

*US election: Advocates hope Bristol Palin's pregnancy will open US sex education debate*

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By Elana Schor

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As teenage pregnancy takes centre stage in the presidential race, advocacy groups are hoping to sidestep politics and open a new debate over the effectiveness of sex education in the US.

Leaders of both parties have said the pregnancy of Republican vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin's daughter should not become a campaign issue. Still, advocates are gently urging that the story of 17-year-old Bristol Palin open a national dialog on teenage sexuality.

"What I hope this does is really highlight the fact that Senator McCain's positions as a presidential candidate, and Governor Palin's as his running mate, are completely out of touch with what teens need in America," Planned Parenthood president Cecile Richards said. "They need comprehensive education, they need support in making responsible decisions," she added. "This is an issue that the American public has reason to be interested in [the candidates'] positions on."

As governor of Alaska, Sarah Palin supported funding abstinence-only education in schools. She wrote that "explicit sex-ed programmes will not find my support" on a 2006 election questionnaire.

Palin was called "pro-contraception" during her gubernatorial run. However, she is also a member of the anti-abortion group Feminists for Life, which raises concerns on its website that "certain forms



of contraception have had adverse health effects on women".

McCain has a similar record of opposing funding for sex education that includes contraceptives as a viable choice for teenagers.

Asked in 2007 whether he backed George Bush's policy of abstinence-only sex education, McCain wavered before asking an aide to remind him of his position. "[W]ould you find out what my position is on contraception -- I'm sure I'm opposed to government spending on it, I'm sure I support the president's policies on it," McCain said.

Speaking on Fox news yesterday, McCain spokeswoman Nancy Pfotenhauer warned liberal activists and bloggers that "they just hurt their own credibility" by using the Palin pregnancy to question the viability of Republican-backed sex

education policies. "Shame on them for trying to make a political issue out of a private family matter," Pfotenhauer said.

That argument was anticipated by Rob Boston, a spokesman for Americans United for Separation of Church and State. "The religious right and conservative groups backing McCain will certainly imply that any discussion of the larger issue of how sex education is taught in the US is off base because this is a private family matter," Boston said. "I disagree with that."

"We can use this incident as a ... moment to examine where we are on the issue of sex education and ask the candidates what they want to do on this particular issue."

The teenage birth rate in America rose in 2006 after nearly 15 years of decline, with about 435,000 babies born to mothers between 15 and 19 years of age. More than 729,000 teenage pregnancies are reported in the US each year, according to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

Jessica Sheets, a spokeswoman for the National Campaign, said the Bristol Palin pregnancy "is a really good way to say, 'this could be happening to anybody'".

"We should be looking at more options here," she added. "We don't want to limit ourselves to only talking about X or only about Y."

The Palin flap is the third teenage pregnancy saga this year to capture American attention. Jamie Lynn Spears, the 16-year-old sister of pop singer Britney Spears, delivered a baby daughter in June amid reports of a pregnancy "pact" – later debunked – among high-school girls in the small town of Gloucester, Massachusetts.

"It's clearly time that we all start talking about the bigger picture on teen pregnancy -- and not just a couple of cases, but the thousands of young women each year who need help preventing pregnancy," Martha Kempner, a vice-president at the Sexuality Information and Education Council of America, said.

Abstinence-only education is explicitly endorsed in this year's Republican party platform, which calls forgoing sex before marriage "the responsible and expected standard of behaviour". A decade-long study of abstinence education, authorised by Congress, found last year that it is as effective in preventing premarital sex as education that includes a broader slate of health options. Abstinence education was also found to have no discernible effect on condom use.

Bristol Palin is expected to marry her child's father, 18-year-old Levi Johnston, in the coming months.