

Gov. to end abstinence program

But births to teens down, backers argue

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COLUMBUS -

Gov. Ted Strickland's proposed \$53 billion budget eliminates an abstinence-only sex-education program.

Removal of \$1 million in state aid over two years marks a shift in Ohio support for abstinence-only programs, which advocates call a national model.

The federally subsidized program encourages schoolchildren to abstain from sex until they're married.

Strickland said he thinks abstinence programs don't work well in the long run and does not plan to apply for federal money after current funding ends Sept. 30.

"The governor believes that, considering the very challenging budget environment we find ourselves in, that this is an unwise use of tax dollars because there is no conclusive evidence that suggests the program works," Strickland spokesman Keith Dailey said.

Strickland has proposed other child programs, including pre-kindergarten and all-day kindergarten, which would help children start off better in school, Dailey said.

The governor could be headed toward a legislative showdown during budget hearings, state Rep. Bill Seitz, R-Green Township, said.

"If you eliminate abstinence-only, what does he propose to replace it with?" Seitz asked.

"I think it would be rough sledding to substitute an abstinence-only program that is working to some degree with a free-condoms-for-everybody program that would be quite controversial."

Carole Adlard, director of Cincinnati-based Healthy Visions, said, "It's very easy to say it doesn't work when (Strickland) doesn't have anything to support it."

Adlard said births to teenage girls in Cincinnati fell by 51 percent from 1993's 391 to 2005, when there were 193.

"When you've got independent people coming back and saying this is the impact it's had ... that's not feelings, it's statistics," Adlard said.

"You can't argue with numbers."

Healthy Visions is one of four providers of abstinence education to about 25,000 students in 43 school districts in Hamilton, Butler, Warren and Clermont counties.

Ken Blackwell, the former Cincinnati mayor whom Strickland defeated for governor last year, stressed the importance of abstinence-only education Thursday before a speech about marriage.

"Unless you're totally giving up on character development of our young people, abstinence education is a must," Blackwell said. "I believe that young people of character can overtake instincts to engage in premarital sex."

Blackwell would not discuss specifics of Strickland's first budget plan but said the governor is "abandoning our young people. . . . He's not just abandoning programs. He's abandoning our youth."

Blackwell now works as a fellow with the Buckeye Institute in Columbus and Family Research Council in Washington, D.C.

Ohio abstinence groups have received \$23.7 million in federal dollars in the past three years, according to the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States. The state has contributed \$500,000 a year, in addition to running programs through the Governor's Office on Faith-based and Community Initiatives.

Statewide, teen pregnancy rates have dropped from 42.3 pregnancies for every 1,000 females ages 10 to 19 in 1997 to 33.1 in 2005.

Under a 1999 Ohio law, public schools must stress in health courses that abstinence is the only surefire way to prevent pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases and HIV. But the programs have increasingly come under fire. A U.S. General Accounting Office report last fall said little oversight or analysis is done to see that federally funded abstinence programs are effective.

The Associated Press contributed.

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