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Abstinence can be taught along with contraception

Part 3 of 3

On a recent morning at Los Angeles Academy, a middle school in a high-poverty neighborhood, Jaylin Frizier, 12, hunkers over his laptop computer.

A graphic illustration appears giving step-by-step instructions on how to put on a condom. Then a video shows a woman unrolling a latex sheath down two fingers. Next, animated condom packages shriek in horror as someone contemplates using the wrong kind of lubricant. It's a scene you won't find in many schools in Texas.

In the mid-1990s, California embraced sex education that teaches students the importance of waiting until they're older to have sex, but also the value of using protection if they don't wait.

Compare this with classrooms in Texas, where messages around contraception — if they're delivered at all — have sometimes been shrouded in negativity and misinformation.

Which method has proved most effective? The numbers are telling: Texas had the fourth-highest teen birth rate in the nation while California was 29th in 2010.

California reduced its numbers despite sharing Texas' demographics and sky-high teen birth rates in the early '90s. And while more teens have abortions in California than in Texas, California reduced those at the same time it brought down teen births.

California teachers freely promote condom use and other birth control methods. They demonstrate condom use in class. Classroom talk is frank and open. Many schools have free condom handout programs.

In Texas, where a state code demands a heavy emphasis on abstinence, teaching tends to be more constricted. Condoms can't be distributed as part of instruction.

Across the U.S. there are essentially two types of sex ed curricula — comprehensive programs that promote abstinence and contraception, and programs that promote only abstinence, many of which historically cast contraceptive use in a negative light, if it was included at all. Texas has been called the "poster child" for the latter.

But the buzzword in sex education now is "evidence-based" — programs that are proven to positively change teen behavior — most of which are comprehensive, at least for now.

As the tide turns toward such rigorously tested programs, once firm lines are blurring. Some so-called abstinence-only programs teach more than "just say no" — decision-making skills and the like — and some now address contraception in a more neutral way. Meanwhile, some so-called comprehensive programs spend more time teaching abstinence than contraception.

In Texas, parents, teachers and administrators are rethinking sex education.

While many districts still use curricula that focus only on abstinence, many have moved to or are considering evidence-based programs.

The movement is percolating in school health advisory councils as members confront Texas' continued high rate of pregnant girls and what science says can bring it down.

There's a sense of urgency: Teens giving birth cost Texas \$1.2 billion a year — \$70 million in Bexar County alone. The incidence contributes to a raft of social ills, such as welfare dependency, child abuse and incarceration.

In California, sex education was just one part of a strategy to cut the state's teen birth rate, now below the national average. It also increased teen access to contraception and launched a range of teen pregnancy prevention efforts, such as programs that urge boys to be responsible.

"It's the kitchen-sink approach," said Bill Albert, chief program officer of The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

To understand just one element of that success — sex education — it helps to learn what's being taught in classrooms in both states, and why.

What students learn

Jaylin gazes for a time at the condom-application drawings.

Like his classmates at Los Angeles Academy, he seems unfazed by the explicit material. Contraception is a common subject in teacher Doelyn Estrella's life sciences class: Condom illustrations have lost their shock value. But does he need this much information? Jaylin smiles shyly.

"Not now, because abstinence is best," he said softly. "But when I'm older, I'm going to need to know this stuff. This gives me confidence."

Some 1,300 miles away, a different scenario is playing out. Leticia Allen, an educator with the nonprofit group JOVEN, asks students at San Antonio's Leal Middle School a series of questions. What if your date wants to be alone with you? (Go to a movie!) What if he or she starts pushing up against you? (Say you have to go to the restroom!) But Raeanne Guzman, 14, has a question.

"Sometimes, though, you can learn all about abstinence but you really get caught up in the moment and you forget about it," she said. "Sometimes you can't do it."

Allen has the answer. "That's why you need to tell someone about your decision to be abstinent, so they can help you do it," she said.

Contraception won't be discussed with the sixth- through eighth-graders signed up for the program. However, the curriculum is among the few abstinence-only programs to carry that all-important imprimatur: evidence-based. A review by the national campaign organization noted it doesn't "advocate abstinence until marriage or portray sex in a negative light or suggest that condoms are ineffective."

Marilyn Grubbs, coordinator for student support services at Harlandale Independent School District, said Leal serves a traditional Hispanic community, so abstinence-only adheres more closely with parents' values.

"We're talking about middle schoolers, so they're still kids and very naïve," she said. "It's a little bit frightening to go into a lot of depth. We're more comfortable (talking about contraception) in small groups with children who are (sexually) active."

Gina Lopez, a counselor at Leal, feels differently. "I wish kids were getting more information," she said. "This year we had an eighth-grader who had a miscarriage, and we have one pregnant in seventh grade and one pregnant in eighth. I keep telling myself, 'Well, one or two, that's not so bad.' But one or two is too much." In Texas, about 34 percent of teens have had sex by ninth grade. By senior year, the number rises to nearly seven in 10.

At Leal, students learn how abstinence can help them avoid the "three horsemen of the apocalypse" — HIV/AIDS, other sexually transmitted diseases, and pregnancy. As with countless other students across Texas, it is drummed into their heads that abstinence is the only "100 percent effective" way to stay safe — in a world where swirling pop-culture messages urge them to do otherwise.

Those who will go onto Harlandale High School, where a federally funded program recently began delivering comprehensive sex education, will learn about contraception.

But for now, misinformation seems to rule the day. Asked after class where they get information about birth control,

the students say: the Internet. Friends. Movies. Parents? Nah, too awkward. Do they trust the information?

They shake their heads no.

One thing they do know: Condoms don't really work. "They fail about half the time," said Esmeralda Sanchez, 14.

A California class

Students in the seventh-grade life sciences class at Los Angeles Academy would know Esmeralda's number is wrong.

They, too, are taught abstinence is the only 100 percent effective way, but they're given other numbers as well: No contraception use for one year carries an 85 percent chance of pregnancy. Use a condom and the number drops to 15 percent. Use a condom perfectly, it drops to 2 percent.

"I tell boys, 'Dress up your penis like a present,'" said teacher Kristie Barisdale.

For those who suspect comprehensive programs push a pro-contraception bias, her classroom walls suggest otherwise. Everywhere are posted reasons kids shouldn't have sex, from the usual "three horsemen" to other messages — it can ruin your reputation, make you drop out, disappoint your parents. Barisdale and another teacher, Susan Knight, spend time preaching abstinence, such as refusal skills and decision-making. They shoot down youthful misperceptions — that a baby will fulfill a desire for love, that sex keeps a boyfriend loyal.

They use an evidence-based curriculum developed by a Houston researcher that includes the laptop lessons on condom how-to. Knight said the lessons need to be explicit, given the students' circumstances.

"Many are from single-parent homes; many have mothers who were themselves teen parents. Many parents never got sex education themselves, so there's nothing to pass down, even if they were comfortable doing that," she said.

Few parents exempt their children from the sex-ed classes. "They're glad for us to teach it, because they don't want to," Barisdale said.

A host of surveys show most parents — including those in Texas — want their children to learn about contraception as well as abstinence.

Money for abstinence

Standards for sex education in Texas differ from California's in that here abstinence must be taught as the "preferred choice of behavior" and it gets the most attention.

A 2009 survey by the Texas Freedom Network, a liberal

watchdog group in Austin, found that most of the 1,000 districts in the state that responded taught only abstinence. Forty-one percent of programs contained false information, including distortions about condom effectiveness.

In California, programs must teach abstinence but also be comprehensive, age-appropriate and medically accurate, reflecting the actual risks of using contraceptives.

Three years ago, state Rep. Mike Villarreal, D-San Antonio, wrote a bill that would have required sex education in Texas to be medically accurate. It didn't even make it out of committee.

In 1997, the federal government began giving money to strict abstinence-until-marriage programs. California has never taken the money. Texas, by contrast, has hauled in the most of any state — more than \$400 million just since 2007. It has turned down millions in new funding for comprehensive programs.

But no law limits Texas to abstinence-only: Districts can decide how in-depth they want contraception instruction to be.

Recipients of the abstinence-only money must now use medically accurate programs, said Carrie Williams of the Texas Department of State Health Services. Monitors check annually to see whether recipients are abiding by the rule.

Asked how often monitors catch recipients spreading false information, she said “of four recent site visits, two resulted in corrective letters.”

Some programs go to great lengths to avoid controversy. In Texas, districts must teach HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted disease prevention. But in one state-approved health textbook, used in the Schertz-Cibolo-Universal City district and others, the chapter addressing prevention includes nary a mention of condom use — although students are advised to “get plenty of rest.”

Others have used scare tactics. An early edition of *Choosing the Best*, an abstinence-only curriculum, advised students to spray their genitals with Lysol after using condoms.

Linda Mora, a deputy superintendent at Northside ISD, said its health advisory council is exploring evidence-based programs to replace *Choosing the Best* in middle schools and an abstinence-only textbook used in high schools along with a supplemental unit on contraception.

“Our teen pregnancy numbers don't seem to be going down,” she said. “Abstinence-plus is the trend, but we have to find (programs) that fit our community's mores.”

For many Texas students, it's not so much a question of good instruction as whether they get any at all.

“With San Antonio's huge dropout rate, if students don't get sex education early in their high school career, they may never get it,” said Dr. Janet Realini, president of Healthy Futures of Texas, which seeks to prevent teen and unplanned pregnancy in San Antonio and throughout the state. Teen pregnancy is a main reason many students drop out — males as well as females, she notes.

Meanwhile, a desire for programs that teach contraception is growing among some parents. “Ten years ago, we got calls from parents saying they didn't want schools involved” in sex education, said Rachel Naylor, director of physical education, health and athletics at Northeast ISD. “Now they're saying, ‘Ya'll aren't teaching enough.’”

Charmaine Cedillo, whose son gets comprehensive instruction at New Frontiers, a charter middle school in a low-income, Hispanic neighborhood, said she wants him armed with knowledge. “You see all these young girls walking around pregnant,” she said.

Other parents believe abstinence-only instruction shouldn't be watered down.

Teaching birth control, especially in middle school, “is a sad message, almost like giving up,” said one mother who asked not to be named so as not to identify her children. Her two teen sons took vows to remain virgins until marriage.

“Teaching that condoms provide safe sex isn't true,” she said. “But the real problem is it makes you think you're entitled to do whatever you want. You're not entitled to have sex just because you want to.”

Kyleen Wright, president of the Texans for Life Coalition, agreed. “We don't tell kids, ‘Try not to be too fat or too drunk when you drive or just smoke a little bit,’” she said. “In Texas, we have a clear and singular message. We don't change that message just because not everyone is getting it.”

But Cheyenne Armendariz, 12, who attends New Frontiers, said kids can discern the difference between information and permission. “I mean, like, duh, we have our own brains,” she said.

Studies show many comprehensive programs do work — they delay kids from having sex or reduce the number of sex partners or increase use of protection — while most abstinence-only programs that have been studied to date don't.

This may change as more abstinence programs are developed and tested, said Albert, with the national campaign.

Gov. Rick Perry didn't directly address emailed questions regarding Texas' teen birth rate compared with California's.

But a staff member did send a statement that read in part: “Abstaining from sex is the only 100 percent effective way to avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. ... Parents should play a strong role in encouraging responsible behavior and healthy choices in their children.”

A new direction

About half of parents don’t talk to their kids about sex. Today, where explicit material is a mouse click away, one might assume teens know about contraception. But half say they know little about how to use condoms.

In San Antonio, students at Southside High and some other schools are getting the details.

Through a \$6 million, five-year federally funded program, the University of Texas Health Science Center is working with five districts in ZIP codes on the South Side with some of the city’s highest teen birth rates: Southside, Harlandale, South San Antonio, Southwest and Somerset.

Dr. Kristen Plastino said the goal is to reduce teen births by 10 percent by 2015. Three districts are using a comprehensive curriculum. Southwest and Somerset opted for abstinence-only. All are evidence-based. Evaluators held community meetings for a year to make sure everyone was comfortable, she said.

“To our surprise, parents were very receptive,” said Jorge Topete, a Southside district spokesman. By state law, parents can exempt their children from the classes.

The Southside curriculum was adapted to fit with the communities’ values, Plastino said — an explicit drawing of condom use was converted into text, for example. Like many programs today, it includes take-home sheets to help kids start a dialogue with their parents. Research shows teens who are closely connected to their parents are more likely to delay sex, have fewer partners and use protection.

Could it fly?

As more schools move away from abstinence-only — in an era when many females delay marriage until their late 20s — the question remains: Will Texas follow California’s approach?

Some of its more radical policies, like condom giveaways at school, will happen in Texas “when hell freezes over and pigs fly,” said state Rep. Garnet Coleman, D-Houston.

“There has to be a change in leadership,” said Coleman, who co-authored the language that created the school health councils. “The leadership in Texas has chosen to ignore science and the reality that some teens choose to have sex.”

State Rep. Warren Chisum, R-Pampa, who wrote the council bill with Coleman, believes the present setup is working.

“All the Texas law states is that schools have to spend as much time promoting abstinence as any other thing,” he said. “We’re not ever going to do away with teen pregnancy, but Texas has been very successful. We don’t need to follow California or New York, because comprehensive programs have never worked anywhere. All they do is promote sexual activity.”

It’s not that simple, said Albert, with the national prevention campaign.

“Searching for a magic bullet for what is a very complex social problem is a fool’s errand,” he said. “You cannot connect the dots between piecemeal abstinence-only programs in select communities across the nation to an overall decline in the teen birth rate. You can’t do that with comprehensive programs either. What we can do is look at particular programs in particular environments under laboratory conditions and evaluate what works best.”

Albert notes recent teen birth declines began about five years before the federal government’s monetary push for abstinence-only programs.

With the tenor of Texas politics, it’s doubtful California-style change will transplant here any time soon, said Mark P. Jones, chairman of the political science department at Rice University.

“Moderate Republicans aren’t going to use their limited political capital on sex education,” he said. “They’re not going to risk the conservative backlash. Yes, most Texans want comprehensive sex education, but it’s the minority who are opposed to it that are the most vocal.”

The main issue is honesty, said Susan Tortolero, director of the University of Texas Prevention Research Center. Better sex education is a start, but without easier access to contraception, “we’re basically giving up on the 800,000 Texas teens that are already sexually active.”

The three-year-old Texas Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy may help get the conversation going, she said.

What California did, Realini said, was to get beyond politics and focused on kids’ needs and what science says works.

“We can do that, too, but it may be a steeper climb.”