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Sex ed in the schools: What's in those books, anyway?

By KRISTIN TILLOTSON, Star Tribune

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Amid all the back-and-forth over the comprehensive sex education bill that died recently in the shadow of an expected governor's veto, there has been little discussion of what the curriculum in question actually contains.

Bits and pieces from various textbooks or teachers' guides have been pulled out as examples to support one agenda or decry the other. But they don't provide a complete picture for the many parents thinking, "I don't want my 12-year-old to get pregnant or contract an STD. But I'm also not comfortable with her learning how to put on a condom by practicing on a banana at school."

The Minnesota Organization on Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention and Parenting (MOAPPP) has more than a dozen teachers' guides and other texts used in sex-ed curriculum in Minnesota and elsewhere. And while the approaches vary, three commonalities are evident:

- All go well beyond the ground covered in the "pink brochure, blue brochure" routine that baby boomers experienced in fifth grade, but vary considerably in degrees of explicitness.
- Despite complaints that abstinence gets short shrift in comprehensive programs, all of these books stress abstinence as a strongly positive option, and some present it as the preferred option.
- All books also include lessons and role-playing games dealing with how to have healthy emotional relationships, with tips on avoiding bullying, recognizing sexual abuse and standing up for one's rights.

Troubling statistics

Although wrangling over sex-ed bills in the Legislature goes back nine years, this session's efforts took on extra urgency following news that one in four American teens has a sexually transmitted disease, and that teen pregnancies in Minnesota rose by 6 percent in 2006, the first time in 16 years. While the state already requires that students get information about HIV and other STDs, bill proponents wanted to expand the statute to include pregnancy prevention and how to have healthy relationships.

To Tom Prichard of the Minnesota Family Council, an advocacy group that influenced the bill's quashing at the Capitol, the statistics only reinforce the need for abstinence-only teaching.

"We're giving the wrong message," he said. "When you teach that condoms are a valid alternative, you legitimize the notion of kids going ahead and having sex as long as it's safe sex. There's no such thing as safe sex."

Tim Stanley, director of public affairs for this region's chapter of Planned Parenthood, disagrees. "Study after study from trusted and authoritative sources like the CDC [Centers for Disease Control] have concluded that abstinence-only education is a failure," he said. "At this point, it's a truth like the sky is blue and the Earth is round."

A recent statewide survey conducted by University of Minnesota researchers found that 89 percent of parents in Minnesota approved of sex ed that included information on abstinence and the prevention of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, while 10 percent supported abstinence only.

"There was a time when the job was simply to teach teens about contraceptives," said Brigid Riley, director of MOAPPP. "But now, with nearly half the kids in the country saying they have already had sex, kids' lives are at risk."

How are the books chosen?

The Minnesota Sexuality Education Review Panel serves as the Ebert & Roeper of sex-ed curricula, giving thumbs up or thumbs down to books, videos and other materials. In addition to educators and health-care workers, the 30-member panel includes a Hmong outreach coordinator, a probation officer and a youth pastor.

The criteria used for determining suitability are based on federal guidelines, including whether it is age-appropriate. A video called "The Talk," for example, was recommended, but the panel advised it be shown to teens 14 and up rather than the "12 and up" printed on the box.

Some of the curricula are targeted at specific student subcultures. The Planned Parenthood-published "Streetwise to Sexwise" is aimed at high-risk youths, which contains more advanced material than another one of its books, "Making Sense of Abstinence."

The "Our Whole Lives" teachers' guide series, which Riley called "the farthest left," is one that might raise a few eyebrows with some of its suggested games and discussions. Divided into three age groups, the series curriculum for grades 10-12 includes condom practice and role-playing involving one friend pressuring another that "real men" don't use condoms when they have sex.

The guide for grades seven through nine includes a game with M&Ms standing for various STDs and safe-sex practices (the object is to get as many brown candies -- which stand for

abstinence-- as possible.). For grades four to six, there's a list of common bodily changes to expect at puberty and an edited explanation of lovemaking (emphasis on the love).

"It's hard for parents to think about this kind of thing when their child is in second grade," said Riley, who has a grown daughter. "But when that child gets to be 11, 12, 13, it becomes very compelling. The stuff we were getting in the 1970s, even the '50s, is more complete than what some kids are getting today."

The Minnesota Family Council's Prichard isn't convinced.

"You can't present all this information and assume that kids will go out and make astute decisions based on what we want them to do," he said.

Riley doesn't see any other choice: "We emphasize that parents are first and foremost in setting parameters and expectations, but the environment kids are growing up in has changed. Crassly, sex education saves us money. Not so crassly, it saves young lives."

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