

Sex education is a must in NY

■ **Passage of Healthy Teens Act had broad support, and all kids need the information, but Albany failed again**

BY CLAUDIA GRIVATZ COPQUIN

It's a shame that for the fourth year in a row, the New York State Legislature came to a close last week without passing the Healthy Teens Act. This piece of legislation shouldn't be controversial — it's nothing more than a grant opportunity enabling school districts and community groups to apply for funds to develop comprehensive sex education programs for teens.

According to Family Planning Advocates of New York State, New York has no designated funding stream for comprehensive sex education, nor is such education even mandatory. Instead, while schools are mandated to provide HIV and

AIDS education as public health issues, teaching broader sex education is at the discretion of school boards and therefore varies from district to district. On Long Island, with our 124 school districts, that means there's no uniformity in who's getting what information.

And all teens need this information. If they can't obtain it from their parents or their school, they go to their friends or the Internet. Often, the answers they find there are simply wrong.

Grants from the Healthy Teens Act would enable districts to create and implement programs that teach medically accurate health information pertaining to sex, which would include abstinence as well as safe sex and contraception.

Passage of this measure ought to be a no-brainer; it passed the Assembly with bipartisan support for four years in a row. This year, the Assembly voted 130-14 in favor of the bill. It's supported by 150 organizations, including The Ameri-

can Academy of Pediatrics and the American Academy of Obstetricians and Gynecologists.

And just in the nick of time — before the Legislature came to a close, that is — the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released a shocking report that one in four teenage girls has a sexually transmitted disease. Other studies show that in New York six out of 10 teens have sex before graduating from high school, and almost 40,000 teens become pregnant in New York every year.

Couldn't more education be the key to curbing sexual activity, preventing pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections?

Health care professionals, family planning advocates, educators, parents and a good number of researchers say yes. Our federal government says no. The government offers states zero money for comprehensive sex education. Instead, since 1996, the government has spent about \$50 million a year in grants to fund abstinence-only sex education: essentially, "just say no" for sex.

Initially, 49 states accepted the funds, but, over time, more than 15 states have rejected the federal money — as of last fall,

New York became one of them, turning down \$3.5 million a year for an agenda that simply does not work. New York Health Commissioner Dr. Richard F. Baines stated: "The Bush administration's Abstinence Only Program is an example of a failed national health-care policy directive, based on ideology rather than on sound scientific-based evidence that must be the cornerstone of good public health-care policy."

The proof is in the government's own 10-year study of four abstinence education programs. Approved and funded by Congress and conducted by Mathematica Policy Research based in Princeton, N.J., it concluded that "the programs had no effect on the sexual abstinence of youth."

Despite the research, sex education remains a highly divisive topic, with activists such as Valerie Huber of the National Abstinence Education Association insisting that abstinence-only education is effective, and that condom demonstrations and other forms of contraception ought not to be part of the lessons. And then there are those such as Karen Holgate. In her book "From Crayons to Condoms:

The Ugly Truth About America's Public Schools," she preaches the ineffectiveness of condoms and says that teen sex is condoned by school authorities.

But whether you look at sex education as health care policy based on science or as a faith-based morality issue, this year, just like last year, the Healthy Teens Act died in Albany at the hands of the Senate Finance Committee. And weirdly, for reasons that have nothing at all to do with this ongoing debate . . . or even finances.

An e-mailed statement from Senate spokesman Mark Hansen explains it this way: "Concerns have been raised about the bill duplicating existing school health curriculum, including existing HIV education efforts. Concerns have also been voiced about the impact of having another mandate on schools that could impact time spent on core subjects such as math and science."

If that's really what they think, the Senate has clearly missed the mark. If a school district applied for a Healthy Teens Act grant, it would mean they were seeking to fill an educational void on behalf of its students — nothing else.



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OPINION