

House bill would set stricter sex ed policy

Sponsors focus state's guidelines on abstinence

By Carrie Dennett
Emerald Reporter

SALEM - The Oregon House is currently considering a bill that could drastically alter the way public school teachers approach the subject of sex education.

House Bill 3411 would create guidelines where none currently exist. It emphasizes teaching abstinence from sexual intercourse as the only effective means of preventing pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

The bill's primary sponsor, Rep. Walt Schroder, R-Gold Beach, said school districts have been allowed to make their own decisions about the content of sex education courses, and most have promoted using contraceptives and safe-sex techniques.

"This isn't necessarily a bill

addressing abstinence," said Larry Wells, Schroder's legislative assistant. "This would just set up some guidelines."

Under the new bill, sex education courses would be required to include information about the possible consequences of sexual activity outside of marriage, as well as teach respect for a monogamous, heterosexual marriage.

The curriculum would also include instruction on the laws regulating financial responsibility to children born out of wedlock and sexual relations between an adult and a minor.

Under current Oregon law, guidelines are only set for curriculum about AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases, not for general sex education.

"The prevailing attitude seems to be 'sexual activity has become the norm, so now let's deal with the consequences,'" he said. "This bill moves into the area of prevention."

Schroder said studies done by a family advisory committee show that curricula based on contraceptive use and safe-sex techniques are ineffective in preventing teen pregnancy.

"We checked out all the books that are available for high school sex education classes," Schroder said.

Many of the texts not only neglected to include the failure rates of condoms in AIDS prevention, he said, but they also tended to be sexually explicit.

The bill's proponents complain that texts commonly used in sex education courses fail to give enough attention to abstinence.

Sandra Nelson, a representative of the Eagle Forum of Oregon, testified at a public hearing on the bill that only two paragraphs in one commonly used text dealt with abstinence. She said it was described as a possible alternative to responsible sexual activity.

"One can't help but wonder, what is abstinence?" she asked. "Is that irresponsible?"

"Today, sexual activity is a health situation, it's not simply morality anymore," she said.

Melodie Harmon, a 17-year-old student at Forest Grove High School, testified that the failure of sex education courses to teach the emotional and physical consequences of sexual activity created problems for some of her friends.

Opponents of the bill say it fails to deal with the complexities of teen-age sexuality.

Jeanne Atkins, a lobbyist for Planned Parenthood Affiliates of Oregon, said teen-agers learn about sexuality in high school, whether it is from a class or from other students.

"The question is will (sex education) be part of the classroom, as part of a valid curriculum?" she asked. "Or will it be incomplete and inaccurate because it is passed from teenager to teenager and believed?"

Because there is no uniform curriculum, it is not possible for the bill's proponents to evaluate the effectiveness of sex education that emphasizes safe sex rather than abstinence, Atkins said.

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