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Study: Abstinence classes don't stop sex

By SHARON JAYSON

Students who participated in programs to discourage sex before marriage didn't hold off any longer than peers who didn't participate in such programs, finds a long term study authorized by Congress. Those who participated in the four "abstinence-only" program studied had sex about the same age — 14 years and nine months — as those in their communities who didn't have any specialized abstinence education, and had similar numbers of sex partners, says the \$7.7 million study conducted by Mathematica Policy Research Inc. of Princeton, N.J. for the U.S. Administration for Children and Families.

"We have a lot of information about what people know and intend. The real question is what they do," said Sarah Brown, director of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, who served on an outside advisory panel for the evaluation process. "None of the four programs were successful in raising the age of first intercourse at all."

The federal government spends about \$176 million annually on abstinence programs. Over the past decade, it has spent about \$1.5 billion on such efforts. Those who favor comprehensive sex education, which includes information about contraception, have criticized the "abstinence only until marriage" approach as ineffective.

Earlier interim reports suggested that the programs might be swaying teen's away from sex, said Harry Wilson, associate commissioner of the Family and Youth Services Bureau at the Health and Human Services Department. He is the Bush administration official who oversees two of the federal government's three abstinence programs. "To us, it suggested that attitudes were changing. We didn't know if the behaviors would change — if that would follow —

and it didn't," Wilson said. "It's not a referendum on comprehensive sex education in comparison to abstinence, but it does suggest that we have some things to learn from the study."

The study — the first long-term look at actual youth behavior rather than attitudes — began tracking 2,057 youths in their late elementary and middle school years and followed them four to six years. The control group had one to three years of abstinence education at one of four programs around the country. They were in Miami, Milwaukee, Powhatan, Va., and Clarksdale, Miss. Follow-ups were conducted at one year, two years and four to six years later. About half from each group had remained abstinent. Chris Trenholm, a senior researcher at Mathematica who directed the study, says those who had abstinence education also didn't differ in the rates of unprotected sex. Some critics have claimed that abstinence programs lead to less condom use because such programs discourage condoms and contraception in favor of abstinence.

Abstinence programs have been funded by the federal government since 1982, but the major push came after a 1996 overhaul of the welfare laws, when hundreds of programs were created. Congress has until June 30 to renew the Title V block grant program, which receives \$50 million annually for abstinence programs and allows an additional \$37.5 million to states for matching grants. Supporters of abstinence programs decried the report's release so close to the program debate.

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The timing is an "attack on abstinence funding," said Kimberly Martinez, executive director of the Abstinence Clearinghouse, based in Sioux Falls, S.D. "Abstinence education has grown and changed significantly since this funding began and because this is very small sample — four out of 700 programs — it's not a fair assessment of the abstinence field," said Valerie Huber, executive director of the National Abstinence Education Association, a professional association of abstinence educators created in February.

Critics of abstinence-only education say the report sends a clear message that Congress should fund comprehensive sex education rather than abstinence-only programs.

"We've spent billions of dollars and we don't have anything to show for it, so it is time for this Congress to fund programs that work," says William Smith, vice president for public policy at the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States.