

Let's talk about sex ed

What should be taught? Curriculum still raising debate

Bhavani Srinivas
staff writer

Sex education, an ever-controversial topic, constantly sparks debate across the nation.

The issue also was renewed in Charleston County when the district's Health Advisory Committee recommended a new curriculum for comprehensive middle school sex education, Making Proud Choices! Community meetings this summer also revealed concerns about the way alternative sexual lifestyles are taught as well as the role of parental choice in sex education.

The debate led the county's superintendent, Dr. Gerrita Postlewait, to propose a new policy in September that would allow parents to choose between several different sets of curricula for their students.

New curriculum choices

Health teacher Holly Kut said a major misconception in the community is that all sex education curricula approved for use by the school district will be implemented in schools, but the curriculum that is taught is up to the discretion of principals.

Physician Elizabeth Wallis, who attended the summer meetings and spoke before the school board, said she can see the effects of current sex education curricula on her patients at MUSC. Wallis believes the Making Proud Choices! curriculum could be a good solution for the problems she faces as a health care professional. Wallis said she sees problems beyond the obvious health concerns of pregnancy and infection.

"I see teenagers who don't know how to think about whether or not they want to have sex, and that's as important as the other stuff," she said.

Pastor Leon Maxwell of St. Peter's AME Church, a member of the Health Advisory Committee, agrees comprehensive sex education is a necessity to address the realities in the Charleston community. Maxwell also criticized religious arguments against comprehensive sex education.

"They [Charleston community] use their religious talk when it's necessary and convenient... You see, it changes when it comes to your door," he said.

Maxwell said abstinence-only education is especially unfavorable because of current laws.

"The state of South Carolina has also made legislation that a young girl can consent to having sex at the age of 16, so somewhere down the line she needs to be taught about the dangers [of sex]," he said.

April Borkman, program manager of the Ethnic Minorities Preventative Outreach and Web-based Education for Risk Reduction Program (EMPOWERR) at MUSC, is promoting implementation of the Making Proud Choices! program in Charleston County Schools.

Borkman has evaluated Making Proud Choices! and believes it to be a viable choice for sex education.

"This program is one that we've used with EMPOWERR in after school and community groups and we've gained lots of behavioral change, knowledge change and attitude change," she said.

Major concerns

Even this option does not address the major concerns of lawyer Marie-Louise Ramsdale.

Ramsdale, a Wando parent, became involved in the debate on sex education when she found that Wando's sex education curriculum complies with the Comprehensive Health Education Program.

Ramsdale said this policy is discriminatory and due for reevaluation.

"This law was actually passed in the late '80s, which was a time of the AIDs hysteria," she said.

Ramsdale said this issue is part of a larger problem hindering progress in South Carolina.

"I think that South Carolina is dominated by conservative ... leadership that does not face reality, and as a result South Carolina continues to lag the nation in virtually everything that matters and excel in things that keep us back, like teen pregnancy and high school dropout rates," she said.

Senior Duncan Eisen-Slade said the way the curriculum addresses alternate sexual lifestyles is alienating.

"There's a big gay community at Wando, and they're probably going to be really lost [in terms of information]," he said. "Whether or not [policy makers] mean to do this, they're saying that this huge group of people [s]...lifestyle is wrong, and [that] they shouldn't even be taught how to be safe."

Some students, however, are not as adamant about change. Senior Spencer Mamo said he is not sure there are many changes that need to be made in the curriculum.

"Personally, I wouldn't really want to hear

about it [alternate sexual lifestyles], but that's just because it would make me a little uncomfortable," he said. "But then, all sex ed makes people uncomfortable somewhat."

Choice of curriculum

Kut said she is unsure of the logistics behind Postlewait's proposed plan of giving parents options of what type of sex ed their children should receive.

"In theory, I think it's great. In reality, I don't know how she's going to do it," Kut said. "She's going to have to hire more teachers, to be able to offer more classes at the same time."

Kut said if she were to consider the sex education of her own children, she would opt for a comprehensive, scientific curriculum.

"I don't want them to be sheltered," she said. "They need to understand diversity of different lifestyles, whether it's their lifestyle or not, and as a parent, it's my job to instill the values [that] I want them to have."

Although Kut said she thinks the abstinence-based curriculum is very strong, there are serious weaknesses in the curriculum that cannot be addressed until laws change.

Mamo said Postlewait's proposal is a good idea and said it could work similar to Wando's well-established gym choices that give students input in their physical education.

"I think that probably depending on how much your family is involved in telling you about sexual activity, then they [should be able to] change what you need, because I think everyone needs a certain level of sex education," Mamo said.

Eisen-Slade, however, is critical of Postlewait's proposal to have parents choose their students' sex education.

"If they're objecting to people getting an education, they need to re-prioritize what they're objecting to," Eisen-Slade said. "They think that people will stop having sex if they stop learning about it. That's not true. They'll just do it in a worse, more dangerous way."

Borkman and Wallis recognize parental choice is important in the decision of sex education.

"I think it's important that we do hear from parents," Borkman said. "I think that's something that we have not been very good at."

Maxwell said he commended Postlewait on her efforts to enact change and her involvement in Health Advisory Committee meetings.

"It gives the parents the opportunity to choose what they want their children to learn rather than letting just having the few dominate everything," Maxwell said.

Ramsdale said students should be the ones to choose their education.

"Quite frankly, I'm not sure how many parents will take the time to actually figure out the difference between the options," Ramsdale said.

The facts

The law

The Comprehensive Health Education Program is a state statute that reads: "The program of instruction provided for in this section may not include a discussion of alternate sexual lifestyles from heterosexual relationships including, but not limited to, homosexual relationships except in the context of instruction concerning sexually transmitted diseases." All curricula approved for use at Wando, in Charleston County and South Carolina as a whole must adhere to this law.

South Carolina facts

1 in 3 female teenagers will become pregnant before her 20th birthday

○ Since 1992, the teenage birth rate has declined by **52%**

○ South Carolina has the **12th** highest teenage birth rate in the United States

18% of teen pregnancies in South Carolina end in abortion

○ South Carolina spends **\$166 million** annually on teen childbearing costs

National facts

850,000 is the average number of teen pregnancies annually in the US

○ The United States has the **highest** rate of teen pregnancies and STDs out of all developed nations

○ 22 states and the District of Columbia are required to teach sex ed in public schools

34% of American public schools have an abstinence-only message, which either prohibits or limits information about contraceptives

○ The US has spent over **\$1 billion** supporting abstinence-only sex ed programs

information gathered from AdvocatesforYouth.org, WebMD.com, the Food and Drug Administration, US Library of MedicineNational Institute of Health and teenpregnancysc.org

"I don't want [my kids] to be sheltered."
Health Teacher Holly Kut