

Anything But Abstinence: A Conference on 20 Years of Great Sex (Ed)

Lee Duigon



By law, New Jersey's public school sex educators are required to "stress that abstinence from sexual activity is the only completely reliable means" of avoiding unwanted pregnancies and sexually-transmitted diseases.¹

But if you visited an October 20, 2003 conference celebrating New Jersey's twentieth year of mandated sex education, you would never guess there was any such requirement.

Sex educators from thirty states attended the conference — sponsored by Rutgers, New Jersey's state university — to talk shop, learn about the latest innovations in their field, and discuss the future of sex education.

Not one of the conference's eighteen workshops dealt with abstinence education, let alone provided any guidance in teaching it. A 2003 draft of the State Department of Education's Core Curriculum on Comprehensive Health and Physical Education for Grades 2-12 (eleven pages of small type) mentions abstinence only once, as a subject to be covered in Grade 6.

"We all believe abstinence should be a very important component" — (not the most important, as laid out by the law) — "of any program," said Susan Wilson, executive director of the Network for Family Life Organization, the conference's chief organizer. "But teenagers need to know more than just one form of protection."

The conference's guidebook did include one article about abstinence

education: a May 5, 2002 column by Albert Hunt in *The Wall Street Journal*. The column's title reveals its message: "Abstinence-Only for Teenagers: A Pipe Dream." Mr. Hunt described abstinence-centered sex education as "fundamentally flawed" and "a delusion."

The question is not whether abstinence education works, but whether people who don't believe in it can teach it — if, in fact, they are teaching it at all.

The Politics of Sex Education

Judged by the contents of the workshops and the floor displays at the conference, sex educators adhere to a discernible ideology.

- "Moralizing" or "dictating" to teenagers doesn't work (Barbara Huberman, of Advocates for Youth, in a monograph presented to the conference "Adolescent Sexual Health in Europe and the U. S — Why the Difference?").
- Homosexuality is only one of many diverse but equally acceptable and respected varieties of sexual behavior (Workshop B8, "Using 'Partner' is Not Enough: Teaching About Sexual Orientation").
- Everyone has a right to "celebrate" his sexuality in his own way, as long as he takes the necessary precautions against disease (mission statement by Planned Parenthood, one of the conference's sponsors).
- All forms of contraception are morally acceptable (floor displays of a wide variety of contraceptive

devices and medications, pitched for sale to schools and sex education teachers).

- The state has the moral authority to define and teach all aspects of health and family life (Department of Education Core Curriculum).

The conference's list of "collaborating organizations" includes Planned Parenthood, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the National Organization for Women (NOW), the Right to Choose Education Fund, and the New Jersey Family Planning League. Listed as "organizations that have agreed to help" are the American Psychological Association (infamous for advocating the legitimization of pedophilia in 1999), the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund (currently suing in the state supreme court to force the establishment of "gay marriage" in New Jersey), the Kinsey Institute, and the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League (NARAL).

Director Wilson denied that the list showed that sex education has a hard left political slant. "All of these organizations have a firm belief in providing young people with honest, medically accurate information on which to base decisions in their daily lives," she said.

Conspicuously absent were conservative, pro-family organizations — no sign of Focus on the Family, Concerned Women for America, the Traditional Values Coalition, or any other recognizably pro-family group.

"The conservative organizations don't believe in our basic premise," Ms. Wilson said.

Abstaining from Teaching Abstinence

The only discussion of abstinence education at the conference was the expression of opinion that it doesn't work.

Last year a delegation from the New Jersey Family Policy Council met with Gloria Hancock, chief of staff at the State Department of Education, to discuss abstinence-based sex education.

In a letter from Ms. Hancock, they were told that her office "found that the law is ambiguous and virtually unenforceable" (e.g., what do we mean by "stress"?). The department, she wrote, was waiting for passage of a new bill, Assembly Bill 2272, that would address "both abstinence and the use of contraception" — a bill "which the department supports because it represents a more balanced approach and is consistent with our comprehensive Health Education Standards," Ms. Hancock wrote.

A year later, A-2272 had yet to be introduced and wasn't even on the legislative schedule — leaving Law 303 still in force, still mandating an emphasis on abstinence.

"Our problem with this particular law is that it says that any type of family and health education should stress abstinence," Ms. Hancock said. "We teach comprehensive family life education, and certainly abstinence is one part of that. But that requirement to 'stress abstinence' is too vague."

"We understand human behavior. What about protection for those young people who choose not to abstain? They need protection, too."

Peggy Cowan, one of the members of the Family Policy Council at the meeting, said the Department of Education's attitude showed defiance of the legisla-

ture and the people of New Jersey.

"It's incredible to me that we can have a state law that is totally ignored by the Commissioner of education because they don't like it," she said. "What more do we have to do than pass a law and have the governor sign it?"

Also at the meeting was another council member, Bernadette Vissani.

"We were amazed they were so transparent about not enforcing the law [303]," she said. "Some individual teachers will look for materials to help them teach abstinence. But if you're asking whether the Department of Education is providing any leadership from the top down, the answer is no. They don't like abstinence education, so they don't teach it."

Europe vs. Africa

If sex educators don't teach abstinence, what might they teach instead?

Barbara Huberman's presentation to the conference offered the European experience as "a new paradigm for adolescent sexual health in America."

In the Netherlands, France, and Germany, Ms. Huberman reported, teenagers posted dramatically lower numbers than American teens for pregnancies, births, and abortions, and sexually transmitted infections, such as HIV, syphilis, gonorrhea, and chlamydia. Why, she asked, such a difference?

"We Americans got caught up in the Sexual Revolution in the 1960s, and we never got over it," she said. "Europeans have left that behind. But they don't try to dictate to their young people. They respect teenagers' rights to act responsibly, and give them the tools they need to avoid unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections."

Whether we teach abstinence or not, she said, many teens, especially older ones, will choose to be sexually active. Our media and popular culture constantly encourage such a choice

and many adults do not set an example of abstinence. "We've always stressed abstaining from sex until marriage, but let's face reality. Older teens are going to be sexually active, so we'd better give them the information they need to stay healthy."

Meanwhile, in the small African country of Uganda — with resources far less than those of the United States or Western Europe — an abstinence education program has succeeded brilliantly.

Faced with an AIDS infection rate of 30% in 1992, Uganda activated a program called "ABC."

"A is for Abstinence, B is for 'Be faithful to your partner,' and C is for Condoms — in that order," said Richard Kabonero of the Uganda Embassy. "Abstinence comes first and foremost. After all, condoms aren't always easily available in my country. We rely on abstinence, and it works."

After ten years of the ABC Program, Uganda's AIDS infection rate shrank to 4 %.

Mr. Kabonero has observed sex education programs and AIDS prevention clinics in several U.S. cities. Displaying a diplomat's reserve, he said he noticed "some resistance to the idea of teaching abstinence" among American sex educators.

Why does an approach that has worked so well for Uganda meet little but criticism and skepticism in America?

"I don't know why," Mr. Kabonero said. "All I know is that we stress abstinence in Uganda, and it works." ■

Lee Duigon is a Christian free-lance writer from New Jersey. He has been a newspaper editor and reporter and a published novelist. He and his wife, Patricia, have been married for 26 years.

1. P. L. 2001, c. 303, the "AIDS Prevention Act of 1999."