

StarTribune

Editorial: Sex ed/Abstinence-only is unrealistic

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Despite mountains of evidence that a "just say no" approach to sex education isn't effective, the Bush administration and Congress have channeled millions more into abstinence-only programs. While there is clearly a place for encouraging adolescent celibacy, the additional federal funds would be better spent on comprehensive programs that also discuss contraception and safe sex.

Included in the spending bill Congress approved last month was a \$30 million increase for abstinence-only programs, bringing the total to nearly \$170 million.

The boost reflects President Bush's drive to shift the focus of sex-education policy toward an emphasis on abstention from sexual activity until marriage.

That idea can be part of a sex education curriculum, but school leaders should resist taking the abstain-only funds to set up programs that deny students complete information. Though pregnancies among younger teens have dropped (due to a combination of factors, including good sex education), America still has more teens giving birth than other developed nations. And the rates of sexually transmitted diseases among U.S. youth are still too high.

Still, the Bush administration remains focused on a zero-tolerance policy that ignores facts, research and science. Money is being channeled to abstinence-only teaching even though government has no empirical data to back it up. In the face of mounting research data showing the ineffectiveness of such programs, the administration postponed its own study until 2006.

Other respected researchers have made the case for comprehensive, inclusive programs. The National Institutes of Health, the National Academy of Science, the Guttmacher Institute and a 2001 Surgeon General's Report all concluded that so far no exclusively abstinence-based program has significantly delayed sexual activity.

About a year ago, a Minnesota Health Department study revealed that the state's five-year-old, \$5 million abstinence-only initiative -- which forbids any mention of contraception or safe sex -- has done little to encourage healthy behavior among teens exposed to it.

And just last week, a congressional analysis of some abstinence-only programs found they may be more harmful than helpful. Conducted by Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Calif., the review exposed numerous examples of "false, misleading or distorted" information being taught in the programs, including declarations that abortion can lead to "sterility and suicide" and that touching genitals "can result in pregnancy."

In rebuttal to Waxman, a Bush undersecretary said further studies are unnecessary when abstinence is the only 100 percent effective way to prevent pregnancy and disease. But that response sidesteps an important point: There is little proof that simply telling young people not to have sex actually changes their behavior.

Most polls show that 50 to 65 percent of all high schoolers become sexually active before they graduate. After reviewing hundreds of thousands of programs, the previous surgeon general concluded that students exposed to only abstinence education were less likely to practice safe sex when they did become active, thus increasing their risk for pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Adolescents experience hormonal changes as a natural part of becoming sexual beings. That cannot be stopped by pretending it isn't happening or using distorted antisex scare tactics. Schools, parents and government should offer students the best, most complete and honest information available to help them make wise choices -- whether they choose to remain chaste or have sex.