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Carrie Reiger of Healthy Futures spoke to a Lynn English High School health class about abstaining from sex. (Globe Photo / Christina Caturano)

Lynn teens consider abstinence-only sex education

By Peter Schworm, Globe Staff | January 3, 2005

Carrie Reiger, 28, stood in front of a classroom full of teenagers at Lynn English High School and told them to resist hormones, peer pressure, and a pop culture that portrays teenage sex as cool and mainstream.

Reiger, a teacher with Healthy Futures, the largest program in Massachusetts promoting teenage abstinence, decided years ago she would wait until she was married to have sex. Now she travels the state, going classroom to classroom, school to school, extolling the advantages of marriage, depicting the difficulties of teenage parenthood, and teaching nonphysical ways to express affection.

"A lot of students say, 'What else are we supposed to do if we don't have sex?' " she told the Lynn teens, some curious, some diffident. " 'How else are we supposed to show we care about someone?' Well, here are some ways." In an activity mirrored after the game show "Family Feud," students shouted out answers like "Say you love them," "nice words," "nicknames," and "blowing a kiss."

Some of the students rolled their eyes and made wisecracks, but many nodded in approval.

Healthy Futures, one of a surging number of federally funded school-based programs across the country, is on the front lines of an intensifying debate over the merits of abstinence education and the government's proper role in influencing teenage sexual behavior. Healthy Futures teaches its five-session program in more than 30 middle and high schools in the Boston area. In its third year, the program is an example of an aggressive national campaign by the Bush administration and social conservatives to urge teenagers to postpone sex until they are married.

In Massachusetts, individual school districts can decide for themselves about how they want to teach sex education, though the state recommends teaching both the benefits of abstinence and methods to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

Healthy Futures teaches that the only sure way to avoid sexually transmitted diseases is to abstain from sex -- and that not having sex is cool, too.

Fred Cole, a Lynn English senior, was one student in Reiger's audience last month who agreed. Cole said he had always thought he was in the minority for choosing not to have sex.

"Everyone talks about sex, especially guys. There's a lot of pressure around it," he said. "But I don't think people know about all the different diseases you can get. It's pretty scary."

Healthy Futures program director Rebecca Ray cited data that suggest 27 percent of students decide not to have premarital sex after they attend the program.

Cole admitted that he left the Healthy Futures class unsure about whether he will stay abstinent. Lynn English senior Krista Roy, 18, said teenagers will have sex no matter what they are told and that many students treat sex as a natural part of becoming an adult.

"It's just expected," Roy said. "It's the next step."

Abstinence education stresses the health risks of early sexual activity and sends adolescents the clear message that they should remain virgins until marriage. Comprehensive sex education also urges abstinence but teaches safe-sex practices as well.

Abstinence supporters said that teaching students about safe sex sends the message that sexual activity is a legitimate and even inevitable teenage behavior. Opponents counter that abstinence education not only fails to delay sexual activity, it increases the likelihood teenagers will not use contraception when they have sex.

The debate returned to the headlines recently when Representative Henry A. Waxman, a California Democrat, released a report finding that federally funded abstinence-education programs deliver "false and misleading" information about contraception and sexually transmitted diseases.

Congress has provided \$170 million this year for abstinence-education programs, a \$30 million increase from 2004 and more than double the spending from four years ago. By law, federally funded abstinence classes can highlight only the shortcomings of contraception in preventing pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

Abstinence supporters credited the approach with declines in the rates of teenage sex and pregnancy. They pointed to a National Center for Health Statistics survey released last month that found that adolescent sexual activity had decreased.

Opponents of abstinence education said that the approach discourages teenagers from using contraception.

"We often compare it to a driver's ed course showing gory photographs of car accidents" to encourage seat-belt use, said Erin Rowland, a spokeswoman for the Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts. "Focusing on failure of condoms leads to distorted information in the best-case scenario, and completely wrong information in the worst."

Specialists who study sexual behavior say that neither approach can claim sole credit for any decline in teenage sexual activity.

Bill Albert, a spokesman for the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, said increased abstinence and use of contraception have been more or less equally responsible for the 33 percent decline in teenage birth rates since 1991.

"If both sides want to claim credit, they should," Albert said.

The Healthy Futures presentation at Lynn English was led by Reiger and another young teacher who also has decided to remain abstinent until marriage.

During a week of hourlong classes, instructors from Healthy Futures told the students that they are too young to handle the emotional consequences of sexual activity and that chastity is a virtue. They emphasized that abstinence is the only sure way to avoid pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

"What did we learn about condoms?" Reiger asked the class. "They're going to reduce the risk, but they aren't absolute protection," she said.

In a quiz designed to improve students' perception about married life, Reiger asked students if single or married people reported having better sex lives. Almost all answered single, and when Reiger informed them the opposite was true, students shook their heads in surprise.

Ray said the exercise was designed to counteract what she described as a sex-saturated culture and a media that glamorizes sex outside marriage.

"If they see that on every single show, it normalizes the behavior," Ray said. "They think that's what they are supposed to do."

She said students who took the class were more likely to disagree with the statement "condoms make sex safe" and agree that "sexual activity before marriage can be physically and emotionally detrimental," Ray said.

That message rang true for Maria Angelone, a 15-year-old who said she deeply regretted her decision to have sex.

"You might think it's right, but you wind up really regretting it," she said. "There's a lot of peer pressure to have sex, but people don't talk about how you can get your heart broken."

Angelone came away heartened by the message that teenagers can choose abstinence even if they are no longer virgins. She promised herself she will remain chaste until she is much older.

"I'm going to wait for a while," she said.

Others said sex is too natural and enjoyable to postpone until marriage.

"I'm still young; I'm not ready to have a long-term relationship," said Joel Grullard, 16, who said he has had sex with several girls. "I'm just trying to have fun."

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