

'Abstinence-only only gets worse'

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On January 26, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) announced that it would continue to fund Community-Based Abstinence Education programs, further restricting the sexuality education of America's young people.

Like past years' decisions to continue funding for abstinence-only education, this recent announcement, which introduces a new set of guidelines, emerges not from logic or evidence, but from extreme right-wing ideology.

A History of Big Money and Bad Policy

One billion federal tax dollars have gone into abstinence-only programs since 1996, and \$115 million dollars will be allocated to Community-Based Abstinence Education programs in the 2006 fiscal year. These programs stress abstinence as the only way to prevent unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and do not provide information about birth control methods, except to stress their failure rates.

Abstinence-only education has spilled into international funding, as well. The President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, which grants funding to 15 countries that have been affected by HIV/AIDS, requires grantees to allocate at least 33 percent of their prevention spending to abstinence-only-until-marriage programs.

What's New?

The new ACF guidelines require programs receiving funds to teach that abstinence before marriage guarantees a happier life, complete with greater wealth, healthy children, longevity, freedom from psychological problems, and better educational opportunities. The guidelines fail to provide evidence to support this guarantee.

The ACF also now requires that programs receiving funds define

abstinence in the strictest terms: "voluntarily choosing not to engage in sexual activity until marriage." Sexual activity is defined as "any type of genital contact or sexual stimulation between two persons including, but not limited to, sexual intercourse." Suggestions for staying abstinent include avoiding television and not staying out late.

Marriage is defined as "a legal union between one man and one woman as a husband and wife." This implies that gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) teens have no choice but to embrace a lifetime of abstinence. Sexually active teens are also marginalized, as the ACF associates depression and suicide with premarital sex — again providing no evidence to back up its claim.

Instead of funding effective, medically accurate sex education programs, which address both abstinence and birth control, the ACF has continued to fund programs that forbid discussion of safer sex and contraception. And with these new guidelines, programs that receive funding must now sign a statement promising not to provide information about contraception, even if they want to do so with non-government funds. (Signing this statement used to be voluntary.)

The Facts About Abstinence-Only Programs

From its inception, the abstinence-only education initiative has promoted a biased moralistic agenda instead of a public health agenda, withholding vital information and promoting misinformation. Abstinence-only programs prohibit information on contraception services, sexual identity, and human sexuality — leading to censorship within the public school system.

Abstinence-only funding has also often crossed the constitutional line separating church and state. Many abstinence-only federal grants have gone to religious organizations, with instructions that they are not to spend any of the money for religious purposes. But making sure these instructions are followed is difficult, if not impossible.

Silver Ring Thing — an abstinence-only education group that has received more than \$1 million from HHS since 2003 — advocates in its mission statement "offering a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as the best way to a sexually pure life." Only after the American

Civil Liberties Union filed a lawsuit against HHS was federal funding of Silver Ring Thing suspended.

In December 2004, Rep. Henry Waxman (D-CA) released a report that exposed many of the factual inaccuracies presented in abstinence-only curricula, such as the erroneous claims that condoms don't work 30 percent of the time and that HIV could be transmitted through tears and sweat.

The new guidelines attempt to address these inaccuracies by requiring references for all contraceptive efficacy and STI data from ACF grantees. But there are no standards in place to ensure that these references are legitimate, or that the information presented is medically accurate, making the new requirement useless.

Reality Check

No research has proven that abstinence-only programs actually work. What the research does show is that Americans, by and large, are not abstinent people. More than 60 percent of high school seniors are sexually active. The median age at first intercourse for women is 17.4 years, whereas the median age at first marriage is 25.3 years. For men, the median age at first intercourse is 17.7 years, and the median age of first marriage is 27.1 years.

And while virginity pledgers may be more likely to delay sex (on average they have sex a year and a half later than non-pledgers), they're less likely to use contraception when they do have sex, exposing themselves to an increased risk of unintended pregnancy and STIs, including HIV.

Sexually active teens have the highest rates for many STIs and the highest unintended pregnancy rates, and are estimated to account for nearly half of new HIV infections. The numbers are troubling, but abstinence alone has not been proven to be an effective tool to combat these statistics. And contrary to what abstinence-only programs suggest, no scientific data has shown that consensual sex between teenagers is psychologically harmful.

What's Next?

The new guidelines have increased federal grant periods from one or three years to five years, ensuring these programs are funded through fiscal year 2010. Hundreds of millions of federal tax dollars will support these programs even after President Bush leaves office.

Abstinence is certainly an important aspect of any sex education curriculum. But to limit discussion of pregnancy and STI prevention to abstinence alone, omitting any information about contraception, not only flies in the face of what the scientific community supports — it also threatens the health and safety of young people.

Teenagers need comprehensive sexuality education to make reasoned decisions about their sexual health and to become sexually healthy adults. By mandating a biased attitude toward sex and withholding crucial knowledge, the federal government is putting the lives, health, and emotional well being of young people at risk.

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<http://www.plannedparenthood.org/pp2/portal/files/portal/webzine/newspoliticsactivism/fean-060413-abstinence.xml>