

## Under Increased Pressure, Abstinence-only Advocates Intensify Campaign to Protect Their Funding

In April, a nine-year, \$8 million, congressionally mandated evaluation of federally funded abstinence-only-until-marriage education programs found that these programs have no statistically significant beneficial impact on young people's sexual behavior (related article, Spring 2007, page 2). In July, when the Bush administration touted the 25% decline in the U.S. teen sexual activity rate between 1991 and 2005 in releasing a new report, it was soon after revealed that all of the decline occurred by 2001 and that the rate has remained flat even as public dollars for abstinence-only education have grown exponentially. (Other research has credited improved contraceptive use for the bulk of the decline.) Faced with this latest evidence that abstinence-only-until-marriage programming is ineffective, advocates are pursuing a major lobbying and public relations campaign to preserve the funding it receives.

A key component of this campaign is a well-publicized survey conducted by Zogby International for the recently formed National Abstinence Education Association (NAEA) purporting to show broad public support for abstinence-only education and much weaker support for comprehensive sex education. Upon closer inspection, however, it is clear that the survey—acknowledged by a Zogby associate to be primarily an exercise in “message-testing”—relies on false or misleading information to move respondents toward its desired positions rather than truly

gauge public opinion. In the poll, most of the 1,002 parents of children ages 10–16 surveyed initially said they favored comprehensive sex education over abstinence education. However, after being told that abstinence education permits “age appropriate discussion of contraceptives” and “information on condom usage skills” (when, in fact, only negative information about contraception is permitted) and that the abstinence message “ends up being lost” in comprehensive sex education (which research disputes entirely), many parents changed their minds. By the end of the survey, 61% said they preferred abstinence programming. But while the survey may have succeeded in confusing parents about what label should apply to what educational approach, parents remained firm in their support for education about contraception. In a striking finding (not being promoted by the NAEA), almost 80% of parents queried by Zogby agreed—close to 60% agreed strongly—that learning how to use condoms and other contraceptives correctly is in the best interest of their children.

Another putative weapon in the abstinence-only arsenal is a report issued in May by the federal Administration for Children and Families (ACF)—responding to a 2005 request from arch-conservative Sen. Tom Coburn (R-OK) and former senator Rick Santorum (R-PA)—on the “content and effectiveness” of nine comprehensive sex education curricula. Conducted by the conservative

Sagamore Institute for Policy Research, the content analysis relied on a word search: Sagamore counted how often at least 16 words or phrases referring to contraception or condoms appeared in these curricula contrasted to the words “abstinence” or “abstain”; curricula were not given credit for other words that could be used to describe the concept of abstinence, such as “wait,” “delay,” “avoid” or “refuse.” Using this rudimentary approach, the report concludes that contraception is given much greater emphasis than abstinence in comprehensive sex education.

The ACF report also criticizes the curricula for containing medical inaccuracies—a well-documented, pervasive problem in abstinence-only programs. Specifically, the report takes issue with the use in one curriculum of the term “dental dam” instead of “rubber dam,” notes that three programs included out-dated information on the spermicide nonoxynol-9 and faults one program for citing an inaccurate condom failure rate (12% rather than 15%). In the end, however, even the ACF was forced to acknowledge that seven of the eight programs for which there were evaluations showed positive impacts on condom use, while two delayed sexual debut; one program showed a positive impact for males but a negative effect for females.—  
*Heather D. Boonstra*