

Bill intended to clarify what Utah health educators can teach about contraception stalls in committee

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SALT LAKE CITY — A bill intended to clarify what health educators in public schools can teach about contraception stalled in the House Education Committee Wednesday on a 6-6 vote.

The bill spells out that educators can teach factual information about contraception but may not advocate for its use.

HB71, sponsored by Rep. Ray Ward, R-Bountiful, states instruction on the "medical characteristics, effectiveness and limitations of contraceptive methods and devices" is allowed.

Some teachers told Ward they fear that their instruction could be misconstrued as advocacy so they want clarity in state statute.

One told him: "It is such a sticking point for a lot of us. How do you teach something so important without risking your career and your livelihood to what others may interpret you as saying?"

"The way the code is written today makes teachers nervous to use that curriculum," said Ward, who is a family practice physician.

While Utah's state sex education curriculum is abstinence-based, instruction about contraception is allowed under state law and State School Board rules. Some schools teach an abstinence-only curriculum, but the decision is left to local control.

HB71 was supported by the Utah PTA and a number of health educators who addressed the committee. Kathleen Kaufman, representing the Utah Nurses Association, also spoke in favor of the bill, noting teachers need "defining clarity" in the law.

"We feel that students need information for this crucial aspect of personal health before they need to make adult decisions. Actually, they're making some of these adult decisions during their teen years already," Kaufman said.

Chelsie Acosta, who teaches health at a Salt Lake junior high, said Utah health teachers "are scared to death to teach what we can actually teach."

Acosta said her primary goal as a health educator is to teach students how to protect their bodies and their health.

"I am the last person that wants to advocate or to encourage contraception to your children. That's on you. That's your family values. That conversation is not for me to have," she said.

Dalane England, of United Women's Forum, spoke in opposition.

Instead of clarifying matters, HB71 adds more ambiguity, she said.

"The more we talk about sex to teenagers, the more we get more sex with teenagers. We live in a totally sex-saturated society," England said.

On the one hand, Utah law prohibits sex between teenagers, she said, "not that that law stops them from doing it. One thing, we're telling them not to have sex and then we're telling them about contraception. Our code already tells us what we can say about contraception. I think it's done well."