

Teach adolescents about responsible sexuality

There is no shortage of bleak news these days when it comes to the status of adolescent health, both nationally and in the state of Minnesota. It is time for Minnesota to step up, regardless of political party, and be the leaders we always have been on serious, common-sense issues that affect the future of our children.

A recent report from the Centers for Disease Control found that for the first time in 14 years, the teen birth rate has increased, especially among 15- to 19-year-olds.

Additionally, sexually transmitted infections are on the rise at a staggering rate in Minnesota. According to a report from the Minnesota Department of Health, sexually transmitted infections have reached their highest level ever in Minnesota, with the rate of chlamydia doubling over the past 10 years and a gonorrhea infection rate at its highest since 1990.

An estimated 750,000 American teens will become pregnant this year, and nearly 4 million will contract a sexually transmitted infection.

Minnesota's young people deserve a balanced, honest approach to sexuality education in order to best make informed, responsible decisions that will preserve their health and well-being. As parents, teachers and policymakers, we have an obligation to simultaneously protect and empower youth by providing them with accurate, age-appropriate, fact-based sexuality education. By doing so, we can make sure Minnesota's youths have the knowledge they need for smart decisions that will help them to avoid unplanned pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections and plan brighter, healthier futures.

Comprehensive sexuality education gives young people the tools to make responsible decisions and to take care of themselves. Research shows that comprehensive sexuality education does not increase sexual activity among teens; in fact, it helps young people delay sexual activity and make safer, more informed decisions. And the major-



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ity of parents in Minnesota and across the nation want comprehensive sexuality education taught in schools.

In fact, the preliminary results of a parent survey from the University of Minnesota Healthy Youth Development Prevention Research Center shows that fully 100 percent

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of parents surveyed think that sex ed information should be medically accurate, with more than 90 percent of parents in favor of comprehensive sex ed programs that teach young people how to prevent pregnancy, facts about contraception, family planning and the role of preventing pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.

Leading medical groups agree that comprehensive sexuality education is crucial. The American Academy of Pediatrics, American College of Obstetricians & Gynecologists, American Medical Association and the American Public Health Association support comprehensive sex education.

In 2002, one-third of teens had not received any formal instruction about contraception, and more

than one in five adolescents received abstinence education without receiving instruction about birth control.

What we've been doing simply isn't working. It is time for Minnesota to respond to the needs of our children and give them the education their parents want them to receive: medically accurate comprehensive sexuality education. Teens trust in and rely on adults to be honest, and they deserve no less, especially when it comes to sexuality education. Similarly, citizens trust in and rely on their elected officials to respond to public health concerns appropriately.

Unfortunately, sexuality education in Minnesota doesn't live up to what parents expect or medical professionals recommend. Last year, the Legislature came as close as it ever has, passing legislation promoting comprehensive sexuality education that would have delivered fact-based sexuality education for Minnesota students in grades seven through 12 while giving communities local control over content. The bill enjoyed bi-partisan support but was rejected by Gov. Tim Pawlenty at the 11th hour.

As bleak as recent reports on adolescent health are, we can still make a difference by working toward solutions that parents, teachers and mainstream Minnesotans can agree on. Let's stand together, Republicans and Democrats, and commit to passing legislation requiring fact-based, locally controlled sexuality education in our public schools. It's time to take a common-sense approach and equip Minnesota's youth with the information they need to protect themselves against unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.

State Sen. Sandy Pappas of St. Paul and Rep. Neva Walker of Minneapolis, both members of the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party, are co-authors of the legislation they argue for above, the Responsible Family Life and Sexuality Education bill. Pappas' e-mail address is sen.sandy.pappas@senate.mn. Walker's is rep.neva.walker@house.mn.