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AJC Home Edition
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Monday, 01/15/2001
Section: Features Letter: D Page: 1 Words: 1993

Learning to say N-O to S-E-X With abstinence pledge becoming popular, schools consider adding it to curriculum

By Gracie Bonds Staples/Staff

Despite recent findings that virginity pledges help curb teen sex, metro Atlanta schools aren't rushing to go beyond an abstinence-based curriculum and include such pledges. But abstinence pledges could become more popular --- and fast. "I wholeheartedly would support this in the schools," said Lebrentha Copeland, the mother of two students ages 9 and 15. "They should've had it last year." Copeland was one of nearly a half-dozen parents from Fulton County who voiced their support at a meeting last week in favor of pledges and adding a program called Choosing the Best to the district's curriculum. The group was part of an advisory committee studying whether to move ahead with the program.

Fulton is one of several districts in metro Atlanta, including Cobb and Gwinnett, that will be considering the Choosing the Best curriculum over the next few weeks. Choosing the Best is a nonprofit educational organization that provides resources and training to help teens say no to sex.

The heightened interest in Choosing the Best and programs like it, including True Love Waits, comes in the wake of a study that found teenagers who sign abstinence pledges are likely to remain virgins about 18 months longer than those who don't are.

And the state may soon offer some help for schools, churches, and nonprofit organizations that want to start programs. The Governor's Children and Youth Coordinating Council has \$800,000 to give for these programs and will be taking applications.

Suzanne Luker, grants administrator for the state's abstinence education program, said it will likely fall to each school district to decide whether to incorporate a curriculum that includes pledges. The state's sex education law tells schools to encourage abstinence as part of the sex-ed curriculum but doesn't mandate how to do that.

Luker said the state funds 42 programs that promote abstinence until marriage, including 11 in metro Atlanta, but none of them is offered by school districts. In addition to the abstinence message, most of those programs include character building, life skills, tutoring, mentoring, and signing pledges.

"We don't just tell them not to have sex," Luker said. "We try to give them skills to be good citizens and grow up to be responsible adults and make good decisions."

Proponents point to the drop in teen pregnancy rates and in the numbers of teens who say they're sexually active as proof abstinence and pregnancy prevention programs help kids say no.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, between 1991 and 1997, the number of teens who had sex fell from 54 percent to 48 percent, while prevalence of condom use rose from 46 percent to 57 percent. Still, every year, 3 million cases of sexually transmitted diseases and 1 million pregnancies occur among teens. HIV/AIDS is one of the leading causes of death among teens and young adults.

With statistics like that, "I'm happy that pledges work to delay sexual involvement," said Kay Scott, president and CEO of Planned Parenthood of Georgia. "However, the study also points out that those who took the pledge were less likely when they became sexually active to use protection." Despite recent findings that virginity pledges help curb teen sex, metro Atlanta schools aren't rushing to go beyond an abstinence-based curriculum and include such pledges.

But virginity pledges could become more popular --- and fast.

"I whole-heartedly would support this in the schools," said Lebretha Copeland, the mother of two students ages 9 and 15. "They should've had it last year."

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"The take-home message to me is that comprehensive sexuality education programs, when you encourage abstinence but also talk about prevention, continue to be the most effective," Scott said.

Choosing the Best emphasizes abstinence and making good choices, but also provides information on protecting against sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy. The curriculum was written seven years ago by Bruce Cook, who, with his wife, Donna, had been asked to head a health and safety committee at their son's school, Pace Academy in Atlanta.

With the help of a friend who worked at the CDC, Bruce Cook put together a curriculum that provided students with "good medically sound reasons why abstinence made sense," he said.

Some 40 states and 2,000 school districts have adopted Bruce Cook's program, including 50 in Georgia. Since 1998, the nonprofit has contracted with the state Department of Education to train public school teachers in abstinence instruction. So far, about 800 teachers have completed training.

The department has asked Choosing the Best to develop additional resource material for students in grades six through 10 that would become available to any school that wants to use it. All material will be subject to the approval of the local sex education review committee in each district.

With Choosing the Best, schools can purchase one of four age-specific curricula that are taught over eight 50-minute sessions. The programs cost about \$3 to \$6 per student.

While advocates of such programs acknowledge a pledge is not a magic potion, they say it can be a decisive point for teens who've been equipped with good reasons why abstinence makes sense. They also say that abstinence is the best way to prevent teen pregnancy and STDs.

Faye Power, health improvement program specialist for Muscogee County schools in Columbus, knows first-hand. She has taught eighth-graders the Choosing the Best curriculum for six years.

"What we're seeing is students are very receptive to the program," Power said. "At the end they feel very encouraged, very positive about themselves and their ability to accomplish this, and they have a very good understanding of the relationship between their sexual activity now and the effect it will have on their future goals. They are committed to abstinence and to themselves and their future."

Parents on the Fulton County committee were clearly impressed with Cook's presentation. In perhaps the most passionate show of support, Debra Busing held up the Choosing the Best Life student manual and declared: "This is what our teachers need. Throw out the textbook." Busing has 17-year-old twin sons at Chattahoochee High School and an 11-year-old daughter at State Bridge Crossing,

Judy Fraser of Roswell agreed. "This is some of the best stuff I've seen," said Fraser, who has a seventh-grader at Northwestern Middle School. "I want my college daughter to see it, and I want my son who's a junior at Roswell to see it, even if I have to purchase it."

In each Choosing the Best program, students are encouraged to make a pledge by the sixth session, but are not required to. And in the last three sessions, students receive assertiveness training to be able to follow through on their pledge.

"Our thesis is you have to prepare ahead of time," said Cook, who has developed training programs for businesses and organizations. "The positive side of the pledge program is you slow kids down, you get them to think, and what we're seeing is more and more kids are choosing abstinence."

That's hardly a surprise to the Southern Baptist Convention, which developed the True Love Waits pledge seven years ago.

"I sort of laughed to myself because everybody else is finding out what we already knew," said Gordon Davidson, consultant with the Georgia Baptist Convention.

At least 50 churches in metro Atlanta, Davidson said, have True Love Waits programs. The next national campaign for the program is Feb. 14, when teenagers all over the world are being asked to sign an online commitment card to remain sexually abstinent until marriage at www.truelovewaits.com

Fifteen-year-old Morgan Birch of Lithonia made a commitment to virginity two years ago at a True Love Waits conference held at church, Greenforest Community Baptist in Decatur. She plans to renew her pledge next month at the church's fifth annual conference.

Contrary to the headline on the October cover of the popular teen girls magazine YM that "it's cool to be a virgin," Birch said virginity is hardly a coveted virtue at Redan High School, where she is a 10th-grader.

She hasn't encountered pressure to engage in sex, but she knows teens who have been pressured, not only to have sex, but also to smoke and drink. Still, she said, signing a pledge to remain chaste is a good thing.

"If you sign it, you don't want to break your promise," she said.

Even students who stopped short of signing pledges themselves said such declarations may be a good thing.

"It could help get rid of many diseases and teenage pregnancies, if kids listen," said Dwayne Pascoe, a 16-year-old junior at Chattahoochee High School. But he said, "I'm not sure I'd take a pledge because you can't be sure what will happen in the future."

Caption: WHAT THE PLEDGE STUDY REVEALED

The study of virginity and abstinence pledges, released last week by researchers at Columbia University in New York and the National Institutes of Health, found that

abstinence pledges do help kids say no. The study was based on interviews and questionnaires completed by more than 20,000 teenagers between 1994 and 1997. Key findings:

About 50 percent of teens who took the pledge remained virgins until about age 20. But among nonpledgers, 50 percent were no longer virgins by age 17.

Even when such factors as religious belief, social and economic status and family structures are taken into account, the positive effect of the pledge is clear.

But when a pledge is broken, the chances of negative consequences are greater: Pledgers are significantly more likely to have sex without contraception.

Ironically, the more popular taking the pledge becomes in a school, the less effective it is. If more than 30 percent of students pledge, the effect is eroded.

By 1995, church-sponsored abstinence programs had led 2 1/2 million teenagers to take a pledge.

ON THE WEB:

Details of the study:

www.nichd.nih.gov/new/releases/adolescent.html

or www.cpc.unc.edu/addhealth

Choosing the Best: www.choosingthebest.org

True Love Waits: www.truelovewaits.com

Caption: ABSTINENCE FREEDOM PLEDGE

From 'Choosing the Best' program

Recognizing that abstinence enables me to experience:

Freedom from: worry, guilt, pregnancy, pressures to marry before I am ready, abortion, sexually transmitted diseases, being used by others and the bother and worry of contraceptives and

Freedom to: be in control of my life, develop self-respect, focus my energy on establishing and realizing life goals, experience more healthy and long-term relationships and enjoy being a teenager . . .

I make a commitment to myself, my family, my friends, my future spouse, and my future children to be sexually abstinent from this day forward until I enter into a marriage relationship.

COMMITMENT CARD

From 'True Love Waits'

Believing that true love waits, I make a commitment to God, myself, my family, my friends, my future mate and my future children to be sexually abstinent from this day until the day I enter a biblical marriage relationship.