

The Summer of Love

A few decades ago, the subject of sex education would have had no place in national politics, and would not have been considered within the purview of the federal government. But times have changed, and since the 1970s, the government has used its considerable resources to try to manage what schools teach children about sex. In the past six years, under a Republican president and Republican-led Congresses, the federal government has put its weight behind abstinence education—supporting both abstinence-only programs and other sex-ed classes that teach about contraceptives but emphasize the value of abstinence.

The effect of abstinence education on teen behavior is notoriously difficult to gauge. But while encouraging young students to avoid sex as long as possible is the most obvious aim of abstinence education, a federal policy of promoting it has a secondary purpose: to prevent the government from (whether intentionally or not) actively encouraging unsafe practices on the part of students too immature to grasp the consequences.

The Democratic victory in the 2006 elections has shifted the priorities of Congress on a wide variety of foreign and domestic issues, including sex ed. This summer, congressional Democrats have worked to curtail the focus on abstinence in government-funded sex education, seeking to eliminate abstinence-education funding that had been made possible by legislation like the Community-Based Abstinence Education Program, the Adolescent Family Life Act, and the Title V Maternal and Child Health Service Act. Reauthorization for the latter legislation nearly lapsed this July, but Congress temporarily extended its abstinence education component for three months. It is on uncertain ground for reauthorization this September, as are federal abstinence education programs more generally.

Instead of abstinence education, congressional Democrats are supporting “comprehensive” sex-ed and family-planning programs that would make it easier for poor women to obtain contraceptives and to learn about the morning-after pill. Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, who has been prominent in advancing this legislation, argues its purpose is “to reduce unintended pregnancies” by “prevent[ing] them in the first place.” This is all well and good, and the supporters of the abstinence education programs that Democrats are now gutting surely also want to reduce unwanted pregnancies. Abstinence programs may not work as well as their advocates claim, and they may overemphasize their effectiveness at preventing pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, but for all their flaws, at least they strive to put sexuality in its fuller human context—as integral to love and marriage, and as directed toward family and children.