



# Congress Studies Whether Abstinence Education Works

Monday, March 11, 2002

By Catherine Donaldson-Evans

## FOX NEWS

With teen pregnancies nearing 4 million each year and another 4 million teenagers contracting sexually transmitted diseases annually, abstinence-only sex education advocates say their message is the only one preventing teens from getting caught with their pants down.

But as Congress considers how much more money to spend on a federal initiative promoting abstinence-only education, the debate over its effectiveness rages anew.

Those involved in the sexual abstinence movement point to the overall drop in teen birth rates in the last decade and feedback from adolescents that indicates the message is getting through.

"It's very successful," said Kathleen Sullivan, director of Project Reality, an abstinence-before-marriage group that publishes some of the curricula. "People who pay taxes have the right to have their money go toward teaching kids a healthy message."

Their opponents, who favor comprehensive sexuality education with an abstinence unit, cite their own feedback from kids and the lower teen birth rates as proof that AIDS awareness and safe-sex courses work best.

"There is no evidence whatsoever that an abstinence-until-marriage program affects a young person's behavior," said Barbara Huberman, director of education and outreach at Advocates for Youth, an organization that promotes

comprehensive sex education. "The science in this country tells us the comprehensive, open approach helps kids delay initiation of the first sexual experience."

Figuring that reducing teen pregnancy would help decrease welfare rolls, Congress passed a measure in the Welfare Reform Act that gave states \$50 million a year over five years, from 1998-2002, to implement abstinence programs. An extra \$32 million a year from other sources also went toward the initiative.

Only California didn't accept the federal funds because it had tried abstinence education before and found it failed.

Lawmakers are currently considering upping federal spending to \$135 million a year for the next five years.

In response, opponents to abstinence-only education have introduced a parallel bill for consideration, H.R. 3469, which would give a comparable amount of federal funding for comprehensive sexual education.

As part of that effort, 77 different state and national organizations — led by Advocates for Youth — drafted a letter to President Bush asking that he withdraw support from "unproven" abstinence programs. Bush included the abstinence-before-marriage issue on his presidential campaign platform.

Huberman said the White House hasn't responded, though Secretary of State Colin Powell told an audience of MTV viewers in a recent interview that young people should be given access to safe-sex information and birth control, a comment that was derided by conservative Republican Party members.

### **No Real Data to Go By**

Though some programs have been around for more than a decade, clear statistical evidence on whether the curricula work is hard to come by. That's in part because adolescent sexuality and teen pregnancy are tough to measure accurately and in part because the federally-backed initiative is so new and varies widely based on how states use the money.

"It's very difficult to pin down, county by county, according to programs in the schools," Sullivan said.

Congress has pledged to spend \$6 million evaluating a handful of the curricula used, but the study could take over one year to complete.

According to the 2000 census, births to teens in 1999 — the most recent year for which figures are available — were down from 4,158,000 in 1990 to 3,959,000. But they climbed slightly between 1997 and 1999. Teen pregnancy rates dropped between 1990 and 1996, but they don't account for all miscarriages and abortions and recent figures aren't out yet.

Sullivan, whose organization works primarily with Illinois public schools, said pre- and post-tests on abstinence courses have shown they do change students' attitudes, but those results have been ignored. She sees the growth in demand for the abstinence curricula — and the positive feedback — as evidence enough.

Huberman said a University of Minnesota study found abstinence exercises like the Baptist-inspired "Virginity Pledges" — where kids write out promises not to have pre-marital sex — delay the age at which kids have sex for the first time.

"But the sad thing was that those kids who took the pledge and broke it were much less likely to use contraception," she said.

Pro-abstinence organizations believe adolescents are too young to be pondering birth control and should simply choose not to have sex before marriage.

Project Reality's Game Plan curriculum and other abstinence teachings do address birth control — but focus on the failure rates and the fact that it can't prevent the emotional impact of having sex.

Pro-comprehensive education groups favor teachings that encourage postponing sexual involvement and tell teens to practice safe sex if they do decide to have it. They say the abstinence curricula are an unrealistic one-size-fits-all model relying on guilt and scare tactics.

"What gets confused here are religion, science and politics," Huberman said. "Waiting for marriage is a perfectly appropriate belief for some and should be respected. But we have to respect all values around sex education."