

## Free to Be anywhere but on campus

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Here's a number that you don't hear mentioned very often: Fifty-three percent of high school students — yes, those hormone-raging, moody, media-addicted kids we love so much — have never had sex.

And the numbers are improving. In 1991, it was 46 percent.

I say "improving" because, for all the cultural eye-rolling about what kids have done for generations, most parents still want their teens to be in that 53 percent. Studies show that the vast majority of parents think sex education should include information about both contraception and abstinence. Furthermore, most parents would still prefer that their children hold off on sex until they're adults, possibly even until they're married or in a committed relationship. This is almost as much a secular value as it is a religious one.

Why? Because we know sex is not as guilt-free, pressure-free or pain-free as it's portrayed. Enough said.

Yet for some reason we still can't manage to have a healthy conversation about the A word: abstinence. In the twisted vernacular of our modern-day politics, it's somehow become a dirty term.

Worse, we can't seem to agree on the importance of encouraging kids who are abstinent, by chance or choice, that they aren't what they fear — alone.

Our lack of a common goal is evident in the heated debate waged recently in our letters section, on our Web site and elsewhere concerning the Sonoma County-based Free to Be campaign.

In case you've missed this, here it is in a nutshell. Free to Be is a local nonprofit, started in 1991, that has been invited for 18 years into local schools to present what it calls an "age-appropriate and medically accurate abstinence education." It is not an abstinence-only program as some critics contend. There are no calls for virginity pledges. At the heart of the program, older teens merely talk to younger kids to tell them that they don't have to have sex to be cool.

Keep in mind, kids are not required to go to these sessions. And this is not the only program invited into schools to talk to kids about sex. But it's one of the few, if not only, that emphasizes abstinence.

Last year, the program reached 3,400 kids in more than 40 schools in Sonoma County. After one session, one high school girl wrote, "You've made me realize abstinence wouldn't make me a friendless loser."

Is this so bad?

One of the most persuasive arguments I've heard in defense of the program came from a social worker, an admitted skeptic of federally supported abstinence programs like this one, who was hired to evaluate the program for Sonoma County schools.

"What many students have told me is that Free to Be has helped them realize that choosing to be sexually abstinent during high school does not mean that they are undesirable or that they are condemning themselves to the life of a social outcast," Selena Polston of Sebastopol wrote in a Close to Home column in June. "The fact that Free to Be has been invited to speak at so many Sonoma County schools over the years (including in the traditionally 'liberal' west county school districts) speaks to the fact that the program is viewed by teachers and administrators alike as both beneficial and sufficiently non-ideological."

Nevertheless, the program has been banned from just about every public school in Sonoma County this year with no hope of being invited back. Why? Because of a threatened lawsuit by the American Civil Liberties Union, which argues that the program does not abide by the California Education Code.

In fact, the code requires that "the value of abstinence" be taught in schools and Free to Be has lined up several legal opinions concluding that it is compliance with the code.

But it doesn't matter. Let's also set aside our skepticism that every teacher, volunteer and guest speaker at local schools, whether addressing sex education or not, is in compliance with the education code.

The fact is that Free to Be is now program non grata in public schools not because of a lawsuit but because of the threat of one.

As Free to Be Executive Director Sue Bisbee told us, most school districts don't have the resources to risk fighting a lawsuit. "They just don't have the funds," she said. "They have to be safe."

So the ACLU wins by forfeit — and kids lose.

In a Close to Home column on Friday, the Oakland-based Public Health Institute laid out its opinion of how the Free to Be curriculum "violates" the education code.

Most of its complaints, it seems to me, pertain to the accuracy of some of the information Free to Be gives out. If that's the case, why not work with the Free to Be folks to change their numbers rather than partnering with the ACLU to run the program out of public schools?

The fact is these criticisms sound like a verdict in search of evidence. Except it doesn't look like Free to Be will even have its day in court.

With all the problems facing students and public education, one would think adults have more important things to do than keeping Sonoma County students from talking about abstinence.

Small wonder so many within that 53 percent feel like outcasts.

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