

Comprehensive Sex Education & The Obama 2010 Budget

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The 2010 budget unveiled last week proposes exactly what candidate Obama promised when it comes to abstinence education. Funds for abstinence-only programs were cut, while more money is dedicated for family planning groups, and for comprehensive sex education in public schools. Such redistribution signals the coming of the end of the golden age of abstinence-only education.

President Obama plans to cut total funding for abstinence-only education in 2010 by \$14.2 million, a thirteen percent reduction compared with the previous year. These cuts are likely the first in a series of steps to eventually zero out all federal funding for abstinence-only education.

More than \$1 billion in taxpayer money was spent during the last administration on abstinence-only education. And yet compared with teens in almost every other developed country, American teens still have more partners, shorter relationships, less contraceptive use, more infections, more abortions, and more babies. Clearly, “Just Say No” is not working.

Not one well-designed scientific study exists suggesting that abstinence-only training has any meaningful impact. In fact, any upside of modest delays in the sexual debut of teens subjected to abstinence-only education, or compelled to pledge virginity until marriage, have proven more than offset by the downsides of higher rates of pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease when eventually teens do engage in premarital and unprotected-out-of-ignorance sexual intercourse.

On the other hand, multitudes of studies have shown the effectiveness of science-based, age-appropriate comprehensive sex education on reducing early sexual experimentation, teen pregnancy by as much as half, and transmission of sexual infections – all without a concomitant increase in rates of sexual intercourse.

Clearly, if we're to spend hundreds of millions of dollars on teaching and protecting kids, we ought to spend it in the most comprehensive manner possible, and not on programs that offer students incomplete, religiously-biased information that focuses on abstinence and provides no information on safer sex.

We ought also to spend it in the most medically accurate manner possible. According to a GAO study ordered by Congress, and released in October 2007, not only were students who took part in sexual abstinence programs just as likely to have sex as those who did not, many such programs were called out for teaching kids medically inaccurate information about condoms and HIV.

Not surprising, then, that the new spending bill requires any competitive grants awarded to abstinence-only education programs to not just “be scientifically accurate”, but that “none of the funds made available in this Act may be used to disseminate scientific information that is false or misleading.”

No one is suggesting the abstinence education for all teens should end. Rather, adolescent health experts, educators, and family planning advocates have long argued only for that federal funding for abstinence-only-until-marriage programs should end.

Because most young people have sex for the first time in adolescence, but do not marry until their twenties, young adults are likely to be sexually active before marrying for an average of a decade. This means they need protection from unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. Some may never marry; some are not legally able.

Some may choose to be abstinent until marriage. That is their right and their prerogative. But the fact remains that no matter what we preach and teach most young people will choose to engage in premarital sexual activity. Are we to throw them all under the bus?

Or do we equip them early on with good negotiating skills, medically accurate information, and access to birth control – including condoms – that can prevent either one or both of unintended pregnancy and

infection? Overwhelming numbers of Americans polled have answered that, yes, sex education curricula should include discussion of both abstinence and contraception.

We must make certain as a nation that young people get the medically accurate information they need to make responsible life decisions. Years of study and experience have proven that fear tactics don't work; abstinence-only exhortations don't work; chastity pledges don't work; and sanitized "birds and bees" information does not work.

Abstinence plus safer sex programs offer the best preventive options we currently have, providing skills training for adolescents to handle a variety of situations, and support for those who plan to be abstinent until marriage, those who are unsure, and those who anticipate having intercourse early.

President Obama, in his first budget, is to be applauded for charting a new course toward comprehensive sex education, and away from wasteful spending on abstinence-only programs that actually increase unintended pregnancies and infections, and result in billions of dollars of future healthcare and related economic costs to the nation.

After all, who isn't for cutting government programs that don't work and increasing funding for those that do; for saving money now, and saving money later?