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Opinions vary widely on sex-education review committee

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DAYTONA BEACH -- Answering the question about what Volusia public schools should include in their sex-education program isn't likely to be an easy task for a committee whose members found out Wednesday how widely their views differ on the issue.

"This is a very diverse group intentionally," said Emily Cortes-Torrado, chairman of Volusia's School Health Advisory Committee, of the subcommittee that began sorting through human-sexuality curriculum materials Wednesday.

The group is charged with recommending whether the abstinence-only approach to teaching sex education that Volusia has used for years is enough or whether it should be expanded to include information about contraception or, even further, to cover lifelong sexual development.

Florida state law requires school districts to teach "abstinence from sexual activity as the expected standard for all school-age students while teaching the benefits of monogamous heterosexual marriage."

"The statute says this must be taught, but not that this is all that can be taught," Deputy Superintendent Chris Colwell told the committee. "It's inclusive, not exclusive."

Twenty-six Florida school districts, including Volusia, reported in a 2007 survey they used an "abstinence-only" approach to teaching sex education. Flagler was one of five districts that didn't answer the survey.

Twenty-eight other school districts reported using "abstinence-plus" programs that encourage students to refrain from sexual activity outside marriage but also include information on contraception, disease prevention and sexual behavior other than intercourse. Eight districts used a combination of approaches, depending on students' ages.

The third option discussed Wednesday by the committee would be a "comprehensive" sex-education program that would stretch from kindergarten to high school. It would start in the early years with disease prevention techniques like hand washing and later tackle such topics as sexual development, reproductive health and interpersonal relationships.

Two-thirds of Florida high school seniors reported in the 2007 Florida Youth Risk Survey they'd had sexual intercourse while 60 percent said they'd had oral sex.

"Abstinence is great if the kids are abstinent, but they're not," said Lynn Koller, an Ormond Beach parent and committee member who prompted the sex-education review by complaining about the existing program last year.

The Pure Energy abstinence-only program used in Volusia schools since 2000 was dropped because it lost its federal funding. One of its founders, Jessica Errico, also serves on the review committee.

Errico, who favors the abstinence-only approach, isn't alone on the 11-member subcommittee. Katherine Kelley, a physical education and health teacher at Creekside Middle School in Port Orange, said she prefers that approach as well.

Telling students abstinence is the "expected standard" and then teaching them about contraception methods sends a "mixed message," Kelley said.

The subcommittee will meet again Nov. 13 to continue work on its recommendation.

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