

School abstinence-only program does not protect children

By Lynn Koller

The Friday night event at the Unitarian Universalist Society in Ormond Beach promised free cookies, along with a panel discussion focused on the topic of reforming the abstinence-only sex education in Volusia County public schools to a scientifically-valid program that teaches students about human sexuality based on facts rather than didactic quasi-religious rhetoric. The panel consisted of Kevin Aplin, vice president of Florida's Brevard chapter of the ACLU; Jenna Cawley, director of education and advocacy at Planned Parenthood of Greater Orlando; and myself.

Despite the setting and the panel, the issues at-large would have appealed to the most politically-conservative attendees. Note: Agreeing with the ACLU and Planned Parenthood on the issue of sex education reform in Volusia County does not, under any circumstances, make you a de facto member of these organizations. Instead, you could consider yourself aligned with the American Medical Association, American Academy of Pediatrics, American Psychological Association and every other major health organization.

Aplin described the grassroots effort last year in Brevard County to eliminate its abstinence-only program in favor of comprehensive sex education. Cawley explained the difference between these two types of curriculums. Abstinence-only programs are typically run by religious organizations, exclude or alienate those who aren't heterosexual, and offer students no information on contraceptives other than to point out their deficiencies. Comprehensive sex education programs offer students fact-based information on sex, relationships, and contraception, while still promoting abstinence as the healthiest choice for middle and high school students.

I spoke about the organization that has provided sex education to Volusia County students through the most recent school year, Pure Energy, run by the Central Florida Pregnancy Center Inc./Resources for Women located in Deltona. This is a religious group that receives tax money for sending its untrained representatives into Volusia schools spouting ideological platitudes about sex and marriage. Large studies, like the April 2007 study commissioned by the U.S. Congress, have repeatedly proven abstinence-only programs ineffective in reducing teenage sexual activity, pregnancy, or sexually transmitted disease rates.

Virginity-until-marriage vows are an inherent component of most abstinence-only programs, including Pure Energy's. These vows are almost always broken and are an insult to those gay and lesbian students - and their families and the community-at-large - who are legally prohibited from marrying, as well as anyone who chooses not to marry. We are under no obligation in Volusia County to teach students this kind of narrow-mindedness and intolerance, particularly from programs totally ineffective in doing anything but devaluing a large segment of the unmarried population, undermining individual parent's beliefs about sex and marriage, and insulting our children's intelligence, all while it squanders our taxpayer dollars.

Opponents of abstinence-only programs clearly don't advocate casual sex with multiple partners - or that teenagers have sex at all. Instead, they oppose that students receive harmful propaganda from a church-based organization that uses its abstinence-only federal funding to subsidize its ministry and "pro-life" pregnancy center that surreptitiously receives much of its federal funds.

Florida Statute 1003.46(2)(a) states that public schools must: "Teach abstinence from sexual activity outside of marriage as the expected standard for all school-age students while teaching the benefits of monogamous heterosexual marriage." While the wording of this statute is problematic in both logic and intent, it doesn't preclude teaching about the larger spectrum of human sexuality. And, fortunately, Florida Statute 1003.46(1) allows districts to "provide instruction in acquired immune deficiency syndrome education" and how to control the spread of HIV, which is essentially impossible to do without discussing contraception and sexuality.

The citizens of Volusia County have the right to decide that they would prefer the school district provide their children with a fact-based curriculum of sex education, as other Florida counties have done, and as we do in other academic subjects, such as American history as a mildly ironic example.

Florida Statute 1003.42(2)(f) demands that we teach American history "as factual, not as constructed" and that it "shall be viewed as knowable, teachable, and testable." Not only that, but the history of the Holocaust is "to be taught in a manner that leads to an investigation of human behavior, an understanding of the ramifications of prejudice, racism, and stereotyping, and an examination of what it means to be a responsible and respectful person, for the purposes of encouraging tolerance of diversity in a pluralistic society and for nurturing and protecting democratic values and institutions."

Imagine this: Volusia County adopts a sex education program that is factual not constructed, is knowable, teachable, and testable, leads to an understanding of human behavior and the ramifications of prejudice, and encourages tolerance of diversity in a pluralistic society ...

It could happen. As the Volusia County School District evaluates its sex education curriculum options this year, please support the adoption of a comprehensive curriculum that demonstrates these qualities, as well as effectiveness in reducing teenage sexual activity, pregnancy, and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases.

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