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November 19, 2020

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State Board of Education Final Vote on Sex Education Friday

The Texas State Board of Education is set to conduct the final vote on sex education in its General Meeting Friday. The vote will end their three-year review and revision of the Health TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills), which include the Reproductive and Sexual Health strand. The third and final public hearing was held Tuesday morning and was limited to 3 hours of testimony. (The first public hearing in June lasted over 16 hours, and the second in September lasted over 7 hours). The Board heard continued testimony from those in favor of the current standards and those opposed. They resumed discussion during their meeting yesterday and will bring the final revisions for vote Friday.

The proposed standards are focused on abstinence as is required legally by the Texas Education Code 28.004, and include instruction on healthy relationships, communication, refusal skills, boundary setting, STIs/STDs, and contraception. Supporters of the abstinence-focused standards have emphasized that the new standards are not “abstinence-only” as they have been characterized. They contend that the standards present a comprehensive set of needed knowledge and skills and are medically accurate, age-appropriate and evidence-informed. The new standards present an “optimal health” or “sexual risk avoidance” approach which includes upholding primary prevention for all students, regardless of their socioeconomic or family status, their sexual orientation, nor their past sexual experiences. The new standards present abstinence as the only 100% effective way to avoid the risks of pregnancy, STIs/STDs and emotional risks.

Opponents have pressured the State Board to add two remaining topics- “consent education” and “inclusive” education for LGBTQ students. Several amendments were brought by two Board members to add these concepts but were all voted down during the Board discussion Wednesday afternoon.

Power to Decide (formerly the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy) defines consent as “an agreement between participants to engage in sexual activity” and Advocates for Youth defines consent as “both people are actively willing to engage in sexual behavior.” Opponents to this addition contend it is inconsistent with the Texas Education Code requirements and support the currently included student expectations on refusal skills and boundary setting for avoiding sexual activity. With regards to LGBTQ information, data is limited as to how many Texas children currently identify by these terms. The CDC YRBS 2019 results showed 2.8% of Texas high school students identifying as “gay or lesbian” and 7.9% identifying as “bisexual.” The health risks of STIs/STDs and pregnancy are higher among teens who identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual, which supports the abstinence-focused approach for all students.

Since the current health TEKS were implemented, the birth rate of teens in Texas has fallen steadily and significantly. So also have fallen the rates of teen abortion, pregnancy and sexual activity. In contrast, sexually transmitted diseases among Texas youth are increasing, as are emotional and mental health concerns, which indicates a greater risk for those who choose to be sexually active.

“We appreciate the thorough review process conducted by the State Board and TEA and support their clear decision to uphold the abstinence-focused sexual health instruction for all children in Texas. The health data simply doesn’t support the radical re-direction that has been called for. The new standards are based on health and science and promote optimal health for Texas’ students and their families,” states Lori Kuykendall, President and CEO of Medical Institute for Sexual Health.

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