



SEX EDUCATION IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

INTRODUCTION

In early November, the Assembly debated and passed Assembly Bill 458, described by supporters as the “Healthy Youth Act.” This bill would significantly change the rules for providing sex education in public schools grades K-12. The WCC opposes AB 458 and its companion bill, Senate Bill 324.

CURRENT LAW

Currently, the decision to provide instruction in human growth and development rests with local school boards. Some school boards choose not to offer instruction in this area at all. Others stress abstinence and character education. Still others offer “comprehensive” sex education, so-called because it teaches about contraception in addition to abstinence. The law only requires that if school boards provide instruction, they must adhere to the following provisions.

First, a school district must respect the principle of local control and parental involvement by appointing an advisory committee composed of parents, teachers, school administrators, pupils, health care professionals, members of the clergy, and other residents of the school district to assist with the development, review, and implementation of the curriculum.

Second, a school district that provides instruction in this area has the flexibility to include any of the following in its curriculum:

1. self-esteem, responsible decision making, and personal responsibility;
2. interpersonal relationships;
3. discouragement of adolescent sexual activity;
4. family life and skills required of a parent;
5. human sexuality, reproduction, family planning (including natural family planning);
6. human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS);
7. prenatal development, childbirth;
8. adoption, available prenatal and postnatal support, and male and female responsibility.

However, if a local school district includes subject areas 5-8 above, it must ensure that abstinence, marriage, and parental responsibility are all covered in the same course.

Nothing in current law prohibits instruction on contraceptives. Indeed, Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) currently teaches comprehensive sex education, which includes a detailed review of contraceptive methods.

Current law also permits a volunteer health care provider to come into the school and provide direct instruction, but only in the subject areas 1-4 listed above. Volunteers are explicitly prohibited from teaching in the sexuality areas 5-8 listed above.

PROPOSED CHANGES

While the Healthy Youth Act would not mandate that school districts provide sex education, only comprehensive sex education programs could be used if they did. Programs that focus solely or principally on abstinence and character education would not meet the requirements of the bill. In effect, this would

mean that parents and school districts would be restricted in the choice of programs they can offer school children.

The Healthy Youth Act requires each school board that elects not to offer human growth and development instruction to notify each parent or guardian of this fact. In short, the bill would make the school district look negligent for not adopting a comprehensive sex education program.

It also would allow a volunteer health care provider to teach the entire human growth and development curriculum in the schools. As noted above, this is not permitted currently. Many of our cash-strapped public schools districts will find it hard to resist this offer of volunteer instruction from groups like Planned Parenthood.

At the same time, the Healthy Youth Act would prohibit teen pregnancy prevention programs from accessing federal grant funds through the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) unless these programs could demonstrate “increased use of contraceptives.” This change would effectively prevent abstinence and character education programs from applying for federal funds through the DPI.

Finally, the Healthy Youth Act would prohibit showing any “bias” against students who are sexually active.

WCC POSITION

Truly comprehensive and healthy sex education teaches students that sexuality is integral to their whole well-being – physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual. It teaches that saving sexual activity for marriage is the surest way to express that totality, to ensure that children will grow up in a stable environment, and to avoid harm. It teaches that trust, fidelity, and friendship are fostered best when individuals exercise responsibility and self-control.

The most effective sex education requires the involvement of parents, not their replacement. Current law should be retained because it fosters parental involvement and local control, allows schools to send the message that children should not be sexually active, and provides the flexibility to develop a variety of effective approaches.

ACTION REQUESTED

Assembly Bill 458 and Senate Bill 324 are available for Senate action any time after mid-January. Please call or write your state Senator urging that neither bill be advanced and that current law be retained. To find contact information for your Senator, go to www.legis.state.wi.us or call the Legislative Hotline at 1-800-362-9472. Reasons to oppose include:

1. Diminishes the role of parents and local communities in educating children on a grave moral and health matter.
2. Encourages rather than discourages youth to engage in sexual activity because it prohibits any “bias” against sexually active students and requires that programs demonstrate increased contraceptive use.
3. Restricts the ability of local school districts to offer effective abstinence and character education programs in public schools.

For more information, please contact Barbara Sella at 608/257-0004.