

Lawmakers let sex-ed debate rage

One faction backs abstinence. Another wants students to have all the facts. Meanwhile, state law remains vague about how much schools are required to teach.

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"What are some reasons for not having sex?" health teacher Sandy Naughton asked a classroom of slightly embarrassed seventh-graders at Community of Peace Academy in St. Paul.

"Not getting pregnant," one student answered.

"AIDS," another said.

"If you're going to get your feelings hurt," answered a third.

"That's right," said Naughton, who comes to the charter school each week to teach seventh- through 12th-graders about abstinence, relationships, sexually transmitted diseases and contraception. "You have to think about your emotions - if you're going to get heartbroken, feel bad about yourself or disappoint yourself or someone else important in your life."



Sandy Naughton, who works for Health Start clinics, holds her weekly sex education class with 12th-graders at Community of Peace Academy in St. Paul on May 11. (CRAIG BORCK, Pioneer Press)

Sex education is a perennial issue at the Legislature, and this year was no exception as lawmakers argued over whether every seventh- through 12th-grader should get comprehensive sex education, as the Community of Peace Academy students do.

Minnesota law mandates only that schools have a curriculum that helps "students to abstain from sexual activity."

But proponents of comprehensive sex education think students should also receive age-appropriate, medically accurate information about sexuality, contraception and relationships to make their own healthy decisions.

They say the goal is to be practical, not political; meanwhile, they worry current law is too vague and leaves a patchwork of policies under which some students don't get needed information.

Opponents of comprehensive sex education say that such programs send mixed messages and that the current law should be strengthened and do more to promote abstinence in all schools.

Comprehensive sex education came closer than ever to becoming policy in this year's legislative session, although it was taken out of the education bill during last-minute negotiations, at the request of Gov. Tim Pawlenty.

Janice Lamont, whose Amnion Crisis Pregnancy Center has spent 15 years teaching high school students in Dakota County about abstinence, said she thinks comprehensive sex education gives teens mixed messages: They are told they should wait for marriage but in the same breath taught how to use contraception, she said.

"We as adults need to send the message that abstinence until marriage is the route to go," Lamont said. "It's spiritually, emotionally and physically beneficial for kids to wait ... and I tell them they'll never regret it."

Volunteers from the Burnsville agency go into schools to talk about abstinence and tell students real-life stories about unintended pregnancies and the emotions that accompany them. Lamont said the presentations - which the Dakota County schools use to supplement sex-education classes - aim to empower teenagers and tell them it's OK to abstain.

"They're getting thousands and thousands of messages about being sexually promiscuous without consequences, from the media," she said. "They're just barraged by misinformation."

Some students want abstinence to be emphasized. Bobbi Erdman, a 16-year-old student from Minneapolis who attends St. Paul Conservatory for the Performing Arts, said she felt she learned more about condoms and other contraception than about abstinence during sex education.

Erdman said teenagers need to understand the emotional consequences of having sex before they can be ready for it.

"When we learn about drugs, they say, 'Just to say no,' " Erdman said. "That should be the same message we get about sex."

At Community of Peace Academy, 12th-graders in Naughton's class are at ease talking about love, sex, relationships, sexually transmitted diseases, contraception and gender stereotypes.

Naughton works for the nonprofit Health Start, which offers health services to communities and schools, and has known the seniors for about five years. Her toughest task always is to get students comfortable talking and asking questions - and her students agree.

"It was really awkward at first, but it's really cool that we can talk about these things in a respectful way," Andrea Farley said.

During one exercise this spring, students picked index cards with unfinished statements on them. The statements were read aloud and completed by students in the class.

Chloe McClelland took the first question. "The most important thing I learned in Family Life since seventh grade is ..." she read, before pausing and answering: "to use protection."

Mai Sheng Lee answered next: "It's OK to say no."

Naughton said this kind of openness is exactly what a sex- and family-education class should look like. She likes to let student questions drive the pace and the content of her lessons so she can give students the information they want and need.

Students should feel they can trust adults, ask questions and get truthful answers, Naughton said.

"They really deserve to have their questions answered. And if you say: 'No, I can't tell you that. I'm an adult and I know better' ... then they'll just go off on their own and figure it out themselves.

"It's important to tell kids to wait," she said. "I always talk about it. But not everyone is going to listen to that, and you want them to be safe."

Both sides point to studies to prove their points. Opponents say surveys show typical comprehensive sex-education curriculum devotes less than 5 percent of its work to abstinence.

Michael Resnick, a University of Minnesota pediatrics professor and director of research in the adolescent health and medicine division, argues that the evidence is clear that abstinence-only education isn't more successful in stopping teens from having sex, and he pointed to a recent congressional study that found students who took part in abstinence programs were just as likely to have sex as those who did not.

"Clearly, we're all coming from the same place. We're concerned about the health and well-being of our kids. I know ... I'm a dad," he said. "But I also want to invest in kids in ways that work."

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