

Parents with a PURPOSE

Local Parents Group Fights for Realistic Sexuality Education Courses in Public Schools

By Mary Schley

AS MORE TEENS and pre-teens become sexually active, many are finding that simple lessons in biology and "Just say no" sex education classes are not helping them make difficult decisions. This has led a group of parents to begin a campaign for reality-based sexuality education courses in local public schools. The group calls itself Parents United for Responsible Policies on Sexuality Education, or PURPOSE.

The program aims to unite parents, educators, and other concerned community members in an effort to help determine the quality and content of sex education in public schools. Members also want to make sure comprehensive, reality-based sexuality education is complete and current. "We would like to be a resource in helping schools. A lot of the curricula [taught in sex education courses] is outdated, and their policies are often unclear," says Sharon Green, Planned Parenthood of Santa Cruz County director of Community Education.

Santa Cruz Planned Parenthood started PURPOSE last June after petitioning for and receiving a \$20,000 grant from the National Planned Parenthood Federation. PURPOSE is a response to the growing number of abstinence-only programs being taught in the schools, according to Green.

She says she confronted this trend in Santa Cruz when she suggested bringing health educators and condoms into a local school extension for high-risk children. "The room was filled with opposition—loud and angry," Green says. "I knew there were people who supported the idea of reality-based sex education, but they had no resources to voice their support. PURPOSE helps them to get involved."

Cynthia Mathews, director of public affairs for the Santa Cruz County Planned Parenthood, says parents who support reality-based sex education have not demonstrated their views at meetings because they are happy with school programs like PURPOSE. "Perhaps parents haven't perceived the need to show support," she says. "Typically people don't demonstrate when they're happy. People tend to mobilize when they want something to change."

The opposition to PURPOSE has not been hidden. The conservative religious monthly, *The Forum*, ran a front page article decrying the program's efforts. The cover illustration depicted a big Santa Claus figure representing Planned Parenthood, and a tiny, unopened gift labeled, "abstinence ed." Green says this perception is entirely incorrect. "Last year we provided PSI [Postponing Sexual Involvement] to 4,800 kids. We provided birth control education to maybe 1,000."

Mathews says she recognizes some hostility towards reality-based sex education as well. "There are a small number of people within the school district who have been vocal for a narrow view of sex education," she says. "Our point is to support a more realistic view."

Noel Smith, editor and publisher of *The Forum*, says PURPOSE is more of an advocacy group for Planned Parenthood than a parents' group. "They are trying to make it appear as a parents' group to get reality-based sexuality education in the schools," he says.

In fact, according to PURPOSE Program Coordinator Steve Krause, 150 parents are already involved, and more are signing up on a daily basis.

But there are other viable methods of dealing with sex education, according to Smith, like "teaching children not how to do it, but how not to do it at all."

Smith says he is opposed to school programs like PURPOSE primarily because they advocate certain behavior that some parents do not endorse. "We live in a society that has choices," Smith says. "It's not the school's place to advocate sexual involvement by providing contraceptives. That is sending the wrong message."



However, Julie Sherman, interim director of education and prevention programs at the Santa Cruz AIDS Project (SCAP), says PURPOSE does not simply push contraception. "PURPOSE doesn't over or under-teach condoms," Sherman says. "It's not saying 'You're not ready, period.' It's saying, 'Look at the choices and the risks involved.'"

Sex education involves more than teaching abstinence, according to Sherman. She says, "Abstinence is not always the answer, but there are reasons to postpone it [sexual involvement]. High school students want respect, and we teach them with respect."

In order for the group to have an impact on sex education curricula in public schools, the role of parents in PURPOSE is crucial. "Parents are the primary educators of their children," Green says. "We would like to give them the tools to help them discuss it [sexual involvement] most effectively." According to Green, children who have been able to discuss sex-related issues with their parents often postpone sexual involvement longer, and tend to make more responsible de-

cisions regarding sex.

Green says parents can get involved in PURPOSE in a number of ways. In addition to keeping up with PURPOSE mailings, parents can go to the parent review nights at their children's schools, and can write articles for the PURPOSE newsletter. "I think it's really important to support our school boards in providing comprehensive education to their kids," Green says.

PURPOSE involves teaching comprehensive sex education in public schools for grades K-12, and the program includes "developmentally appropriate" education for each level. According to Green, the first level includes topics such

as identifying body parts, human development, relationships, behavior, health, society, and culture. She says educating at this level is very important. "If we teach our kids what those body parts are, and what is private and what is not, we take away the fear and embarrassment," Green says. "Then kids can come to us and tell us clearly when someone is behaving inappropriately."

Starting the program at such a young age is intended to prepare children to deal with sex and enable them to make responsible decisions when they are older. "It's really important because it gets taught at a personal level, so they can make good decisions," Green says. "We want to give them support early on. It's difficult to change kids' behavior once they've become sexually active."

As children get older, they are presented with new topics, including reproduction, adolescence, body image, and the changes that occur. "Body image is really necessary, and it should be taught from the lowest level," Green says. "Kids need to know that bodies come in different shapes, sizes, and colors, and that that uniqueness is important." The PURPOSE program is currently being used in local public, middle and high schools.

"It's really needed," says Sherman. According to Sherman, SCAP does a talk about AIDS at a Rotary camp every year, and one year a woman approached her to ask about contraception. "She

had been using lubricating gel as contraception. The fact that she didn't know that [it wasn't a contraceptive] is scary to me," she says. "Many relationships have undue hardships in them because of lack of knowledge."

The program also includes sexuality education issues for gay and

lesbian students. "If we're talking about complete and comprehensive sexuality education, we're talking about sexual orientation as well," Krause says. According to Krause, the 26-member PURPOSE steering committee contains a distinct gay, lesbian, and bisexual representation.

PURPOSE has been welcomed and appreciated by most teachers, students, and parents, according to Mathews. "Response to the pilot [program] has been extremely positive," she says. "Although the grant money has run out, we will find a way to build on this and continue it."

To support PURPOSE and to receive its monthly newsletter, call Planned Parenthood Community Education at 408-457-0111. **CHP**

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