

Under Obama administration, abstinence-only education finds surprising new foothold

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Last month, for the first-time ever, Health and Human Services added an abstinence-only education curriculum to the list of 28 evidence-based pregnancy prevention programs that the Obama administration will fund.



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This was something of a surprise. When it comes to preventing teen pregnancy, the Obama administration has staked out a decidedly anti-abstinence-only-education stance. The president has, in previous budgets, zeroed out funds for such programs as federal reviews have found such programs to have no impact on sexual abstinence and, in some cases, include inaccurate information on sexuality.

“I do believe that contraception has to be part of [the] education process,” Obama said on the campaign trail in 2008.

Even so, abstinence-only education has hardly disappeared from federally funded teen pregnancy prevention programs. Curriculums that teach abstinence as the singular method of birth control retained a \$55 million budget in 2012, a full third of the \$176 million available during President George W. Bush’s last year in office.

In April, the Office of Adolescent Health added Heritage Keepers’ Abstinence-Only curriculum to a list of evidence-based teen pregnancy prevention programs. Heritage Keepers is the first abstinence-only curriculum to become eligible for the Obama administration’s \$75 million Teen Pregnancy Prevention Fund.

“What we’re hoping is that getting one program on the list shows they’re willing to look at the issue of teens and sexual risk avoidance,” says Valerie Huber, president of the National Abstinence Education Association. “I certainly do hope this could be the beginning of a new trend.”

The move quickly drew the ire of liberal groups, many of whom signed onto an April 30 letter asking Health and Human Services to explain the decision.

The department, however, has no plans to do so. Health and Human Services spokesman Mark Weber said that the program met the two benchmarks for approval as “evidence-based:” It had a strong study design and demonstrated a statistically significant impact on students’ behavior.

The vast majority of programs reviewed do not make the cut: Of the 225 pregnancy prevention strategies that the administration has so far reviewed, it has approved just 31 as “evidence-based.”

“What we’re committed to is impartial research, and then sharing the information so that communities can make the choices that are appropriate for them,” Weber said.

As evidence on the Heritage Keepers curriculum, Health and Human Services cites a 2011 unpublished study of 2,215 middle school students conducted by a group of Salt Lake City-based researchers. It compared the portion of “sexually-experienced” students among those in the abstinence-only program, and those outside it. This metric frequently is used in evaluations of comprehensive sex education as well, as a proxy for understanding how student behaviors may change.

For the control group — which was not in the Heritage Keepers curriculum, — the number rose from 29.2 percent at the start of the program to 43.2 percent one year after the program concluded. Among those in the abstinence-only program, there was a smaller increase, from 29.1 to 33.7 percent.

“It’s encouraging that the science is recognized,” says Anne Badgley, CEO of Heritage Services, which developed the curriculum. “All sides of this issue have a long way to go on connecting why programs do or don’t work. I really think what we need to be having is a discourse that gets out of the deep ideological divide and starts focusing on the outcomes here.”

Moving forward, Huber hopes to see more programs added to the evidence-based set of interventions of that Health and Human Services will cover. The Obama administration certainly hasn’t been kind to abstinence-only education; aside from \$250 million in earmarked, Affordable Care Act funds, there’s only about \$5 million in dedicated funding in other government programs.

Working with an administration whose budgets have repeatedly attempted to end abstinence-only education, however, could be a whole lot worse. “I’m actually hopeful that we will see more good, good sexual risk avoidance program developed,” says Huber. “That can really set a foundation for us.”