

Dirty Words? Mandated Sex Education *By Jamie Keith*

In classrooms throughout Alabama, school administrators and teachers are providing students with learning opportunities that will serve them well during childhood, adolescence and adulthood.

A detailed course of study is defined for all grades and the requirements for graduation are established.

However, in one critical area, critics say Alabama is not adequately addressing the educational needs of its students.



Sex
education

photo©istockPhoto.com

Alabama does not mandate sex education in public schools and, as a result, students may not be receiving the knowledge and information they need to prevent unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Alabama Law, Act No. 92-590, defines the minimum contents to be included in sex education programs or curricula in schools where sex education is taught. Specifically related to sex education, the act requires that “as a minimum” programs must include and emphasize:

“...Abstinence from sexual intercourse is the only completely effective protection against unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) when transmitted sexually.”

The act also requires that programs and curricula include and emphasize:

“...Statistics based on the latest medical information that indicate the degree of reliability and unreliability of various forms of contraception, while also emphasizing the increase in protection against pregnancy and protection against sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV and AIDS infection, which is afforded by the use of various contraceptive measures.”

Are You Implementing the Law?

A question facing local education authorities, school administrators and educators is: “Can schools implement proven effective prevention programs that meet the requirements of Alabama law stated in Act No. 92-590?”

It is alarming that during 2006, 34 percent of all reported cases of sexually transmitted diseases in Alabama infected teenagers. Also of significant concern is the increase in the state’s teen pregnancy rate during 2006 to 39.6, up from a rate of 37.5 in 2005. The increases in teen pregnancy and teen STD rates are compelling reasons for the education community to review the act defining sex education in Alabama public schools and implement programs that meet the requirements of the act.

Do You Understand the Problem?

We must understand the complex issues that contribute to the participation of Alabama's youth in sexual risk behaviors in order to reverse the STD epidemic among teens and reduce the rate of teen pregnancy in this state. With this understanding, we can begin to select and implement prevention strategies that are evidence-based and have been proven effective in preventing teen pregnancy and teen STD. There are effective, science-based prevention programs that have a strong abstinence message and that provide medically accurate information about the reliability and unreliability of contraceptives and condoms.

A recent study released by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy detailed research findings on programs to reduce teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Some of the programs identified in the study focus on both abstinence and information on various methods of contraception. It is important to note that there are also service-learning programs highlighted in the study that have strong evidence of reducing teen pregnancy rates while young people are enrolled in the program.

Are You 'Willing' to Face this Complex Issue?

Another question facing local education authorities is: "Will schools implement pregnancy and HIV/AIDS prevention programs?" The issues of teen pregnancy and teen STD are complex, complicated and often controversial. While supporting abstinence as the only completely effective way to protect the physical, spiritual, emotional, psychological and mental well-being of youth, sex education programs in Alabama's public schools should also provide students with evidence-based, proven effective sex education that gives them the knowledge and skills they need to ensure a future free of unintended pregnancy and STD — not only during their teen years but throughout their adult lives.

Nearly all teenagers are at risk of pregnancy and STD because most teens will experience pressure to have sex at

some time during adolescence. Abstinence from sexual activity is the most effective method of pregnancy and STD prevention. Ideally, one would hope the abstinence message would be enough to prevent teens from engaging in sexual behavior while serving to protect their spiritual, emotional, psychological and mental well-being. Realistically, however, public health data and student surveys indicate that a message that stresses abstinence and includes complete and medically accurate information about contraception and condoms may be necessary.

What is the School Board's Role?

There is concern in the education community about these important health issues and the lasting impact they have on the lives of teens and their families. There is also a growing interest in identifying and implementing effective prevention programs in the school setting. What roles do school boards have in assessing the needs of youth in their school systems and encouraging the implementation of effective prevention programs? School boards may...

- ◆ Provide leadership for policymaking.
- ◆ Define a vision for fully developing young people.
- ◆ Monitor the needs of youth in local communities and set or revise policies based on identified needs.
- ◆ Direct the superintendent to address the issue of teen pregnancy prevention through policy implementation.
- ◆ Partner with other community organizations for the purpose of communication and community outreach.
- ◆ Ensure programs are available that enhance student achievement and health development.
- ◆ Provide resources for effective teen pregnancy programs.

Implementing evidence-based programs that have been proven effective in reducing sexual risk-taking behaviors should be a goal of all local education authorities. These programs can be implemented in accordance with Act 92-590. ■



Jamie Keith is executive director of the Alabama Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. She may be contacted at acptp@bellsouth.net

President Signs Supplemental with Medicaid Provision

President George W. Bush signed legislation June 30 that saves the Medicaid Administrative Claiming program administered through the Alabama Association of School Boards for now.

The War Supplemental Appropriations legislation included a moratorium on the Medicaid rule eliminating certain transportation and administration reimbursements to schools. The Senate's vote on the measure, which included the same language as the House,

passed in June by an overwhelming 92-6 margin.

Now that the bill has been signed, federal Medicaid reimbursements to schools for identifying and providing needed services for Medicaid-eligible children with disabilities will continue until at least April 1, 2009. Without Congressional action, the MAC program was set to end June 30.

A temporary win, Congressional leaders now have until April 2009 to find a permanent solution.

AASB Executive Director Sally Howell said the association supports the MAC program as an excellent example of a partnership between public schools and the state Medicaid Agency to enable point-of-service delivery for students in need. Howell also said AASB will continue to work closely with the National School Boards Association and the Alabama Congressional delegation on this issue because the MAC program provides critical revenue for schools and services to eligible children. ■