

NO SEX Ed

Congress Pushes Abstinence in the Schools

By Annette Fuentes



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Conservative crusaders for teenage sexual abstinence scored a major victory when Congress passed welfare reform last year. Overshadowed by the welfare-to-work aspects of the new law was a provision to fund programs to teach kids that sex before marriage is not only morally wrong but almost always dangerous to their health. The religious right has been hammering away at sex education programs in local school districts across the country, while pushing programs that send a “sex-equals-death” message. For them, the provision in the welfare law is a multimillion dollar dream. For health experts and educators, it’s a dangerous mix of politics and religion that ignores sound public health practices and the realities of teen sex at a time when AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases are rampant.

Like many parts of welfare reform, the abstinence education provision is part of a conservative strategy to reduce the welfare rolls by attacking out-of-wedlock births. Robert Rector of the Heritage Foundation, the bill’s major advocate, enlisted conservative Republican senators Lauch Faircloth of North Carolina and Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania to create the legislation and introduce it in the Senate as an amendment to Title V of the Social Security Act. The provision, which allo-

cates \$50 million a year starting in 1998, passed with little public discussion or debate and broad bipartisan support. With a required state match of \$3 for every \$4 from the federal government, the abstinence-only initiative will spend \$437 million over the five-year life of the law.

Abstinence-only programs are the Christian right’s response to the sex education provided in varying degrees in public schools for the last 25 years. A comprehensive sex-ed program typically offers age-appropriate information about birth control, abortion and AIDS, portraying sex as healthy and normal while encouraging kids to make wise choices. Experts say that although abstinence from sex should always be part of the message, the realities of teen sexuality require more than a “just-say-no” approach.

Only 22 states, however, mandate any sex education and another 15 states require only HIV/AIDS education. According to the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), just 10 percent of the nation’s schools teach a comprehensive sex-education program. On the other hand, abstinence-only programs have gotten substantial federal support under the Adolescent Family Life Act of 1981, which funneled \$30 million annually to programs that deliv-

ered an abstinence-only message. Funding slowed after 1993, when the Center for Reproductive Law and Family Policy filed a lawsuit charging that the law promoted overtly religious messages. But by then, such right-wing groups as Phyllis Schlafly's Committee on the Status of Women had already obtained grants to create abstinence-only curricula.

Schafly's group funded two of the most widely used programs in public schools, "Sex Respect" and "Choosing the Best." Public health experts call them dangerously inaccurate, biased and moralistic. Until it was recently revised because of criticism, "Choosing the Best" advised teens to wash their genitals with Lysol after condom use to prevent sexually transmitted diseases. "Sex Respect," written in 1985 with \$1 million in state and federal funds, tells kids "there's no way to have premarital sex without hurting someone," refers to abortion as "killing the baby," and implies that the AIDS virus can pass through latex condoms and be transmitted by kissing.

A May 1997 report on abstinence-only programs in California schools by the Public Media Center and the Applied Research Center found that "Sex Respect" portrays black youth, in text and illustrations, as promiscuous, irresponsible and troubled. The report says the program is suffused with a Christian fundamentalist bias that uses moral absolutes instead of sound educational and health principles. How widespread are such extremist curricula? According to the report, 1 in 4 of the country's school districts use abstinence-only curricula and 1 in 8 use "Sex Respect" in particular.

Many states initially balked at applying for the new pot of abstinence funds because of the restrictions on what can be taught and skepticism that abstinence-only programs actually work to postpone teen sex. But in the end, all 50 states submitted funding applications to the federal Maternal and Child Health Bureau, concluding that there is no such thing as bad money in a time of cutbacks.

But state health and education officials have found themselves caught between a rock and a hard place. Dan Daley, policy analyst at SIECUS, said he got many calls from frantic state officials. "They were very conflicted," he says. "They wanted to do an application that was good public health and not political." In his review of 40 state applications, he found that the majority planned some media campaigns and would target youngsters under 14, those for whom an abstinence message is most effective. "States have tried to make lemonade out of lemons," he says. "The plans show public health officials struggling to put together plans based on sound principles."

Enter the National Coalition for Abstinence Education (NCAE). Like a highway patrol cop waiting at a speed trap, the newly formed coalition anticipated that public health offi-

cialists might not take the abstinence-only initiative seriously enough. "Congress had an extremely narrow intent for these dollars," says Peter Brandt, the coalition's coordinator. "There was a feeling among a lot of people when this law passed that states would go in the opposite direction and attempt to sabotage the intent. And there was a feeling that the Maternal and Child Health Bureau wouldn't provide the critical oversight needed."

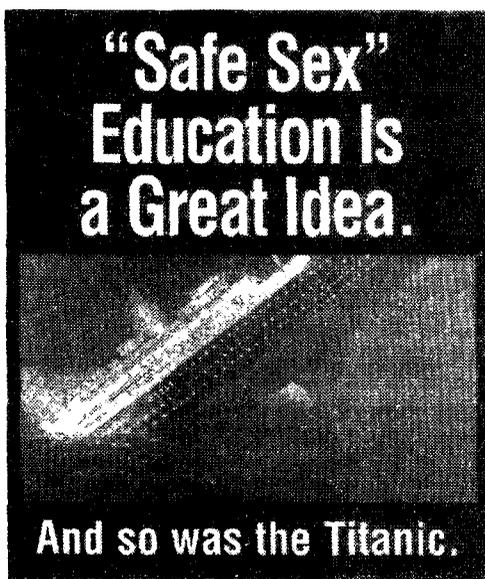
Brandt says the coalition is just an amalgam of some 62 grass-roots groups and is run by "a couple of volunteers in a couple of offices spread out over the United States." But among the members are several of the largest and most politically potent conservative organizations in the country: the Eagle Forum, the Family Research Council and Focus on the Family. Sources say Focus on the Family, which like the coalition is based in Colorado Springs, is the real muscle and money behind the abstinence effort. Its founder, James Dobson, who proselytizes a conservative Christian agenda on his nationally syndicated talk radio show, rails against comprehensive sex ed as a tool of homosexuals and leftists. In September, his group, which is the largest publisher of abstinence-only educational material in the country, took out

full-page ads in newspapers in several states, condemning sex education for failing to prevent teen pregnancies and exhorting governors to adopt abstinence-only programs.

In October, the coalition sent out letters to the heads of all 50 maternal and child health programs announcing its intentions to review all state funding applications and issue "compliance report cards" on each state's adherence to "the spirit and letter of the legislation." The report cards, meant to look like official documents, declare that they were compiled by a national panel of abstinence-centered authorities. High grades went to proposals that targeted kids from ages 9 to 19, did few or no media campaigns, focused on classroom instruction, hewed to all eight parts of the federal abstinence-only definition (see "The

ABC's of Abstinence-Only Education," page 18), and gave abstinence advocates a dominant role in shaping the proposal. Failing grades went to state proposals that were media-heavy and promoted an abstinence message that included such terms as "non-judgmental, respectful, culturally relevant and not fear-based."

Proof of the coalition's clout surfaced quickly. In the spring, the Oklahoma Family Council, a coalition member, reviewed a copy of the state's funding application. According to sources, conservative Rep. Tom Coburn contacted Gov. Frank Keating and persuaded him to revise the application according to the coalition's wishes. In a letter to Oklahoma's health commissioner, the coalition's Brandt wrote: "We honor you for



The conservative group Focus on the Family took out this full-page ad in the Charleston, W.Va., Gazette.

your wisdom and courage in submitting an amended plan. ... We had completed a report card on your original plan, but put it on hold after learning that an amended plan would be written. Your original plan received a grade of F." Roland Foster, a spokesman for Coburn, said he wasn't aware of Coburn's conversations with the governor, but acknowledged that Coburn had worked with state health department officials to put together the revised application. As for Coburn's interactions with the coalition and its Oklahoma affiliates, he says, "We know these people. We appreciate their goals. We support what they're doing."

The coalition has fewer supporters in Maine, where Gov. Angus King has publicly declared his opposition to abstinence-only programs. Not surprisingly, Maine's proposal got an F, and health officials there received a letter from Brandt stating: "NCAE hereby denounces the Maine state plan and encourages all abstinence organizations and advocates in Maine to publicly do the same. ... In too many states, abstinence-centered programs are being planned to simply oblige the philosophy and structure of comprehensive sex education. This is not what Congress intended."

Although Maine had been reluctant to apply for the abstinence money because of its limitations, "after a great deal of discussion including the governor, we felt the money could be used to augment our work," says DeEtte Hall, program man-

ager for Maine's Teen and Young Adult Health Program. "We're doing a fairly good job of abstinence-based comprehensive family life education. We have the third lowest teen pregnancy rate in the country. We don't want to jeopardize that." Maine proposes to spend its entire \$172,000 grant on TV ads promoting parent-child communication. Hall wasn't concerned about opponents, who are a vocal but small presence, and was confident that Maine's proposal would sail through the approval process.

But the pressure is intense. State health officials targeted by the coalition's report-card campaign have been inundated by calls from conservative religious activists. "Our folks are getting caught in the middle of varying agendas," says Catherine Hess, executive director of the Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs in Washington, D.C. "There is concern about the level of monitoring by interest groups at the beginning stages of the program. The amount of energy it takes to respond to the letters and calls detracts from moving on and draws energy away from other important work."

Brandt downplays the coalition's influence. "We're just an ad hoc coalition," says Brandt. "We can't go into states and spank anybody." The ultimate arbiter of whether states are adhering to the letter of congressional law must be Congress itself, Brandt says. The coalition, however, has the ear and sympathies of conservative Republicans—and some Democrats—in

Congress and in the state houses. "They've asked us to keep records of our monitoring and possible misspending of the federal funding," says Brandt of certain Congress members whom he declined to name.

Lost in the conservative drive to control teenagers' sexuality are the kids themselves. For most of them, all the messages about abstinence and sex only in the context of marriage go in one ear and out the other. More than half of all teens have had intercourse by age 18. Every year, 3 million teens are infected with sexually transmitted diseases, and AIDS is now the sixth leading cause of death for youth aged 15 to 24. Abstinence-only programs that tell kids, "Pet your dog, not your date" or "Don't be a louse, wait for your spouse" are a pathetic defense. Does arming them with a condom make the world a safer place? Substantial evidence says it can, in concert with other tools and information. But for religious conservatives, keeping kids safe is not the goal. "What impact will the abstinence-only message have on AIDS prevention?" says Susan Flinn of Advocates for Youth in Washington, D.C. "It says to me that these people don't care at all about young people at risk of contracting AIDS." ■

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THE ABC'S OF ABSTINENCE-ONLY EDUCATION

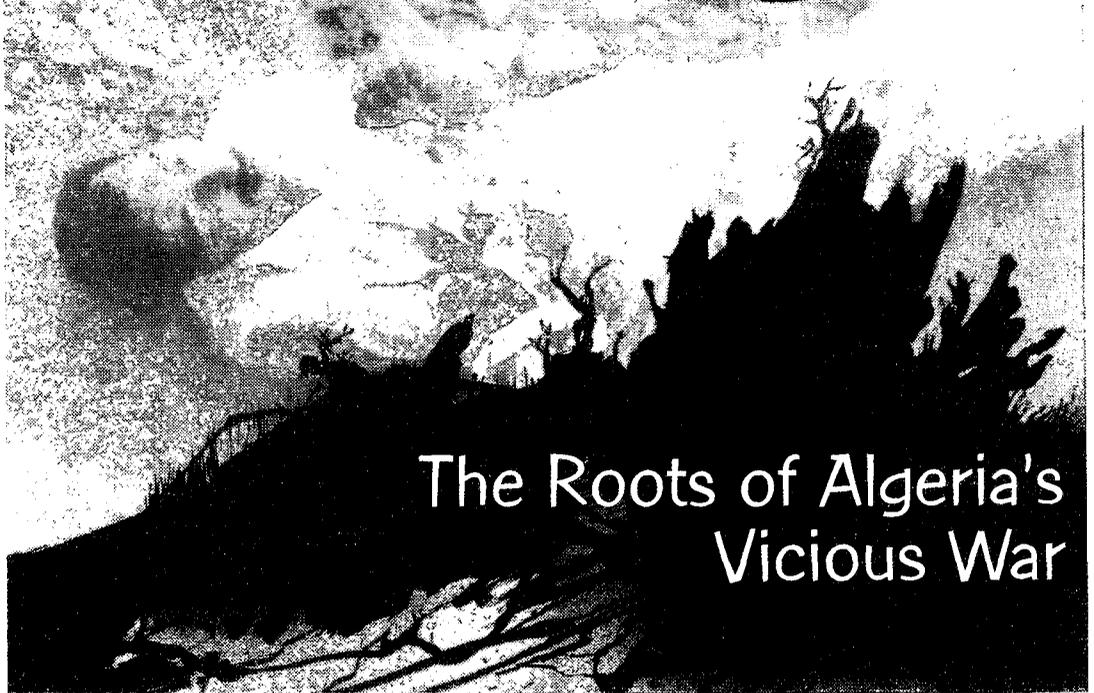
The Heritage Foundation created the definition for abstinence-only education that was used in the federal initiative. The definition consists of eight principles, but states are instructed that "it is not necessary to place equal emphasis on each element of the definition" as long as their proposed programs don't contradict any single element. Conservative activists use these principles as a yardstick to measure states' commitment to abstinence-only education, demanding that all elements be reflected in their funding proposals.

Abstinence education, according to the definition, means an educational or motivational program that:

- A.** has as its exclusive purpose teaching the social, psychological and health gains to be realized by abstaining from sexual activity;
- B.** teaches abstinence from sexual activity outside marriage as the expected standard for all school-age children;
- C.** teaches that abstinence from sexual activity is the only certain way to avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases and other associated health problems;
- D.** teaches that a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity;
- E.** teaches that sexual activity outside of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects;
- F.** teaches that bearing children out-of-wedlock is likely to have harmful consequences for the child, the child's parents and society;
- G.** teaches young people how to reject sexual advances and how alcohol and drug use increases vulnerability to sexual advances;
- H.** teaches the importance of attaining self-sufficiency before engaging in sexual activity. —**A.F.** ■

The Battle of Algiers

BY JAMES CIMENT



The Roots of Algeria's Vicious War

The Algiers suburb of Bentalha is a bleak place in the best of times. A maze of dusty streets wind their way around crumbling brick buildings and heaps of burning refuse. Tens of thousands of people live piled on top of each other; extended families share a single apartment with the latrine out back.

The young women escape to the rooftops; the young men, mostly unemployed high school graduates, hang out in the streets and squares, earning the Algerian epithet, *hittiste*, which translates as “those who keep the walls standing” (by leaning against them).

This tedium was shattered on the night of September 22, when the Armed Islamic Group (GIA, its French acronym) descended on the suburb. In four hours of mayhem and bloodshed, the guerrillas massacred more than 85 people.

The scene that greeted rescue workers the next morning was horrific but all too familiar—disemboweled, mutilated and burned bodies on street corners and in living rooms. Bentalha is just one in a series of massacres (three in September alone) that have terrorized the suburbs and towns south of the capital—a region Algerians call “the triangle of death.”

An estimated 60,000 to 100,000 people have lost their lives since the conflict between militant Islamists and government security forces began in early 1992, after the military canceled elections that the fundamentalist Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) was poised to win. Yet the Algerian conflict makes barely a ripple on the global stage because few foreign journalists have

visited the country since a 1993 *fatwa* was issued by Islamist guerrillas calling for the death of “foreign infidels.”

Algeria is unique among the nations of the Arab world. The country was colonized by the Europeans longer than any other Arab nation (from 1830 to 1962) and has undergone the only real anti-colonial struggle in the Arab world (aside, perhaps, from the Palestinians). This history has bestowed on Algerians a complicated mix of revolutionary pride, war-induced secretiveness, deep Muslim faith and Western tastes.

The National Liberation Front (FLN), which led the country to independence from France in a bitter eight-year conflict, ruled Algeria for the nation's first 30 years. Combining a strident anti-imperialist foreign policy with state-led economic development, the FLN lifted Algeria from the colonial morass in which the French had left it to the higher rungs of the Third World ladder. The literacy rate doubled to over 75 percent among men (women still languished below 50 percent), and infant mortality fell by two-thirds.

Blessed with massive fossil fuel reserves discovered shortly before independence, FLN leaders spent lavishly on social welfare programs, industrial infrastructure and themselves. Over time, the party grew corrupt, nepotistic, inefficient and incompetent. With the collapse of oil prices in the '80s, the country nearly went broke, amassing a foreign debt of more than \$26 billion by the early '90s. Austerity measures