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THIS STORY HAS BEEN FORMATTED FOR EASY PRINTING

Keep feds out of sex education By Jeff Jacoby,
4/21/2002 REMEMBER Naomi Wolf? She was the consultant hired by Al Gore's presidential campaign to advise the candidate on everything from his wardrobe to how an "alpha male" should act. Gore went to elaborate lengths to hide Wolf's involvement in his campaign, perhaps because of what The Washington Post called "her many provocative views." Among them: "that the best way to strike a balance between abstinence and sexual intercourse is to teach teenagers `sexual gradualism' or masturbation, mutual masturbation, and oral sex." Gore lost, but Wolf's views prevailed anyway. Or so you might conclude from some of the sex-education curricula being recommended to educators by the federal government. Consider "Be Proud! Be Responsible!" - a sex-ed program endorsed by the Centers for Disease Control. Some excerpts: "Today we will practice using a condom so that you will know how to use them and what they feel like when you are ready.... Using a condom requires getting used to new sensations." Students take turns "putting condoms on their fingers" or a "penis model," and are encouraged to think up ways "to make condom use fun and pleasurable." Such as? "Tease each other manually while putting on the condom." "Think up a sexual fantasy using condoms." "Hide them on your body and ask your partner to find it." Another CDC-favored curriculum includes a section called "Learning about Lubricants." Among the topics covered: why "grape jelly, maple syrup, and honey" make good sexual aides. Sure beats memorizing the capitals of Eastern Europe. Then there is SIECUS, the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States. Its guidelines for "comprehensive sexuality education" - developed with CDC money -

cover instruction not only for teens, but for kids 5 and up. Thus, at the "early elementary" level, ages 5 to 8, the guidelines call for children to learn, among other things, that "rubbing one's own genitals to feel good is called masturbation." At the next level, 9- to 12-year-olds are taught that "many boys and girls begin to masturbate for sexual pleasure during puberty" and that "exploring feelings about sexuality is common." For high school students, the Naomi Wolf - er, SIECUS - guidelines cover "oral, vaginal, or anal intercourse," "sexual fantasies," and the use of "erotic photographs, movies, or literature." They also stress - doubtless for the benefit of students who may be getting a different message at home - that "some people continue to respect their religious teachings and traditions but believe that some views are not personally relevant." You may think sex-education curricula like these are just dandy or you may find them appalling, but one word you wouldn't use in describing them is "abstinence." And yet, says a new report from the Physicians Consortium, an organization of doctors with an interest in public health, such programs are often marketed as "abstinence-based" or "abstinence-plus." It's deceptive labeling: Yes, students may be told in passing that not having sex is the one sure way to prevent pregnancy and sexual diseases, but the overriding emphasis is on "safe sex" and condoms. By contrast, the Physicians Consortium promotes an agenda of abstinence until marriage - the same "abstinence only" message that President Bush has proposed spending \$135 million to promote next year. Among the backers of that approach is Robert Rector of the Heritage Foundation. In a recent survey of the professional literature, Rector concluded that "real abstinence education is essential to reducing out-of-wedlock childbearing, preventing sexually transmitted diseases, and improving emotional and physical well-being among the nation's youth." Though abstinence-until-marriage education is often derided as archaic, Rector found that "abstinence education programs have repeatedly been shown to be effective." In my view, "abstinence-plus" sex education is as flawed as "abstinence-plus" drug education would be. ("Kids, not shooting up is best. But if you are going to do drugs, here's how to keep your needles clean.") Yet I can't help wondering why sex education should be the federal government's concern at all. Americans are sharply divided on this subject. Some want "safe-sex"

curricula complete with condoms and grape jelly, some want a relentless focus on premarital chastity, and some (like me) would rather see the kids go back to memorizing Eastern European capitals. If ever there was an issue *not* suited to a one-size-fits-all policy, surely this is it. The feds ought to steer clear of sex ed altogether and let local school boards decide what local schools should teach. But until that day comes, can we at least agree to stop torturing the word "abstinence?" **Jeff Jacoby's** e-mail address is jacoby@globe.com. This story ran on page E7 of the Boston Globe on 4/21/2002. © Copyright 2002 Globe Newspaper Company.