



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

TESTIMONY IN OPPOSITION TO SENATE BILL 324 AND ASSEMBLY BILL 458: HUMAN GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT INSTRUCTION

Presented by Kim Wadas, Associate Director

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My name is Kim Wadas and I am the Associate Director for Education and Health Care at the Wisconsin Catholic Conference. On behalf of Wisconsin's Catholic bishops, I strongly urge you not to support Senate Bill 324 or its companion, Assembly Bill 458.

Human sexuality is both intensely personal and social in its consequences, and what we teach our children about sexuality today has implications for the kind of society we will live in tomorrow.

We recognize that opinions differ as to the best way to educate children about their sexuality and reduce adolescent pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STI). We are among those who teach children to avoid unintended pregnancies and STIs by delaying sexual activity until marriage. Others maintain that expanding access to contraception is the surest way to achieve these goals.

Whatever our position, however, we have to remember that parents have the first and most important responsibility for educating their children. Public laws and educational policies can either support and affirm parents as the primary teachers, or they can undermine parental authority and responsibility.

Our current law on human growth and development instruction (Wis. Stat. s. 118.019) recognizes that parents need help in providing moral guidance to their children and it therefore supports giving local school boards the discretion and flexibility to create the education programs that are best suited to the needs of their students and communities. Some school boards have chosen the comprehensive sex education approach. Others have chosen to focus on abstinence and character education.

These bills, on the other hand, discount the moral nature of this issue and substitute the authority of the state for that of parents and local school boards. They do so in two main ways.

Criteria for Funding. The bills mandate that if the Department of Instruction applies for federal funds for teen pregnancy prevention programs, these programs must, among other things, demonstrate an increase in contraceptive use.

Such a mandate effectively devalues abstinence as a message to our youth. It devalues as well the parents who want to convey that message to their children. It sends the message to the

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federal government that all Wisconsin residents back comprehensive sex education. This is simply not the case. The Legislature should not tie the hands of school boards, and through them parents, in this manner. If school boards choose to adopt sex education programs that do not promote contraception, they should be free to do so.

Use of Volunteers. The bills also privilege a certain kind of volunteer health care provider to come into the schools to teach human growth and development. Currently, volunteer health care providers are prohibited from teaching certain subjects regarding sex education in schools. If these bills were to pass, volunteers would be permitted to provide instruction on sex education, though only those who promote contraceptive use would be able to fulfill all the mandatory subject requirements. Any program or volunteer health care provider who questioned the "health benefits" of contraceptives for children could be denied admission. As they could not provide instruction on all required subjects, supplementary instruction would be required. Again, this is discriminatory and represents an unwarranted intrusion of the state into the lives of families.

Today, more than ever before, society understands the tremendous costs associated with child and teen sexual activity. More than ever, parents and teachers need to give students the support and practical tools they need to withstand the enormous pressures to engage in premature sexual activity. Such an education is not just about avoiding pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases or avoiding feelings of being used, abused, or betrayed. The best education teaches children to develop their unique character and potential, to grow in their capacity for love and responsibility. It helps them to learn from past mistakes and change potentially damaging behavior.

Rather than dictating a uniform approach for all sex education programs across the state, the Legislature should focus its efforts on encouraging all parents, educators, health practitioners, and other concerned citizens to create diverse and innovative ways to address the moral and health care crises affecting our youth.

For all these reasons, I urge you not to advance Senate Bill 324 and Assembly Bill 458.

Thank you.