

Houston-area school districts adopt new take on sex ed

By Erin Mulvaney | September 13, 2012 | Updated: September 14, 2012 6:26am

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David Wiley, professor of health education at Texas State University-San Marcos, pauses before speaking about sex education at a Texas Freedom Network news conference outside the Capitol Tuesday, Feb. 24, 2009, in Austin, Texas. (AP Photo/Harry Cabluck)

Photo: Harry Cabluck / AP

Some Houston-area school districts are shifting away from traditional abstinence-only sex education classes this school year, part of a statewide trend that has prompted concern among some parents that kids are learning too much, too soon about sex.

The Spring Branch and Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District are the latest in the area to adopt an "abstinence-plus" program. Seventh-graders will take the 12-lesson program created by the [University of Texas Prevention Research Center](#) in Houston that teaches about contraception, unplanned pregnancy and condom use, in addition to abstinence.

In Harris County, 10 school districts and the KIPP charter school system have adopted or are adopting similar programs, as are districts in Austin, Corpus Christi, San Antonio and Plano.

At a recent Cypress-Fairbanks ISD informational meeting, some parents expressed concern over the new content, calling it against their "moral fiber" and a "bad choice" for students and school districts. However, fewer than 10 parents out of more than 200 at the meeting had doubts about the program, said [Debra Hill](#), coordinator of secondary science at Cypress Fairbanks ISD.

Opt-out clause

Parents can choose to opt their children out of the class.

Hill said surveys completed by middle school parents last February showed that 55 out of 60 who attended an information meeting felt comfortable with the curriculum.

Public schools do not have to provide sex-education programs, but if they do, the Texas Education Code requires that they stress abstinence as the preferred choice for unmarried teens and devote more time to it than to other behaviors.

[Susan Tortolero](#), director of the UT program, said the more teens know about sex, the less likely they are to engage in it.

"The misperception is that by talking about condoms and contraception and talking about sex, kids are going to increase their sexual activity; we know definitely that is not true," Tortolero said.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services gave \$15 million to Tortolero's team at UT to develop a program to tackle the teen pregnancy rate. The program was tested in about five to 10 Houston Independent School District schools over the last seven years. About 20,000 kids in Harris County receive the instruction each year.

Texas has the nation's third-highest rate of unplanned teen pregnancies - 63 per 1,000 births - for girls 15 to 19, and the second-highest rate of multiple births for girls 15 to 19.

Ten percent of sixth-graders have had sex, and by 12th grade 70 percent of teens have had sex, translating to more than 800,000 sexually experienced teens in Texas, according to UT research.

Objects to content

Jonathan Saenz, the director of legislative affairs for the conservative **Liberty Institute**, said the content of UT's program is "over the top" for middle school students, full of sensitive topics and graphic images.

"I don't think it's age-appropriate, and I don't know if it follows state law," Saenz said. "It talks more about how to have sex than ways to actually avoid having sex."

He said he was disturbed by a video that showed how to use a condom and another lesson that mentioned anal sex.

Tortolero said the program does mention different sexual practices but has proved to decrease activity for vaginal, oral and anal sex among teens.

Most Texas school districts teach abstinence-only programs, but a 2011 **Texas Freedom Network** study showed that 25 percent of schools used models in the 2010 school year that taught about contraception and condom use, compared to a little under 4 percent in 2008.

In some districts, parents led the charge in asking for a different kind of sex education, said **Dan Quinn**, a spokesman for the Austin-based Texas Freedom Network.

"Parents didn't realize how little their kids were learning in schools," Quinn said.

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