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## **The Family Room: Abstinence only can't replace sex ed**

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Windsor Middle School is considering replacing its current sex education program with WAIT Training, an abstinence-only curriculum. WAIT stands for Why Am I Tempted, and it promotes itself as a love/relationship education. It explicitly states it is not sex ed, and that's no lie.

WAIT doesn't accurately or wholly educate students on transmission of HIV/AIDS or prevention of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Instead, the program dogmatically presents abstinence until marriage as a cure-all, the sole prescription for everything regarding sex and relationships.

I've read the workshop manual from cover to cover. Most parents will not have that opportunity. Instead, they will be given the chance to attend three informational presentations by WAIT staff. These presentations will probably be engaging and lively. But what they won't tell parents about the program is, I believe, more important than what they will.

Unless you've read the manual, you won't know that our female students will be told that "provocative dress is disrespectful to the man you're with." Hello??! What ever happened to telling our girls that provocative dress makes them look cheap, that it is an advertisement of their low self-respect, whether they're with a guy or not?

Unless you've read the manual, you won't realize that the sources from which the staff pull their information are outdated, despite the manual being a revised edition. Most of it comes from the late 1980s through the mid-1990s. I found a source citation dating back to 1969. In addition, the program is rife with generalizations that lack scientific backing. For example, one handout tells students that "Married people have the best and most sex." It also tells them that married men have a lower incidence of mental disorders. It neglects to report that married women have higher incidence of emotional disorders because marriage is more demanding of women than men (a statistic I found from 2005).

The findings of a 2005 study were reported in the journal "Sexually Transmitted Infections." That study indicates that married women are "much more likely" than single women to have sexual difficulties. But our girls won't hear that, either. Also, the manual fails to tell students who these married people are being compared to. Single men? Singles in general? Giraffes?

It's disconcerting that adults are giving our children questionable information ("Married people appear to have a calming influence in their lives"). It's downright dangerous when they give our students misinformation. For example, students are asked to analyze risk factors for HIV/AIDS transmission: No risk, At risk, High risk. They are told that the sweat, tears, saliva, of an infected person can put them at risk for transmission. But NIAID, a department of the National Institutes of Health, publishes a fact sheet that explicitly states that there is no scientific evidence that the virus can be spread through saliva, sweat or tears.

The "fact" sheets on STDs are equally misleading. Students are told, verbatim, the same thing on each one: The only way to prevent catching this disease is to abstain from sex until marriage.

Students will be given a handout that includes important topics to be discussed with potential spouses. On that list they'll find religion, childrearing philosophies, and the most important topic of them all: what temperature to keep the house throughout the day and during the night. Girls will be provided with a "Wedding of My Dreams" handout that has them complete sentences like "My guests will eat (blank)," "My bridesmaids will wear (blank)," and "We will honeymoon in (blank)." I don't want my middle school student to be thinking of marriage. At that age, these kids have enough on their plate.

Which brings me to my last gripe against WAIT. It imposes a specific set of values on a general population. Not everyone plans or hopes to marry. And what about our homosexual students? WAIT completely ignores them, sending the not-so-subtle message that they are not important or valued as individuals. If for no other reason, WAIT should not replace sex ed because it further ostracizes an already-marginalized population of our kids. Ironically, the majority of people who promote abstinence-until-marriage are the same people who refuse gays the legal right to marry. Sorry, gay folks. No sex for you. Ever.

Currently, eighth graders are offered a healthy sexuality class that is abstinence-based but which also provides valuable information should students choose another option. And since the government tells us that 46.7 percent of our high school kids have engaged in sex, it would be irresponsible of us to withhold that information from our children.

Historically, abstinence-only education has failed our kids. And time is not a luxury we can afford where their health and well-being are concerned. Do you want to wait to see if this WAIT program works, while in the meantime your child could be having unprotected sex? I don't.

Censoring valuable information such as how to have protected sex should our kids choose to engage will not cement a commitment to abstinence. It will only give them an excuse to make stupid, possibly life-threatening choices as they exercise their independence.

These students are humans with free will. Let's treat them as such.

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