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Lambrecht: Texas should reject federal abstinence funds

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In 2008, Texas should practice abstinence. How? By joining Virginia, Montana and the growing list of states who are standing up for their teens and abstaining from receiving dollars tied to a failed federal abstinence-only agenda for our youth.

In the past decade, the federal government has spent more than \$1 billion on abstinence-only programs to tell young people that they should wait until they're married to have sex, but without providing a backup plan for those who do not. The effort has been a failure. Study after study shows that abstinence-only programs don't increase abstinence. The programs don't delay the age of first sexual experiences. And they don't reduce pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections. The failure of this political agenda is increasingly apparent. We recently learned that Texas is No. 1 in the nation for repeat teen births, and teen birth rates are on the rise in the United States for the first time in 14 years.

The pregnancy of 16-year-old Jamie Lynn Spears has added a celebrity face to this issue and put teen pregnancy in the spotlight for parents everywhere.

As the parent of a 6-year-old daughter, I know how challenging this issue can be. Comprehensive sexuality education that is age-appropriate and scientifically based is the answer.

Our clinic and education staff see young people every day who need medically accurate sex education. We see concerned parents making extra efforts to bring their teenagers to meet with our health educators because they aren't getting all of the facts in Texas schools. Teens have many questions and need a trusted source for medically accurate answers.

The politics surrounding sex education have led to missed opportunities in preventing teen pregnancy. More than 80,000 teenagers in Texas become pregnant every year. We all agree that teens should practice abstinence. But the overwhelming majority of us also agree that we want our adolescents to be healthy and safe. In a 2004 poll, ninety percent of Texans agreed that public schools should educate students with age-appropriate, medically accurate sex education that includes information on abstinence, birth control and the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV.

The best way forward is to promote abstinence while promoting healthy communication between parents and their children; help our young people develop responsible decision-making skills; and provide accurate information about contraception to reduce sexually transmitted infections and teen pregnancies.

A first step, and one that would make a difference in the lives of Texas families, would be for Texas to follow the lead of 14 other states by rejecting the failed federal policies requiring abstinence-only and commit to providing our young people the education they need to make safe, healthy decisions in 2008. After months of headlines highlighting discouraging news about teen pregnancy, this would be welcomed news for Texas families.

Ken Lambrecht is president and CEO of Planned Parenthood of the Texas Capital Region.