

# Tactical Sheet

## **PROBLEM LANGUAGE: Washington spending, government waste, taxpayer dollars**

Sometimes, when others go to bat for you against abstinence-only programming – like the op-ed writers quoted here – their effective short-term tactics may actually make your job harder in the long run. The idea reinforced in these op-eds is that “government” misspends “our” money, and lots of it. While the frustration prompting these comments is more than understandable, vilifying government doesn’t promote publicly funded comprehensive sexuality education over abstinence. Instead it leads too easily to a conclusion that our government shouldn’t be in the business of sex education.

- Attacking government waste in specific contexts like funding for abstinence-only programs can undermine long-term efforts to build support for public funding and oversight of sexuality education.
- Phrases like wasting taxpayers’ money or get government out of our schools reinforce an undemocratic understanding of government as separate from society; a foreign entity that common sense would have us “shrink,” “starve,” or “drown” for our own good.

## **ALTERNATIVES: Emphasize that government – *our* government – is capable of better**

Abstinence can be labeled a waste of time and money – but emphasize that what policymakers are wasting is the opportunity to serve us. By focusing on wasteful government spending, you prime audiences to make negative generalizations about government expenditures, even when for real public needs.

- 1 Help the public recognize that through government we are capable of great social good. Instead of condemning government waste, **convey misspending as a missed opportunity to serve our common good:**

**AVOID:** ...a waste of taxpayers’ dollars...

**BETTER:** ...a wasted opportunity to teach our kids ways to live healthy and fulfilling lives...

- 2 A democratic government is not a separate entity from its people. **Add a possessive to government** – like our – to remind us that government is none other than us, and we hold the power to make the decisions that affect us:

**AVOID:** ...the federal government is pouring over a billion dollars into abstinence...

**BETTER:** ...we’re missing the chance to have our government use our resources to maximize learning, health and happiness...

## Op-Eds by Allies of Comprehensive Sex Education

*“What makes no sense is continuing to spend billions of taxpayer dollars on programs that don’t work.”*

- The Herald, SC

*“The federal government must stop pouring millions of dollars of taxpayers’ money down the rathole of ‘abstinence-only sexual education.’”*

- Telegram & Gazette, MA

*“Based on the \$7.7 million study of their impact... Congress should stop wasting taxpayers’ money.”*

-Boston Globe

*“And if sex education is too controversial, how about getting Washington out of the business altogether...”*

-Redding.com

## Insights from cognitive linguistics

- **Mass noun effect.** Absent words like a, the, or our, government can be understood as a mass noun – as something monolithic and dehumanized, rather than as the cooperative democratic enterprise of our citizenry. (Consider the effect on cat when it is used as a mass noun: “there’s cat on my driveway.”)
- **Metonymy.** When the word Washington is used to stand-in for our government, it contributes to feelings of alienation and distance from our representatives and our political process.

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