School Ties

Principal needs nod from parents

May 1, 1999

Less than nine months after Max Friedman, 47, took the helm of Moorpark High School in Ventura County, California, a 30-strong parent group put the principal in the hot seat for hosting an educational assembly on AIDS without their permission. Friedman told the board of ed that he accepted responsibility for violating the school's guidelines of informing parents about presentations on sexuality, and promised to keep such discussions board-of-ed certified from now on—meaning no straight talk about condoms. But, he told POZ*, with half of all new HIV infections occurring in 15-to-24-year-olds, that doesn't mean he is pleased with the linguistic lockdown.*

Was the assembly successful?

I tell you, I looked around the room and every kid was paying attention. I've never seen that kind of attention before. I had several good conversations with students who said they got a lot out of it. But obviously those who weren't so happy went home and told Mom and Dad.

One student said it was "somewhat graphic."

Please. It wasn't graphic. We took out the put-a-condom-on-a-banana scene, if that gives you any idea.

So why the brouhaha?

The issue wasn't so much the content as the parents' right to decide whether their kids should attend. Unfortunately we probably won't be allowed to do any more AIDS assemblies. We'll do other things as part of health ed, but AIDS is a very emotional topic and this is a very conservative district. Everything's based on middle-of-the- road values. According to our district's philosophy, controversial issues are better addressed in smaller group settings.

Did any good come of it all?

One parent actually thanked me. "I have a very open relationship with my kids about sex," she said, "but I appreciate you bringing in the experts to tell them the real story about HIV."

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