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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Bush's Sex Scandal

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I'm sorry to report a sex scandal in the heart of the Bush administration. Worse, it doesn't involve private behavior, but public conduct.

You see, for all the carnage in President Bush's budget, one program is being showered with additional cash - almost three times as much as it got in 2001. It's "abstinence only" sex education, and the best research suggests that it will cost far more lives than the Clinton administration's much more notorious sex scandal.

Mr. Bush means well. But "abstinence only" is a misnomer that in practice is an assault on sex education itself. There's a good deal of evidence that the result will not be more young rosy-cheeked virgins - it will be more pregnancies, abortions, gonorrhea and deaths from AIDS.

Look, I'm all for abstinence education. I support the booming abstinence industry as it peddles panties and boxers decorated with stop signs (at www.abstinence.net), and "Pet Your Dog, Not Your Date" T-shirts.

Abstinence education is great because it helps counteract the peer pressure that often leaves teenagers with broken hearts - and broken health.

For that reason, almost all sex-ed classes in America already encourage abstinence. But abstinence-only education isn't primarily about promoting abstinence - it's about blindly refusing to teach contraception.

To get federal funds, for example, abstinence-only programs are typically barred by law from discussing condoms or other forms of contraception - except to describe how they can fail. So kids in these programs go all through high school without learning anything but abstinence, even though more than 60 percent of American teenagers have sex before age 18.

In the old days, social conservatives simply fought any mention of sex. In 1906, The Ladies' Home Journal published articles about venereal disease - and 75,000 readers canceled their subscriptions. Congress banned the mailing of family planning information, and Margaret Sanger was jailed in 1916 for selling a birth control pamphlet to an undercover policewoman.

But silence about sex only nurtured venereal diseases (one New York doctor, probably exaggerating, claimed in 1904 that 60 percent of American men had syphilis or gonorrhea), so sex education gradually gained ground. Then social conservatives had a brilliant idea: instead of fighting sex ed directly, they campaigned for abstinence-only programs that eviscerated any discussion of contraception.

That shrewd approach succeeded. In 1988, a survey by the Alan Guttmacher Institute found that only 2 percent of sex-ed teachers used an abstinence-only approach. Now, the institute says, a quarter of them do.

Other developed countries focus much more on contraception. The upshot is that while teenagers in the U.S. have about as much sexual activity as teenagers in Canada or Europe, American girls are four times as likely as German girls to become pregnant, almost five times as likely as French girls to have a baby, and more than seven times as likely as Dutch girls to have an abortion. Young Americans are five times as likely to have H.I.V. as young Germans,

and teenagers' gonorrhea rate is 70 times higher in the U.S. than in the Netherlands or France.

Some studies have claimed that abstinence-only programs work, but researchers criticize the studies for being riddled with flaws. A National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy task force examined the issue and concluded: "There do not currently exist any abstinence-only programs with strong evidence that they either delay sex or reduce teen pregnancy."

Worse, there's some evidence that abstinence-only programs lead to increases in unprotected sex.

Perhaps the most careful study of the issue involved 12,000 young people. It found that those taking virginity pledges had sex 18 months later, on average, than those who had not taken the pledge. But even 88 percent of the pledgers had sex before marriage.

More troubling, the pledgers were much less likely to use contraception when they did have sex - only 40 percent of the males used condoms, compared with 59 percent of those who did not take the pledge.

In contrast, there's plenty of evidence that abstinence-plus programs - which encourage abstinence but also teach contraception - delay sex and increase the use of contraception. So, at a time when we're cutting school and health programs, why should we pour additional tax money into abstinence-only initiatives, which are likely to lead to more pregnancies, more abortions and more kids with AIDS? Now, that's a scandal.

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