

# States up funds for abstinence-only sex education

By Molly M. Ginty  
Special to Sentinel-Voice  
WASHINGTON (WOMEN'S E-NEWS) - Avra Feinberg was flummoxed.

When this 16-year-old junior took sex education at her public high school in McLean, Va., her teacher was only allowed to read from the textbook and students were not allowed to ask questions.

"They told us abstinence was the only effective form of birth control and that other methods would fail," says Feinberg, whose last name has been changed to protect her privacy.

"But with so many of us already having sex, that message wasn't very helpful. If our sex-ed classes don't give us complete information, what are we supposed to do?"

Feinberg's question is one being posed by health advocates concerned about the efficacy of abstinence-only sex education programs, which have received \$1 billion in federal funding since 1982 and are now being taught in an estimated one-third of U.S. middle and high schools.

Most recently, the New York-based Sexuality Information and Education Coun-

cil of the United States (SIECUS), added to the concerns being raised about these programs when last month it released "State Profiles: A Portrait of Sexuality Education and Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Programs in the States," which shows a growing number of states are boosting funding for these health courses.

In March, the New York-based American Civil Liberties Union petitioned a federal court to stop the Louisiana Governor's Program on Abstinence from featuring religious material on its official website, AbstinenceEdu.com.

Also last month, a study released by Columbia University in New York showed teens who pledge to remain virgins until marriage are less likely to use condoms than their non-pledging peers, but six times more likely to engage in oral sex and four times more likely to practice anal sex.

"These developments are disturbing because they show we are neglecting American teens, who are in dire need of better sex education," says Deb Hauser, vice president of the Washington, D.C.-based Advocates for Youth.

"Young people in

America have the highest pregnancy rate in the industrialized world, with 1-in-25 teen girls giving birth. They also have one of the highest rates of sexually transmitted diseases, with teens accounting for 25 percent of new STD cases in the U.S.," she said.

The SIECUS study also warns of the consequences of programs like those in South Carolina, where contraception may only be discussed in the context of marriage; where adoption can be discussed, but not abortion and where homosexuality may not be discussed "except in the context of instructions concerning sexually transmitted diseases."

The report touches on a growing concern among health advocates: fear that abstinence-only sex-ed, with its emphasis on sexual shame, conventional values and female culpability, may be doing a disservice to American girls.

"These programs set up a clear dichotomy of 'good girls do and bad girls don't,'" says Martha Kempner, director of public information for SIECUS. "They tell girls that if they have sexual desire, they are not only abnormal, but bad." Released in late

March, the SIECUS report comes on the heels of mounting concerns about abstinence-only sex education.

In early December, a congressional report ordered by Rep. Henry Waxman, a Democrat from California, found that 11 out of 13 popular abstinence-only sex-ed programs contain false or misleading information, teaching teens that, for example, one can contract HIV through saliva, that touching someone's genitals can lead to pregnancy and that abortion can lead to sterility and suicide.

In mid-December, the Department of Health and Human Services reported that one-third of all U.S. teens have not learned about contraception in school.

In January, NBC aired a poll showing that 30 percent of teens between 13 and 16 are already sexually active. In February, a coalition of 210 health organizations demanded that Congress implement formal review of taxpayer-funded abstinence-only sex education programs.

Critics say that abstinence-program teachers are only allowed to talk about birth control in terms of failure rates. They can say condoms have a 3 percent

failure rate; but not that they are 97 percent effective at preventing pregnancy if used correctly.

Health educators are concerned not only about how abstinence-only programs are affecting teen behavior, but about the conservative values these programs promote.

With names like Education Now, Babies Later and Managing Pressures before Marriage, abstinence-only health courses assume marriage and child-rearing are the right choices for all students and disregard the 10 percent of students who are gay or lesbian.

Health advocates say abstinence-only programs also peddle fear.

In a Nevada TV spot cited in the SIECUS report, for instance, a young woman claims sexually active women are three times more likely than virgins to attempt suicide and says some of her friends "have had sex, lost their boyfriends and been left feeling dirty and cheap." Advocates are also challenging the accuracy of abstinence-only sex-ed curriculums, which have been in U.S. schools for nearly a decade.

"There's no scientific evi-

dence that abstinence-only sex-ed actually works," says Bill Albert, a spokesperson for the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, based in Washington, D.C. "Federal funding is flying out the door without any analysis of these programs' effectiveness."

Since President Bush took office in January 2001, federal funding for abstinence-only initiatives has more than doubled.

Though the government will funnel \$170 million into these programs in 2005, the kind of comprehensive sex-ed that was popular in the 1990s (which includes complete information about safe sex, condom use and birth control) will receive no dedicated funding.

"Comprehensive sex-ed is backed by 30 years of research proving it works," says Deb Hauser of Advocates for Youth.

"This approach delays the onset of sexual activity and increases contraception use. While abstinence is an admirable goal, it's unrealistic to think that young people will wait. We need to respect teens by empowering them instead of treating them like hormonal accidents that are just waiting to happen."

## Ministers

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who also attended the Nashville conference, says the key to avoiding a repeat of last November will be to educate and equip members during the organizations' conventions, so that clear information on political focuses and agendas can be taken back to communities and spread.

"You educate them clearly by starting early, talking to them, not only on a national scale but on a grassroots level," Jemison says. "What we're seeing now is a total disregard for the very issues that they campaigned on during the election. We hear nothing now about same-sex marriages. I think reality has set in the Black community that this administration does not have their best interest at heart and that they became a pawn that was used for the re-election of the president." Some Black clergy acknowledge that they're in a dilemma.

"We're kind of put in the middle of the road because, in regards to these issues, we're going to kind of line up...with the Republicans and Christian right," says the Rev. Charles Blake Jr., community relations director at the West Angeles Church of



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—Rev. Major L. Jemison

God in Christ in Los Angeles.

"But, when it comes down to the programs and the policies that are enacted to help out the poor people of our community, we're lined up somewhat more with the Democrats." The answer is pulling away from both parties and becoming independent, Blake says.

"They've put us in a position of where we, as an African-American church community will have to come up with our own agenda or our own platform as to what's going to benefit the African-American community at large," he said.

Black churches must unify, says activist and civil rights minister, the Rev. Albert "Al" Sampson, pastor of Fernwood United Method-

ist Church in Chicago.

"I would hope that ministers on both sides of the issue would call a national summit of dialog. I think it's very important that we put White folks out of our house, out of our business, out of our churches and come together as brothers and sisters called by the God of our ancestors," Sampson says.

"This is causing a split from the pulpit to the pews. Brothers and sisters should come and reason together." He says planning meetings for Nation of Islam Minister Louis Farrakhan's second Million Man March next fall might be good settings to rally around.

"The dialogue can begin in major cities around the Million Man March mobilization, so that by the time we

get to the 10th year anniversary (Oct. 14, 15, 16), a lot of dust will be settled; a lot of wounds will be healed, because we should have a covenant among ourselves."

Such meetings always have the potential to become volatile. Some clergy have expressed anger towards others who have supported President Bush's "faith-based initiatives." Says Lowery, "While there are some who are opportunistic, we need to engage in serious, honest brotherly and sisterly dialogue."

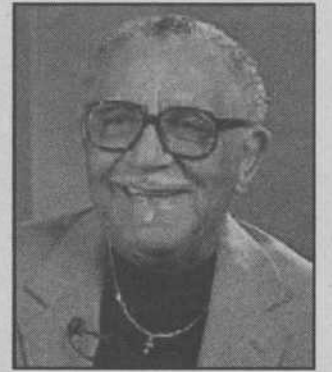
Any strategy should include sending a message to the Democrat Party, which normally wins 90 percent of Black voters, says Susan Johnson Cook, president of the 10,000-member Hampton (Va.) Ministers Conference.

"I think President Bush actually campaigned better, to be very honest. Politics has its target communities, and he actually targeted the Black Christian communities as well as the White Christian communities, so more people responded," says Cook, pastor of the Believers Christian Fellowship Church in Harlem.

"I think the campaign

*"We never did just one thing. We never just marched. We never just picketed. We did it all. We negotiated. We adjudicated, we marched, we picketed, we went to jail, we registered to vote, we voted. We had to do all those things, and we need to do them all now."*

—Rev. Joseph Lowery



could have been run better on the Democratic side. Now that's just a basic. ...We're not voting as emotionally anymore. It's also kind of, 'Give me some information.'" If Black churches were to get more active in dealing with social ills, then people would be less apt to become distracted and they would learn more, says the Rev. Willie Barrow, minister of justice at the Vernon Park Baptist Church in Chicago and long-time member of the Rainbow/PUSH board of directors.

"Every church has got to expand its ministry in this new age to deal with homeless, deal with poverty, deal with education and deal with health care," says Barrow. "If you get the people involved, then they will see the injus-

tics. Most people don't even know their Congressman. They don't even know their aldermen or their council members. We are not so much divided as we are disconnected."

Former Alabama State Sen. Charles Steele, Jr., president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, agrees. "We must go back to the basics. The basics being that we must represent disenfranchised people, which happen to be Black folks, people of color and poor White folks," Steele says.

"And the point being, you can't allow any strategy by the opposition to get us off of our foundation, to get us off of our mission. I don't care what your religious faith is. If you're Black, you're catching hell."