

## Sample Op-Ed

### *Who's In Bed with the Sex-Ed Lobby?*

**By Valerie Huber**

Ask parents what they want the schools to tell their children about premarital sex and most will give you a common-sense answer: Abstain.

That's what Zogby International discovered when it recently surveyed more than 1,000 parents of teen and pre-teen children on behalf of the National Abstinence Education Association.

Nonetheless, there is a campaign underway to defund the federal program that supports abstinence education in American schools, while continuing funding that can be used for so-called "comprehensive sex-education" that instructs children in the finer points of condom use and other so-called "safer" sex practices.

Since the 1970s, American taxpayers have spent billions on contraceptive education. In return, we have gotten increases in teen sex, teen pregnancy, and millions of teens infected with STDs — some of which are incurable or even fatal.

Parents want a change. Almost 90 percent of those surveyed by Zogby said they believed being sexually abstinent was best for their child's health and future. When parents learned that the typical abstinence-education course emphasized relationship building, self-worth, and the potential negative emotional, financial, & physical consequences of premarital sex, almost 80 percent said they would support such a program over a comprehensive sex education program.

When parents learned the differences between abstinence education and comprehensive sex education, and then were asked which should get government funding, 59% chose abstinence education and only 22% selected comprehensive sex education.

Even with such strong parental support, federal funding for abstinence education is relatively new and remains quite modest. Rightly putting partisan politics aside significant abstinence education funding was signed into law by both Presidents Clinton and Bush so, from the outset, this approach was about the sexual health of youth as it should be now. The most recent funding estimates demonstrate a wide disparity with so called comprehensive sex ed having access to about 10 times the funding than that available for abstinence education. Still, that is too much for some teen sex advocacy groups in our culture. The Boston Globe editorialized on April 25, for example, that abstinence education — as

opposed to "comprehensive" sex education — is a "waste" of both time and money. "Sex education should be part of the public school curriculum," the Globe argued, "but it should be comprehensive and it should not be supplemented or replaced by a singular, ineffective approach to sexuality." In other words, tax money should teach students how to have sex, but not to abstain from it.

The Globe and other enthusiasts of this view are now using as evidence a federally commissioned — yet too narrow — study released in April by Mathematica Policy Research Inc. This study looked at only 4 of the more than 700 abstinence education programs that have received federal grants. Yet from this miniscule and unrepresentative sample, the study sweepingly concluded that students who participated in abstinence education programs were no more likely to remain abstinent than students who did not participate.

And a small sample size was not the only problem in making sweeping all or nothing generalizations. None of the programs studied continued to teach children in high school — when they are most likely to be consider initiating sexual activity.

The important fact is that other credible peer reviewed studies show the positive effects from abstinence education including delaying sexual debut, reducing partners once sexually active, and empowering sexually active students to embrace abstinent behavior. The Journal of Health Behavior reported that students who were previously sexually experienced were about twice as likely to be abstinent after completing an abstinence program as their sexually experienced peers who didn't receive abstinence education. In Washington, D.C., according to Adolescent and Family Health, girls who participated in the Best Friends program were seven times more likely than the comparison group to avoid sexual activity.

There is no doubt about the message parents want society to help them send their children: Abstinance is the healthiest choice.

The question is whether Congress will help them deliver it in our schools, or whether tax money will be reserved only for programs that spend most of their time promoting "safe" sex and condom use.

If not renewed, the abstinence education funding program will expire this year. That means parents will find out soon whether their local congressman stands with them — or is in bed with the sex-ed lobby.

-----  
*Valerie Huber is executive director of the National Abstinence Education Association*