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Sex-ed beyond abstinence

School boards would do well to level with students

The "just say no" approach isn't working in public-school sex education. The Volusia County School Board acknowledged that this week, approving a switch to a sex-education program that emphasizes abstinence but includes crucial information about reliable means of birth control and disease prevention.

The board should have gone further -- a sentiment several board members seemed to share. Volusia's new policy includes more accurate information (officially known as "abstinence plus") starting in eighth grade, but requires parents to sign permission slips before eighth-graders can participate. Parents of high-school students can take their children out of sex ed, but aren't required to agree in advance that their sons and daughters can participate.

Board members should expand the program to students in sixth and seventh grades, and consider moving toward a "comprehensive" sex education model that offers students frank -- but unbiased -- information about their own sexuality, including accurate information about teen pregnancy, diseases, peer pressure and alternative sexuality. Flagler County, which still uses the limited "abstinence only" model, has further to go. Students in Flagler County deserve accurate, complete information about their own sexuality as well.

The stakes are high. Birth rates to teen mothers increased in both counties in 2006, the last year for which statistics are available. The rate of sexually transmitted diseases among all age groups nearly doubled in Flagler County from 2004 to 2006, though the county is still well below the state average. Volusia County's rate of infection dropped in 2005 but rose again in 2006.

Last year, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that one in four teen girls has had at least one sexually transmitted infection. A survey of Florida teens -- taken after the state switched to abstinence-based sex-education curriculum -- shows that sexual activity is on the rise. And many districts around Florida still use covertly religious, inaccurate and bigoted materials to teach sex education, something the Legislature should put a stop to.

Parents don't want to think of their middle- and high-school age children as sexually active. But the consequences of ignorance are even worse. Honest, scholarly discussion of sex -- with all the alternatives and consequences -- will be much more likely to help students make the right decisions about their own sexuality.