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Volusia schools' abstinence-only sex-ed program challenged

By **MARK HARPER**

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DELAND -- Abstinence-only sex education is under attack.

Volusia County Schools Superintendent Margaret Smith, speaking at a press conference at the district offices Thursday, said she will hold off forming an opinion until hearing from the School Health Advisory Committee.

Ormond Beach mom Lynn Koller complained to the School Board last month about a program, Pure Energy, that has reached nearly 10,000 students in Volusia middle and high schools since 2000. Developed by the Central Florida Pregnancy Center, Pure Energy fails to provide students with information about birth-control methods other than abstinence, discriminates against gay and lesbian students and has never been assessed for its effectiveness, Koller said.

George Griffin, a Deltona resident who is president of the Volusia-Flagler Chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, said in a phone interview Thursday his organization will lobby Volusia County school officials to provide students with a more comprehensive sex-ed program.

"From a civil liberties perspective, we see this as life-saving information that's being censored," Griffin said. "Essential information (students) need for prevention of disease and pregnancy is being filtered out of the education process."

Koller also attacked Pure Energy's approach, which involves trained volunteers -- rather than credentialed teachers -- providing the information.

Jessica Errico, a Deltona mother of two Deltona High School graduates, helped found Pure Energy, which is now in limbo because of cuts to the federal budget that funded it. In a phone interview, she defended the program, saying it was reviewed by the Florida Department of Health annually and that teachers regularly praised its contents.

"The key component of sex education is empowerment, which is fabulous," she said. "If (Koller) would see the program, she would have no bones with it at all. It's sad to see people criticize without seeing it."

The School Health Advisory Committee will meet in September. Both Koller and Errico have been invited to participate.

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