

Miseducation: The Lowdown on Abstinence-Only Sex-Education Programs

by Heidi Bruggink

IN LATE OCTOBER 2006 New Jersey became the fourth state to reject federal funding for sex education programs. Thanks to Bush administration mandates, accepting the federal money would have required the state to abandon its existing comprehensive sex-ed curriculum, and instead rely exclusively on abstinence-only programs. But though New Jersey's decision and similar ones by California, Connecticut, and Maine are encouraging, not every state has the luxury of turning down federal dollars. And that's bad news for those concerned about reproductive health.

While the U.S. government will spend over \$241 million in federal funding on abstinence-only programs in 2007, there's good reason to doubt the effectiveness of the Bush administration's preferred approach. A recent General Accountability Office study concluded that abstinence-only programs suffer from a lack of oversight and found little evidence that they succeed at preventing teen pregnancy. Another study, released in 2004 by Rep. Henry Waxman (D-CA), found that over 80 percent of abstinence-only curricula supported by the Department of Health & Human Services (HHS) contained false, misleading, or distorted information about abortion, contraception, and gender roles, and routinely presented religious beliefs as scientific fact. The results of the Bush administration's promotion of abstinence-only curricula speak for themselves: the nation's teen birth rate, teen pregnancy rate, and abortion rate all remain the highest in the industrialized world.

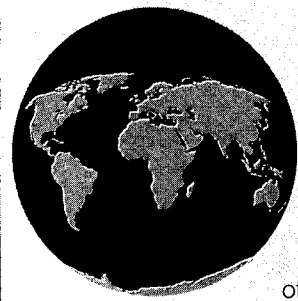
A closer look at the abstinence-only programs that have received federal funding suggests further cause for concern. In 2004 the HHS Capital Compassion Fund announced over \$58 million in grants to "grass-roots, faith-based" organizations, including groups like Catholic Charities of Kansas City and Lutheran Family Services of Nebraska. Among

the many examples of abstinence-only programs being run with federal dollars by groups with explicitly religious missions is the Silver Ring Thing (SRT). SRT—which urges teens to pledge to refrain from sex until marriage and to make a public show of their commitment by wearing a symbolic silver ring—is the primary outreach of the John Guest Team, whose parent company, the John Guest Evangelistic Team, works, according to its website, "to communicate the message of Jesus Christ to the unchurched through creative, media-based and one-on-one evangelism."

A review of other abstinence-only sex-ed programs only further reinforces the religious undertones being utilized in public schools. The Why kNOw? program directly paraphrases 1 Corinthians 13:4 to describe the true meaning of love: "Real Love is patient; is kind; does not envy; does not

cartoon Mike Lester





The fifth annual

Reporters Without Borders Worldwide Press Freedom Index was issued October 24, 2006, ranking the level of freedom enjoyed by the press in


168 nations. The good news is that very poor countries can still be very observant of freedom of expression. The bad news is that the most repressive countries remain so, and certain Western democracies are experiencing a steady erosion of press freedom.

The United States (53rd) has fallen nine places since last year, after being in seventeenth position in the first year of the Index, in 2002.

War, welcome changes of regime, and the fallout from the Danish cartoons depicting Mohammed were all cited as factors affecting the scores this year. For a complete list of rankings go to: www.rsf.org.

2006 Ranking	Country	2005 Ranking
1 (tied)	Finland/Iceland/ Ireland/Netherlands	1
5	Czech Republic	9
6	Estonia	11
-	Norway	1
8	Slovakia	8
-	Switzerland	1
10	Hungary	12
16	Bolivia	45
19	Denmark	1
-	Bosnia-Herzegovina	33
34	Ghana	66
51	Japan	37
53	United States	44
50	Israel	47
133	Sudan	139
134	Palestinian Authority	132
141	Sri Lanka	115
154	Iraq	157
159	Nepal	160
160	Ethiopia	131
161	Saudi Arabia	154
162	Iran	164
163	China	159
164	Burma	163
165	Cuba	161
166	Eritrea	166
167	Turkmenistan	165
168 (of 168)	North Korea	167 (of 167)

condoms don't work simply use protection less often—they don't engage in sex at a lesser rate.

Clearly, we do our young people a great disservice by continuing to use such misleading and dangerous curricula. The Bush administration's reliance on abstinence-only sex ed confronts advocates of a more comprehensive (and effective) approach with a strategic challenge: How can we promote healthy sex education without being viewed as morally deficient? Like it or not, many parents remain anxious that comprehensive sex ed takes what they view as one of their most sensitive parenting tasks out of their hands, and puts it into those of teachers and administrators whom they may not trust. Even the most widely effective and highly promoted comprehensive sex-ed programs, such as "Making Proud Choices" and "Draw the Line/Respect the Line," still include decision-making skills that stress personal choice and limit-setting—topics parents may prefer to teach their children themselves. Public health educators must find a way to maintain or at least respect parental control and personal choice while stressing the need to provide effective factual information to teens. 

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