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Sex education advocates prepare to wait on electorate

By **JOSEPHINE MARCOTTY**, Star Tribune

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Propelled by a rising tide of sexually transmitted diseases and teen pregnancy rates, advocates for sex education that includes birth control and STD information tried again this year to push a bill into law.

For the second year in a row, legislators pulled the measure when Gov. Tim Pawlenty threatened a veto. His spokesman, Brian McClung, said Pawlenty opposed the bill because he believes sex education curricula "are best left to local districts and parents."

What now? Advocates said Tuesday their best strategy might be to wait for the winds of political change.

"I think we need a new governor," said Brigid Riley, director of the Minnesota Organization on Adolescent Pregnancy, Prevention and Parenting (MOAPPP). "The leadership in the state has to recognize that sex education is one way to improve statistics that are going in the wrong direction."

Or they need enough supporters in the Legislature to override a veto, said Tim Stanley, senior director of government affairs for Planned Parenthood of Minnesota, South Dakota and North Dakota.

"We have to sit back and see what the election gives us," he said. "Maybe there will be enough strength for veto-proof majorities."

Foes still pushing hard too

On the other side of the debate, Tom Pritchard, executive director of the Minnesota Family Council, said his group lobbied hard against the measure because it was contrary to an abstinence-only approach, which precludes providing any information about birth control or homosexuality.

"It was promoting a contraceptive message," he said.

The bill was passed by both the House and the Senate, but it was stripped out of the omnibus education bill when Pawlenty said he would veto the entire package if it contained the sex education language.

Sen. Sandy Pappas, DFL-St. Paul, who sponsored the bill, met with Pritchard to discuss it, but they said they were unable to reach agreement. Last week, Pappas tried to resurrect it as a free-standing bill, but it was too late to pass something so controversial, she said.

Officials from the organizations that formed a coalition to support the comprehensive sex education bill said they would try again next year to find language palatable to Pawlenty.

Pappas said she thinks he is unlikely to change his mind.

Few other options, backers say

The coalition's members say they are left with few options this year for slowing the increasing rates of sexually transmitted diseases and teenage pregnancies in Minnesota.

The number of Minnesotans infected with a sexually transmitted disease has increased every year since 1996. In 2007, more than 17,000 people became infected with one of the big three -- chlamydia, gonorrhea or syphilis -- an increase of 3.8 percent over 2006.

Teenage pregnancies and births went up by 6.4 percent between 2005 and 2006, the most recent data available. It was first increase since 1996 and twice the national average.

The number of high school seniors who say they are sexually active also increased from 46 percent in 2004 to 48.4 percent in 2007, according to a survey of students by the Minnesota Department of Education.

Experts say that there are many factors behind those trends. But one of them is sex education. "We are now reaping the results of ineffective and inaccurate education that many of our kids are receiving," said Michael Resnick, an expert on adolescent health and a professor at the University of Minnesota.

The sex education bill would have required school districts to adopt curricula for seventh-through 12th-graders that met certain standards. It would have included an emphasis on abstinence first but then would have provided information on pregnancy prevention, birth control, sexually transmitted diseases, relationship building and self-esteem. Proponents of the bill said an abundance of research shows that is the best way to persuade teenagers to both delay sex and reduce disease.

Riley, who works with schools through MOAPPP, said many school boards don't know that schools already are required to provide students some information about STDs and HIV -- although not about methods of prevention beyond abstinence.

Essentially, she said, current laws leave it up to individual health teachers to decide what to teach and how to teach it.

"All numbers are going in the wrong direction," she said. "What are we as a state going to do about that? Keep telling kids to say no? It's a fabulous message, but it's not enough."

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