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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-3602

February 2, 2010

**STUDY FINDS FOCUS ON ABSTINENCE IN SEX-ED CLASSES CAN
DELAY SEXUAL ACTIVITY**

Dear Colleague:

I commend today's Washington Post front-page story to you, entitled: "*Abstinence-only programs might work, study say.*"

This peer-reviewed study published in the February edition of the Archives for Adolescent and Pediatric Health adds to the growing body of research showing the effectiveness of abstinence education programs.

The study argues definitively for the value of the single focused abstinence approach when teaching sex education. This research shows that teens were more likely to delay the initiation of sex if they received a clear abstinence message, as opposed to a "comprehensive" sex education message. If we are truly interested in "evidence based" approaches that work, then today's findings should challenge the wisdom of eliminating abstinence education among the federally funded choices for sex education. I urge my colleagues to endorse a course correction within the 2011 budget on this issue.

*Sincerely,

Dan Boren – Member of Congress

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Washington Post

Study finds focus on abstinence in sex-ed classes can delay sexual activity

By Rob Stein

Washington Post Staff Writer

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Sex education classes that focus on encouraging children to remain abstinent can convince a significant proportion to delay sexual activity, researchers reported Monday in a landmark study that could have major implications for the nation's embattled efforts to protect young people against unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. In the first carefully designed study to evaluate the controversial approach to sex ed, researchers found that only about a third of 6th and 7th graders who went through sessions focused on abstinence started having sex in the next two years. In contrast, nearly half of students who got other classes, including those that included information about contraception, became sexually active.

"I think we've written off abstinence-only education without looking closely at the nature of the evidence," said John B. Jemmott III, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, who led the federally funded study. "Our study shows this could be one approach that could be used."

The research, published in the Archives of Pediatric & Adolescent Medicine, comes amid intense debate over how to reduce sexual activity, pregnancies, births and sexually transmitted diseases among children and teenagers. After declining for more than a decade, births, pregnancies and STDs among U.S. teens have begun increasing again. The Obama administration eliminated more than \$150 million in federal funding targeted at abstinence programs, which are relatively new and have little rigorous evidence supporting their effectiveness. Instead it is launching a new \$114 million pregnancy prevention initiative that will fund only programs that have been shown scientifically to work. The administration Monday proposed expanding that program to \$183 million next year. The move came after intensifying questions about the effectiveness of abstinence programs.

"This new study is game-changing," said Sarah Brown, who leads the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. "For the first time, there is strong evidence that an abstinence-only intervention can help very young teens delay sex and reduce their recent sexual activity as well." The new study is the first to evaluate an abstinence program using a carefully "controlled" design that compared it directly to alternative strategies -- considered the highest level of scientific evidence.

"This takes away the main pillar of opposition to abstinence education," said Robert Rector, a senior research fellow at the Heritage Foundation who wrote the criteria for federal funding of abstinence programs.

The new study involved 662 African-American students who were randomly assigned to go through one of five programs: An eight-hour curriculum that encouraged them to delay having sex; an eight-hour program focused on teaching safe sex; an eight- or 12-hour program that did both; or an eight-hour program focused on teaching the youngsters other ways to be healthy, such as eating well and exercising.

Over the next two years, about 33 percent of the students who went through the abstinence program started having sex, compared to about 52 percent who were just taught safe sex. About 42 percent of the students who went through the comprehensive program started having sex, and about 47 percent of those who just learned about other ways to be healthy. The abstinence program had no negative effects on condom use, which has been a major criticism of the abstinence approach.

"The take-home message is that we need a variety of interventions to address an epidemic like HIV, sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy," Jemmott said. "There are populations that really want an abstinence intervention. They are against telling children about condoms. This study suggests abstinence programs can be part of the mix of programs that we offer."