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Abstinence-only classes in local schools forfeit sex education to religious sermon

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I will be bold and proclaim that seventh-graders should abstain from sex. This being my firm belief, I was not terribly concerned when my seventh-grade son came home from Hinson Middle School commenting that a speaker had told him and his classmates that they shouldn't have sex. That sounded like solid advice, assumedly as part of a larger curriculum of health education.

Then, my son joked about the speaker urging that everyone abstain from sex until marriage, because sex outside of marriage can cause serious physical and psychological problems. This jarred me out of my late afternoon haze. At the least, it insults the many single parents, who like sex and arise from it unscathed, that the public school teaches their children that they are engaging in illicit acts of danger. At any rate, it's unclear how marriage, per se, protects against the effects of sex.

The message blatantly discriminates against those who fall somewhere outside of heterosexual on the vast spectrum of human sexuality, who do not desire marriage, or are prevented by law from marrying in Florida. The message stigmatizes children and parents who live in a nontraditional household by characterizing heterosexual marriage as the only healthy adult relationship. Apparently, gays, lesbians and others not married should remain celibate until death.

The students also heard that while some people use condoms to prevent sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy, the condoms often fail, leaving teenage bodies wracked with incurable sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies. In fact, actual research shows that latex condoms are highly effective when used properly and are largely responsible for the decrease in the epidemic spread of HIV/AIDS. It's unethical that a program interested in public health would disparage contraceptive use. The student workbook, which I subsequently obtained, does accurately state, "No matter how strong a condom is, it won't protect you from a broken heart." On this point, the workbook is correct: Condoms have not been proven to protect against cardiovascular disease.

William Poniatowski, program specialist in physical education, health, driver traffic safety and athletics for Volusia County, pointed out that this abstinence-only education program, according to federal guidelines, cannot teach about condoms. I questioned, then, how they were able to teach that condoms were ineffective. If they can teach that condoms are ineffective, then they must certainly be allowed to teach that condoms are effective most of the time when used properly. But the problem wasn't only the message, it was also the messenger.

I've never been fond of fear-based teaching, but I am less fond of unqualified speakers teaching public school students about sex using a potent combination of fear, self-righteousness and intolerance for others, along with an unspoken ideological agenda and unsubstantiated, erroneous information, which is the formula for the Title V, federally funded, Pure Energy Abstinence Education Program in place at Hinson and other Volusia County middle- and high-schools, though I'm sure they mean well. It's not teaching; it's preaching.

Coincidentally or not, Pure Energy is funded by a grant written through Deltona-based Resources for Women, located at the same physical address and Web site as the Central Florida Pregnancy Center, Inc., a "pro-life" establishment, which, according to its site, offers "ministry to the hearts of women," with the latter being the registrant organization for the Pure Energy Web site. Both of these organizations are closely associated with Cornerstone Broadcasting Corp., an evangelical ministry. A July 2006 report by Sen. Henry Waxman, D-Calif., reports that pregnancy resource centers have received more than \$30 million in federal funding since 2001, and most of this money has been funneled through federal programs for abstinence-only education.

I spoke with Bonnie Thurman, director of the Pure Energy program. She confirmed that "coaches" or trainers who teach the children have no credentials in health, education or any related area, but they do receive training as part of the program. She describes it is a "character based" program; students are not taught anatomy or the mechanics of sex, but only that they should not have sex until they are married. She reiterated the program's mantra, found in the Game Plan workbook for students: "Abstinence is the only 100 percent effective protection from the possible physical, emotional, mental and social consequences of sex before marriage. Abstinence is the safest and healthiest lifestyle." The statement exemplifies the vacuous nature of the curriculum, which is A.C. Green's Game Plan, published by Glenview, Ill.-based Project Reality.

I asked around, thinking that I cannot be the only parent troubled that this program spreads its propaganda in Volusia County public schools. When I mentioned Pure Energy to other parents, they smirked and nodded knowingly that it offered no value to the students. However, many parents seem to feel that it's a no-harm, no-foul effect. The program offers children nothing, but it does no harm, as their own children are receiving proper information from home to compensate. Also, program proponents maintain that students are allowed to opt out of the training.

These arguments are seriously flawed. While students may receive sufficient sex education at home, as a community we cannot tolerate intolerance toward others promoted in our public schools and cannot dismiss the effect on our community. We cannot allow unqualified "coaches" to teach students that condoms are ineffective barriers against pregnancy and disease. We cannot allow our public schools to be soapboxes for evangelists. While students are allowed to opt out of the program (instead of opting in, which would be only slightly less egregious), it's unfair to create a scenario where those who are most likely to be stigmatized by the program are further stigmatized by sitting outside their classrooms, twiddling their thumbs in another room.

Abstinence-only programs don't work, in spite of our government investing more than \$1 billion in them over the past decade. Major studies have repeatedly demonstrated that these programs are unsuccessful in reducing teenage sex, STDs or unplanned pregnancy. The April 2007 study commissioned by Congress found that the programs have essentially no effect. The programs are not supported by any major health or medical organization, including American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Medical Association or the National Institutes of Health, to name only a few. While President Bush blesses these programs with \$50 million per year, school budgets are being slashed and long-serving teachers are being fired because of budget cuts.

We have the right in Volusia County to abstain from programs without merit, and we should protect our children from programs such as Pure Energy Abstinence Education Program, which is no education program at all. For the sake of our community, we should insist that the public schools implement comprehensive sex education programs that teach curriculums based on scientifically verifiable data rather than religiously based sanctimonious rhetoric of less-than-Intelligent Design.

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