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Expanded sex ed to begin in eighth grade

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DELAND -- Expanded sex education classes that will include information on birth control and prevention of sexually transmitted diseases will start in April for Volusia County students in eighth grade and high school.

Superintendent Margaret Smith reported that decision to the School Board on Tuesday, a majority of whose members said they'd like the program to start as early as sixth grade.

"I would like to see it in sixth through eighth grades, but you have to compromise a little bit," board member Al Williams said.

Candace Lankford and Judy Conte also supported that approach, but the curriculum decision fell under the superintendent's authority and there was no board vote.

State law requires Florida schools to 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."

However, it does not prohibit school districts from going beyond that.

Smith's decision expanded upon the recommendation of an advisory committee she asked to review the sex education curriculum after an Ormond Beach mother complained last year the "abstinence-only" program Volusia had used for years was ineffective and biased against gay and lesbian students.

The committee recommended retaining an abstinence-only approach in middle schools but adopting an "abstinence-plus" curriculum including information on birth control, prevention of sexually transmitted diseases and sexual behavior outside of intercourse for high schools.

"What we're talking about here is a health issue," Conte said.

Williams suggested the board may want to revisit the issue and expand the abstinence-plus program to sixth and seventh grades "once parents and students get used to this."

Parents of eighth-graders will have to give their permission up front for students to participate in the abstinence-plus program while parents of high school students can pull their children out if they want.

Lynn Koller, who filed the original complaint about the abstinence-only program, objected to that distinction Tuesday. "The students in need of it the most are most unlikely to get it," said Koller, who served on the sex education advisory committee.

Parents and students will be allowed to review the state-approved curriculum materials before they're used, Deputy Superintendent Chris Colwell said, and the physical education and health teachers who present the lessons will receive about three hours of training.

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