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Parents, doctors, gay-straight alliance sue school over abstinence-only policy

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A group of parents, physicians and the Gay-Straight Alliance Network are suing the Clovis Unified School District in California over an abstinence-only-until-marriage sex ed program.

The lawsuit alleges that the district is violating California law and putting teens? health at risk by teaching students misinformation and denying them critical instruction about condoms and contraception.

A 2003 state law requires that sexual health education in public schools be comprehensive, medically accurate, bias-free and appropriate for students of all sexual orientations.

Two parents in the district, the American Academy of Pediatrics California District IX and the Gay-Straight Alliance Network are suing the district. The American Civil Liberties Union, with pro bono assistance from the law firm of Simpson Thacher & Bartlett LLP, is handling the case.

The Clovis high school?s sex education program is taught using a textbook that does not mention condoms at all, even in chapters about HIV/AIDS and on preventing STDs and unintended pregnancy. Instead, the textbook advises that to protect against STDs, a student has self-respect, gets plenty of rest, goes out in groups and practices abstinence.

The curriculum teaches that all people, even adults, should avoid sexual activity until they are married. Additional materials compare a woman who is not a virgin to a dirty shoe and suggest that men are unable to stop themselves once they become sexually aroused, according to a news release on the lawsuit.

?Young people, experts and legislators have agreed that schools must provide comprehensive and relevant sex ed in order to keep California?s students healthy,? said Carolyn Laub, executive director of Gay-Straight Alliance Network. ?By ignoring the law, Clovis schools put all students at risk and particularly harm lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth, who need unbiased information to make healthy decisions.?

Aubree Smith, the mother of a Clovis student and a plaintiff in the suit, said, ?Our kids need complete, accurate information to help them protect themselves against STDs and unintended pregnancy. That?s information they?ll need at whatever point in their life they become sexually active.?

The rate of STDs among California teens has been on the rise over the last decade.

In Fresno County, teens account for nearly a third of chlamydia cases and a quarter of gonorrhea cases, both of which can have serious health consequences if they are not detected and treated.

Fresno County also has one of the highest rates in California of chlamydia infection among 15-24 year olds.

Teen birth rates are dropping across the state, but they remain high for rural areas. Fresno County has had one of the highest teen birth rates in the state for more than a decade.

?Clovis provides a top-notch education in so many ways, and it?s important that students get the most up-to-date sex education too,? said Mica Ghimenti, a plaintiff and the mother of three children.

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