

July 18, 2007

Abstinence Education Faces an Uncertain Future

By LAURA BEIL

HALLSVILLE, Tex. — When Jami Waite graduated from high school this year in this northeastern Texas town, her parents sat damp-eyed in the metal bleachers of Bobcat Stadium, proud in every way possible. Their youngest daughter was leaving childhood an honor graduate, a band member, a true friend, a head cheerleader — and a steadfast virgin.

“People can be abstinent, and it’s not weird,” she declared. With her face on billboards and on TV, Ms. Waite has been an emblem of sexual abstinence for *Virginity Rules*, which has risen from a single operation in nearby Longview to become an eight-county abstinence franchise.

For the first time, however, *Virginity Rules* and 700 kindred abstinence education programs are fighting serious threats to their future. Eleven state health departments rejected abstinence education this year, while legislatures in Colorado, Iowa and Washington passed laws that could kill, or at least wound, its presence in public schools.

Opponents received high-caliber ammunition this spring when the most comprehensive study of abstinence education found no sign that it delayed a teenager’s sexual debut. And, after enjoying a fivefold increase in their main federal appropriations, the abstinence programs in June received their first cut in financing from the Senate appropriations committee since 2001.

But the final outcome is in question. Some \$176 million in federal support has survived several early maneuvers in the House, and the full House plans to debate the issue July 18 as part of the proposed Health and Human Services budget.

Lost in the political rancor, however, is that teenagers throughout the country are both abstaining more, and, especially among older ones, more likely to use contraception when they do not abstain.

While the reasons are not all understood, government data show the trend began years before abstinence education became the multimillion-dollar enterprise it is today. Through a combination of less sex and more contraception, pregnancy and birth rates among American teenagers as a whole have been falling since about 1991. Texas, however, has seen the smallest decline despite receiving almost \$17 million in the name of virginity.

No state has more to lose in this battle than Texas, which draws more abstinence money than any other. Drive through the piney woods of northeastern Texas, and the earnest faces of adolescents appear on billboards with slogans like “No is where I stand until I have a wedding band.”

The Longview Wellness Center, which sponsors *Virginity Rules*, collects almost \$1 million annually in abstinence financing, and serves 33 area school districts.

Even in this state, where President Bush acquired his loyalty to the policy, abstinence cannot be typecast. Megan Randolph of Dallas, who like Jami Waite just finished high school, believes in the abstinence message. But she is bothered by courses that try to scare teenagers with harrowing talk of ruined lives. “In those classes, there are going to be kids who have had sex and that hasn’t happened,” Ms. Randolph said. “So they’re going to think that doesn’t apply to them.”

Teenagers, she said, crave unfettered information — the kind restricted under federal abstinence education law, which discourages intimacy outside marriage but provides no instruction for safer sex.

At her school, Ms. Randolph, 19, was the “sexpert,” the one girls often called late at night, asking questions. And this year, before leaving Dallas to attend the [Air Force Academy](#), Ms. Randolph was hailed as volunteer of the year by the area’s [Planned Parenthood](#) — part of abstinence education’s axis of evil.

In northeastern Texas, advocates of abstinence education vow to fight for their mission because to them, it is not just a matter of sexuality or even public health. Getting a teenager to the other side of high school without viruses or babies is a bonus, but not the real goal. They see casual sex as toxic to future marriage, family and even, in an oblique way, opposition to [abortion](#).

“You have to look at why sex was created,” Eric Love, the director of the East Texas Abstinence Program, which runs *Virginity Rules*, said one day, the sounds of Christian contemporary music humming faintly in his Longview office. “Sex was designed to bond two people together.”

To make the point, Mr. Love grabbed a tape dispenser and snapped off two fresh pieces. He slapped them to his filing cabinet and the floor; they trapped dirt, lint, a small metal bolt. “Now when it comes time for them to get married, the marriage pulls apart so easily,” he said, trying to unite the grimy strips. “Why? Because they gave the stickiness away.”

Shoring up marriage was Robert Rector’s vision a decade ago. A fellow at the Heritage Foundation, Mr. Rector wrote the first bill that legally defined abstinence education, and got it attached as a stowaway to the 1996 welfare overhaul, backed with \$50 million for the states. A later Congress, irked at states’ finding loopholes in the original intent, designated a second pool of abstinence money in 2001, now the lifeblood of the movement.

Mr. Rector says viewing abstinence primarily through the lens of public health distracted the focus from marriage. “Once you understand that that’s the principal issue,” he said, “you understand that handing out condoms to a 17-year-old is utterly irrelevant.”

Strengthening marriage this way may resonate with teenagers like Ms. Waite, whose conviction is planted in a deeply held marital value, but not necessarily with Ms. Randolph, who says she is more preoccupied with succeeding in the Air Force than with marriage.

In abandoning abstinence education, states have largely said that comprehensive sex education programs, which discuss contraception beyond the failure rates, have a better scientific grounding. New laws in Colorado, Iowa and Washington state that sex education must be based on “research” or “science” — which is often interpreted as code for programs that include discussions of safer sex.

Much of the data cited in support of the efficacy of abstinence programs are from surveys taken immediately before and after a program. These commonly find an increase in intentions to stay abstinent, but do not necessarily mean that a year later, high on emotion, teenagers will follow the script.

Most studies so far have found no significant impact on behavior, and the few that do see only modest changes. In April, Mathematica Policy Research released a report that was nine years and \$8 million in the making. Scientists followed middle school children enrolled in four separate abstinence programs for about five years, and found no difference in the age of first intercourse between them and their peers.

Opinions vary on whether the absence of evidence — to borrow from Carl Sagan — is evidence of absence. One of the leading experts on sex education programs, Dr. John Jemmott of the Annenberg School of Communication at the [University of Pennsylvania](#), says some abstinence education programs in the future might show promise. He is hopeful about an abstinence curriculum that he has designed which, unlike many, tries to get teenagers to think long-term about their behavior and its consequences, questioning, for example, whether a boyfriend would really love you if you had sex with him. Many programs dwell on the risks of sex, not the reasons.

Dr. Jemmott knows many colleagues view abstinence education as a failed experiment. “I think that is unfair,” he said. “I think what they should say is there is not enough evidence to state whether it is efficacious.” On the other hand, he said, it is also unfair to say that sex education that discusses — without maligning — condoms encourages sex. Data from many programs, in fact, find the opposite.

[Those who thought abstinence education financing would decline swiftly under a Democratic watch were wrong: On July 11, the full House extended state grants through September — a reprieve at the edge of expiration. That same day, the House Appropriations Committee increased spending, a political move to make the proposed Health and Human Services budget more appealing to [Republicans](#), said Representative David R. Obey, Democrat of Wisconsin, the committee chairman.]

While the future of abstinence education is unclear, Mr. Love, back in Longview, believes “the message will go on, whether the government decides to fund it or not.”

Just ask Jami Waite. The former cheerleader is carrying her resolve to college, where she is on her way to becoming a nurse. One day she plans to wed. Until then, she says, virginity will rule.

Jacqueline Palank contributed reporting from Washington.

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