

Minority Report

To: Margaret Smith, Superintendent of Schools

From: Lynn Koller

cc: SHAC members; School Board Members; Chris Colwell, Deputy Superintendent

Date: November 21, 2008

Re: Sex Education in Volusia County Public Schools

The recommendations of the School Health Advisory Committee, subcommittee on the human sexuality curriculum, to reinstate an abstinence-only sex education curriculum in the middle schools should not be adopted. Research shows that sex education is most effective in preventing pregnancy and STDS before the onset of sexual activity – earlier than high school where half of the students are already having sex. Abstinence-only programs do not provide sex education and are ineffective and—given the obligations the system has to students and the public—unethical in the public school system.

SHAC’s recommendation to implement an abstinence-plus program in high school leaves unclear the specifications of that program. While abstinence-only programs have strict federal and state guidelines (e.g., mandates teaching about contraception only in terms of failure rates), abstinence-plus and comprehensive sex curricula are wide-ranging and open to interpretation. Whatever program Volusia County schools implement should be consistent in content and message across the grades, provide age-appropriate information, be implemented with fidelity, and be fact-based. Anything else is likely to prove confusing to students since what appeared to be right at one level must be rescinded before being re-taught differently at the next level.

The SHAC subcommittee met three times before voting with too limited a discussion of the issues and without addressing actual research and reliable data about the effectiveness of the various types of sex education programs. The committee also never addressed what the purpose of a sex-education program should be. I had suggested in my report to the subcommittee dated September 17, 2008, that we consider the goals outlined in *Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education, 3rd edition*, published by SEICUS (p. 19-21). See <http://www.siecus.org/data/global/images/guidelines.pdf>. Broadly, the guidelines state:

The primary goal of sexuality education is to promote adult sexual health. It should assist young people in developing a positive view of sexuality, provide them with information they need to take care of their sexual health, and help them acquire skills to make decisions now and in the future.

I suggested that the primary goal should be to promote “sexual health” as opposed to “adult sexual health,” understanding that one doesn’t need to be sexually active to be sexually healthy and informed. The SIECUS guidelines place the goals into four educational areas: information; attitudes, values, and insights; relationships and interpersonal skills; and responsibility. It’s imperative that we outline our

goals so that we can select an appropriate program and, just as importantly, assess that program for effectiveness - something that has not been done for the past eight years.

Paradoxical to the voting results, the committee members commented with sadness on seeing pregnant middle school girls walking the halls of Volusia County schools and the climate of general moral decrepitness enveloping our society. Previously, I was asked to stop emailing the committee members with research and comments because my fact-based comments were generally offensive and personal —though it remains unclear what specific comments were offensive and personal—thus curtailing the only substantial documented research provided to this committee. Some of that material is restated in this report.

In general, proponents of abstinence-only education seem strangely unaffected by the weight of evidence proving the ineffectiveness of that type of program. Research and facts seem to have little influence over this issue. I am hopeful that such will not be the case with the actual sex education model and curriculum that you propose for Volusia County. Since the Committee is only advisory, I would hope that you will not see its findings as binding.

Volusia County should adopt an evidence-based comprehensive sex education program that is incorporated into an age-specific health or science curriculum from elementary school through high school. It would be useful to articulate our goals for the sex education program in Volusia County.

The Central Florida Pregnancy Center (CFPC) was running an abstinence-only-until-marriage program called Pure Energy in Volusia County since 2000 until you suspended the program earlier this year. With Pure Energy, unqualified “coaches” – often young people whose only subject-matter qualification is an unplanned pregnancy or apparent sexual regret – teach our middle and high school students about human sexuality using the just-say-no-until-you’re-married approach. While the program administrators promote the youth-teaching-youth approach as a way of reaching the students, the program has no credibility whatsoever based on scientifically-based research. Pure Energy is, essentially, a bridge to nowhere.

We have had a Pure Energy in place in Volusia for eight years, with no assessment or evidence to validate the effectiveness of that program that affects thousands of children and has cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. There is no evidence to demonstrate that Pure Energy has helped anyone but the “pro-life” pregnancy center that receives much of its federal funds. Jessica Errico, the founder of Pure Energy, confirms that the program teaches marriage (and, thus, consensual adult sex) as a benefit that only heterosexuals can enjoy. Pure Energy provides a reductive view of human sexuality and one that promotes discrimination and stigmatizes those students, parents, and community members who do not fall strictly into the heterosexual model and those who do not wish to marry.

An article in the *Deland-Deltona Beacon* dated August 13 (<http://www.beacononlinenews.com/news/daily/1044>), states that Ms. Errico “hopes to revitalize another aspect of the center's ministry, the Pure Energy abstinence program.” The doctrine of separation of church and state, as well as common sense, would seem to indicate that a Christian ministry is inappropriate for the public schools. It is particularly ineffective as a sex education provider. I objected to Ms. Errico’s role on this committee as a result of her organization’s financial interest in the outcome. I asked that if she remained on SHAC, that her organization, Pure Energy, be excluded from consideration as a sex education provider in Volusia County due to her influence over the process

compared with competing organizations, and her publicized acknowledgement that she is seeking sources of funding for the CFPC. My objection was rejected.

The April 2007 study commissioned by Congress proved that abstinence-only programs do not work. You can find the full text of that document at <http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/publications/pdfs/impactabstinence.pdf>. In the study, four abstinence-only programs out of 700+ were selected specifically because they appeared to provide promising results in terms of reducing teenage sexual activity, pregnancy, and STD transmission. However, even these cherry-picked programs failed to provide any evidence of success. No major study has provided any evidence that abstinence-only programs do more than siphon money to church-based pregnancy centers established for the purpose of opposing women's reproductive rights. See Senator Henry Waxman's July 2006 report, *False and Misleading Health Information Provided by Federally Funded Pregnancy Resource Centers*, for specific dollar figures (p. i, 3) at <http://oversight.house.gov/documents/20060717101140-30092.pdf>.

Senator Waxman's December 2004 report, *The Content of Federally-Funded Abstinence-Only Education Programs*, specifically cites the curriculum used by Pure Energy in Volusia County middle schools - basketball player A.C. Green's *Game Plan* - as providing false and misleading information about the use of contraceptives (p. 9, 11). See the report at <http://oversight.house.gov/documents/20041201102153-50247.pdf>. The workbook, which I have, certainly offers an inane curriculum that provides misleading and false information about contraceptives. For example, it states that 20% of female oral contraceptive users between ages 12-18 became pregnant over "a mere six months" and condoms failed 18.4% of the time for teens under 18 after one year of use (p. 27).

Game Plan also perpetuates gender stereotypes and is centered on specific religious beliefs, all while totally rejecting gay and lesbian students and community members. Gay and lesbian students are often kids least able to seek information from their family, friends, and churches, and are in the most need of accurate information and resources. There are estimates that four times as many gay and lesbian teens commit suicide compared with heterosexual teenagers. Gay and lesbian students are entitled to an education that does not exclude or alienate them. Further, the need to understand the spectrum of sexuality and diversity is far from exclusive to these teens. Nothing in the Florida Statutes precludes that we educate our students about a diverse range of family relationships, gender, and sexuality.

I suggest that we focus on comprehensive sexual education programs that provide scientifically-based information for Volusia County students.

I encourage you to review a report from the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, a non-ideological group focused on decreasing teen pregnancy in the US. Its November 2007 report, *Emerging Answers: Research Findings on Programs to Reduce Teen Pregnancy and Sexually Transmitted Diseases* (see http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/pdf/pubs/EA2007_FINAL.pdf), demonstrating that no independent evaluation has found that abstinence programs significantly impact teen sexual behavior while comprehensive programs have been found to both delay teen sexual initiation, increase use of condoms, and decrease the overall number of sexual partners (p. 15).

You can find an outline of a comprehensive health education program implemented in Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland as an example that we might use for Volusia County at <http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/policy/pdf/igpra.pdf>. I am not suggesting that we adopt this program verbatim, but only that it is a good model.

It is probably absurd to expect a sex education program of any kind to significantly curtail teen sexual activity in high school at any time in the foreseeable future. It's estimated that about half of all teens in high school have had sexual intercourse (in 2007, 46% of all girls and 50% of all boys), not including those who have had oral and/or anal sex. See the report "Teen Sexual Behavior and Contraceptive Use: Data From the Youth Risk Behavioral Survey, 2007" based on CDC data at <http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/pdf/fast-facts-yrbs-2007.pdf>. Comprehensive sex education can make inroads, particularly when students are educated about sexuality *before* the onset of sexual activity. And, more importantly, a comprehensive program can make a significant difference in teen pregnancy and STD rates by providing students with accurate information about condoms and birth control. I am suggesting that we adopt a program that addresses students' needs from elementary through high school. In addition to influencing behaviors, we shouldn't forget that a sex education is also valuable for the sake of education itself. Those students who decide to remain celibate until marriage still benefit from an understanding of human sexuality and how it is a driving force of human behavior.

Clearly, it is the responsibility of Volusia County to offer a comprehensive health education to students that includes instruction on family life, issues of sexuality, and HIV prevention. We are also mandated not to discriminate against students based on sexual orientation. All reputable comprehensive sex education programs teach that abstinence from sex is the most effective form of birth control and STD prevention; no reputable comprehensive sex education program promotes sexually promiscuous behavior.

Volusia County is required by **Florida Statute 1003.42(n)** to offer the following:

Comprehensive health education that addresses concepts of community health; consumer health; environmental health; family life, including an awareness of the benefits of sexual abstinence as the expected standard and the consequences of teenage pregnancy; mental and emotional health; injury prevention and safety; nutrition; personal health; prevention and control of disease; and substance use and abuse.

Florida Statute 1003.46(1) states:

Each district school board may provide instruction in acquired immune deficiency syndrome education as a specific area of health education. Such instruction may include, but is not limited to, the known modes of transmission, signs and symptoms, risk factors associated with acquired immune deficiency syndrome, and means used to control the spread of acquired immune deficiency syndrome. The instruction shall be appropriate for the grade and age of the student and shall reflect current theory, knowledge, and practice regarding acquired immune deficiency syndrome and its prevention.

The Volusia County **School Board Policy (507)** on "Non Discrimination and Educational Equity" states:

It is the intent of the School Board of Volusia County to offer the opportunity to students to participate in appropriate programs and activities without regard to race, color, religion, national origin, sex, disability, marital status, political beliefs, sexual orientation or age except as otherwise provided by Florida State Law.

As I stated in an editorial (in *The Hometown News*):

We should provide our students with a fact-based curriculum of sex education, as other Florida counties have done, and as we do in other academic subjects, like 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.”

I continue to propose that we adopt a comprehensive sex education curriculum 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. I want my kids and the other children and teenagers in the community to have access to truthful information on health and human sexuality from a trained educator in Volusia County Public Schools, as we expect of all other subject areas.

Please let me know if I can provide clarification or additional data to corroborate the position that I have outlined above.

Lynn

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