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Youths speak up for abstinence

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One young girl proudly said she's a "secondary virgin" and another joked that her parents would have to go back to school for decades to learn all that she's been taught so far in the Heritage Keepers sex ed program - but they were preaching to the choir.

The Charleston County School Board already has adopted the program, which stresses abstinence from sex as the only certain method of preventing pregnancy and disease transmission, to be offered as a supplement to its sex education curriculum.

What's still at issue is who will serve on the advisory board that helps oversee sex education.

The school board in April appointed the director of Heritage Community Services Inc., Anne Badgley, as a volunteer to coordinate the district's program. By doing so, the schools can take advantage of a \$95,903 Heritage grant without spending any more money to launch the program.

The school district's current sex education program is abstinence-based, meaning that teachers stress abstinence from sex before marriage while at the same time teaching about contraception and disease prevention, as is required by state law.

The Heritage program stresses abstinence only, involves students in small groups to help build their self-esteem and will be offered to supplement the existing program.

Speaker after speaker - including Cyndi Mosteller, this area's representative on the state Department of Health and Environmental Control board - approached the podium at Monday's school board meeting to pay tribute to the Heritage program's emphasis on developing skills to resist peer pressure.

Both adults and children said it gives students a warped sense of security to rely on condoms as protection during sex, since early sex can cause emotional and physical problems.

"A condom offers no protection to their hearts and their minds," said one speaker.

Apparently, some were worried that the school board might interfere with the appointment of a Health Advisory Committee to oversee the sex ed program - possibly trying to stack committee membership with those who oppose the Heritage program.

One speaker outright urged the board not to appoint former board Chairman Robert New, arguing he has a conflict of interest because he serves as an education issues consultant at Channel 5 news.

Another speaker, the Rev. Conrad "Buster" Brown of East Cooper Baptist Church, urged the board to honor its commitment to allow district Superintendent Chip Zullinger to appoint the members of the school district's Comprehensive Health Advisory Committee.

However, Zullinger has punted on the issue.

The board asked him last month to come up with a list of recommended members for the Health Advisory Committee by its May 24 meeting.

Although he had taken personal leave and wasn't at work Monday or Tuesday, Zullinger did send a memo to school board members Monday saying he recommends the district's eight constituent school boards be allowed to appoint the committee members.

The memo said each constituent board is asked to submit the names and addresses of its suggested members to Dr. Marian Mentavlos, associate superintendent for instruction, by June 11.

The county school board took no action and had no public discussion of Zullinger's memo Monday.

Carol Koontz, chairman of the District 2 Constituent School Board in Mount Pleasant, said she's going to recommend to her board members and to the county's other constituent school board chairmen that they decline the opportunity to name the health committee members.

"Dr. Zullinger has stood in the way of our doing our job as it was prescribed by law. Now he is giving us something to do that is not in our purview," Koontz said. "He's abdicating his responsibility."

Zullinger and the constituent school boards have been at odds almost since his arrival nearly three years ago. The constituent boards were left out of the planning process for the creation of choice or magnet schools, Koontz said, and since then have seen their power eroded by the creation of school governance councils that now play a role in hiring principals.