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What schools should say about sex

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COMMUNITY VOICES

"No, that is not how babies are made," my friend recently said to her 13-year-old daughter who asserted that pregnancy occurred through an act that may exacerbate a woman's TMJ dysfunction but certainly will not impregnate her. Thus ensued an awkward moment where she formulated how to explain to the middle-school student the fertilization process and the ways that people avoid it.

Apparently, teenagers don't know everything about sex. Some who are sexually active actually know very little. And regardless of what they know, Volusia teens are not all sexually abstinent, despite eight years of subjugation to an abstinence-only-until-marriage program, Pure Energy, which the district suspended earlier this year for review by the School Health Advisory Committee (SHAC), on which I served.

Many of these teens do not have stable families or resources where they can turn for vital information about health and sexuality. Sexuality has the potential to enhance life, create life, and inflict great harm and suffering. Human sexuality education in public schools can be life-affirming and often life-saving; it is irresponsible for a community to ignore it. Florida public schools are required to provide human sexuality education, but the type of instruction is largely up to individual counties, though that may soon change.

The Florida Healthy Teens Act (SB 848 and HB 449) would require public schools receiving state funding to provide comprehensive, medically accurate, age-appropriate information about contraception and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) from the sixth grade through high school.

Volusia County should not wait for the legislation to pass, considering that we currently have no sex education program in place for this year, pending SHAC's review of the issue.

Unfortunately, SHAC is recommending to Superintendent Margaret Smith that we continue to indoctrinate middle school students with the abstinence-only-until-marriage ideology, despite ample empirical evidence demonstrating that these programs fail. Pure Energy's religiosity-laced, inaccurate, inane, self-righteous, and at least mildly misogynistic blathering has led to nothing but a continual assault on our students' intelligence and a draining of public funds.

Inexplicably, SHAC recommended that high school students receive an abstinence-plus program, which will likely confuse students with a strangely mixed message. Whatever program we select should be consistent in content and message across the grades, provide age-appropriate information, be implemented with fidelity, and be fact-based. An evidence-based sex education program no more replaces the parents' role in talking about sex to their children and teens than a World Religion course replaces a family's faith-based values.

Many parents are good at communicating their value system to their children through modeling behaviors that they want their children to emulate and encouraging a continual dialog. Parents may also provide their children with important information about contraception and sex. Most parents are not, however, professional educators trained in any facet of human sexuality. They are no more qualified to teach human sexuality to children and teens than they are to teach algebra or American history. As well, some children and teens are not capable of talking to their parents about sex.

Last year, a teenage boy, an athlete in a Volusia public high school, began a romantic relationship with one of his male classmates. He was terrified that his family and teammates would find out and could not confide in any but a few friends for fear of alienating everyone who was important to him. Being a teenager tends to be difficult enough without fear of the ostracism, taunting, and sometimes violence that gay and lesbian teens have historically faced.

By the fact that this student identified himself as gay, he became up to four times more likely than his heterosexual peers to commit suicide. He also became statistically much more likely to contract HIV/AIDS than his heterosexual (and lesbian) peers. Yet, the abstinence-only-until-marriage programs choose to unashamedly ignore this sensitive population of teens. As well, they deny the most avidly heterosexual students an education about the diverse spectrum of sexuality.

When I twice asked another SHAC committee member how we should address the gay and lesbian population with the abstinence-only-until-marriage message that she advocated, a program which has students vow to remain celibate until marriage, she finally replied: "We don't." That's unacceptable.

There is no evidence that including gay and lesbian students in the conversation about human sexuality will create a sudden outbreak of gay-ism. It is simply a part of human sexuality, and by teaching that homosexuality exists does not mean that it is being promoted as a heterosexual alternative. Frankly, if a student believes that homosexuality is a sin, the exposure to such information may just as easily strengthen that belief. Teaching the "right path" requires the teaching of other paths; otherwise, the outcome is automatons who can only preach the party line.

If parents, teens, and other community members want to promote the healthiest possible environment, they will support the adoption of a comprehensive sex education curriculum for Volusia County middle and high schools that is factual, accurate, and evidence-based and leads to an understanding of human behavior and the ramifications of prejudice, and encourages tolerance of diversity.

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Teen abstinence?

The following figures are for 2007:

- In Volusia County, 678 teen births, including 24 births to children 15-and-under.
- Teen births in Volusia represented 12.5 percent of all births; compared with 10.9 percent statewide, where figures are skewed by Miami-Dade and a few other counties and does not include miscarriage, stillbirths or abortions.
- There were 533 abortions in Volusia County, including all age groups.