

We Must Provide Medically Accurate Information to Our Teens

By Melissa Reed

Did you know that your tax dollars are being spent to teach our students medically inaccurate information about sex, including that using a condom is akin to pointing a loaded gun at your head? Well, it's true.

Last year, NARAL Pro-Choice North Carolina and the ACLU of North Carolina released a study that examined the sex education curricula used in six of North Carolina's largest counties. We discovered that three commonly used abstinence-only curricula are promoting misinformation and hiding the facts from our kids. And, that these curricula are now being taught in at least 24 other North Carolina school districts. As a mother, and a taxpayer, I am frightened by this news.

The "abstinence-only" curricula we analyzed cite medically inaccurate information as fact and convey biased and misleading stereotypes that excuse and thus may encourage male sexual aggressiveness and undermine teens' decision-making skills. Some of the blatant and dangerous falsehoods in the curricula used in Cumberland and New Hanover counties, and in at least 24 other school districts across the state, include the following inaccurate information:

- Inflated failure rates of condoms in preventing pregnancy or transmission of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).
- The teacher's guide for one text, titled *Me, My World, My Future* equates condom use with holding a loaded gun to your head in a game of Russian roulette.
- *Sex Respect* teaches, "a guy who wants to respect girls is distracted by sexy clothes and remembers her for one thing. Is it fair that guys are turned on by their senses and women turned on by their hearts?"
- *Choosing the Best Life*, states that "generally, guys are able to focus better on one activity at a time and may not connect feelings with actions. Girls access both sides of the brain at once, so they often experience feelings and emotions as a part of every situation."

Currently, the U.S. has the highest rates of teen pregnancy in the Western industrialized world, with 866,000 teenagers becoming pregnant each year. According to our state's health officials, North Carolina has the ninth highest pregnancy rate, the seventh highest rate of gonorrhea, and the 18th highest rate of chlamydia in the U.S. It is unacceptable for ideology, instead of science, compassion for our young people, and common sense to drive North Carolina's response to our twin epidemics of teen pregnancy and STD/HIV infections.

Further, the use of these medically inaccurate curricula actually violates North Carolina law. North Carolina law requires that "[a]ny instruction concerning the use of contraceptives or prophylactics shall provide accurate statistical information on their effectiveness and failure rates for preventing pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, in actual use among adolescent populations."

Certainly, sex education programs should encourage abstinence, but they cannot stop there. Comprehensive, medically accurate sex education is the best way to give our teens the skills they

need to delay becoming sexually active and, if they do, to protect themselves against STDs and unintended pregnancies. No credible studies show that abstinence-only programs have a significant impact on participants' initiation or frequency of sex. Rather, by censoring information and offering misinformation, abstinence-only programs can actually harm young people by putting them at risk of STDs and pregnancy. In this instance, what they don't know may, in fact, hurt them. It may well change their lives forever. Young people need facts, not blanket prohibitions.

The best way to reduce teen pregnancy and STDs is to institute abstinence-based curriculums that promote abstinence while giving our students all the facts on how to protect themselves. Only when our teenagers have complete and accurate information can they make appropriate decisions. It's time for our state legislature and the North Carolina State Board of Education to realize the often life-saving benefit of teaching our students the truth.

As parents and taxpayers, we can no longer afford to remain silent. Our voices must be heard in order to wake policymakers up to the fact that North Carolina parents want their kids to be equipped with facts. In fact, in a 2003 parent opinion survey conducted by the NC Department of Public Instruction, 90.5 percent of parents want the schools to provide responsible, medically accurate sex education. Two simple things you can do are: 1) Talk to your child's principal and ask if any of these misleading programs are part of the curriculum; and 2) Contact your legislator and ask them to support honest, realistic sex education in the schools. This quite literally could be a matter of life and death.

Reed is the executive director of NARAL Pro-Choice North Carolina.
