

NATION

Purpose of sex classes elusive

No clear answers on teaching teens

By Cheryl Wetzstein
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

A Planned Parenthood symposium on sex education last week pointed up the difficulties of deciding what messages should be sent to teens.

By the end of the 90-minute, occasionally combative session at the Capitol, a top Planned Parenthood Federation of America official was defending abstinence-based education, and a leading proponent of abstinence was saying "just say no" programs "don't work either."

Meanwhile, a spokeswoman for the Family Research Council said the group will urge the GOP-led Congress to revisit the funding disparity for federal Title X and Title XX programs.

Title X is a Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) program that provides funding — \$193 million in fiscal 1995 — for family planning and reproductive health. About a third of the people served by Title X programs are teens.

Title XX is an HHS program created to fund abstinence-based sex education demonstration projects. Its funding has steadily dwindled to \$6.8 million a year.

Planned Parenthood's symposium Tuesday, titled "Our Kids Are Hearing a Lot About Sex But What Are They Learning," addressed the plight of American teens who are "bombarded" by sexual messages but given "glorified anatomy" classes to counteract such messages, said federation President Pamela Maraldo.

The solution, Planned Parenthood panelists said, is more comprehensive sexuality education, with uniform lessons about contraception, "diversity," masturbation, fantasy and other "real" human sexual responses.

The solution, countered Patricia Funderburk Ware, director of education at Americans for a Sound AIDS-HIV Policy, is "comprehensive, abstinence-based sexuality education."

Panelists disagreed over the goal of sex education.

"The primary goal . . . is not to prevent pregnancy or sexual disease, although we're certainly concerned about those things," said panelist Pamela Wilson, an author and sex educator.

"The primary goal," she said, "is to facilitate adult sexual health, to help young people . . . enter adulthood capable of being a loving, caring, responsible and responsive partner to someone in a relationship that fits in their value system, whether that be marriage or a lifelong commitment, whatever that is."

American youths need to be taught "how to incorporate sex education into an overall positive approach to living," but in a way that is consistent with other messages society sends teens, Mrs. Ware said.

"We can't tell them not to use drugs, not to get involved in violence, but say, 'Well, honey, we know you can't contain this emotional desire to have sex,'" said Mrs. Ware, former director of the Title XX program.

She said her vision of sexuality education promotes abstinence in a real-world context by stressing that:

- The best way to avoid being one of the 2.5 million teens who get sexually transmitted diseases is to have the fewest possible partners.
- If sex is delayed at least to age 19, you are likely to have fewer sex partners and make better choices.
- The most pleasurable sex is enjoyed by married people.

"I'm not talking about abstinence-only programs, where they just point a finger and say, 'Just say no.' They don't work either," Mrs. Ware said. "We're talking about a comprehensive approach."

Trish Moylan Torruella, Planned Parenthood's vice president for education, replied: "When I talk about comprehensive sexuality education, I am talking about abstinence-based programs.

"I can assure you Planned Parenthood is not advocating a free-for-all. We are very much advocating postponing sexual involvement until a young person is ready, [although] 'ready' doesn't necessarily mean marriage."