

# Critics Push to Cut Abstinence-Only Sex Ed. Funds

By AP / DAVID CRARY

(NEW YORK) — With the exit of the Bush administration, critics of abstinence-only sex education will be making an aggressive push to cut off federal funding for what they consider an ineffective, sometimes harmful program.

How quickly and completely they reach their goal is uncertain, however, as conservative supporters of abstinence education lobby Congress and President-elect Barack Obama to preserve at least some of the funding, which now totals \$176 million a year.

And even if federal funding is halted, some states — such as Georgia — are determined to keep abstinence programs going on their own, ensuring that this front in the culture wars will remain active.

Obama is considered an advocate of comprehensive sex education, which — unlike abstinence-only curriculum — includes advice to young people about using contraceptives if they do engage in sexual activity. However, Obama spokesman Tommy Vietor declined to elaborate on what the new president would propose in his own budget plan.

Cecile Richards, president of the Planned Parenthood Federation of American, depicted the federal abstinence-only program as “an utter failure that has wasted more than \$1.5 billion” over the past decade. Like other critics, she noted that several major studies — including a federally funded review — have found no evidence that the abstinence-only approach works in deterring teen sex.

“Talking with Obama, he totally understands the need for young people to have comprehensive sex education — they need information that protects their health,” Richards said. “I hope that will be the position of the administration, but when Congress gets involved, sometimes things get more complicated.”

Even after Democrats took control of Congress in the 2006 elections, liberals lacked the votes to end abstinence-only funding, and President George Bush stuck by his strong support for it.

But Rep. Louise Slaughter, D-N.Y., said the 2008 elections not only put Obama in the White House but also increased the ranks of senators and representatives who share her opposition to funding abstinence education.

“We believe the amount of money that goes into it would be so much better used on things to prevent unwanted pregnancies,” she said. “I think we’ll have enough votes to deal with it.”



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Slaughter is a lead sponsor of the Prevention First Act, introduced this month in the House and Senate, that proposes multiple initiatives to reduce unintended pregnancies. One component calls for promoting “medically accurate” comprehensive sex education.

Supporters of abstinence education acknowledge the shift of political power in Washington, but they have appealed to Obama to preserve some federal funding for their programs.

Valerie Huber, executive director of the National Abstinence Education Association, suggested that one option would be for Congress “to allow true choice” by approving funding for both comprehensive and abstinence-focused programs.

Referring to recent data showing increases in teen births and sexually transmitted diseases among young people, she said, “Now is not the time to remove even one of the tools that can help teens.”

However, Slaughter said she would oppose any effort to fund both approaches.

“We can’t have both, because abstinence-only doesn’t work,” she said.

Among the organizations attempting to bridge the ideological divide on sex education is the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

Its director, Sarah Brown, said the campaign’s approach is “science-driven” — favoring comprehensive sex education over the abstinence programs.

“In a highly constrained fiscal environment, it’s critical to focus precious dollars on programs that have evidence of good effects,” Brown said. “When you look at the best science, the abstinence-only programs come up short.”

Still, she said there could be a long-term benefit to conducting research on whatever abstinence programs do endure.

“I suspect that if research community keeps testing them, there might be a couple that do have an effect,” she said.

Georgia supplements its federal abstinence money with more than \$500,000 of state funds.

“Abstinence education will remain a strategy of our youth development initiative regardless of what happens at the federal level,” said Jen Bennecke, executive director of the Governor’s Office for Children and Families.

She credited the Georgia program — which includes character-development curriculum — with contributing to a 50 percent decrease in teen pregnancies since its inception 11 years ago.

Roughly half the states receive federal abstinence funding — the others have spurned the program, under which instructors are directed to teach that sexual activity outside of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects.

Supporters of abstinence education say it promotes the only method that’s 100 percent effective in preventing pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease. Critics say the abstinence programs don’t deter teens from having sex, leave them without crucial information on avoiding pregnancy and STDs, and in some cases provide false information about condoms’ reliability.