

# Summit educates local teens on healthy life choices

## Organizers battle to cut Texas high rate of teen pregnancy through events

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Kelly Welsh, a behavioral health doctoral candidate at UT, plays a team-building exercise with middle and high school students during the iChoose Teen Summit at the ACC Eastview Campus on Wednesday.

Because Texas had the highest number of teen pregnancies last year in the U.S., organizers of the iChoose Teen Summit educated young Austinites on healthy sexuality Wednesday.

More than 100 teens attended the event at Austin Community College's Eastview Campus, spending most of their time in workshops discussing everything from "Alcohol, Drugs and Dating" to "Healthy Masculinity." When not in workshop sessions, students could attend a resource fair — a series of information tables set up by sponsor organizations. The fair presented information about quitting smoking, empowerment for young women and health insurance.

"This is about making sure our kids have healthy choices," said Dennis Johnson, a Boys and Girls Club affiliate who emceed the event. "It's about us challenging them to challenge each other and to challenge us as adults."

Cynthia Brown, a Planned Parenthood spokeswoman, said the two main goals of the summit were to educate teens about pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection prevention. One in four teenage girls in America has an STI, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Brown emphasized the importance of healthy relationships — not just healthy bodies — when it comes to sexuality.

Several non-profit organizations sponsored the event, including Planned Parenthood, Lifeworks, GENaustin and Any Baby Can.

"This is a very grassroots movement," said Amy Pierce, an iChoose summit coordinator. "It's great to see all of these local organizations coming together to make this happen."

According to Planned Parenthood, Texas receives more money for abstinence-only sex education than any other state. The Texas Education Agency claims that "abstinence-only" is a misnomer.

"The only requirement is that sexual education be abstinence-based," said DeEtta Culbertson, a Texas Education Agency spokeswoman. "Any district can go beyond that, but they must emphasize abstinence as the preferred method of behavior."

Culbertson cited a Texas education code that states that schools must "devote more attention to abstinence from sexual activity than to any other behavior."

Texas dropped to No. 3 this year in the number of teen pregnancies in the state, following New Mexico and Mississippi.

"That doesn't mean we've gotten better," said Rebecca Snearly, another Planned Parenthood spokeswoman at the event. "They've just gotten worse faster."

Snearly said there were problems with abstinence-only sex education in Texas schools.

"It's not that abstinence is bad," Snearly said. "It's actually the best way to prevent pregnancy. But what are you going to do when these kids turn 18, become adults and start having sex?"