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## State gets money for sex-free ed

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In an effort to advance the abstinence education programs President George W. Bush promoted in his State of the Union address last week, the federal government awarded almost \$500,000 Wednesday to a Boston-based group that teaches teenagers that no sex is the safest kind.



*Media Credit: Tegan Keller*  
House Speaker Tom Finneran gave his support to an abstinence program.

The Healthy Futures program, which could receive nearly \$1.5 million over three years through the grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, teaches a curriculum focused on sexuality, healthy relationships and self-respect, Program Director Rebecca Ray said. Each educator is committed to abstinence or waited until marriage to have sex - and they all tell students their own stories, which Ray said helps teens relate and feel comfortable.

"This program is based on the acknowledgment that teenagers are not animals in heat," said John Ensor, the president of A Woman's Concern, the group that helped launch Healthy Futures in September 2002.

At a news conference at the Statehouse Wednesday, Ensor read an email from a 15-year-old girl describing the trauma she went through after having sex in high school.

"It's because of such teenage girls and boys damaged by premarital sex that we started Healthy Futures," he said.

National abstinence education funds are modest, Health and Human Services Regional Director Brian Cresta said, but "it's competitive and we're looking to fund programs we think can do the most with the dollars." Bush "singled out" Healthy Futures in a speech last year as a model of effective programs, Cresta said, adding that both students and teachers have lauded the group's curriculum.

Cresta presented Ray with a check for \$448,434 - the first installment of the grant - at the news conference. He said the government needed to do more research "so we can prove what we already know: that abstinence education works."

House Speaker Thomas Finneran also lent his support to the program at the news conference and decried what he called a media fixated on sex.

"If truth be told, we could put three more zeros on the figure on that check and it would not even begin to make a dent in the images" children are exposed to in the media, he said. "Family hour these days would make a sailor blush."

The grant announcement came just one day after the Massachusetts Department of Public Health released a report showing teen pregnancies in the state at their lowest level ever. From 1990 to 2002, there was a 36 percent decline in teen pregnancies, according to the report.

But these encouraging numbers are not reason to believe the safe-sex curriculums practiced in most Massachusetts health classes - which focus on both abstinence and contraception - are enough, Ray said.

"There's a lot of different things that go into a teenager's decision to be sexually active," Ray, a 2001 Boston University School of Public Health alumna, said. She pointed out that while pregnancy rates continue to decline, so do rates of sexually active teenagers. The 2001 Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey, conducted every few years, showed that 44 percent of Massachusetts high school students had ever had sex, down from almost 49 percent in 1993.

"A lot of kids I talk to become sexually active by default," Ray said, especially girls who "didn't know there were other options." In Healthy Futures' 5-day classroom presentations, educators use skits and small group discussions to let students know there are other choices.

"Teens and youth are getting bombarded with different messages in the media," Cresta said. The federal government is promoting Healthy Futures and similar programs to "complement" other sex education programs, he said, as "one of the many tools educators will have in their hands."

Abstinence education is not just geared toward reducing teen pregnancy, Cresta added. Waiting until marriage can also help combat the continually rising number of teenagers with sexually transmitted diseases, he said. Every year, about three million teenagers are diagnosed with STDs, according to the state risk survey.

Federal officials have directed the regional Health and Human Services office to develop other programs that will integrate abstinence education into other family planning programs. According to Cresta, Bush has proposed \$73 million for the Special Projects of Regional and National Significance office that helps fund initiatives like Healthy Futures.

Staff writer John Tozzi contributed to this report.