Cutting Class

Whatever happened to AIDS ed in schools? Don't tune in to Campaign 2000 for the answer. Doug Irelands flunks America—and its politicians—for their low HIV GPA.

October 1, 2000 By Doug Ireland

If there's one critical AIDS issues our timorous politicians won't be campaigning about this election year, it's the crisis of safe-sex education in American's middle and high schools. Although the CDC says that more than half of new infections occur in the under 25-age group, only slightly more than two-thirds of the 15, 000 or so U.S. school districts have sex-ed policies, according to a 1999 Alan Guttmacher Institute study. Of districts that do, a mere 14% have policies that discuss condom use. What's worse, of districts that have changed their policies, those with comprehensive sex-ed (all aspects of sexuality, including pregnancy, contraception, HIV, and STDs, and abstinence, dropped by 37 percent).

The problem is a political backlash against safe-sex ed—driven by ultraconservatives and the Christian right who, since the early '90s, have stepped up their campaign. Although a 1992 Gallup poll showed that 68 percent of adults (and 81 percent of high school seniors) believed that condoms should be available at schools, Congress didn't: The welfare "deform" legislation of 1996 included $250 million in funding through 2002 for abstinence-only teaching methods to prevent HIV, STD's and teen pregnancy. (Congress has appropriated no direct federal funding for any other form of sex-ed: "A mutual faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity" Although many members of the governing class can't meet such a Victorian requirement, state matching funds boosted the amount spent on this ostrch0like primitivism to more than $500 million.

As Brian Wilcox of the Center on Children, Families, and the Law at the University of Nebraska puts it: "Abstinence-only funding has dramatically skewed, leading to a letdown of the commitment to HIV education. In many places, the subject has been pulled from the curriculum." Take Ohio, where in March the GOP-controlled legislature—spurred by the far right groups such American Family Association—rejected a $1 million CDC grant because it included $90,000 for STD prevention. Even in reputedly liberal New York City, which mandate every ninth through 12th grader receive six AIDS lesson a year, condom demos have been banned. A study by ACT UP's youth Education Life Line found, in fact, that only 10% of city schools are in compliance with the board of education's mandate to provide AIDS instruction. During his first town meeting in June, new schools head Harold Levy asked about AIDS ed and condom availability. His answer: a cynical laugh and peremptory "Nest question!"

Meanwhile, in Massachusetts, home to the best programs to protect gay kids form violence, pressure from the right wing caused the department of ed to fire two educators—a third reigned—for ‘too explicit” answers to students’ questions about sex at a Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) conference.

This obsession with abstinence has little scientific basis. The American Medical Association last December found that abstinence-only programs are of limited value and called for comprehensive sex ed. Yet the Guttmacher survey found that 86 percent of schools with sex-ed policies require teaching abstinence as the preferred or only option. And pressure from Neanderthal pols like Rep. Tom Coburn (R-OK) helps ensure that programs the CC recommends to states are often diluted to near impotence.

Who’s battling the sex-ed backlash? Not teachers unions—the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers say they’re too busy defending public schools against voucher proposals. Not may gay groups—they’re too fearful of the old-gays-are-pedophiles canard (GLSEN), for example, failed to vigorously defend the fired Massachusetts educators, and its rep says sex ed is “not in its mission statement.” Not local ASOs, either—they’re too worried their funding will be further cut by right-leaning legislatures. But until AIDS activists begin building sex-ed coalition with medical, parents, teacher, and student groups—district by district—to insist on comprehensive sex ed, the number of teens with HIV will only grow. Now, do your homework: Contact Advocates for Youth at *www.advocatesforyouth.org*

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