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Abstinence education suffers Supporters struggle to shield teens from heartache

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COURTESY

Risk avoidance vs. risk education; which is best to help teens avoid this?

Want kids to do better in school? Convince them not to have sex?

Want less chaotic and fragmented families in this country? Convince people not to have sex until they're married!

Want to get the entitlement rolls in this country back to a manageable level? Convince people not to have children until after they're married!

These are the answers to some of the more serious problems in this country that a group headquartered in Charleston has

KNOW THE FACTS

■ Less than half of mothers age 17 and younger ever graduate from high school

■ 66 percent of poor families were begun by a young, unmarried mother

■ One-in-two young people age 18 and under in South Carolina who live in some form of poverty

■ Children of teen mothers are 50 percent more likely to repeat a grade, less likely to complete high school and have lower standardized test grades

■ 13 percent of babies born to 15- to 17-year-olds have low birth weight

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been successfully advocating since 1995, but now the group that spreads the abstinence message says it's facing major funding and political obstacles.

"It's all the drama that comes with sex that is derailing our kids," said Mary McLellan, statewide chairman of the SC Healthy Family Formation Coalition, an advocacy component of Heritage Community Services.

At one point Heritage had five offices and about 50 trained male and female teachers

in South Carolina promoting abstinence and marriage across the state, but the Obama administration has diverted federal grant monies for abstinence programs to groups in the Planned Parenthood camp, who are more interested in teaching youngsters how to use condoms and have so-called "Safe Sex" than they are in teaching them to set boundaries, look to the future and formulate a successful plan for their lives, McLellan said.

McLellan and Anne Badgley, founder/CEO of Heritage, recently visited Horry County for a meeting of Christian women at Westminster Presbyterian Church where they spread the word about the possible demise of authentic abstinence education in South Carolina, as well as nationally.

They say they have the documents to prove that abstinence education has been successful.

During the Bush administration when abstinence funds were still available, McLellan says the Heritage group was extremely active.

Since federal and state-funded abstinence education began in 1996 in South Carolina, there has been a 44 percent decline in teen pregnancy in the age group Heritage typically teaches, 17-years-old and under, the ladies say, quoting a S.C.

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FROM A1

Department of Health and Environmental Control study.

According to a 2011 Centers for Disease Control report, nationally only 30 percent of teens in that age group report having had sex, McLellan said. This is a significant decrease over the past 15

■ In South Carolina, a girl between the ages of 10-19 gets pregnant every 49 minutes
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years, she said. Programs that educate kids on how to use birth control or condoms can count success only within that 30 percent as they claim that their way is best, she said.

"The latest independent evaluation of Heritage's data shows that the kids who get our program are three times less likely to start having sex or continue having sex when measured a year afterward. That's unheard of. There are over 20 proven effective abstinence programs in the nation and we're one of the top ones," she said.

McLellan reports that "Heritage educators know how to teach abstinence effectively to students. Our evaluations on behavior change for the past 17 years prove it. Heritage Keepers® students choose to abstain from sex at a rate three times higher than students not getting the program, so why are we kidding ourselves that 'Safe Sex' programs can effectively teach students to abstain? Show me a 'Safe Sex' program that has data indicating that they influence behavior change in students to significantly delay sex or discontinue it.

The goal of 'Safe Sex' is to increase condom use, not abstinence, and certainly not abstinence until marriage since the concept of marriage has been eliminated from the schools. Heritage educators have never shied away from teaching in the same schools that also have 'Safe Sex' instruction. Students are smart, they know the difference and are amazed to find out that abstinence is a science-based realistic choice they can make regardless of sexual history. They also need to feel validated and respected in their decisions about abstaining, not ridiculed," she added.

Heritage programs want not only to save young girls

"Because we are abstinence based, we don't promote the banding out of contraceptives. We don't promote the buying of the contraceptives.."

Tammy Trulove
Horry County Schools

from unwanted pregnancy, but also work to rebuild American families.

"They hope to reconnect the dots among sex, children, families and parenting and help teens see that doing things in the right order can make huge differences in how successful their lives are.

They want to help youngsters build a life script around whom they are. They want them to see that if they complete their educations and get married before they have children that much of the fragmentation and chaos found in families today will be eliminated.

"We think people are more than their genitals. I know people think that's strong... We want to teach avoiding completely any

risky behavior," she said.

But McLellan says her group isn't naive; they know that the older teens become the more likely they will be to have sex.

Still, they think if they can hold them back at least until they're in their 20s the lives of young people and society in general will be improved.

It's clear, she said, "Science and biology support sex within marriage as the ideal healthy choice."

Other programs teach "risk reduction;" theirs teaches "risk avoidance," she said.

"Risk reduction groups are tearing down boundaries that need to be set and kept," she said.

Although McLellan says she has run into people who think it is illegal to teach abstinence in schools, the truth is that South Carolina law requires that any sex education program strongly emphasize abstinence until marriage. Marriage is mentioned four times in the South Carolina law, so why has it been taken out of Comprehensive Health Education and the S.C. Health Standards? she asks.

Cayci Banks, director of communications with the S.C. Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, and Tammy Trulove, Horry County's coordinator for comprehensive health education, say their groups adhere to the law.

"All of the programs say that abstinence is the first and best program for young people, and I think everyone agrees with that," Banks said repeating later that they make it clear that abstinence is the first and best path to take.

"We believe strongly in abstinence, but we also want to give young people the facts and you always want to educate. If a young person is going to be sexually active you don't want them not protecting themselves...." she said.

Banks says all of their programs are age appropriate and medically accurate.

She likens their message to parents who tell their children not to drink alcohol, but follow that with a request to their teens to phone them if they do so they can pick them up and help them avoid automobile accidents.

Banks says studies within South Carolina show that about 50 percent of South Carolina's high school students are sexually active, but says that number swells closer to 70 to 75 percent for high school seniors. Many of them, she believes, are not as knowledgeable about sexual matters as people want to think.

The idea that kids should be instructed in birth control because they're going to have sex no matter what anyone tells them leads McLellan to pose this

■ Becoming a parent is the number one reason why teen girls drop out of school
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question: Why are adults prosecuted for giving alcohol to minors, yet it is okay, even mandated for teachers to instruct minors, who cannot legally consent to sex, that sex among and with minors is normal and expected? The Heritage ladies have

Seven questions abstinence educators ponder:

■ Why are adults prosecuted for giving alcohol to minors, yet it is okay, even mandated for teachers to instruct minors, who cannot legally consent to sex, that sex among minors is normal and expected?

■ Aren't minors caught drinking alcohol arrested? Or at least told to stop?

■ If a minor is having sex, shouldn't that be reported to the authorities since that minor cannot consent to sex? What if they are being forced to have sex? Who is protecting these minors from being exploited?

■ Isn't ignoring or promoting underage drinking and/or teen sex considered contributing to the delinquency of a minor? Doesn't ignoring or promoting sex among minors violate reporting laws and sexual abuse laws?

■ Why are we appalled when sexual predators entice and seduce children to sexual acts, yet think nothing of teachers grooming children to feel comfortable talking about sex and using condoms by practicing with their classmates?

■ Why are we shocked when teachers cross the line and have sex with students?

■ Does any of this make sense to you?

a book, *See, Lies and Hook Ups - A Parent's Guide for Fighting Back* and a companion video series, which they are giving away to schools, churches and other concerned adults who are willing to use it to teach about the value of abstinence, because they fear the benefits of abstinence and marriage will be lost to another generation if more funds are cut. The number of free packages will be limited per county.

Horry County is of special concern to the ladies because the S.C. Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy has recently obtained a grant to promote its *Safer Choices* program throughout Horry County.

To be selected for the program, a county had to have a teen pregnancy rate higher than the national average, had to meet population requirements and had to have a community that was mobilized and ready to support the program.

The teen pregnancy prevention program is training teachers, health educators and others who work with teens who share their objectives.

The S.C. Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy has also gotten a grant for Anderson County where a program called Teen Outreach Program or TOP, has been implemented. McLellan doesn't like

either of these programs. She calls them "gender bending," "Safe Sex," "condom pushing programs" that tell kids that safe sex is just as good as abstinence if kids are careful and use protection, but she counters that there is no birth control or protection that is 100 percent effective, especially when it comes to spreading sexually-transmitted diseases.

She points out that the program is called *Safer Choices* not *Safe Choices*.

Trulove said the S.C. Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy program hasn't changed Horry County Schools' curriculum. It was already using *Safer Choices* when the group came in for training. Horry County uses It's Your Game, Keep It Real with middle school students.

Trulove said the state group offered the school district better ways to train teachers who are taking the programs into the schools. About 20 people were trained in Horry County in October of 2011.

In accordance with state law, parents have the right to opt their children out of

■ Less than half of teen mothers ever graduate from high school and fewer than 2 percent earn a college degree by age 30
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some portions of the program.

If parents make a request, students can skip classes on reproductive health education, pregnancy prevention and contraceptive education. Male

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