

Parents wary of graphic sex ed in 5th grade

By Kristan Trugman
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Gregory Stiggers, 8, had a question for his mom.

The third-grader at Riverdale Elementary School in Prince George's County wanted to know what a virgin is — and if it's a dirty word.

"I told him that it is not. I told him what it meant and that it is what I want him to be until marriage," said Linda Stiggers, a PTA president.

But in another two years, Gregory's mother won't be the only one telling him the facts of life: His teachers will, too.

Unless parents say otherwise, 10- and 11-year-olds at schools across the region are routinely being taught about sexual intercourse, fertilization, the workings of male and female genitalia, birth and the stirrings of puberty.

School officials say the material is age appropriate, and all say they send letters home to advise parents once issues of puberty and human sexuality pop up in the curriculum in fifth grade.

But Fairfax County Superintendent Robert Spillane is not so sure the system works as well as the sex-education experts claim.

He has ordered grade school

principals to stop showing boys' sex education videos to fifth-grade girls, and vice versa, until further notice.

Mr. Spillane's "priority message," released Friday, comes after a mom and dad told The Washington Times that their 11-year-old daughter was being taught about male erections and "wet dreams."

Some school systems say they work up to the subject of human sex gradually.

Alexandria curriculum specialist Judy Turner said first-graders are introduced to mammal births and breast feeding, and by third grade teachers tie in similarities like how chickens have eggs to carry their chicks and humans carry babies in their bodies.

The curriculum for kindergarten through fourth grade is virtually uncontested, school officials said.

By the fifth grade, the lessons get more specific. "Kids to Kids: Talking About Puberty" is used by most area jurisdictions for fifth-graders. The videos, one about girls and the other about boys, have youths discussing menstruation, erections, wet dreams and ejaculation.

Generally, school systems in the area all teach the same topics to the same age levels through videos

WHAT ARE YOUR CHILDREN WATCHING?

All local school systems let parents view videos and review the curriculum for their sex-education courses, sending a letter home to notify parents and letting them pull their children out of the course if they want to.

Alexandria: Curriculum material is available for viewing. For review, contact Cindy Johnson at 703/824-6717.

Arlington County: Information on viewing material was unavailable.

District: Curriculum is set on a school-by-school basis. For review of material, contact your child's school.

Fairfax County: Schools schedule a meeting when parents can view the videos. For review at other times, contact Dorothy Higham at 703/846-8654.

Montgomery County: Schools schedule a meeting when parents can view the videos. For review at other times, contact Sandra Days at 301/279-3272.

Prince George's County: Schools schedule a meeting when parents can view the videos. For review at other times, contact Michael Schaffer at 301/853-5684.

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and lessons.

School officials complain that few parents take advantage of the chance to review the sexual education movies used to teach their children the facts of life.

Only 2 percent of Prince George's County parents pull their children out of sex-education classes. The figure is less than 2 percent in Montgomery County and about 3 percent in Fairfax County.

Grace Terzian, 44, is one parent who wishes she had taken the chance to view the sex-ed videos her fifth-grade son saw at Louise Archer Elementary School. The one on girls' development included instructions on how to insert a tampon, and a scene in which a boy talks about buying tampons for his girlfriend, she said.

"After hearing him tell me these things, I could kick myself for not

having seen the films. I wish I had gone and viewed these films," said Mrs. Terzian.

Critics of the video last year opposed the tampon scene, saying it does not depict "a natural modesty" boys that age should have.

Simply previewing the videos is no guarantee that parents won't be surprised by what their children learn.

That's what happened to Larry and Blanca Wiggins, Fairfax County parents who said they were assured their daughter Amanda, 11, would not see a 10-minute, fifth-grade video in which two boys talked about having erections during class.

When Mrs. Wiggins, 43, saw the sex-education videos at Centreville Elementary School's orientation, she said she asked and was told that Amanda would only see a video geared toward girls. But Amanda saw videos about pubescent changes in both girls and boys, which the curriculum calls for.

"They have girls learning about masturbation and boys learning how to use tampons. By the time they get done [with the classes], they have everything so mixed up, it has taken me years to get them straight," said Bunny Galladora, 48, a mother of five children.