to document the outcome of each call attempt, as well as the survey questions and their responses. The system enables calls to be scheduled so that different times of the day and week are represented. In this study, all phone numbers received a minimum of six unsuccessful call attempts before being withdrawn from the sample.

## Sample Error

With a total of 434 completed interviews, the overall sampling error is +/-4.7% at the 95% confidence level. This means that researchers are 95% certain that these results are within 4.7% of the results that would have been obtained if the entire Alabama parent population had been interviewed.

## Dates of Interviewing

Interviewing began on Tuesday, April 11, 2017. The quota of 400+ surveys was reached on Wednesday, May 24, 2017.

## Who Participated in the Study?

The target population for the survey included randomly parents or guardians of children in the Alabama Public School System. A total of 2,402 eligible parents were reached. Of these, 434 completed the study, a response rate of 18.1%, an acceptable response rate for telephone surveys.

Most were females (78%), the exact percentage represented in the earlier Mobile County survey. Fifteen percent were between the ages of 18 to 35; one-half were between the ages of 36 to 50. About one-third (32%) was over the age of 50. The remainder (2.9%) did not respond to the question.

About 4% had less than a high school degree; 30% completed high school; 23% completed some college; and 27% completed college. An additional 15% completed an advanced degree. About 1% did not answer the question about educational attainment. See Figure 1 Parents Education Level.

Parental income varied widely. All income levels were represented across this sample. See Figure 2 Parents Income Level

Figure 1. Parents Education Level

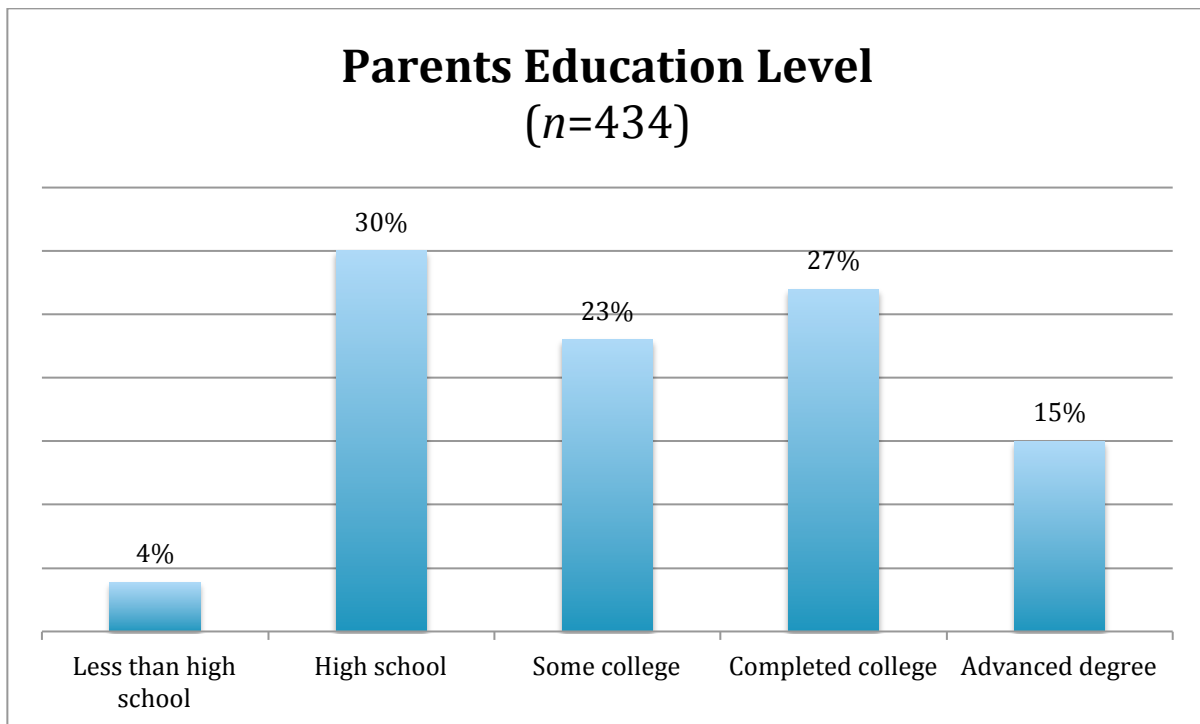
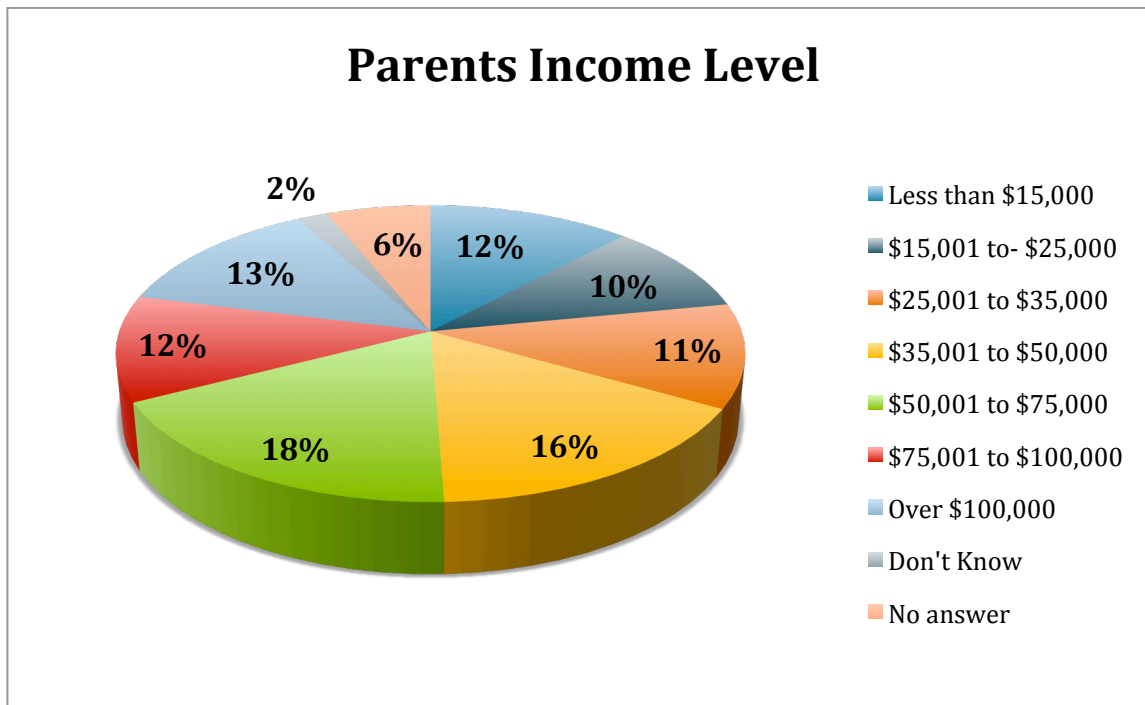
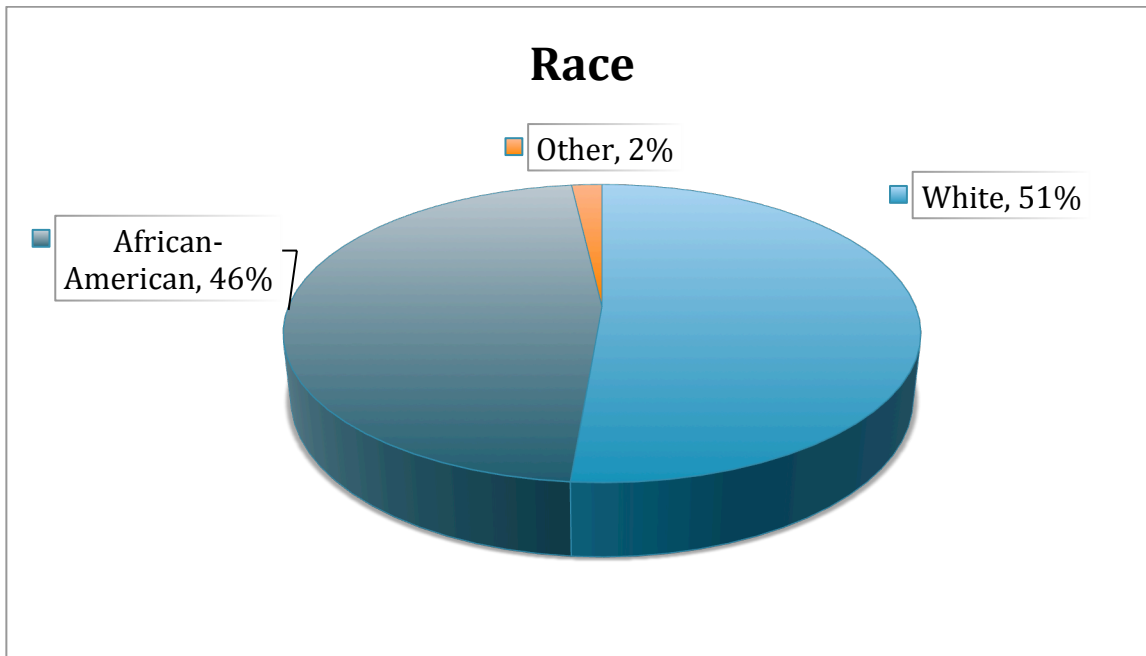


Figure 2. Income Level Represented by Alabama Parents of Public School Children



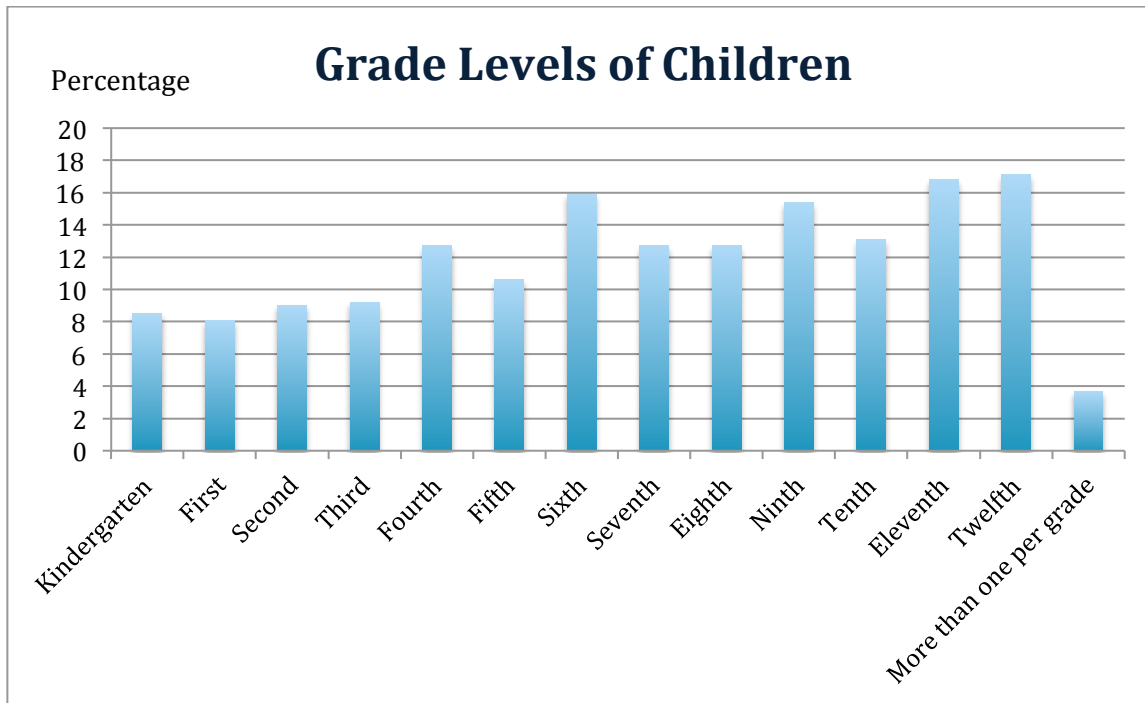
Racial distribution in the study loosely resembles Alabama's racial demographic except in this study, compared to the State of Alabama, there was a slightly higher distribution of African-Americans than Whites. Alabama's distribution in July 2016 was 69% White; 27% African-American.<sup>5</sup> See Figure 3. to view the display for race.

Figure 3. Race represented by parents of Alabama public school children



All public school grades were represented by the parents in this study. See Figure 4 for a breakdown by grade level and percentage of children represented.

Figure 4 Grade Levels of Alabama parents of public school children.



Alabama parents were asked about who they believed should play a role in determining sex education for their children in schools. The overwhelming majority (98%) reported that parents should play a role in determining how sex education should be taught. Similarly, 95% of parents believe public health professional should play a role. Interestingly, about three-fourths (72%) reported that students should play a role. Over half (67%) believed that elected school board members should play a role. Over half (58%) reported religious leaders should play a role with and about one-third (36%) reported they believed that state legislators should play a role in determining how sex education should be taught.

### **Survey Results for Alabama Parents and Comparisons to 2011 Mobile County Parent Survey**

Parents were asked overall if they thought their children should be taught sex education in the Alabama public school system. The results were remarkably similar to the findings taken from Mobile County parents in 2011. In both Mobile County in 2011 and again in this broader Alabama survey, 83% of parents indicated sex education should be taught in the public school system.

Alabama parents were then asked if they knew whether or not their children were taught sex education in Alabama public schools. About 42% responded that their children were taught sex education in public schools, 38% stated their children were not taught sex education, 20% responded they did not know. Two did not answer.

Parents were asked about their opinion as to how much classroom time should be given to sex education for the entire school year in high school. Almost half believed that one hour of sex

education each week for the entire school year (36 hours total) should be given. About 22% believed one hour of sex education each week for half the school year (18 hours total) should be given with about 12% reporting one hour each week for one quarter of the school year (9 hours total) would be sufficient. Only 3% believed that 2 to 3 hours of sex education for the entire school year would be sufficient; 6% believed one hour or less would be sufficient. Only 2% reported no time should be provided. Three percent did not know or had no opinion.

All responding parents were asked which topics they thought would be important for their children to learn about sex education in Alabama public schools. Tables 1 to 19 show the findings of each topic parents believed should be taught in the Alabama public school system. In those cases wherein parents reported it was very important to teach a particular topic, the Mobile County 2011 number is provided for comparison purposes.

Parents were also asked about what grades sex education should be addressed in public schools. Tables 20 to 23 display these results.

*Table 1: How important do you think it is that your child learn about how to talk with parents about sex and relationship issues at some point during their schooling? Would you say . . .*

	<i>Frequency of Alabama Parents</i>	<i>Percent of Alabama Parents</i>	<i>2011 Mobile County Comparison</i>
Very Important	330	91.9	94.5
Somewhat Important	24	6.7	
Not too Important	4	1.1	
Not at all Important	0	0.0	
Opposed to topic being taught at all (Volunteered)	0	0.0	
Don't Know	0	0.0	
No Answer	1	0.3	
<i>Total</i>	359	100.0	

*Table 2: How important is learning to deal with pressure to have sex? Would you say . . .*

	<i>Frequency of Alabama Parents</i>	<i>Percent of Alabama Parents</i>	<i>2011 Mobile County Comparison</i>
Very Important	336	93.6	95.2
Somewhat Important	16	4.5	
Not too Important	2	0.6	
Not at all Important	4	1.1	
Opposed to topic being taught at all (Volunteered)	0	0.0	
Don't Know	1	0.3	
No Answer	0	0.0	

<i>Total</i>	359	100.1	
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*Table 3: What about waiting to have sex until after graduating from high school?*

	<i>Frequency of Alabama Parents</i>	<i>Percent of Alabama Parents</i>	<i>2011 Mobile County Comparison</i>
Very Important	310	86.4	90.4
Somewhat Important	32	8.9	
Not too Important	3	0.8	
Not at all Important	5	1.4	
Opposed to topic being taught at all (Volunteered)	3	0.8	
Don't Know	3	0.8	
No Answer	3	0.8	
<i>Total</i>	359	099.9	

*Table 4: How to talk with a girlfriend, boyfriend or partner about not having sex?*

	<i>Frequency of Alabama Parents</i>	<i>Percent of Alabama Parents</i>	<i>2011 Mobile County Comparison</i>
Very Important	321	89.4	91.8
Somewhat Important	34	9.5	
Not too Important	1	0.3	
Not at all Important	1	0.3	
Opposed to topic being taught at all (Volunteered)	1	0.3	
Don't Know	1	0.3	
No Answer	0	0.0	
<i>Total</i>	359	100.1	

*Table 5: How to talk with a girlfriend, boyfriend or partner about birth control and sexually transmitted diseases?*

	<i>Frequency of Alabama Parents</i>	<i>Percent of Alabama Parents</i>	<i>2011 Mobile County Comparison</i>
Very Important	325	90.5	92.5
Somewhat Important	25	7.0	
Not too Important	3	0.8	
Not at all Important	2	0.6	
Opposed to topic being taught at all (Volunteered)	2	0.6	
Don't Know	2	0.6	
No Answer	0	0.0	
<i>Total</i>	359	100.1	

*Table 6: How to deal with the emotional issues and consequences of being sexually active?*

	<i>Frequency of Alabama Parents</i>	<i>Percent of Alabama Parents</i>	<i>2011 Mobile County Comparison</i>
Very Important	328	91.4	93.3
Somewhat Important	20	5.6	
Not too Important	2	0.6	
Not at all Important	4	1.1	
Opposed to topic being taught at all (Volunteered)	2	0.6	
Don't Know	2	0.6	
No Answer	1	0.3	
<i>Total</i>	359	100.2	

Table 7: Abstinence until marriage?

	<i>Frequency of Alabama Parents</i>	<i>Percent of Alabama Parents</i>	<i>2011 Mobile County Comparison</i>
Very Important	289	80.5	81
Somewhat Important	51	14.2	
Not too Important	9	2.5	
Not at all Important	5	1.4	
Opposed to topic being taught at all (Volunteered)	3	0.8	
Don't Know	1	0.3	
No Answer	1	0.3	
<i>Total</i>	359	100.0	

Table 8: Transmission and prevention of HIV or AIDS?

	<i>Frequency of Alabama Parents</i>	<i>Percent of Alabama Parents</i>	<i>2011 Mobile County Comparison</i>
Very Important	357	99.4	98.1
Somewhat Important	2	0.6	
Not too Important	0	0.0	
Not at all Important	0	0.0	
Opposed to topic being taught at all (Volunteered)	0	0.0	
Don't Know	0	0.0	
No Answer	0	0.0	
<i>Total</i>	359	100.0	

Table 9: Transmission and prevention of other sexually transmitted diseases?

	<i>Frequency of Alabama Parents</i>	<i>Percent of Alabama Parents</i>	<i>2011 Mobile County Comparison</i>
Very Important	353	98.3	98.3
Somewhat Important	6	1.7	
Not too Important	0	0.0	
Not at all Important	0	0.0	
Opposed to topic being taught at all (Volunteered)	0	0.0	
Don't Know	0	0.0	
No Answer	0	0.0	
<i>Total</i>	359	100.0	

Table 10: The use of condoms?

	<i>Frequency of Alabama Parents</i>	<i>Percent of Alabama Parents</i>	<i>2011 Mobile County Comparison</i>
Very Important	332	92.5	92.8
Somewhat Important	20	5.6	
Not too Important	0	0.0	
Not at all Important	3	0.8	
Opposed to topic being taught at all (Volunteered)	4	1.1	
Don't Know	0	0.0	
No Answer	0	0.0	
<i>Total</i>	13	013.0	

Table 11: How important is it that your child be exposed to classroom demonstrations of how to use a condom correctly?

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>2011 Mobile County Comparison</i>
Very Important	189	52.7	53.6
Somewhat Important	75	20.9	
Not too Important	15	4.2	
Not at all Important	20	5.6	
Opposed to topic being taught at all (Volunteered)	41	11.4	
Don't Know	16	4.5	

No Answer	3	0.8	
<i>Total</i>	359	100.1	

*Table 12: How to use other birth control methods, such as birth control pills and IUDs?*

	<i>Frequency of Alabama Parents</i>	<i>Percent of Alabama Parents</i>	<i>2011 Mobile County Comparison</i>
Very Important	225	62.7	62.5
Somewhat Important	68	18.9	
Not too Important	10	2.8	
Not at all Important	21	5.9	
Opposed to topic being taught at all (Volunteered)	27	7.5	
Don't Know	6	1.7	
No Answer	2	0.6	
<i>Total</i>	359	100.1	

*Table 13: Effectiveness and failure rates of birth control methods, including condoms?*

	<i>Frequency of Alabama Parents</i>	<i>Percent of Alabama Parents</i>	<i>2011 Mobile County Comparison</i>
Very Important	310	86.4	85.3
Somewhat Important	38	10.6	
Not too Important	1	0.3	
Not at all Important	5	1.4	
Opposed to topic being taught at all (Volunteered)	2	0.6	
Don't Know	2	0.6	
No Answer	1	0.3	
<i>Total</i>	359	100.2	

*Table 14: Where to get birth control, including condoms?*

	<i>Frequency of Alabama Parents</i>	<i>Percent of Alabama Parents</i>	<i>2011 Mobile County Comparison</i>
Very Important	284	79.1	75.7
Somewhat Important	43	12.0	
Not too Important	7	2.0	
Not at all Important	9	2.5	
Opposed to topic being taught at all (Volunteered)	11	3.1	
Don't Know	3	0.8	
No Answer	2	0.6	

<i>Total</i>	359	100.1	
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*Table 15: How to get tested for HIV or AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases?*

	<i>Frequency of Alabama Parents</i>	<i>Percent of Alabama Parents</i>	<i>2011 Mobile County Comparison</i>
Very Important	315	87.7	88.9
Somewhat Important	32	8.9	
Not too Important	4	1.1	
Not at all Important	4	1.1	
Opposed to topic being taught at all (Volunteered)	2	0.6	
Don't Know	1	0.3	
No Answer	1	0.3	
<i>Total</i>	359	100.0	

*Table 16: What to do if one has been raped or sexually assaulted?*

	<i>Frequency of Alabama Parents</i>	<i>Percent Alabama Parents of</i>	<i>2011 Mobile County Comparison</i>
Very Important	354	98.6	98.8
Somewhat Important	3	0.8	
Not too Important	0	0.0	
Not at all Important	1	0.3	
Opposed to topic being taught at all (Volunteered)	1	0.3	
Don't Know	0	0.0	
No Answer	0	0.0	
<i>Total</i>	359	100.0	

*Table 17: Talking about what sexual orientation means?*

	<i>Frequency of Alabama Parents</i>	<i>Percent of Alabama Parents</i>	<i>2011 Mobile County Comparison</i>
Very Important	266	74.1	76.9
Somewhat Important	59	16.4	
Not too Important	10	2.8	
Not at all Important	8	2.2	
Opposed to topic being taught at all (Volunteered)	10	2.8	
Don't Know	4	1.1	
No Answer	2	0.6	

<i>Total</i>	359	100.0	
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*Table 18: How about the risks of oral sex?*

	<i>Frequency of Alabama Parents</i>	<i>Percent of Alabama Parents</i>	<i>2011 Mobile County Percent Comparison</i>
Very Important	303	84.4	85.1
Somewhat Important	32	8.9	
Not too Important	4	1.1	
Not at all Important	7	2.0	
Opposed to topic being taught at all (Volunteered)	8	2.2	
Don't Know	3	0.8	
No Answer	2	0.6	
<i>Total</i>	359	100.0	

*Table 19: How about the risks of anal sex?*

	<i>Frequency of Alabama Parents</i>	<i>Percent of Alabama Parents</i>	<i>2011 Mobile County Percent Comparison</i>
Very Important	294	81.9	82.5
Somewhat Important	29	8.1	
Not too Important	4	1.1	
Not at all Important	10	2.8	
Opposed to topic being taught at all (Volunteered)	9	2.5	
Don't Know	9	2.5	
No Answer	4	1.1	
<i>Total</i>	359	100.0	

*Table 20: Now we will focus on the appropriate age for teaching five of these sex education topics. If you feel that any of the issues should not be addressed at all, don't hesitate to say so. In what grade should children first be exposed to information about basic reproduction?*

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Elementary School (K-5)	93	25.9
Sixth	110	30.6
Seventh	61	17.0
Eighth	36	10.0
Ninth	34	9.5
Tenth	11	3.1
Eleventh	1	0.3
Twelfth	5	1.4
Not taught at all	1	0.3
Don't Know	6	1.7
No Answer	1	0.3
<i>Total</i>	359	100.1

*Table 21: In what grade should sexually-transmitted diseases first be addressed?*

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Elementary School (K-5)	57	15.9
Sixth	107	29.8
Seventh	80	22.3
Eighth	50	13.9
Ninth	43	12.0
Tenth	11	3.1
Eleventh	3	0.8
Twelfth	3	0.8
Not taught at all	1	0.3
Don't Know	2	0.6
No Answer	2	0.6
<i>Total</i>	359	100.1

Table 22: What about birth control choices?

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Elementary School (K-5)	27	7.5
Sixth	87	24.2
Seventh	78	21.7
Eighth	46	12.8
Ninth	77	21.5
Tenth	20	5.6
Eleventh	3	0.8
Twelfth	7	2.0
Not taught at all	4	1.1
Don't Know	8	2.2
No Answer	2	0.6
<i>Total</i>	359	100.0

Table 23: In what grade should condom usage be demonstrated?

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Elementary School (K-5)	21	5.9
Sixth	54	15.0
Seventh	58	16.2
Eighth	46	12.8
Ninth	85	23.7
Tenth	22	6.1
Eleventh	5	1.4
Twelfth	9	2.5
Not taught at all	45	12.5
Don't Know	7	2.0
No Answer	7	2.0
<i>Total</i>	359	100.1

## Summary

It is clear many of Alabama's adolescents are involved in sexual activity. Alabama parents who participated in this study primarily seek support from leaders in the school system and public health professional in strengthening health resources for their children. Many also look to religious leaders and state legislators to play a role in the implementation of sex education for their children.

The large majority of parents were in support of comprehensive sex education for their children in Alabama's public schools. The sample of Alabama parents surveyed in this study crossed sectors of income, education, and race. They were primarily in support of most education topics and their opinions supported the views of Mobile County parents of 2011. Parental opinions regarding sex education for children in Alabama public schools seem to be consistent across the state and over time.

## References

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