Sex Ed’s Rubber Rubout

Abstinence-pushing federal funds are stretching thin proven HIV and pregnancy prevention in schools. How long before sensible parents and truth-seeking students snap?

July 1, 2003 By Stacie Stukin

Renee Walker, of Mount Diablo, California, was eating out with her 12 year old when he noted that his soggy straw wrapper reminded him of the seaweed put in a woman’s vagina before an abortion. Where had he learned *that*? she asked, agog. In sex ed at Pine Hollow Middle School, he said—the very class Walker had permitted him to take because it promised information on preventing HIV, other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and pregnancy.

Walker soon learned the class was taught by First Resort, a local anti-abortion group. That pissed her off. Not only were graphic details about rare abortion procedures biased and inappropriate for kids her son’s age, she complained to school officials, but “I realized my son got no information about what to do if he wasn’t able to remain abstinent.”

By that, Walker means “comprehensive” sex ed (comp ed), which embraces abstinence as well as information on condoms and contraception for the 6.5 out of 10 teens who, says the nonprofit Alan Guttmacher Institute, go “all the way” before age 18. Her story is the kind that comp-ed advocates cite when they say that schools have been hijacked by DC-funded virtuecrats. “I’m afraid we’re raising a whole generation of kids who are learning that condoms don’t work,” says Adrienne Verelli of the nonprofit Sexuality Information and Education Council of the U.S. (SEICUS), which provides sex-ed guidelines to states and school districts.

Increasingly, that fear is well founded. Although 38 states require that schools teach some kind of AIDS education, what’s actually taught has long been left up to individual schools. But in 1998, the feds started offering states a cut of $50 million dollars for sex ed—as long as it doesn’t contradict such points as “sexual activity outside of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical side effects” and keeps talk of condoms and abortion to their failings. Now every state takes the money except California, which has a law limiting sex ed to “scientifically proven” curricula. (There is virtually no scientific evidence that abstinence education prevents pregnancy and STDs.)

From there, the picture gets more complicated. Some states run with both money and mandate, like Louisiana, whose Governor’s Program on Abstinence organized a chastity pledge of 700 high-schoolers on the state capitol steps in March. But most states give towns the choice of applying for

the money, which has created often hard-to-track curricular patchworks. And Massachusetts and New Jersey keep the money out of schools entirely by putting it into media campaigns aimed at 10 to 12 year olds.

That's why comp ed still prevails in many communities. In Westfield, New Jersey, high school students role-play unplanned pregnancies and visit websites like Planned Parenthood's www.teenwire.com. Most of all, says teacher Jill Katarski, "I help the kids look at the values they're aught at home, at their religious and their cultural beliefs, and help them include all those things when they make decisions about sex." In California, Susan Ackerman of LA's Palisades High says that her district requires comp ed—so she breaks the ice by starting classes with "Mr. P," a dildo in Ken-doll clothes.

But elsewhere, comp ed is losing ground. "States are so strapped that they'll take any money they get, so kids are getting more information about abstinence and less [of what] they need to make good, safe decisions," says Susan Wilson of Rutgers University's Network for Family Life Education. Plus, an additional $55 million (which President Bush proposes raising to $73 million) now goes directly to some 700 abstinence groups, which then court school districts—exactly how First Resort got into Pine Hollow Middle School. As early as 1999, 23 percent of schools told the Guttmacher Institute they were teaching abstinence-only, compared to 2 percent in 1988.

There is resistance. Students have fought back for comp ed in Texas and Washington state, where they've lobbied for a law like California's. Says SEICUS' Verelli: "We've gotten a lot more calls from parents [who, like Walker, were shocked to discover what their kids were learning]. Sensible people can't imagine this would be taught to their young children. There's a chilling effect for teachers—they're scared to answer kids' questions about contraception."

Walker's not. Shortly after becoming a reluctant activist for the protection of kids who don't put off sex until marriage, she showed her son a condom and explained how to use it herself.

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