

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstinence-Based Education Works

The controversy over sex education in the public schools is a major cultural issue in America. Since the federal government has gotten involved in funding such programs, it has become even more provocative and controversial. Former President Bush made the decision to pour significant federal dollars into funding abstinence-based sex education programs. The Obama administration eliminated more than \$150 million in federal funding targeted at abstinence programs. Instead, in 2010 Obama launched a new \$114 million pregnancy prevention initiative that funded only programs that have been shown scientifically to work; it has continued to expand this effort.

Is there any “scientific” evidence that abstinence programs work? There now is and it is a path breaking study. *Washington Post* reporter Rob Stein reports on the first carefully designed study (published in the *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine*) to evaluate the controversial abstinence-based program in which researchers found that only about a third of 6th and 7th graders who went through sessions focused on abstinence started having sex in the next two years. In contrast, nearly half of students who got other classes, including those that included information about contraception, became sexually active. Dr. John B. Jemmott III, professor at University of Pennsylvania, has suggested that “I think we’ve written off abstinence-only education without looking closely at the nature of the evidence. Our study shows this could be one approach that could be used.” Indeed, Sarah Brown of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy argues that “this new study is game-changing. For the first time, there is strong evidence that an abstinence-only intervention can help very young teens delay sex and reduce their recent sexual activity as well.” Further, Robert Rector, senior research fellow at the Heritage Foundation, suggests that “this takes away the main pillar of opposition to abstinence education.” Stein reports that even long-term critics of abstinence education agree that this study provides strong evidence that such programs can work and deserve taxpayer support. Even the Obama administration accepts that the evidence is compelling and such programs may deserve funding.

This new study involved 662 African-American students who were randomly assigned to go through one of five programs: An eight-hour curriculum that encouraged them to delay having sex; an eight-hour program focused on teaching safe sex; an eight-to twelve-hour program that did both; or an eight-hour program focused on teaching the youngsters other ways to be healthy, such as eating well and exercising. Stein reports: “Over the next two years, about 33% of the students who went through the abstinence program started having sex, compared to about 52% who were just taught safe sex. About 42% of the students who went through the comprehensive program started having sex, and about 47% of those who just learned about other ways to be healthy. The abstinence program had no negative effects on condom use, which has been a

major criticism of the abstinence approach.” The abstinence-only program covered information about HIV, beliefs about abstinence and ways to resist the pressure to have sex.

The results of this study are so important that Valerie Huber of the National Abstinence Education Association made this claim: “The current recommendation before Congress in the 2011 budget zeroes out abstinence education, and puts all the money into broader comprehensive education. I think this calls for a policy correction, and I hope that either the White House amends their request or Congress acts upon this, reinstating abstinence education.”

In conclusion, permit me the opportunity to repeat something I have argued on *Issues in Perspective* many times: “When a culture does not honor, encourage and facilitate the sexual ethic presented in Scripture, there will be consequences. This is neither a flippant remark nor one that ignores compassion. Romans 1:18-32 details a pattern for us. God has revealed His truth clearly and forthrightly, with the result that no human will ever be ‘without excuse’ (v. 20) when it comes to understanding His truth. When humans ignore His clearly revealed truth, God ‘gives them over’ (vv. 24, 26, 28) to behaviors that are ultimately self-destructive in their nature. God has made His world with established ethical standards. If humans follow those common grace standards, His common grace blessings will follow. If humans choose to ignore His common grace standards, there will be obvious, clear consequences. As our dysfunctional culture ignores God’s clearly established boundaries for sexual activity, there will be tragic consequences. For that reason there are sexually transmitted diseases and there are teen pregnancies. It is the teens and the children that are then born of such pregnancies that will suffer. This is the tragedy of these statistics. Congress cannot pass laws that will change this. Social workers cannot simply pass out condoms and expect behavior to change. There needs to be a fundamental change of the human heart that sees things the way God sees them. Our only hope is families and our culture saturated with God’s Word and His standards. The heart of our dysfunctional culture’s problem is spiritual!”

See Rob Stein in the *Washington Post* (1 February 2010) and Tamar Lewin in the *New York Times* (3 February 2010).