

# POLICY BRIEF

PO Box 15216, Lansing, MI 48901  
www.michiganfamily.org

## Marriage Education Works: A Public Policy for Private Affairs

by  
Christina Pisani

**Summary** - Marriage education programs provide a tool to strengthen and preserve marriages. Rigorous testing proves these programs help couples and they enjoy widespread support. Public policy could provide much needed incentives to extend marriage education to even more couples. A reduction in divorces will result in lower public expenditures in the court system and human service agencies which often shoulder the burden of public costs associated with fractured families.

### WHAT IS PREMARITAL EDUCATION?

In 2007, 34,522 Michigan marriages ended in divorce or annulment,<sup>1</sup> impacting the lives of almost 31,000 minor children.<sup>2</sup> With these numbers, it is no surprise that over 90% of Michiganders surveyed believe divorce is a major problem in the United States today.<sup>3</sup> But there is hope: A survey of Michigan households shows that premarital education has the potential to address many of the concerns over which these families split, such as unrealistic expectations, the prevalence of conflict or argument, and a lack of commitment to making the relationship work. In fact, 42.2% of divorcees surveyed said that having little or no helpful premarital preparation was itself a major factor in their split.<sup>4</sup> By offering an incentive for premarital education, Michigan can help our community reap the benefits of strong marriages and avoid the public and private costs of divorce.

There are two kinds of premarital education – general, healthy-relationship education, and programs designed for engaged or committed couples. They are different from couples counseling or therapy, though some mental health professionals offer them. Premarital education programs take a variety of forms and are administered both in religious and secular settings. While their content and approach varies, they usually share a core curriculum that focuses on effective communication, conflict management, and problem-solving skills.<sup>5</sup> Many involve discussion of common areas of conflict, as well as the kinds of attitudes and behaviors that often lead to break-downs in relationship. Established programs do not promote a particular family model but teach the kind of processes and skills that are needed to succeed in a marital partnership.<sup>6</sup> The cost of these programs varies,

but most organizations offer assistance or waivers to those in need.

Because healthy-relationship education is skill-based, it can be learned at an early age. The Michigan Healthy Marriage Coalition is partnering with a number of schools in Lenawee County to teach students these important lessons. They are using the *Connections* program, which includes two curriculums - one focusing on dating, and another, for older teens, which includes information on choosing a life partner. Both curriculums include information about the characteristics of healthy relationships, dealing with strong emotions, and effective communication. They include elements of the well-known and effective *PREP* program.

The Coalition also offers three premarital education programs aimed at couples in the area. Foremost among these is the research-based *PREP* program, elements of which are also included in *Connec-*

tions. PREP teaches couples the factors that have been shown to lead to divorce and how to counteract them in their marriage by building a strong, positive relationship.<sup>7</sup> The Coalition also

*...public policy to encourage premarital education is, in itself, a strong message that a healthy, stable marriage matters not only to individuals but also to the broader communities.*

sponsors the *Pick a Partner* program and *Smart Steps*, a program designed for stepfamilies.

Healthy Marriages Grand Rapids offers two marriage preparation programs. *Secrets of Successful Marriage* is an eight hour program offered over two Saturday sessions. In addition to the traditional skill-based curriculum, the program offers information on recognizing the influence of one's family background, managing finances, and blending step-families (in remarriage sessions). The second is *Keys for Couples*, a program for those being married by members of the Kent County District Court. This four hour workshop focuses on relationship expectations, communication, conflict resolution, managing money, friendship and intimacy, and commitment. A similar program is offered in Lenawee County.

#### WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?

Because marital roles are negotiated in today's culture, relationship and communication skills are, now more than ever, the key to a successful marriage. The available research on premarital education shows that it can help couples learn these skills and achieve their marital goals.

A recent and rigorous systematic review of the research on marriage and relationship programs was published in 2005. After scouring nearly 13,000 abstracts, the authors selected 39 studies representing the highest scientific standards for inclusion. Even after excluding several of the studies with the most favorable re-

sults for premarital education programs, the authors found that, on average, such programs have "significant positive effects" on couples.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, couples experienced statistically significant improvements in their communication and overall satisfaction with their relationship.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, another review of the relevant research found that, "the average person who participated in a premarital prevention program was significantly better off afterwards than 79% of people who did not participate."<sup>10</sup> Couples who participated made "significant immedi-

ate gains" in communication, conflict management, and overall relationship quality which last "at least six months to 3 years."<sup>11</sup> The authors concluded that while there has not been much research comparing the different premarital education programs, it is clear that programs addressing conflict negotiation are, in fact, effective. Moreover, a meta-analysis of the available research suggests that "varied educational formats (e.g. group sessions, individual couples counseling, weekend retreats, etc.) and types of educators (e.g., professional vs. lay leaders) may be equally effective . . ."<sup>12</sup>

Besides the traditional, systematic research on the effectiveness of premarital education, surveys of couples also attest to its effectiveness. According to a report published in the *Journal of Family Psychology*, couples who took

### Overview of State Marriage License Fee Reduction Laws

State	Marriage License Fee	Fee with Premarital Preparation	Number of Hours Required	Details
Florida	\$88.50	\$56	4 Hours	Specifies qualified providers. Allows instruction delivered over "electronic medium."
Georgia	Varies	Varies	6 Hours	License fee varies by county and although the marriage license fee is waived, other fees may apply.
Maryland	Varies	Varies	4 Hours	License fee varies by county.
Minnesota	\$100	\$30	12 Hours	Requires use of premarital inventory.
Oklahoma	\$50	\$5	4 Hours	Must be conducted by a "health professional" as defined. Encourages use of Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP).
Tennessee	Varies	(Reduced by \$40)	N/A	Fee reduction only applies to state residents.
Texas	\$60	Free	8 Hours	Must be a skills-based and research-based curriculum; HHSC must maintain a public Web site with information on premarital preparation.

Source: National Healthy Marriage Resource Center

part in a premarital education program reported higher marital satisfaction and commitment than those who did not. They also reported less conflict in their relationship. Moreover, the researches found that participation in a premarital education program “was associated with about a thirty percent decline in the odds of divorce.”<sup>13</sup>

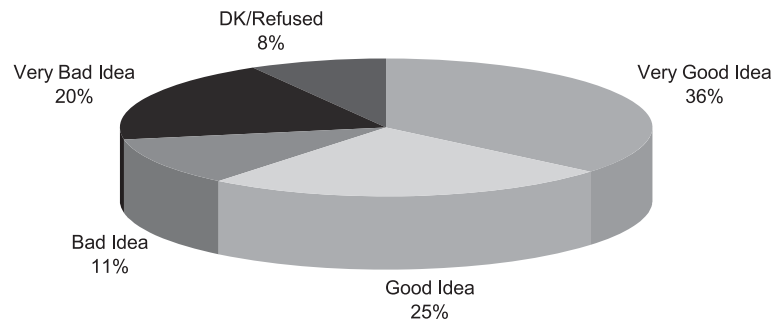
Premarital education programs also offer other, unmeasured benefits. These include reinforcing the idea that marital success takes work and normalizing relationship challenges, both of which can give couples hope in times of challenge. Participation in such a program may increase the likelihood that the couple will seek help later if they face trouble in their relationship. Programs may also serve as a gateway to other services such as help with unemployment or substance abuse.<sup>14</sup>

#### WHY LEGISLATE?

According to the National Marriage Project, “the great majority of American high school seniors still want to get married, with 82 percent of girls and 70 percent of boys recently saying that ‘having a good marriage and family life’ is ‘extremely important’ to them. These percentages, in fact, represent a slight increase from the late 1970s.”<sup>15</sup> The success of their marriages will depend largely upon a set of relationship skills which are rarely taught as part of formal education. Promoting marriage and healthy relationship education for teens and engaged couples, will benefit these groups as well as the community which pays the costs of failed relationships.

Foremost among the public and private costs of divorce is the involvement of the state in divorce, custody, and child support proceedings. Families must bear the intrusion of the state into every area of their lives, from their financial situation to how they discipline their children. This intrusion, moreover, is costly not only in terms of lawyers fees but for the tax payer. For example, Michigan’s 2008

### Support for Low-Income, Marriage Education Tax Credit (2004)



executive budget allocates over \$213.3 million just for the collection of child support.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps most of all, spouses and children lose the major benefits associated with healthy marriages. For example, social science research has found that married people, on average, live longer, healthier, and happier lives than those who divorce. They also do better economically.<sup>17</sup> Children raised by their married parents have better physical and mental health, do better in school, have better relationships with their parents, and are less likely to become juvenile delinquents than those whose parents are divorced.<sup>18</sup> Thus, failed marriages are associated with increased strains on the juvenile justice, public assistance, and healthcare systems.

For these reasons, Michigan should take the opportunity to join the eight other states offering a low cost incentive for couples to participate in premarital education.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, there is wide public support for such a measure. In fact, over 90% of Michiganders surveyed agreed that “all couples considering marriage should be encouraged to get premarital counseling before they marry,”<sup>20</sup> over 60% believed the state should provide financial assistance to low-income couples who could not afford premarital education<sup>21</sup> and over 50% favored going further and making it a legal requirement for all couples entering marriage.<sup>22</sup>

Support for marriage education programs has been consistently high since Michigan Family Forum began track-

ing public opinion in 1995. At that time, two-thirds of Michigan households said premarital education could play “a major role in preventing divorce.”<sup>23</sup> According to a 1997 poll of Michigan residents, 80% of participants found their premarital education program helpful.<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, less than half (45%) of married Michiganders surveyed had participated in premarital education.<sup>25</sup>

Also, legislation supporting marriage education would tap into the resources and energies of established community-based organizations such as the Michigan Healthy Marriage Coalition and Healthy Marriages Grand Rapids. By working together to build strong and healthy marriages, we will build a stronger and healthier Michigan.

It is often said that law is a teacher. Family scholars believe that public policy to encourage premarital education is, in itself, a strong message that a healthy, stable marriage matters not only to individuals but also to the broader communities.<sup>26</sup> Policymakers in Lansing have an opportunity to take a significant step to correct a social ill, weak marriages, in a way that is successful and enjoys public support. Their action will signal the importance of marriage even before their policies are able to take effect.

## Notes:

- 1 Vital Records & Health Data Development Section, Michigan Dept of Community Health. *Number of divorces and annulments, divorce and annulment rates, Michigan and United States occurrences, selected years, 1900 – 2007* [Data File]. Retrieved from [www.mdch.state.mi.us/pha/osr/marriage/Tab3.5.asp](http://www.mdch.state.mi.us/pha/osr/marriage/Tab3.5.asp)
- 2 Vital Records & Health Data Development Section, Michigan Dept of Community Health. *Estimated number of children involved in divorces and annulments, average number of children per decree and rate per 1,000 children under 18 years of age, Michigan and United States, selected years 1960 – 2007* [data set]. Retrieved from <http://www.mdch.state.mi.us/pha/osr/marriage/Tab3.6.asp>
- 3 Glenn, N. D. (2005). *With this ring...: A survey on marriage in Michigan*. Michigan: National Fatherhood Initiative. p. 18
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Dion, M. R. (2005). Healthy marriage programs: Learning what works. *The Future of Children*, 15(2), 139-156.
- 6 Ooms, T. The new kid on the block: What is marriage education and does it work? (Publication No. 05-35). Washington, D.C.: Center for Law and Social Policy, Inc.
- 7 Stanley, S. M., Markman, H. J., Blumberg, S. L., & Jenkins, N. (2006). PREP® leaders manual. Greenwood Village, Colorado: PREP Educational Products, Inc.
- 8 Reardon-Anderson, J., Stagner, M., Macomber, J. & Murray, J. (2005). *Systematic Review of the Impact of Marriage and Relationship Programs*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, at 23.
- 9 *Ibid.* at 19-20.
- 10 Carroll, J.S., & Doherty, W.J. (2003) Evaluating the effectiveness of premarital prevention programs: A meta-analytic review of outcome research. *Family Relations*, 52(2), 105-118.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 Stanley, S.M., Amato, P., Johnson, C.A. & Markman, H.J. (2006). Premarital education, marital quality, and marital stability: Findings from a large, random household survey. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 20(1), 117-126.
- 14 Ooms, *supra* n.6.
- 15 Popenoe, D. (2007). The future of marriage in America. In The National Marriage Project. *The state of our unions 2007: The social health of marriage in America* (pp. 5-12). Piscataway, NJ: Author.
- 16 Granholm, J.M., & Emerson, R.L. (2008) *Executive budget: Fiscal year 2008*. Lansing: Michigan Department of Management and Budget.
- 17 Doherty, W.J., Galston, W.A., Glenn, N.D., Gottman, J., Markey, B., Markman, H.J., et al. (2002). *Why marriage matters: Twenty-one conclusions from the social sciences*. New York: Institute for American Values.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 Seven states offer reduced marriage license fees, while South Carolina offers a tax credit. See, National Healthy Marriage Resource Center, US Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families. (2007) *Fact sheet: Premarital preparation requirements in state law*. Fairfax, VA: Author. Available at <http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/docs/stmarriage-icfs.pdf>; S.C. Code Ann. §20-1-230 (2007).
- 20 Glenn, p. 19
- 21 Michigan Family Forum. (2005). *Marriage and Divorce: Public Opinion in Michigan*. p. 9
- 22 Glenn, p. 19
- 23 Michigan Family Forum. (2005) *Marriage and Divorce: Public Opinion in Michigan*. p. 7
- 24 Michigan Family Forum. (2005). *Marriage and divorce: Public opinion in Michigan*. p. 8
- 25 Glenn, p. 22
- 26 Hawkins, A. J. (2007). Will legislation to encourage premarital education strengthen marriage and reduce divorce? *Journal of Law*