

## State says no thanks to no-sex funding

### Minnesota's abstinence-only sex education program for adolescents is fading as such teaching grows controversial.

By [Josephine Marcotty](#), Star Tribune

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Publicly funded abstinence-only sex education in Minnesota has nearly disappeared.

Last month, for the first time in a decade, Minnesota officials quietly said no thank you to \$500,000 in federal abstinence-only money. That leaves a budget of only \$331,000 for a statewide program that as recently as 2004 received \$2 million.

The decision not to apply for the federal funding came at a time when the value of abstinence-only sex education is being fiercely debated in Minnesota and nationally.

At issue is the question of whether adolescents and teenagers should be taught the view embraced by social conservatives -- that abstinence is the only sure way to avoid pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. According to that view, comprehensive sex education that also teaches kids about birth control or safer sex practices encourages them to have sex. Rules tied to the federal funding forbid any mention of the effectiveness of contraception or of sexual practices that reduce the risk of disease.

Several recent studies have raised the decibel level in the national debate because they found that abstinence-only programs are ineffective in reducing sexual activity among teenagers and adolescents.

In fact, critics of abstinence-only education say its prevalence might be one reason why the long decline in sexual activity among teenagers has stalled since 2001, and why American teens continue to have the highest rates of pregnancy and abortion in the industrialized world.

"Are we moving in the other direction?" asked Michael Resnick, a professor and adolescent health researcher at the University of Minnesota. "Are we seeing a turnaround in these positive trends because we are seeing the impact of ineffective educational strategies on kids?"

#### Debates among lawmakers

Earlier this year, Gov. Tim Pawlenty threatened to veto the state's budget bill because it included language that would have made comprehensive sex education the law. That provision was withdrawn.

Congress is now considering whether to increase abstinence-only funding, which now totals \$175 million a year.

And the U.S. Senate is expected to vote next week on whether the sex education that

money pays for must include scientifically based information

Critics say abstinence programs have sometimes used medically unfounded information. For example, Resnick said he's seen some curricula that assert HIV can be transmitted by sweat or tears.

Since 1998, the Minnesota Department of Health has used state and federal money to fund a statewide program called Minnesota Education Now and Babies Later aimed at 12- to 14-year-olds.

That program provided grants to educators, community organizations, churches and other groups to teach some aspects of abstinence, but not all. They emphasized the social and psychological advantages of abstinence, how to reject sexual advances and self-sufficiency.

### **Mandatory messages**

But recently the federal government changed the rules.

Among other things, it required all such programs to also teach that sex outside of marriage was psychologically and physically harmful.

And the messages had to be directed toward everyone ages 12 to 29, officials said.

Maggie Diebel, director of community health for the Health Department, said state officials thought such messages were inappropriate for 12- to 14-year-olds and opted not to ask for the federal money.

Tom Prichard, president of the Minnesota Family Council, which promotes abstinence-only education, said the Education Now program never really taught a true abstinence approach.

"We thought in some instances it seemed to promote sexual activity, though not intercourse," he said. And the new federal requirements are reasonable, he said.

"Abstinence until marriage is certainly appropriate whatever your age," he said. "You can get an STD and emotional damage from pre-marital sexual activity whether you are a 12-year-old or 25-year-old," he said.

If that were true, "we would be a nation of lunatics," said Bill Smith, vice president of policy for SIECUS, the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, a national advocacy group that promotes sexual health and education.

The vast majority of adults have sex before marriage, he pointed out. The federal requirements "are wholly incompatible with human experience, and there is no scientific validity behind them."

Despite the controversy over sex education, no one really knows what Minnesota students are learning, said state officials and advocacy groups. State law requires that schools include information on HIV and other sexual diseases in health classes, and

encourage abstinence, but nothing more.

"Each school district is different," said Brigid Riley, executive director of the Minnesota Organization on Adolescent Pregnancy, Prevention and Parenting. "It comes down to each building and each principal and each teacher."

But she said when budgets are tight, health education, which includes sex education, is often among the first things to go, so many children may be getting little sex education.

Resnick said he is completing a survey of Minnesota parents in every legislative district on what kind of sex education they want for their children.

The results are not complete, but so far it looks like the overwhelming majority of parents want both approaches: They "want kids to hear an abstinence message, and they want kids to be educated on how to protect themselves if they are already having intercourse," he said.

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