

WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

EYE ON THE CAPITOL

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MAKING SERIOUS CHOICES ABOUT SEX EDUCATION IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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At the end of nearly every legislative floor period, one or two issues galvanize citizen interest. For the floor period that ended on November 5, a debate over how to best instruct schoolchildren about sexuality was one such issue.

In early November, the Assembly debated and narrowly passed Assembly Bill 428. This bill, described by supporters as the “Healthy Youth Act”, would change the rules for providing sex education in important ways.

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. 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, the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) district, for example, currently teaches comprehensive sex education, which includes a detailed review of contraceptive methods.

Current law also permits a volunteer health care provider (e.g., a nurse) to provide 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.

The “Healthy Youth Act” changes current law in important ways.

AB 458 would not require school districts to provide sex education, but only comprehensive sex education programs could be used if they did. Programs that focus solely on abstinence and character education would be prohibited.

AB 458 also 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 Act would make the school district look negligent for not adopting a comprehensive sex education program.

AB 458 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 free instructional staff from groups like Planned Parenthood.

At the same time, AB 458 would prohibit teen pregnancy prevention programs from accessing federal grant funds through the Department of Public Instruction unless these programs could demonstrate “increased use of contraceptives.” This change would effectively bar all abstinence and character education programs from federal funding.

More than ever, we need to help our children resist the enormous pressures to engage in sexual activity. We need to develop positive and innovative programs that truly help students grow in their capacity for love and responsibility. By the way we live, we need to show them that abstinence and marriage work.

AB 458 has passed the Assembly. The Senate will have a chance to consider it in January. Between now and then, citizens need to educate their Senators on the problems inherent in the bill and to ask them not to advance it.

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