

The War on Abstinence

By **Ryan T. Anderson**

Wednesday, June 18, 2008

The Los Angeles Unified School District doesn't want Karen Kropf talking to its students. District leaders fear that what she says isn't "balanced" and that she's not a certified "expert" in the field. Really, though, they just don't like her message about teenage sexual self-control and the limited protection of condoms. That, and they're worried about what the ACLU might say, especially given California's law against "abstinence-only" education.

Investigating Kropf's situation, I was startled to discover an alarming trend that has gone unreported: The ACLU and Planned Parenthood have teamed up in an aggressive campaign over the past several years—a campaign to pressure states to eliminate abstinence education and to reject federal funding for these programs. And though their work hasn't drawn much attention, it has been remarkably successful. A year ago, only four states refused federal abstinence-education funding. Today the number is seventeen. The goal is to get enough states to refuse the federal abstinence-education funding to the point where the ACLU and Planned Parenthood can convince Congress to eliminate such funding entirely.

All this is happening, by the way, as fresh reports arrive almost every month about the benefits of teen abstinence and the effectiveness of abstinence programs.

But first, back to Karen Kropf. For ten years now, she has been speaking at local schools and community centers. When she was invited to speak at an L.A. public school, she was always brought in as a supplement to the official comprehensive sex-ed programs. Planned Parenthood frequently provides the official version, so you can imagine why teachers were eager to invite Kropf.

Kropf would share her story of how she became pregnant at eighteen and had an abortion. Of how the child she aborted would be her only chance, her multiple Chlamydia infections having eventually left her infertile. Her husband would come to the classes as well, warning the students that he had contracted genital herpes despite consistent condom use.

By telling these stories, Kropf brought the statistics about condom failure to life. But her message was more than a scare tactic or a command to "Just Say No." She would clear away the common rationalizations that teenagers use when they begin to feel the pressure to become sexually active.

More important, she would paint an appealing picture of what the alternative could look like—sexual self-control, resilience against passing temptations, better avenues of communication, a wider range of interests, and, ultimately, the ability to make a complete gift of self to another in marriage. As Kropf told me that she would tell the students, for her husband and her, this all "led to the only gift we had to give when we married, . . . proof that we could be faithful." It's a message that students respond to.

Scott Cooper, a teacher at James Monroe High School, where Kropf spoke, first heard her nine years ago. He told me that, “in my twelve years of being involved in educating high-school students, Karen Kropf’s presentation is the most effective abstinence presentation I have seen. Students listen, students are shocked, students are moved by the emotional pain Karen has felt, and students respond. Every time I have seen Karen present in a classroom (at least twenty-five times now), easily 80 percent of both male and female students choose to accept Karen’s charge that they are worth waiting for.” He was so impressed by her presentation, that he joined her board of directors a year ago.

Kropf doesn’t ask for any compensation for her programs. Relying on community support, she charges schools nothing and has never received government funding. Still, some were not happy with her message—though notably not the teachers who invited her, the students who appreciated her, or the parents who wanted their kids to wait until marriage (80 percent of American parents, according to a 2007 Zogby study).

But in 2006, with the ACLU attacking abstinence programs, the Los Angeles school district told Kropf that although she had been invited by teachers to public schools for eight years, she had to stop speaking until she wrote a curriculum and received approval.

She complied and submitted a curriculum. And this past December, the district notified her that she was not qualified to share her experience because she lacked a degree in the field—and, perhaps more decisively, she didn’t promote condom use and birth control. It appears that the district was afraid of violating a California law that prohibits abstinence-only education. The California Department of Education reports that state law “prohibits ‘abstinence-only’ education, in which information about preventing pregnancy and STDs is limited to instruction on abstinence from sexual activity.”

Of course, the school district had someone else coming in to teach about contraception—couldn’t Kropf continue as a supplement? No, because *all* “classes that provide instruction on human development and sexuality . . . shall include medically accurate, up-to-date information about all FDA-approved methods for: 1) reducing the risk of contracting STDs, and 2) preventing pregnancy.” Even a supplementary speaker to a “comprehensive program” must be comprehensive, as California understands the term.

That California prohibits abstinence education is no surprise. Back in 1996, when the Clinton administration introduced federal funding for abstinence education as part of the Welfare Reform Act, California was the only state to refuse the money. In 2004, California Congressman Henry Waxman released a report claiming that abstinence programs were ineffective and that they provided medically and scientifically inaccurate information. Waxman now leads the charge in Congress to remove abstinence funds from the federal budget and has followed his report with a series of congressional hearings.

To give you a sense of just how lopsided last month’s hearing was, consider this: During the questioning of four health experts who testified against abstinence education, Rep. Virginia Foxx asked if they would oppose abstinence education even if scientific evidence showed that it was

more effective than comprehensive sex ed. Three of the four experts testified that they would still oppose it.

And yet few people seem aware of the coordinated effort to achieve all this that the ACLU and Planned Parenthood have undertaken (working in conjunction with such local groups as Advocates for Youth and the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States). In this year's Planned Parenthood annual report, the group boasts success in getting governors to reject federal funding for abstinence: "The tide is shifting in America, and last year 10 governors refused" federal funding. On their website, you'll find hyperlinks where you can "help Planned Parenthood bring vital information about birth control and responsible decision making to the classroom" and "tell your elected representatives it's time to end dangerous abstinence-only programs and to stand up for real sex education!"

The motivations for the campaign are probably legion. Planned Parenthood and their allies stand to make millions of dollars: The federal funding that goes to abstinence education is funding that they would like to be receiving. But the financial interests are secondary. The war on abstinence is the latest battleground in the culture wars. Arguing that it is "one of the religious right's greatest challenges to the nation's sexual health," Planned Parenthood insists that abstinence is "only one tactic in a broader, more long-term strategy" in the conservative arsenal. And Planned Parenthood sees itself as the great opponent to this supposed assault on sexual freedom.

It's not alone in the fight. Federally funded comprehensive sex-ed is, apparently, a civil liberty, and the ACLU wants to make sure that every teenager receives it. The group's website urges visitors: "Stop the Abstinence-Only Charade! Federally funded abstinence-only-until-marriage programs are ineffective, medically inaccurate, and some may even use taxpayer dollars to promote religion. The ACLU is calling for an end to federal funding."

To advance this end, it has established a national campaign—"Take Issue, Take Charge"—to lobby at the state level. The current one is similar to another ACLU campaign—"Not in My State"—launched in 2005. That one targeted eighteen states to get them to reject the federal funds. Today, seventeen states already have: Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Iowa, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Montana, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Virginia, and Wisconsin.

Valerie Huber, the executive director of the National Abstinence Education Association, knows what is going on here. When I spoke with her, she summarized the lay of the land: "Narrow special interest groups are pushing their ideological agenda at the expense of our youth. They are targeting states and local communities in opposition of abstinence education and working to replace it with explicit sex education programs."

And yet most people don't realize what's at stake in rejecting abstinence education. Huber puts the alternative in stark terms: *Comprehensive sex ed* would be better called *contraceptive sex ed*, she insists. "After making the obligatory statement that 'abstinence is the only way to avoid pregnancy and STDs,' they typically spend the rest of their time instructing teens on how to engage in high-risk behaviors that will not result in pregnancy, but can have other serious consequences, including the acquisition of lifelong STDs. Comprehensive sex ed makes the

dangerous allegation that using a condom makes sex safe. At best, this is misleading; at worst, it is dangerous to the health of youth.” In their discussion of abstinence, one prominent comprehensive program has students come up with various sexual activities they could engage in while still being abstinent. The suggested activities include: “cuddling with no clothes on,” “masturbating with a partner,” “rubbing bodies together,” and “touching a partner’s genitals.” Not surprisingly, the curriculum quickly turns to “the endless possibilities of outercourse” and “making the transition from sexual abstinence.”

While the collusion of Planned Parenthood and the ACLU has gone unreported, some attention has been paid to the fact that a growing number of states are refusing federal monies. Usually, this has been reported as if it were uncoordinated, a mere happenstance that all these states have independently decided to reject abstinence funds. When the *Washington Post* reported on the trend, it cited the comments of the groups leading the charge as if they were observers, not partisans, in the battle.

A spokesman from Advocates for Youth expressed hope that “this could be the straw that breaks the camel’s back in terms of continued funding of these programs. How can they ignore so many states slapping a return-to-sender label on this funding?” Meanwhile, a spokesman for the Sexuality Information and Education Council argued that “this wave of states rejecting the money is a bellwether. It’s a canary in the coal mine of what’s to come. We hope that it sends a message to the politicians in Washington that this program needs to change, and states need to be able to craft a program that is the best fit for their young people and that is not dictated by Washington ideologues.” And this from a Planned Parenthood representative: “This abstinence-only program is just not getting the job done. This is an ideologically based program that doesn’t have any support in science.”

But is abstinence education really just antiscientific ideology? Or are those pushing condoms and mutual masturbation really the ones driven by an ideological agenda, all the while ignoring what the best social science is telling us about teenage sex?

When I spoke with University of Virginia sociologist W. Bradford Wilcox (affiliated, as I am, with the Witherspoon Institute), he drew a different picture: “The social science strongly suggests that abstinence is ideal for the physical, social, and psychological welfare of teens—especially girls. So the question is how can public policy best advance this ideal. It’s true that many older studies suggested that abstinence education wasn’t working. But there is a learning curve for any new public-policy initiative, and the newest studies give us some hope that a number of abstinence programs are succeeding in getting American teens to abstain from sex.”

Comprehensive sex-ed classes typically address pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), but consider some of the data. We know that when contraception is used “consistently and correctly,” it can be remarkably effective—only 0.3 percent of women using the pill and 2 percent of women relying on condoms become pregnant during the first year of a sexual relationship. Most teens, however, don’t use contraception consistently and correctly—and it has proven difficult for comprehensive sex-ed programs to eradicate teenage laziness, forgetfulness, lack of discipline, and poor judgment in the heat of the moment. Studies show that only 28 percent of females and 47 percent of males use condoms consistently—as Wilcox notes in *A*

Scientific Review of Abstinence and Abstinence Programs, his report for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

This might account for what scholars call the “typical use” of contraception. So, for instance, we know from the National Survey of Family Growth that 11.8 percent of sexually active women who use contraception nevertheless become pregnant within a year. The rates are even higher among teens: 14.6 percent of non-cohabiting and 30.6 percent of cohabiting teens become pregnant during their first year of contraceptive use.

In 2005 there were 420,000 American girls under the age of twenty who gave birth, 83 percent outside marriage. Meanwhile, the Alan Guttmacher Institute reports that there were 214,750 abortions among fifteen- to nineteen-year-olds in 2002. Even if the unborn children are spared the abortionist’s scalpel, they will be brought into the world at great disadvantage, as social scientists repeatedly report that children do better on every measurable standard when they are born and reared within marriage.

There is good news: During the past fifteen years, teenage pregnancy rates have dropped dramatically, down 50 percent for ten- to fourteen-year-olds and down 35 percent for fifteen- to nineteen-year-olds. This reduction can be attributed to less sexual activity and more contraception. Research by Columbia University public-health professor John Santelli shows that an increase in teenage sexual abstinence can account for 23 to 53 percent of the recent decline in teenage pregnancy.

If typical contraceptive use can result in a high rate of pregnancy, it isn’t surprising that it can also result in a high rate of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). The most recent reports from the Center for Disease Control claim that more than half of sexually active Americans will contract an STI by age twenty-five (though some have challenged the report). The contraceptive pill does nothing to prevent STIs, and condoms do little to prevent diseases spread by genital skin contact, such as human papilloma virus, herpes, and chancroid. The impact of STIs is gendered, with young girls taking the brunt of the burden because their cervixes are not fully developed.

Sadly, many will contract an STI but not realize it until years later. One study, for instance, estimated that 80 percent of women may be infected with one of the strands of the human papilloma virus—but most don’t know about it and won’t know about it until later in life when they are infertile or have cervical cancer.

Some will argue that the answer is more access to condoms, more contraceptive pills, more immunization for STIs. Teenage sex can be safe, they say, if only teens are empowered with the right gear. Yet clearing the typical-use hurdle seems difficult. And, even so, that only accounts for pregnancy and disease. Wilcox’s study brings into question the very concept of “safe sex”: Teenage sex, according to the data, brings about a host of negative consequences for happiness, family life both with the parents now and with a spouse in the future, and academic achievement—to say nothing of increased rates of crime, drug use, and depression.

Just as the damage of sexual activity applies especially to young women, so the benefits of abstinence appear most salient for young women. Consider depression: Only 4.5 percent of teenage girls who abstain from sex and drugs suffer depression, compared to 15 percent of girls having sex and 25.5 percent of girls having sex and using drugs. Meanwhile, a study of twelve- to sixteen-year-olds found that sexually active girls were 6.3 times more likely to have attempted suicide. Wilcox estimates that “increases in premarital sex among adolescents may help account for increases in the adolescent suicide rate from the 1960s to 1990,” while “recent declines in sexual activity may be linked to declines in adolescent suicide rate since 1990.”

Males, too, reap benefits from abstinence but largely in the form of avoiding crime, delinquency, poor performance at school, and alcohol and drug abuse. As a team of researchers writing in *Social Psychology Quarterly* note, “premarital coitus may have far-reaching negative consequences for a white male’s future well-being.” Wilcox proposes that “teenage sex is associated with entry into a peer-centered rather than a parent-centered social milieu, where teens are more likely to take their normative cues from sexual partners and from sexually active peers.” As a result, they tend to “shift their time and activities away from adult-monitored domains and toward peer-centered domains, which increases opportunities for delinquency and substance abuse.”

Given the evidence of the benefits to teen abstinence, one would think that these seventeen states would be readily accepting federal funds. They argue, however, that even if all of this evidence is correct, abstinence education doesn’t work.

Here again, the data aren’t on their side. Wilcox notes that programs such as *True Love Waits* have “increased rates of virginity among adolescents, and they have also reduced the onset of teenage sex, the number of sexual partners, and sexual infidelity among adolescents.” There is also evidence that these programs have “played an important role in driving down the teenage pregnancy rate in the last decade or so.”

Of course, such teenage pledges are often not kept, but they nonetheless have real benefits. “While it is true that most adolescents who take a pledge to remain virgins ultimately end up having sex before marriage, such pledges do have real value,” Wilcox notes in *A Scientific Review of Abstinence and Abstinence Programs*. “Pledgers have fewer sexual partners, they are more likely to abstain from sex before marriage, and they have markedly lower levels of non-marital pregnancy, compared to adolescents who do not take the pledge.”

Meanwhile, in a report released just last month, Christine C. Kim and Robert Rector of the Heritage Foundation reviewed twenty-one studies of abstinence education. They found that of the fifteen that examined abstinence programs, eleven reported positive findings, and of the six that examined virginity pledges, five reported positive results. When I asked Kim about the Heritage report, she said: “Of these fifteen studies, eleven reported positive findings, such as delayed sexual initiation and reduced levels of early sexual activity, among youths who have received abstinence education. When considering abstinence education programs, policymakers should consider *all* of the available empirical evidence.”

These reports are encouraging, but truth be told the data is still sparse. Sex-education programs are simply too new for social scientists to draw any hard conclusions. It's true that the first abstinence programs weren't very effective. But the programmers have refined their methods, and the newest programs seem to be working.

At the least, it is simply wrong to say we have conclusive evidence that abstinence programs do not work. So why is the government spending twelve times as much on comprehensive sex education as on abstinence education? And why have seventeen states rejected federal abstinence funds?

Debates about sexual education are complicated by competing visions of the role of the state and public education. Many, no doubt, would prefer that state-run schools simply not address a question of such moral importance as sexual education and leave the topic to families. Still, even an education system terrified of moral education must confront what the scientific data show—that teenage sex has a host of negative effects on the individual, social, and societal levels that no contraceptive pill or latex barrier can fully prevent.

Advocates such as Valerie Huber have taken the data to heart, and just last week they launched a campaign, Parents for Truth, to counter Planned Parenthood and the ACLU. The best evidence may be what has happened to James Monroe High School now that Karen Kropf isn't allowed to present. In previous years, back when she was talking to the students, the school averaged ten to twenty student pregnancies, Scott Cooper told me. "Over the last school year," he added, "Monroe has had nearly fifty student pregnancies." These teens are the casualties of Planned Parenthood and the ACLU's war on abstinence.

Ryan T. Anderson is an assistant editor at FIRST THINGS. A Phillips Foundation fellow, he is the assistant director of the Program in Bioethics at the Witherspoon Institute of Princeton, New Jersey.

References

[The ACLU on sex ed](#)

[The ACLU anti-abstinence campaign: "Take Issue, Take Charge"](#)

[Planned Parenthood on sex ed](#)

[More from Planned Parenthood](#)

[Positively Waiting—Karen Kropf's abstinence education website](#)

[National Abstinence Education Association—Valerie Huber's organization](#)

[Abstinence Ed campaign: "Parents for Truth"](#)

[A Scientific Review of Abstinence and Abstinence Programs, by W. Bradford Wilcox](#)

[Abstinence Education: Assessing the Evidence, by Christine Kim and Robert E. Rector](#)
