

## EDUCATION

By LAURA BEIL

**I**F YOU TOOK A DRIVE LAST SPRING DOWN THE FARM-TO-MARKET roads that wind through the piney woods of east Texas, you may have admired a lovely crew of teen beauty queens. They all but radiated from the billboard above you, in sparkling tiaras and evening gowns. They were, each one, card-carrying virgins, declaring, "We Are Waiting for Our Prince Charming." A few miles later, another sign informed you that one in four sexually active teens will contract an STD. You could have also glimpsed a highway testimonial from 15-year-old "Ima Waiten."

In this largely rural corner of the state, it's hard not to go through Longview, a town of 78,000 residents, four of the more than \$1 billion George W. Bush campaigns. They represented a small slice of the money that helped fund the birthplace of Virginity Rules, which sponsored these roadside praises of teen abstinence and hosted kid-led virginity campaigns. They represented a small slice of the more than \$1 billion George W. Bush has bestowed on abstinence education. But even without a looming budget crisis, the next chief executive may not be so dedicated to the cause. Barack Obama supports comprehensive sex ed. And while Sarah

Palin said she opposed "explicit sex-ed programs" in 2006, aides now say both Palin and her running mate, John McCain, back federal funding for programs that "promote abstinence as the best option" but also include "information on contraception." For true believers in the wait-for-marriage camp, that's hardly comforting.

They couldn't be losing their president at a worse time. Studies have cast doubt on the programs' effectiveness, and critics have skewered curricula for breaches of accuracy and ethics. The Bristol Palin pregnancy reduced the issue to a late-night TV punch line. (Actually, Wasilia High teaches both abstinence and comprehensive sex ed, according to principal Dwight Probasco.) But after spending a year trying to understand abstinence education as part of a Kaiser Family Foundation media fellowship, I found a surprisingly nuanced—and highly charged—picture. Conservatives seem to want to brand all comprehensive sex education, which includes detailed discussions of contraception, as a conspiracy to encourage teen sex. Liberals just want abstinence education to go away. Both sides profess to care deeply about the country's youth, and I believe them. Sadly, each side seems to operate in its own universe, while our children live in only one.

Although the world has recently preoccupied itself with sex education in Alaska, it is here, in my home state of Texas, where the battle over abstinence is most pitched. This is the ground where then governor Bush first became abstinence education's most powerful champion. The state draws

with 62 teen births per 1,000 population. (The national rate is 40 per 1,000.)

But spend time among the folks of east Texas, folks you'll find at the stadium on Friday night and the sanctuary on Sunday morning, and you start to understand why groups like Virginity Rules will not go quietly. This isn't really about sex. In the eyes of supporters, teaching abstinence to teenagers amounts to teaching marriage to future adults. Around here, people see marriage (of a man and a woman at least) as a means to protect children and reduce poverty—making teen abstinence nothing less than a blueprint for America's future.

The vast majority of public-health experts, however, seldom discuss sex education and marriage in the same sentence. They gauge success by pregnancies prevented, germs not contracted, and kids who enter adulthood with a healthy view of sexuality. The public-health community views a wait-until-marriage message as blind to the world most teens inhabit. The average age of matrimony has steadily climbed, and is now past age 25. (Which is probably why 95 percent of Americans don't walk down the aisle as virgins.)

For all the rancor, the two sides do have

# Just Saying No To Abstinence Ed

Its biggest champion is leaving the White House. And, oh yeah, no one knows whether it works.

points of intersection. Both believe parents and other adults in a child's life should make an active lead in shaping adolescent sexuality. They know that most parents don't want their teenagers having sex, and that about two thirds of kids who have sex say they wish they had waited.

Both camps claim the side of science. But science is, in fact, where the abstinence community finds itself outgunned. In many ways, the wound is self-inflicted: when the abstinence movement was starting to congeal a decade ago, federal funding agencies did not place a priority on evaluation. Many early leaders, motivated more by enthusiasm than science, actually downplayed the need for research.

A decade later, few studies have documented changes in behavior following ab-

**VIRGINITY RULES:** Ford, a former Miss Teen Texas, touted the message from billboards

stinence education. One scientifically rigorous, \$8 million evaluation didn't find any difference in the age of first sexual intercourse. In another recent report, a review of 56 studies for the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, researcher Doug Kirby found favorable data for three abstinence programs, but he says the evidence is only weakly supportive.

Tonya Waite knows her curriculum didn't have the kind of studies that could hold up scientifically, and she never had the budget or expertise to get them. Without research, she says, "How do you truly judge years of performance?"



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culture telling you sex is something you can throw away," says April Ford, who as Miss Teen Texas, starred in the billboard of pageant-winning virgins. An east Texas native, she used her 2005 crown to convince school groups that abstinence isn't lame. "If you have people out there who visually look exactly like what you see on MTV and the movies, it's going to have an effect," she says. An effect that she hopes will outlast Virginity Rules.

With SUZANNE SMALLEY with McCain

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