

## Kansas Lawmakers Scrutinize Sexual Education Curriculum; Lawrence Superintendent Opposed to Changes

TOPEKA — Denise Mead panicked when she learned that her ninth-grade daughter, one of her seven children, was learning about safe sex in her Topeka High School health class, concerned that the curriculum would conflict with her Catholic values.

“We are teaching our children that sex is a beautiful thing created by God,” Mead said.

Under a bill that the House Education Committee approved last month, Kansas public schools would be required to get parents’ consent before students could enroll in sex education courses. The “opt-in” bill also would allow parents to review curriculum before enrolling their children in the classes. However, critics worry that the Kansas bill could undo historic declines in teen birth and pregnancy rates.

Committee Chairman Ron Highland, a Republican from Wamego, said the bill likely would pass if it reaches a floor vote. Rachel Whitten, spokeswoman for House Speaker Ray Merrick, said the bill will be debated in the full House later this month.

Most of the 286 school districts in the state currently have an “opt-out” policy, in which children are automatically enrolled in sex education courses unless their parents exempt them. Each school district chooses its own curriculum for fifth through 12th grade that encourages students to abstain from having sex but also promotes using protection if students are sexually active.

Mead teaches her children that sex should be saved until marriage and that it cements a man and woman’s relationship. She said she only received material about puberty and the dangers of drug use when she requested a copy of the curriculum from her daughter’s health teacher.

Although her daughter assured her that the instructor only briefly discussed sex, Mead said she plans on removing her younger children from sex education classes in the future.

“When people don’t give you the information that they’re covering, it seems like they’re hiding something,” Mead said.

Shawnee Republican Sen. Mary Pilcher Cook sponsored the bill after a parent in her area saw a photo that his then 13-year-old daughter took of a sexual education poster in Hocker Grove Middle School.

The photo, which listed acts including grinding and anal sex, sparked a national controversy over schools’ role in teaching children about sexuality.

This sex-ed poster from Hocker Grove Middle School in Shawnee has inspired legislation that would require districts to receive written permission from parents before students would be allowed to take part in sex education classes.

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Bill Albert, the chief program officer of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, said teen births in Kansas are down 50 percent since peaking in the 1990s.

He worries that the 40 percent of Kansas high school students who are sexually active will be robbed of information that helps them prevent pregnancies if the measure passes.

“Kansas has seen nothing but declines in teen pregnancy year after year. Why would you want to tinker with success?” Albert said.

Another Kansas bill under consideration in the House that would prevent school boards from using national sexual education curriculum seeks to give more control to local educators.

But Rick Doll, superintendent of Lawrence Public Schools, said a prohibition on multi-state standards would have the opposite effect. The Lawrence school district, which has an opt-out policy, adopted national sexual education standards in 2014 with the aim of better preparing students for puberty.

“They would be taking the control away from local decision-makers,” he said about the measure to prevent national standards. He also worries that an opt-in policy would exclude students who forgot to give their parents the form.

“If you believe that reading instruction is important for kids, then you wouldn’t ask them to opt in,” Doll said. “I don’t think opt-in should follow with human sexuality, either.”