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Next governor will face tough choices on sex ed

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Though so-called "social issues" have consumed entire legislative sessions lately, they haven't taken up much air time in the governor's race this season. Independence Party candidate Peter Hutchinson, who has favored a no-new-social-laws policy in his campaign, has dubbed such divisive issues the eight G's:

"Guns, gay marriage, God, gambling, gynecology, green cards, stadiums for gladiators ... the guillotine."

It's hard to believe a guy with such a gift for alliteration is polling at only 4 percent.

While it has been a relief not to spend any more time debating same-sex marriage this month, there are other items on the list that seem like the sort of things gubernatorial candidates really should be discussing. "Gynecology," which I take to mean women's health, and maybe more specifically, reproductive health involving the choices made by both men and women, would seem to be one of these.

In fact, a report just released by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy has noted that the teen birth rate has a real impact on our tax rate: Each child born to a mother younger than 17 costs the state an average of \$5,506 annually. From 1991 to 2004, a total of 75,200 teen births in Minnesota have cost taxpayers an estimated \$2.3 billion.

This new report (you can read it at www.teenpregnancy.org) is a conservative estimate of what teen births cost states in health care and child welfare, including foster care and other services. It also calculates the hidden costs of teen parenting, like lost tax revenues due to lower educational attainment for teen moms and their children, and higher incarceration rates for the sons of teenage mothers.

The good news in Minnesota is the teen birth rate has dropped by an impressive 28 percent between 1991 and 2004. The money we didn't have to spend on kids having kids saved us an estimated \$72 million.

The bad news is that teen births cost taxpayers at least \$142 million in 2004, about two-thirds state and local costs. But this looks like a bargain when you compare it to what teen births cost Texas taxpayers in 2004 — more than \$1 billion.

It is interesting to note that Texas is the home state of President Bush, who, as that state's governor, and now as our president, has been a big fan of abstinence-only sex education aimed at teens. It's just not clear why.

A report from the Texas Department of Health last year found that such training had little impact on teenagers' behavior. About 23 percent of ninth-grade girls reported having had sex before receiving abstinence training — after the training, that number rose to 28 percent. The results were even weirder for 10th-grade boys, whose reported sexual activity rose from 24 percent to 39 percent after being trained in abstinence.

A billion dollars on teen births is what it costs Texas to maintain the illusion that this stuff is working.

But how does the Lone Star State's trouble with teen pregnancies have anything to do with the choices we have in L'Etoile du Nord? Because the guy who ends up governor in Minnesota will get to decide how to deal with the more than \$50 million in federal grants Bush and Congress are expected to approve for states offering abstinence-only education in 2007.

And get this: The feds now want to aim the program at unmarried Americans from age 12 all the way up to 29. This would be an unusual waste of money, even for this administration, when you consider that the National Center for Health Statistics says well over 90 percent of twenty-somethings are already sexually active.

A governor with a grasp on this reality could be a powerful voice who could steer the conversation away from the notion that sexual health is a mere "social issue," and rather a fact of life, with lifelong consequences.

Talking about it more often might not be as divisive as our candidates seem to think. And considering a looming government crackdown on twenty-something sex, it could even be a good way to mobilize the youth vote.

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