

George Allen's crusade against sex education

If you thought Joycelyn Elders was a stitch, you'd probably love what they teach in Virginia's mandatory sex education curriculum, euphemistically called "Family Life Education." But Dr. Elders, ever a bottomless pit of clownish insights having to do with sex, merely inflicted her opinions on the country's adults. Family Life Education, on the other hand, offers much of the same content but imposes it on teenagers who are unable to escape.

Now Virginia Gov. George Allen has proposed doing to "FLE," as the curriculum is called, pretty much what President Clinton finally did to Dr. Elders a couple of weeks ago, namely administer the boot. This does not mean he plans to abolish the program but merely to make it

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voluntary, which to the teachers' guild represents a direct danger to freedom.



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The governor's idea is that local schools would have the choice of offering sex education or not, which they do not now have, and that even if they do so choose, children would not be automatically enrolled as they now are. Instead, if parents wanted their children to endure several years of daily immersion in the minutiae of sex, they could "opt in."

Whatever you think about sex or the need to study it in school, the Allen plan is sensible enough, and it ought to become a model for similar conservative reforms elsewhere in the country. Nevertheless,

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There are two principal objections to mandatory sex education. One is that it's a waste of valuable and limited time that ought to be spent on other subjects that might actually do students some good at some point in their lives. Most adults who ever use any of what of they learned in school regret not having been able to spend more time learning more than they did — another language, more mathematics, more literature or history. It's doubtful anyone other than Dr. Elders ever regretted not having learned how to masturbate.

The other objection, by far the more common and at least as sensible as the first, is that the way sexuality is taught in formal sex ed is not the way most American parents want it taught. From descriptions of

FLE, it seems the parents who say so are onto something.

The Washington Post, faithful to the last in its support of sex ed, recently undertook one of its periodic excursions outside the Beltway to discover what the simple folk had to say on the subject of Mr. Allen's reforms. Predictably the Post came up with comments that its editors thought wiped the governor's proposals off the blackboard.

It uncovered no small number of teenagers who thought FLE was swell. "Most parents," one told the Post's reporter, "don't want their kids to learn about being gay because they think it's wrong or vulgar." Another remarked, "I think that a lot of parents fear that if their kids are exposed to the fact that being gay is normal, they will come out of the closet." The latter sentence in particular illustrates the need for kids to study something else besides sex, namely syntax. Does "they" mean the parents will

come out of the closet or the kids?

But the remarks also illustrate precisely what's wrong with state-mandated sex education. The adolescents in question have been taught

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— and have swallowed without thinking — the instruction that "gay is normal." They have also swallowed

the idea that their parents' beliefs are repressive and unjust because their parents don't agree with "the fact that being gay is normal." And they've ingested the notion that their schools and teachers know more about sex than their parents.

It is by no means inconceivable that somewhere in this country there is a teacher who knows something about sex worth teaching that parents don't know, but the assumption of the state should not be that that is the rule. Undoubtedly, if you study sexuality long enough, you will learn many things that many parents don't know, and there are even fairly elementary aspects of sex that adolescents do need to know — where babies come from, what venereal disease is and how to avoid it and how to spot perverts before they spot you.

But what the juvenile remarks adduced by the Post show is that that's not what some young Virginians are learning in FLE. What they've learned is to look to the state and its agents as the sources of moral authority, and that is the best reason of all to keep adolescent minds out of FLE's reach as much as possible.