

Sex education is still a sensitive topic in Indiana schools

By GRACE SCHNEIDER
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In New Albany-Floyd County schools, sex education begins in the fifth grade, when many girls begin to menstruate.

It's a logical time to introduce topics parents often avoid discussing with their children, said Georgetown Elementary School teacher Nancy Norwood. It's also the start of more explicit instruction that students will receive about sexuality as they advance through junior high school.

New Albany-Floyd is one of several Southern Indiana school districts that offers an established curriculum, woven through health classes, to explain sexual matters, including conception, childbirth and family topics.

But not all Southern Indiana school systems offer sex education, and one development in the past year serves as a reminder that sexual issues remain a sensitive topic.

In June 1994, 60 parents and ministers appeared at a North Harrison school board meeting to oppose a proposed health curriculum that included sex education. They criticized its broadly written guidelines and suggested the policy needed a stronger "abstinence-only" spin.

Nineteen months later, the controversy is muted, but North Harrison has yet to adopt a policy. And it probably won't happen soon, said Superintendent Monty Schneider.

Similar controversies over sex education have flared across Indiana and the nation in recent years, said Julie Slavens, a staff attorney for the Indiana School Board.

Parents have many opinions about what, and how, their children should be taught about sex, Slavens said. And the conservative surge in recent years has led more parents and community groups to question what public schools are teaching.

"Schools are extremely cautious and conservative about any kind of sex ed," observed Terry Smith, West Clark's superintendent.

A survey of local school systems indicates most offer some kind of sex education, as well as the state-mandated teachings on AIDS, hygiene and alcohol and drug abuse.

But not every district offers sex education. At West Clark Community Schools Corp., for example, a school board's decision six years ago not to offer sex education remains in effect.

Discussions about body parts and growth and development are covered in health textbooks. Otherwise, the school system has a small library of instructional videotapes and other materials that teachers use occasionally, said Bob Shireman, the system's assistant in charge of curriculum.

Even in districts where sex education has been a part of the routine for years, teachers and administrators are careful to stick to the books.

At South Harrison, for instance, discussions about growth and development begin in third and sixth grades, but more specific lessons about sexual activity and unwanted pregnancies are saved for seventh- and eighth-graders.

Conception, childbirth and relationships are covered during freshman and sophomore years. "We stick right by the book," said Tom Cullen, a teacher at South Central Junior/Senior High. "If you steer off course, you get into sensitive topics."

Last year, when North Harrison parents questioned the school district's plans, some opponents suggested the district should re-write the curriculum to stress strict abstinence. And they wanted schools to obtain permission in advance from parents

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

Many schools encourage parents to talk with their children and explain their own family values, as youngsters learn about health and sexuality.

Here are some things experts say parents can do to encourage healthy attitudes and behavior:

- ✓ Encourage children to participate in activities that promote positive self concepts, including church and youth-group activities.

- ✓ Discuss your own religious values and beliefs with them.

- ✓ Find time for the whole family to spend together.

- ✓ Encourage children to choose their friends carefully, avoiding peers who are sexually active or who use drugs and alcohol.

- ✓ Teach your child what situations to avoid, including those where they're tempted to experiment with risky behavior.

- ✓ Set limits and help your children understand how to do the same for themselves. Show them it's important to set limits for themselves before placing themselves in emotional situations.

- ✓ Teach them that they should break off relationships with people who do not respect their personal limits.

- ✓ Choose entertainment that promotes family values.

- ✓ Teach young people who have been sexually active that previous actions don't set a lifelong pattern. They can stop anytime and take a new path.

before teaching some material.

Two school districts — New Albany-Floyd and Clarksville — have done just that for years. They notify parents about upcoming classes on sex and ask them to tell the school if they don't want their children to attend the sessions.

Few request that, said Norwood, New Albany-Floyd's health curriculum coordinator. "The biggest majority of the parents are relieved they don't have to talk about it" at home.

Brenda Billner, one of the parents who criticized North Harrison's proposed curriculum last year, said she doesn't favor doing without a curriculum.

"This is something we need to deal with," said Billner, who works as a labor and delivery nurse. "We're having 14- and 15-year-old girls come in and deliver babies."

But she told the North Harrison board last summer that traditional sex education teachings have failed — and the teen pregnancy rate is just one indicator. She urged school officials to consider revamping the policy to include a strong values-based focus.

Many educators, however, defend their curriculum and point out that schools aren't to blame for the teen pregnancy rate or society's moral decline.

At Clarksville Middle School, each lesson includes a strong abstinence theme and always in a "family-life context," principal Tom Rose said.