

The Post and Courier

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Young adults lead courses on abstinence

Published on 03/02/04

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PHOTOS: Stan Weed, director of the Institute for Research and Evaluation in Utah, talks with educators at Heritage Community Services about how well the program is working.

Kingsley Moore (left), a teacher with Heritage Community Services, talks about self-discipline with 10th- and 11th-graders at Stall High School.

Abstinence educators say they are seeing success by connecting with adolescents. Generally, sex education centers on telling kids about reproduction, contraception and sexually transmitted diseases. Adolescents are expected to make their own decisions. But researchers say teens still get pregnant and spread diseases, regardless of how much they know about sex.

"We've been beating a dead horse for years in lots of different programs," said psychologist Stan Weed. He said that realization came to him and fellow researchers about a decade ago when they began evaluating youth programs that address risky behaviors.

Abstinence educators such as North Charleston-based Heritage Community Services take a different tack. Heritage teaches courses to about 25,000 teens a year on abstinence and character-building in 140 locations across the state and in Georgia, Kentucky and the Caribbean. Most of those are schools, along with some youth agencies such as group homes.

The nonprofit organization puts young adult role models in front of students. These adults help to build supportive relationships and foster values aimed at reducing risky behaviors with potential negative consequences. The approach seems to be working, Heritage says.

Comparing anonymous responses from students who took a Heritage course to responses from some 8,000 other students in South Carolina, Weed's research found the number of teens who lose their virginity over a year to be 40 percent lower in the first group — 9 percent versus 16 percent. After a second Heritage course a year later, the Heritage rate dropped from 9 percent to 4 percent.

That's consistent with findings in similar programs elsewhere, Weed said. He is director of the Salt Lake City-based Institute for Research and Evaluation, an independent

nonprofit organization that studies state health departments and private agencies such as Heritage.

Those groups hire Weed's organization to study their effectiveness, he said, but each program is required to report to the federal government. "The federal government wants somebody who is independent, so they bring me in as an outsider to look at this stuff and give them an objective take on it," he said.

Weed travels around the country, visiting youth-at-risk programs throughout Virginia, Arkansas and Louisiana as well as individual programs in Nebraska, Colorado, California and South Carolina. He recently met with Heritage staffers in Charleston.

He said he believes programs such as Heritage are helping kids make more responsible choices, not just about sex, but about drugs, alcohol, education and life in general. And that, he said, means they're more likely to become responsible adults.

The key weapon, according to Weed, is to make personal connections with teens and encourage them to think about why they make choices. That approach appears to have a scientific basis, he said.

Current brain research at numerous universities and institutions, including Dartmouth Medical School and Penn State University, shows teens use more primitive parts of their brains during decision-making. Researchers believe the brain isn't fully capable of processing all sorts of information until adulthood. This sheds new light on understanding how children learn and what kinds of information they comprehend.

"The idea that children were expected to think and behave like adults during the adolescent years was accepted as doctrine and a lot of teaching went on that was based on that," said Anne Badgley, Heritage's founder and CEO. "It really didn't fit what we were seeing in adolescent behavior, but there wasn't any research to back it up."

The Heritage curriculum and teaching style tap into the basic thought processes of adolescents, Badgley and Weed agreed. Essentially, Heritage courses address some key components of Weed's research, based on more than 60,000 teens in the United States, as well as in Russia and South America. Among the factors Weed found to determine behavior are notions of what's good and bad, self-confidence to follow personal values, understanding that decisions influence one's future and balancing personal preferences against peer influence.

"Those are things that the adolescent brain can function around," Weed said.

Heritage teachers agree.

Byron Rounds, who has been teaching Heritage courses five years, said he feels his students are glad to have him share his experiences and decisions.

Rounds was at R.B. Stall High School in North Charleston in the fall with his teaching partner, Kingsley Moore, talking with a group of Junior ROTC students. The sophomores and juniors were about halfway through the fourth course Heritage offers. The first two courses focus on sex, STDs, abstinence and marriage. The next set of courses, known as Heritage Keepers, explores concepts such as self-discipline, goal-setting, communication, respect and pride. All of it connects to Heritage's central message of sexual abstinence outside of marriage.

Like the other 55 Heritage teachers, Moore and Rounds are in their 20s. The teaching staff is about half black and half white and also equally balanced regarding gender. They say they are committed to Heritage's message and want to share it with teens. All the teachers sign a commitment with the students to abstain from sex before marriage.

The teachers work in pairs. Men teach the boys and women teach the girls. In some cases, all the students at a school take the Heritage courses. At Stall, it was JROTC and physical education students. Parents decide whether their children attend.

Outside of the regular curriculum, teachers take students on field trips, such as the Carolina Ice Palace, where they get to put Heritage themes to practice through activities. The classes also do service projects, such as mentoring young children.

The students seem to enjoy the program. "It helps me be more successful in life and in my education," said Precious Mixon, 16, a junior at Stall.

Carrie Kemeling, also a 16-year-old junior, said, "I've learned that there are people out there who actually do care about us."

Stall's JROTC director, retired Air Force Lt. Col. William D. Smith, said he really likes the Heritage message because it's in line with the basic mission of JROTC, building character and citizenship.

Founded in 1995, Heritage is funded through a mix of federal, state and private money. It has an annual budget of more than \$3.5 million, most of which supports its efforts in South Carolina. It recently received a boost at the state level working with the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control. With two new federal grants, the agency is contracting Heritage to implement abstinence-only education across the state, according to Owens Goff, assistant chief with DHEC's Bureau of Chronic Disease Prevention and Control. The agency also is evaluating Weed's findings, he said.

Founder Badgley was the volunteer sexual education coordinator for the Charleston County School District for a year until she was replaced in 2000 by a paid employee. Heritage is in 15 Charleston County public schools and in 55 locations altogether in the Lowcountry.

Heritage is one of many resources state school districts use to comply with state sexual education curriculum requirements, according to health educator Debbie Cockrell, who

serves as a consultant with the Charleston County School District and is employed by DHEC. State law says reproductive health must be taught from sixth grade through high school and include various components such as human physiology, conception, prenatal care and pregnancy prevention. Heritage's abstinence curriculum falls under the latter, which also includes instruction on resisting peer pressure and contraception methods. Heritage is a supplemental program that each principal decides whether to use at each school.

Stall Principal David Basile said Heritage already was in place when he joined the school last fall. He met with the instructors to get a sense of the program and make sure there were no religious overtones, he said. He kept it at Stall because of the character education element. "The schools have a service and opportunity to teach children some basic tenets on character, and this group seemed like they had a good plan to do it. It was easy to implement in the school."

State law also requires each district to have a 13-member health advisory committee of parents, teachers, health professionals, community leaders and the faith community. That board approves materials for sex education programs in each district's schools.

Abstinence-only education is no stranger to criticism. Opponents argue teens should be encouraged to use contraception because they're bound to have sex regardless of whether they are taught to abstain. Badgley said this argument is rooted in the fear of AIDS that mounted from the 1980s. The most current research on condom effectiveness from the National Institutes of Health, Weed said, shows that consistent condom use has an 85 percent HIV reduction rate. It reduces the transmission of gonorrhea by 71 percent, but only for men, he said. He said no consistent evidence shows any reduction from condom use in the other eight STDs studied.

Research shows between 18 percent and 27 percent of adolescents use condoms consistently, he said, and the number increases to 50 percent for adolescents who've had training and education in contraception.