

Experts disagree on marriage promotion

Bush plan has flaws, some say

By TAMAR LEWIN
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PHOENIX — There is a lot of earnest nodding as Leo Godzich tells the seven couples in his premarital education class how important it is to enter into marriage knowing each other's finances, sharing assets and agreeing on their budget priorities.

It is a mixed group, this premarital class at the Phoenix First Assembly of God. Some are members of the church, but most are not. Some have their weddings planned, while others are just beginning to explore marriage. Most are middle class, but some are eligible for a subsidy through the state welfare program, which has budgeted \$1 million for initiatives to promote marriage — much as President Bush proposes to do, to the tune of \$1.5 billion, in the welfare re-authorization bill.

Many such programs already exist, without government backing. During the last decade, marriage education has mushroomed, in churches, community centers, colleges and even high schools.

What there is not is solid evidence that such efforts can bring down the nation's divorce rate, which was projected at roughly 50 percent by the Census Bureau in 2002.

The Bush administration's plan to use federal money to foster healthy marriages among low-income families, first announced two years ago, has drawn considerable fire. While there is consensus among family experts, conservative and liberal, that two-parent households give children the strongest start, there is sharp disagreement about government involvement in promoting marriage.

Some see such efforts as intrusive meddling in a purely private aspect of life. Others worry that marriage promotion could push women to enter into, or stay in, marriages with abusive men. And many advocacy groups concerned with poverty say that what low-income women need is not marriage education, but jobs, training, education and child care. The Bush administration has it backward, they say: self-sufficiency leads to healthy marriages, not the other way around.

There are other concerns, too. The 1996 Federal Defense of Marriage Act defines marriage as a man-woman union, and with gay marriage emerging as a wedge issue with voters, some see the Bush administration's marriage-education initiative as a sop to conservatives pushing for a stronger stance against same-sex marriage.

Whether programs actually produce more stable marriages is unknown.

"This is all still experimental," Godzich said. "That's one reason we need the federal program, to get some research on outcomes and what works."