



A Toolkit to Transform API Communities

By Diana Ip, Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice

Polls show that Asian Pacific Island (API) parents in California, like other California parents regardless of religion, race, or education level, overwhelmingly support comprehensive sexuality education. However, little to no outreach is made to API parents and caregivers to activate their power. So earlier this year, along with support from the American Civil Liberties Union of Northern California, we at ACRJ (Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice) created Transforming API Communities: Tools for Comprehensive Sexuality Education, a toolkit that assists organizers, service providers and other community groups in mobilizing API support for comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) in their local communities and schools.

Of the existing CSE toolkits, most focus on the nuts and bolts of developing and implementing local CSE campaigns. These resources require that parents and caregivers already be educated, galvanized, and ready to take action. Missing are resources aimed at getting parents and caregivers to a place where they feel prepared and impassioned to engage in campaigns. In other words, what's lacking are tools to transform individuals' beliefs about the benefits of CSE.

STARTING WHERE OUR COMMUNITIES ARE AT

To get a deeper understanding of where API parents and caregivers are at, we started by having conversations. Many of the parents and caregivers we talked to were immigrants with little English proficiency, a group whose voice was not represented in any of the research we knew of. What we found was that most parents of this group were committed to improving their children's education – including sexuality education – but didn't know what kind of sex education their children were being taught or what needed to change. Most were unclear about what made comprehensive sexuality education comprehensive. Many of these parents had never talked to their children about sex, and though they would like to, felt uncomfortable doing so and had no idea how to begin. Some – because of language and cultural barriers – felt disconnected to their children's school and didn't know how to approach teachers and administrators about subjects such as sexuality education. What most parents were looking for was basic information and resources on sexuality education, tools on how to talk to their children about sex, and encouragement in feeling empowered to be advocates for their children in school and in their communities.

Our research revealed an information vacuum that had the potential to make our communities susceptible to supporting sex education policies that ultimately harm and jeopardize the health and well being of our youth and communities. Our research surfaced CSE's connection to broader issues of education justice, economic justice, immigrant rights, civic participation, and gender equity. The conversations also pointed us to opportunities for starting the work of making CSE relevant to API parents and caregivers: provide concrete tools that help parents and caregivers communicate

with their children, schools, and each other about topics of sexuality that also draw in social justice values such as gender equity, justice, community. Transforming API Communities: Tools for Comprehensive Sexuality Education includes, among other tools, a series of photographic novellas that depict API parents and caregivers in realistic scenarios regarding their children's growth as sexual beings. The tools help communicate a vision of community where parents and caregiver—once marginalized because of their immigrant background, class, race, etc.—are drivers and decision makers of their own and their community's destinies.

WHY IS CSE IMPORTANT?

Access to Comprehensive Sexuality Education is important for ALL students as one key way for students to have the resources and information that they need to be an active participant in their health and well-being. For students that have access to healthcare and other sources of information, CSE is one of the many building blocks for their growth and development. For low-income students, students of color and immigrant students, CSE may be the ONE place where they have access to information about their bodies, gender and sexuality, because of the dismal state of health care access in low-income and marginalized communities.

THE CALIFORNIA MODEL

California is considered a model state in terms of laws supporting comprehensive sexuality education. It passed state laws requiring that if schools or state-funded community-based programs teach sexuality education, it must be comprehensive. Comprehensive means that the curriculum has to help students learn how to make decisions about sexual activity; provide information on contraception and sexually transmitted infection prevention; and, be accessible to all students.

The reality is that even though CSE has been law since 2004, too many young people are not getting the benefits of this law. We still have a long way to go to ensure that state policy is implemented at the local level. The implementation and monitoring of the law in local school districts is poor. This means that many schools are teaching sexuality education that does not comply with the law and fails to provide students the information that they need.

As it stands, CSE is a district-by-district struggle, a struggle whose success will require a lot of patience and time. But it also affords great opportunity to touch and mobilize large numbers of communities in the margins; and build an enduring base of support for issues and policies that increase our power to make decisions about our bodies, gender and sexuality. Transforming API Communities: Tools for Comprehensive Sexuality Education is a step towards building power.

To download a copy of Transforming API Communities: Tools for Comprehensive Sexuality Education, visit ACRJ's website: www.reproductivejustice.org.