

The Herald-Sun

Stop Tying School Clinics' Hands

People may hold a wide variety of views about the morality and wisdom of teenagers engaging in sexual relations.

We get that.

But there are some facts that should inform any debate over whether to provide contraceptives to teenagers.

First of all, statistics indicate that nearly half of all high school students report having had sexual intercourse, according to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. Citing the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the campaign's website says that one-third of high school students are sexually active – that is, they've had sexual relations within the past three months.

That's despite years – decades – of campaigns to insist on abstinence.

While teen birth rates have been declining steadily, in 2016 there were 26.6 births for every 1,000 girls ages 15-19 -- nine out of 10 of those, outside of marriage. And, the national campaign says, "U.S. rates of teen childbearing remain far higher than in other comparable countries."

While no doubt many teen parents – almost none of whom planned to become parents – are caring and diligent child-rearers, especially if they have family and other support, most outcomes are bleak.

Fewer than 4 out of 10 girls who have a child before they are 18 get a high school diploma. Daughters of teen mothers are three times more likely than others to have a child as teenagers themselves.

"Teen pregnancy is closely linked to a host of other critical social issues -- poverty and income, overall child well-being, out-of-wedlock births, responsible fatherhood, health issues, education, child welfare, and other risky behavior," the campaign organization says. "There are also substantial public costs associated with adolescent childbearing."

Simply put, if more children in this country were born to parents who are ready and able to care for them, we would see a significant reduction in a host of social problems afflicting children in the United States.

Again, putting moral stances aside, the reality of teenage sexual activity – combined with the corrosive effects of unplanned teen pregnancies – should be more than enough reason to give teenagers the means to prevent unplanned pregnancy.

But North Carolina law says that birth control "shall not be made available or distributed on school property." That hamstringing public health clinics at Southern and Hillside high schools, for example, from providing their teen clients with birth control means.

Durham County Commissioners are considering asking the General Assembly to repeal that ban. They should. It is in the best interest of the county and of our teen-aged population.

It's unlikely the current General Assembly would heed that plea. But it should, and the commissioners would be making an important statement about sensibly addressing a serious social issue.