

Middle ground on sex ed

By Cheryl Wetzstein
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Fights over abstinence education are gearing up on Capitol Hill, even as interest grows in a new sex-education program that claims to bridge the abstinence versus "safe sex" debate. Since President Bush took office, federal funding for abstinence education has climbed from \$80 million a year to \$167 million. This week's budget for fiscal 2006 boosts abstinence education funding even higher — to \$206 million.

"Healthy people depend on healthy families, and healthy families are sustained by fundamental virtues, including abstinence before marriage," Health and Human Services Secretary Michael O. Leavitt said Monday, in explaining why the Bush administration asked for a \$39 million increase in the nation's largest abstinence-education grant program.

Supporters of comprehensive sex education have been infuriated by these increases because they think — as stated in a December report issued by Rep. Henry A. Waxman, California Democrat — that abstinence programs often contain "false, misleading or distorted information about reproductive health."

In a Jan. 28 letter to congressional leaders, more than 200 safe-sex advocacy groups and their allies called for a hearing to "fully review the content of abstinence-only-until-marriage programs."

"Our young people deserve better than the extremism of half-truths and lies," said William Smith, public policy official for the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, one of the signatories of the letter.

Meanwhile, a "relationships" sex education curriculum is entering the fray.

Today's teens often know about the physical aspects of sex and the risks of sex, but they don't know much about "the emotional dimensions of sexuality," said Marline Pearson, author of the "Love U2: Getting Smarter About Relationships, Sex, Babies and Marriage" curriculum.

Love U2 fills in those "missing pieces," she said, adding that "kids are hungry" for lessons about successful friendships and romantic relationships.

The first two units of Love U2 were released last year, and "hundreds" of orders already have been filled, said Kay Reed, founder and chief executive of the Dibble Institute for Marriage Education in Berkeley, Calif., which publishes Love U2. The third Love U2 unit on teen communications skills was released last month, and a fourth unit on seeing parenthood "through the eyes of a child" is coming soon, she said.

Sarah Brown, director of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, praised Love U2 as a "welcome addition" to the discussion, in part because it "artfully transcends the tiresome 'abstinence versus contraception' debate."

Tiresome or not, fights over abstinence education are under way in Texas and Louisiana.

Texas A&M University researchers have surveyed 728 middle and high school students before and after their participation in a school-based abstinence program.

To order Love U2 by Marline Pearson
or for more information,
Visit www.DibbleInstitute.org
Call 1.800.695.7975

Preliminary results were mixed: Although more teens said they viewed abstinence as "wise," "good," "safe" and "right," the number of teens who said they had sex grew. For instance, before the middle school students took the abstinence classes, fewer than 8 percent said they had had sex. After they took the program, 12.3 percent said they had had sex. This "unexpected" response also was seen among the high school students.

"We didn't find what many would like for us to find," lead researcher B.E. "Buzz" Pruitt told the Dallas Morning News.

Officials with the Texas Department of State Health Services stressed that the evaluation was preliminary and that the study can't say whether abstinence education works unless it has a control group to show how teens behave without abstinence education.

Abstinence supporters also said the study was flawed. When Texas teens in abstinence education are compared with Texas teens in the federal Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey, abstinence-educated teens have far lower rates of sexual activity, said a report from the National Abstinence Clearinghouse in Sioux Falls, S.D.

While Texas struggles with questions about the effectiveness of abstinence education, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Louisiana has renewed questions about whether such lessons unconstitutionally promote religion.

In 2002, the ACLU successfully sued the Louisiana Governor's Abstinence Program for allowing its abstinence funds to buy religious materials. The state and the ACLU eventually settled out of court, with the state agreeing to closely monitor its abstinence spending.

In November, the ACLU warned Louisiana officials that their www.AbstinencEdu.com Web site was promoting religion in violation of its settlement, arguing that on the site "state-appointed experts" say, "Abstaining from sex until entering a loving marriage will ... [make you] really, truly 'cool' in God's eyes" and "God is standing beside you the whole way" for choosing abstinence.

Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Blanco said the state is "in full compliance" with the court settlement. One ACLU complaint refers to a Web forum where young people talk about abstinence, she noted.

"If these young people choose to discuss their faith in God as a motivating factor in their abstinence decision, they are well within their rights under the Constitution," the governor said.

Mrs. Blanco, a Democrat, also defended the state's Web site links to other Web sites, including ones "that discuss abstinence from a religious perspective."

"While I do not believe that government should promote any religion, I will fight any efforts to banish the discussion of religious issues — in this case, links to outside Web sites — from any Web site or other forum under my jurisdiction," she said.

The ACLU of Louisiana disagreed and on Jan. 17 formally asked a federal court to hold Louisiana in contempt of its 2002 settlement.

"The state promised to clean up its act but it has failed to do so," said Louise Melling, director of the ACLU Reproductive Freedom Project.

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