

God's wrath alone is not enough for teaching proper sex education

By **NICK COLEMAN**, Star Tribune

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The summer that Neil Armstrong walked on the moon, I received a plain envelope in the mail. It was addressed to me by hand but with no return address. Inside was a pamphlet explaining the mysteries of human reproduction.

One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.

I have no idea who sent it, and most of the likely suspects have gone to their reward. But I am grateful to whoever it was. Someone cared enough for me to send the very best.

I already had received the most effective sexual abstinence education money can buy and knew I would rot in hell if I succumbed to the sins of the flesh. Sex before marriage would damn me to eternal fire, a notion hammered into me in freshman religion class at a Catholic high school.

Each day began with a reflection from Brother Joseph, a nervous fellow who chain-smoked between classes and conducted weekly rosary checks, awarding 5 points toward our grade if everyone in a row had their beads. I paid close attention to his homilies, most of which ended with reminders that I would be sorry, when I was being roasted by Satan, for my sinful thoughts.

One story was about a school bus with bad brakes that was roaring down a mountain, seconds from a fiery crash. I sat on the edge of my seat as the bus teetered over various precipices and Brother Joseph told us how the boys on the bus prayed for their souls as they rifled through their wallets, taking out their condoms and throwing them from the bus windows so they wouldn't be found on their corpses and they could be buried as decent Christians by their parents.

I had not seen a condom, let alone thought of keeping one handy. Still, I blushed. I knew how ashamed my family would be if I died on a road littered with unopened condoms.

A few years later, just in time to be extremely useful, that pamphlet arrived. I think about how much I owe to the unknown sender every time I hear people arguing over what kind of sex education we should provide to today's young people. And what I can tell you from my experience is that abstinence education -- even one fueled by the fires of hell -- is not enough.

The latest numbers in Minnesota back me up on that.

In 2005-06, the most recent period for which the state has statistics, there was a spike in the number of teens giving birth, having abortions and becoming infected with STDs.

Something isn't working.

For years, the Coalition for Responsible Sex Ed, an umbrella group of organizations working to reduce teen pregnancies, has been asking legislators to require public schools to add age-gearred contraception information to sex ed classes in grades 7 through 12.

This year, aided by the troubling stats, they may succeed.

"Increased pregnancy and STD rates are an indication we have failed to invest in the health of young people," says Lorie Alveshere, policy coordinator for the Minnesota Organization on Adolescent Pregnancy, Prevention and Parenting (www.moappp.org).

"Young people deserve the information they need to be safe, and healthy."

The bill requiring comprehensive sex ed is called The Responsible Family Life and Sexuality law, and is a real-world approach to teen sex, emphasizing abstinence while providing the information necessary to avoid pregnancy and disease. Abstinence is everyone's first preference, but teens need more than crossed fingers if they cross the line. As most of them will.

"Sexual behavior is a complex issue because sexual behavior is human behavior, and humans are complicated," Alveshere says. "Programs that include abstinence as well as contraception and disease prevention have the best outcomes."

Research by the University of Minnesota also shows -- despite loud opposition from a small minority -- that most parents want teens to get sex ed that includes the whole spectrum. According to the U's Healthy Youth Development Prevention Research Center, nearly 9 of 10 parents want an approach that begins with abstinence but covers pregnancy prevention, too.

On Tuesday, the Coalition for Responsible Sex Ed held its annual lobby day, bringing 75 teens from around the state to meet legislators and lobby for a sex ed law that works. They got a warm reception, including from one older woman who seemed skeptical.

"She tapped me on the shoulder and asked if we were 'promoting sex education,'" Alveshere said. "I said, well, yes we are. ... I was a little nervous. But then she said, 'Thank you. Young people need this education!'"

They certainly do. And they shouldn't have to wait for someone to send it by mail.

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