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JOE LACONTE

The four years Eve Jackson taught "family life" classes at Hamilton Southeastern High School in Indianapolis were troubling ones for her Baptist conscience.

At a time when the hormones of adolescents are at flood tide, Ms. Jackson says, the most powerful message they get about sex is from their peers: "Come on in, the water's fine." Other voices are muffled: Teachers often ignore or play down a state requirement that they stress abstinence in sex education classes. Church-state legal doctrine permits only informational teaching on religious ideas concerning premarital sex; to teach these ideas as "truth" that should motivate students toward chaste behavior is not allowed. Says Ms. Jackson: "As much as I wanted to talk about God, I really couldn't."

What she could talk about — responsible decision-making, peer pressure, self-esteem — had little impact. Finally, she left public education, developed a Bible-based abstinence program taught by high school juniors and seniors, and introduced it into 34 Catholic grade schools throughout the city.

Now the public schools — in a city with a teen pregnancy rate that has risen 40 percent over the last decade — want Ms. Jackson back.

Indianapolis Mayor Steve Goldsmith has asked Ms. Jackson to bring her chastity program, "A Promise to Keep," into 150 public grade schools this fall. Stripped of its religious references, the program will recruit at least 100 high school students to serve as advocates for abstinence. It is just one of more than two dozen initiatives launched by the mayor in the last year, in an effort to reduce out-of-wedlock births. Citing its impact on crime, poverty and welfare dependence, Mr. Goldsmith calls teen pregnancy "the most serious long-term issue facing this city. We can do nothing if we don't solve this problem."

Following a meeting last year that included the city's school

A city's assault on teen pregnancy

superintendent, a prosecutor, a juvenile court judge, and the Marion County Health Department director, Mr. Goldsmith mapped out a 27-point strategy for city-wide action. His aim: to energize public opinion, the courts and church and community groups to stigmatize out-of-wedlock births while helping support teen mothers.

The mayor intends to treat casual attitudes about teen pregnancy with the same tolerance a triathlete exhibits toward flabbiness: Since studies show that roughly half of all teen-age moms are impregnated by males over age 18, Mr. Goldsmith wants prosecutors to crack down on statutory rape. He plans to enforce laws requiring women to establish paternity as a condition of receiving cash welfare benefits. He intends to track and publish monthly reports of teen pregnancies in every high school in the city.

And while local Planned Parenthood clinics seek to build "creative self-expression" through dance, art and painting classes, Mr. Goldsmith is pressuring schools to ban from extracurricular activities pregnant teens and boys who've fathered children. He even has floated the idea of sending pregnant girls to separate schools altogether.

Esperanza Zendejas, superintendent of the Indianapolis public schools, opposes some of the mayor's school-based sanctions, but applauds his broad-based approach to attacking the problem. "The fact

that the city, as a city, is looking at teen pregnancy is extraordinary," she says. "It should be happening in every city in the nation."

It wouldn't be happening in Indianapolis without the support of the religious community, Mr. Goldsmith says. In February he called 100 leaders — Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim and Buddhist — for a summit on teen pregnancy. "Nothing government does will meaningfully improve a community if there is an absence of values," he says. "We could put police officers on every corner of the city, but if our people did not believe in God and basic moral values, then we would still not have a safe community."

Crime statistics seem to side with the mayor: Juvenile crime in Indianapolis has increased nearly tenfold in the last decade, with 75 percent of those offenses committed by children from fatherless households. "Out-of-wedlock birth is driving every single rotten outcome in our city," says Krista Rush, the mayor's social policy adviser.

Communicating an effective abstinence message may be the mayor's most difficult task, and the city's schools will be a prime battle ground. Ms. Jackson cites three essentials: (1) Give kids a clear message of abstinence until marriage; (2) get the message to them early; and (3) find credible high school students to deliver it. Last year Ms. Jackson recruited 200 peer mentors from six Catholic and six public schools to lead the workshops. Most come from strong religious backgrounds.

"That faith component is essential, because it gives them a moral standard to live by. Otherwise, it's anything goes."

Joe Loconte is deputy editor of the Heritage Foundation's magazine, Policy Review: The Journal of American Citizenship. This article is adapted from a longer version in a forthcoming issue.