

Battling a ‘sex-saturated society’: The abstinence movement and the politics of sex education

Jean Calterone Williams

California Polytechnic State University, USA

Abstract

The abstinence movement in the USA, as a sector of the Christian Right, advocates abstinence before marriage and links abstinence to Evangelical Christian morality, sexual purity, and heterosexual marriage. A number of single-issue abstinence groups have formed over the past 10 to 15 years in the USA; their political success in advocating a ‘values-based’ response to sexuality and the current scope of abstinence education is unprecedented in US politics. With the election of President Obama, however, the movement faced the loss of the majority of its funding and powerful elite allies. Using in-depth interviews with directors of four groups that comprise the core of the movement, this article analyzes the movement’s agenda and strategies at this critical juncture in its history.

Keywords

abstinence, adolescent, Christian Right, sex education, social movement

It will be written down in history books how teenagers at the turn of the century were choosing abstinence in a sex-crazed world. And it drove back the teen pregnancy rate; it drove down the abortion rate... It’s truly a movement.

Denny Pattyn, Founder, Silver Ring Thing

Corresponding author:

Professor Jean Calterone Williams, Political Science Department, California Polytechnic State University, 1 Grand Avenue, San Luis Obispo, CA 93407, USA

Email: jemwilli@calpoly.edu

Sex education has been an element of the Christian Right's¹ political agenda in the USA for several decades. Over the past 15 years, the movement has been successful in advocating abstinence-only sex education, bringing abstinence programming to public schools and spawning single-issue organizations dedicated to promoting abstinence and reforming sexuality in the USA. Increased federal funding, and the Christian Right's renewed focus on abstinence as a response to a 'sex-saturated society' (Liebau, 2007), have helped to create an abstinence movement in the style of the pro-life movement. Functioning as a sector of the Christian Right, the abstinence movement relies on seasoned conservative Christian activists and organizations, but also attracts new activists focused primarily on sexuality issues.

The US abstinence movement calls for abstinence before marriage for all unmarried people – teen and adult – and links abstinence to Evangelical Christian morality, sexual purity, and heterosexual marriage. At the core of the movement, a number of single-issue abstinence groups have formed over the past 10 to 15 years; they promote changes in the dominant sexual culture to endorse abstinence over 'free' sexuality, lobby for the use of abstinence-only curricula in public schools, and proclaim the importance of heterosexual marriage. In addition, established Evangelical and 'pro-family' organizations make up a significant portion of the movement's support and strength. For these organizations, abstinence is but one issue in a broader agenda attacking a sexually permissive and secular culture.

Abstinence education is sex education that confronts and openly criticizes a US sexual culture that 'teaches [teens] they have no self-control, teaches them how to have sex and ultimately puts their lives at risk' (Klepacki, 2007; Unruh, 2008: 1). It mandates abstinence from all sexual activity – from open-mouth kissing to touching to intercourse – and does not teach about contraception, except in terms of failure rates. Abstinence-only sex education maintains that virginity before marriage is the socially 'expected standard', and presses for heterosexual marriage for all individuals: 'a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity' (PRWORA, PL 104–193).

In the 1990s, the Christian Right's campaign to promote abstinence as the only moral and healthy choice began to gain political leverage in the USA, and the movement saw a significant national legislative success in 1996. The US Congress passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), the high profile welfare reform bill that was to 'end welfare as we know it'. PRWORA contained a provision that provided a five-year, \$250 million grant for abstinence-only sex education – referred to as Title V funding – ushering in a new period of legislative success for abstinence-only proponents. PRWORA was followed by the passage of further funding, through the Community-Based Abstinence Education (CBAE) program. Increasingly, abstinence-only sex education boasted prominent sponsors at the federal government level, which translated to expanded funding; from 2000 to 2009, abstinence-only sex education received approximately \$200 million in federal and state funding annually, through the Title V program, The Adolescent Family Life Act

(AFLA), and the Community-Based Abstinence Education (CBAE) program. These programs supported and funded the teaching of abstinence-only sex education in public schools, in youth groups, and to teens across the country through both live and web-based chastity programs.

While conservative Christians' support for abstinence-only education is not new in the USA, their success in advocating abstinence is relatively novel. Specifically, the current scope of abstinence education and the level of program funding are fairly recent phenomena. The formation of a national grassroots movement with a core of single-issue abstinence groups similarly is unprecedented. The political significance of the abstinence movement's success extends to many other issues relevant to the Christian Right, including welfare policy and myriad issues related to sexuality. Thus, success in calling for abstinence-only education strengthens the political agenda and power of US Christian conservatives in relatively far-reaching ways, by increasing their visibility and potentially their numbers at the grassroots level, and also by lending support to their anti-gay and traditional marriage planks.

Not surprisingly, the political and public health debates surrounding abstinence-only education have been robust and protracted. Studies have shown that abstinence-only education contains medically inaccurate information and is not effective in changing adolescent sexual behaviors by delaying sex or by reducing the number of sexual partners (Hauser, 2004; Kirby, 2001; Landry et al., 1999; Rabasca, 1999; SIECUS, 2001; Trenholm et al., 2007; US House of Representatives, 2004). Rather, research indicates that comprehensive sex education programs are most effective in reducing 'the number of teens who have sex and the frequency that sexually active teens have sex, their number of partners and their risk of STDs' (Clemmitt, 2010: 272; Kirby, 2001). Comprehensive sex education programs allow broad discussion of sexuality, including instruction on pregnancy prevention, condom use and other contraceptives, as well as abstinence.

Though research findings confirm that comprehensive sexuality education is more effective, one 2010 study of an abstinence-only program showed promise: fewer 6th and 7th grade students who had abstinence instruction reported having sexual intercourse 24 months after completing the program, as compared to the control group that did not receive instruction (Jemmott et al., 2010). However, the author of the study emphasized that his abstinence program

was not designed to meet federal criteria for abstinence-only programs. For instance, the target behavior was abstaining from . . . intercourse until a time later in life when the adolescent is more prepared to handle the consequences of sex. The intervention did not contain inaccurate information, portray sex in a negative light, or use a moralistic tone. The training and curriculum manual explicitly instructed the facilitators not to disparage the efficacy of condoms or allow the view that condoms are ineffective to go uncorrected. (Jemmott et al., :153)

Since Jemmott's program did not teach teens to remain abstinent until heterosexual marriage, did not portray sex as dangerous and harmful to unmarried

individuals, and instructed teachers to respond to questions about condoms accurately, this abstinence program most certainly would not meet the standards for federal abstinence funding, nor would the abstinence movement champion it as an appropriate curriculum. Thus it is unclear how the findings in Jemmott's study might be replicated using a school-based curriculum.

With the election of President Obama, the US government began to emphasize the need for evidence supporting the success of sex education curricula; consequently, abstinence education lost funding and federal government support. The President eliminated the CBAE program, a primary funding stream for abstinence-only education, from his FY 2010 budget. Though the Title V program was allowed to lapse and appeared to have died alongside the CBAE program, Title V funding was reinstated for five years as part of the US health care overhaul in March 2010 (Clemmitt, 2010). These funds are dwarfed, however, by the millions of dollars included in the health care law to fund comprehensive sexuality education (Rabin, 2010). Thus, instead of embracing abstinence-only instruction as was the case during the Bush years, the US Congress will fund 'evidence-based' sex education programs, specifically those that show results in 'randomized, controlled research trials' (Clemmitt, 2010: 272).

As federal funding disappears under the Obama Administration and as the movement's elite allies from the Bush Administration lose power, abstinence advocates increasingly are forced to participate as political outsiders. That is, almost overnight these organizations have lost many of their connections to institutionalized political power and have been weakened relative to their position from 1996 to 2009. The movement will have to expand efforts already in place to galvanize its constituency and to demand cultural change via extra-institutional channels. Since the Christian Right perceives itself as representing an embattled cultural minority, and abstinence organizations argue that their message competes with a barrage of sexually explicit references in American culture, abstinence advocates are well situated to represent themselves as political outsiders, within the realm of social movement politics.

Because of the change in Presidential administration and the transformation in the approach to funding sex education, the abstinence movement is in a state of flux. The institutional access and significant funds enjoyed by the movement through 2009 allowed it to utilize both institutional and extra-institutional resources and means to push its agenda. With most of the resources gone, however, and particularly because many of the single-issue organizations are relatively new, it is unclear which future direction the movement will take. Abstinence advocates could intensify ties to the Republican Party. This approach would accentuate the movement's access to institutionalized power. It would also mean that the movement would have to become more willing to make political compromises, and probably become more likely to define abstinence in the context of wise public health policy rather than in terms of Christian purity. Because they are deeply linked to the Christian Right, abstinence advocates will likely maintain some level of connection to the Republican party (Domke, 2004), though it is unclear

how formal such ties may be and how the relationship will shape the movement. On the other hand, abstinence advocates may focus on extra-institutional politics, becoming stronger as a social movement by taking advantage of the rather sizeable network of abstinence organizations that they have created. These organizations are likely to continue to exist but will have to depend much more on private and individual donations to continue to operate. As a social movement that has lost ground rather suddenly with the election of President Obama, the abstinence movement might even follow the trajectory of the radical elements of the pro-life movement, perhaps turning to more extreme tactics to press its agenda.

This project studies the agenda and goals of the abstinence movement at this critical juncture in its history, testing the movement's successes and its continuing efforts to redefine sexuality and promote abstinence in US culture. Using in-depth interviews and an analysis of movement publications, I examine the agenda, strategies, and ideologies of the abstinence movement, paying particular attention to the role of Evangelical Christianity and the focus on adolescents in current abstinence politics. To better understand the movement's strategies, I analyze intra-movement dynamics involved in framing the abstinence message. The movement variably frames abstinence as an expression of Christian 'purity', as a wise public health choice, or as an adolescent-led challenge to an overly sexualized culture.

The abstinence movement

The battle for abstinence education in the USA – and over sex education more generally – contains many of the aspects found in conflicts over morality policies. Morality policies pertain to issues such as abortion, gay and lesbian rights, and pornography, where the policy conflict is largely moral rather than material, and 'where at least one active coalition involved in the debate focuses on an absolute right and wrong' (Doan and Williams, 2008: 8; Mooney, 2000). Morality policies attempt to change individual behaviors by using financial incentives, or achieving legal sanctions or other authority, 'to affirm, modify or replace community values, moral practices, and norms of interpersonal conduct' (Tatalovich and Daynes, 1998: 1). Because morality policies address core values 'rooted deeply in a person's belief system' (Mooney, 2001: 4), the policy process features relatively little compromise or negotiation (Meier, 1999; Mooney, 1999, 2001; Mooney and Lee, 1995).

In the USA, political disputes related to morality politics often 'juxtapose culturally progressive and secularist beliefs against culturally traditional' and fundamentalist religious beliefs (Doan and Williams, 2008: 8). The battle over sex education has been no exception; those advocating abstinence education have articulated a set of values about sexuality, US culture, and adolescents' best interests that reflect Evangelical Christian beliefs and that clash with the more secular and politically liberal values of those who support comprehensive sex education (Elia and Eliason, 2009; Luker, 2006). Champions of comprehensive sexuality education want 'to promote a positive view of sexuality, to provide students with information and skills about taking care of their sexual health', (di Mauro and Joffe, 2009: 73),

goals that collide with abstinence-until-marriage proponents who view all sexual expression outside heterosexual marriage as problematic.

In a number of ways, disagreements over morality policies lend themselves to social movement organizing. First, morality politics tend to attract large numbers of citizens to participate in the political process, as people may interpret the clashing values represented in policy debates in a very personal way. 'Conflicts over values are more accessible for general debate because most people ascribe to a belief system and feel qualified to hold informed opinions and make political evaluations about moral issues' (Doan and Williams, 2008: 9; Hunter, 1991; Meier, 1994, 1999; Mooney, 1999, 2000, 2001; Tatalovich and Daynes, 1998). Second, as they sometimes do in the abstinence movement, advocates involved in morality policy debates may contend that policy makers have no more expertise than ordinary people in creating solutions to moral problems because moral values primarily should guide solutions. The abstinence movement plays on these very ideas by making appeals directly to parents and even to adolescents themselves about the degraded nature of sexual mores in the culture, and the necessity to teach and proselytize about the importance of abstinence in their communities and to their peers.

As a social movement, the abstinence movement works to mobilize sympathetic organizations along with a mass base of people to demand change in political, social, and cultural realms. It is a political formation distinct from 'related genres such as parties, interest groups, or protests' based on three criteria: the abstinence movement '(1) rest[s] upon a mass base of individuals, groups, and organizations linked by social interaction; (2) organize[s] around a mix of political and cultural goals; and (3) rel[ies] on a shared collective identity that is the basis of mobilization and participation' (Wald, 2000: 5; see also Tarrow, 1998). Collective identity in the abstinence movement is embedded in and shaped by Evangelical Christianity. As John Green argues, the Evangelical sectarian identity provided crucial support for the rise of the Christian Right since the 1970s (Green, 1999). The marriage of Evangelical identity with political activism was furthered by 'the growth in upwardly mobile middle-class converts to evangelicalism in the 1970s and 1980s' (Apple, 2006: 150). These new 'converts' were invested in political action and had the resources to engage politically (Apple, 2006). For abstinence advocates today, the conservative, religious political identity of the Christian Right is channeled into a sometimes singular interest in challenging and changing dominant sexual mores. They organize around and propagate a distinctive ideology that links to the nature of their collective identity and to their calls for cultural and political change (Green, 1999).

While the current abstinence movement represents a new political phenomenon, it also fits squarely within the larger network of US movements associated with a conservative political focus and moral traditionalism (Diamond, 1995). To claim that abstinence is 'new' does not suggest that this is a novel issue for Christian conservatives. Rather, it is the current *scope* of abstinence education, the *success* in pressing for a 'values-based' response to sexual freedom, and the presence of

single-issue organizations, that make the movement politically fresh. As modeled on the pro-life movement, the abstinence movement may be considered a connected movement with deep and multiple ties to the Christian Right (Rose, 2007).

Thus, to analyze abstinence organizations and advocates as a social movement, it is imperative to study their agendas and strategies as they relate to the Christian Right. As key proponents of abstinence-only education, the growth of the abstinence-only 'industry', and its broad elite and financial support, means a significant victory for the Christian Right. The Christian Right is largely responsible for tying abstinence to broader social concerns, since it has fought for abstinence-only sex education since the 1970s by linking it to 'family values', anti-abortion and birth control issues, and an anti-welfare agenda.

Abstinence arguments and strategies are shaped by the history of the Christian Right using social movement politics to criticize what it perceives as a secular, uncontrolled, and hypersexualized US culture (Paterson, 2004; Diamond, 1998; Martin, 1996). As Nancy Ammerman suggests, the Christian Right perceives the problems associated with sex education as linked to multiple issues of morality:

Fundamentalists look at the world in which they live and see immorality, violence, corruption, and sin. It has fallen far short of what God would have it be. In the United States, the list of social ills includes divorce and the 'breakdown of the traditional family.' It also includes a variety of other family-related issues – from gay rights to pornography to sex education and abortion. The present age is ignoring God's laws, living only for the pleasure of the moment, and reaping a harvest of illness and despair as a result. (Ammerman, 1994: 154)

From the perspective of the Christian Right, issues such as gay rights and pornography clearly connect to sex education, as all these issues reflect the dominant, secular culture's power over public policy. As a social movement, the Christian Right has defined itself as a cultural minority, oppressed by the majority culture in the USA and subject to the majority culture's impact on both public policy and social institutions, particularly public schools (Apple, 2006). The movement criticizes public schools for their promotion of anti-Christian values and secular humanism (Apple and Oliver, 1996; Martin, 1996; McGirr, 2001). The Christian Right perceives a loss of religious guidance in public and private life to be causally linked to the breakdown of the family and to the loss of Christian and 'family-centered' values in the public schools (Apple, 2006). Profligate sexuality, the teaching of 'raw sex' in schools (S Rose, 2005), teenage pregnancy, and acceptance of gays and lesbians are all effects – and symptomatic of – the immorality that dominates the culture. Thus, advocating abstinence-only education is one means to undercut anti-Christian values that surround teens.

Evangelical Christians' views toward sexuality and sex education diverge from the general public in the USA.² While 81 per cent of Evangelicals say that premarital sex is immoral, just 33 per cent of the general public agrees (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2004). It appears that 78 per cent of Evangelicals believe that

premarital sexual activity leads to harmful psychological and emotional consequences for the unwed, as compared to 46 per cent of the general public (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2004). Across the USA, approximately 82 per cent of adults favor comprehensive sexuality education that encompasses abstinence, contraception, and broad discussion of human sexuality (Bleakley et al., 2010), and 67 per cent support distributing condoms in schools (Lord, 2010). Half of American adults oppose abstinence-only education programs (Bleakley et al., 2006, 2010). A study by Bleakley, et al. found that attendance at religious services was one of the only factors significantly associated with support for abstinence-only education and with resistance to condom instruction (Bleakley et al., 2010).

The passage of abstinence-only programs in the face of tepid support – and even direct opposition – by the majority of the US population can be analyzed in several ways. First, research suggests that the Christian Right has used ‘stealth’ tactics, combined with overt political organizing among Evangelicals, to pursue passage of morality policies that may be unpopular with the general public (Apple, 2006; Doan and Williams, 2008). Thus, a policy supported by a well-organized minority may be passed with little legislative debate or public scrutiny, as was the case with the initial passage of Title V. Second, elite allies within the US Congress and the Bush Administration played a crucial role in the development and passage of abstinence-only policies, and provided funding streams to nascent organizations.

However, though elite allies played a significant role in the founding and rise of single-issue abstinence-only organizations, access to funding is not fully responsible for the strength of the message, the inspiration of the audience, and for the political power and social importance of abstinence organizations. Although it is unclear how many abstinence organizations operated without any federal funding since 1996, some portion of them did, and many others relied on a combination of federal funds and private donations. That is to say, abstinence organizations have an active grassroots political constituency, one that is willing to help with financial support and lobbying efforts. This constituency’s collective identity – as politically astute and active Evangelicals, ready to battle the overly sexualized and secular culture – underlies and motivates support of abstinence organizations. The importance of collective identity may sharpen in the coming years, as the movement operates as more of a political outsider than during the Bush administration.

Methodology

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with founders and directors of four national abstinence-only organizations that are single-issue organizations and help to form the core of the movement. These include Abstinence Clearinghouse, National Abstinence Education Association (NAEA), Silver Ring Thing, and True Love Waits.³ Interview questions concentrated on the agenda and goals of the individual group in particular and of the abstinence movement more generally. Interviewees discussed the movement’s focus on adolescents, formal and informal ties among conservative groups in the movement, and the role of religion,

particularly in terms of (1) defining abstinence and (2) the relationship of Evangelicalism to broader movement goals.⁴

I pair these interviews with a review and analysis of publications and materials from these four agencies, and six multi-issue, 'pro-family' Christian Right groups active in setting the agenda of the movement, to provide broader context for the interviews. These include Focus on the Family, Concerned Women for America, Heritage Foundation, Family Research Council, Eagle Forum, and the Christian Coalition. Following Sara Diamond (1995), I rely on 'primary source material', namely the abstinence movement's 'own publications and ephemera' to analyze the movement's agenda and organizing principles (1995: 409). Thus, I analyze groups' publications, websites and web-based abstinence programs, including their books, studies, talking points, and related materials.

This examination occurs alongside a review and study of numerous other (scholarly and secondary) sources on the role and activities of abstinence organizations; these will provide a context for the arguments of abstinence groups. As Diamond asserts, 'Given the inherent biases of movement participants, one does not necessarily rely on their accounts of external events, but, rather, on how their interpretations of events derive from and, thereafter, determine movement strategy' (Diamond, 1995: 409). Thus, I explore abstinence groups' own publications and websites in order to understand their interpretations and constructions of abstinence and other issues related to sexuality and US culture, and trace how these interpretations shape movement strategy and ideologies.

The Christian Right and sex education⁵

Sex education emerged in the 1970s as an important part of the Christian Right's agenda, albeit usually with a lower public profile on the national level as compared to such issues as abortion and gay and lesbian rights. Movement groups already involved in the Christian Right in a variety of ways fought to remove sex education from the schools, and later to shape it according to a socially conservative and Christian perspective. The Christian Right's conservative 'pro-family' agenda 'linked opposition to a range of social justice issues and couched them as a defense of the American family against the incursions of feminism, gay rights, and sex education' (Irvine, 2002: 66). The Right viewed sex education as liberals' attempt to 'undermine all parental authority... subvert all Christian morality... [by] promoting sexual perversion, homosexuality, pornography, abortion, family destruction, population control' (McKeegan, 1992: 41–42). Christian conservatives opposed Title X family planning programs, claiming that they created a 'contraceptive mentality' that promoted sexual activity among teens (LeClair, 2006) and a clinical approach to sexuality education.

During the 1980s, it became increasingly clear to conservative groups that their push to eliminate sexuality education in the public schools was futile. For example, by 1988, 93 per cent of 7th–11th grade public school teachers taught in schools that offered sex education (Darroch et al., 2000; Landry et al., 1999). Rather than

concede defeat, Christian conservatives adopted a new strategy: restructuring the *content* of sex education (S Rose, 2005). Christian groups – namely, the Eagle Forum, Focus on the Family, Concerned Women for America, and Citizens for Excellence in Education – focused their resources and time on rallying grassroots support against comprehensive sex education (Apple and Oliver, 1996; S Rose, 2005). Concerned Women for America explained, ‘Our fight and our voice was simply that if you’re going to be talking about sex education in schools – which we don’t think should be done, we think we should be empowering our parents to teach kids about sex – but if it is going to be in the schools, then it needs to be abstinence-only’ (Vergari, 2001: 204–205). By the end of the decade, the Christian Right had increased grassroots support and gained some key Congressional allies for its newly focused agenda, to gain federal funding and to teach abstinence-only sex education to public school children (McKeegan, 1992; Watson, 1997).

US Congressional advocates of abstinence-only education saw an opportunity to include federal funding for abstinence in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PL 104–193), the law passed in 1996 that reformed the USA’s welfare system. As lawmakers were moving closer to a resolution over welfare reform, a small group of social conservatives in the US Congress began to champion legislation for abstinence-only education that was tangentially related to the larger goals of welfare reform. Conservative groups such as the Heritage Foundation helped craft the language of the bill (Daley, 1997). The sponsors of the bill used the Christian Right’s ‘pro-family’ rhetoric and logic – linking premarital sex to pregnancy and to poverty – to justify including it in welfare legislation. For example, one US Senator reasoned: ‘Most welfare reform proposals try to pick up the pieces after an out-of-wedlock birth has occurred. It is much more effective to prevent young women from getting pregnant in the first place. And teaching young people to abstain from sexual activity is one of the best ways to accomplish that’ (Vergari, 2001: 204).

Though abstinence was framed in the welfare reform debate in the context of changing the behavior of welfare recipients, the reach of abstinence-only education was always meant to encompass far more than welfare recipients. As is the case in most morality policy conflicts, the values of the entire nation were seen as defective, and the target audience was adolescents as a whole, not just the poor. In fact, abstinence advocates argue that *all* unmarried people – both teen and adult – should be abstinent until heterosexual marriage.

The passage of Title V provided a definition for abstinence – the A-H criteria – that shaped the abstinence debate and the specific lessons that abstinence curricula and programs must cover. All three funding programs (Title V, CBAE, and AFLA) had to abide by the A-H criteria.⁶ Title V authorized \$50 million annually from 1998 through 2002 for abstinence-only education (CQ Congress Collection, 1997); regular extensions since 2002 maintained funding levels until 2010, when program funding was incorporated into the health care law. The National Abstinence Education Association and Abstinence Clearinghouse, among other abstinence-only organizations, were instrumental in lobbying for and encouraging public

support for extensions of Title V. Abstinence Clearinghouse, for example, sent regular, sometimes daily email updates to member organizations and individuals, explaining legislation, citing names of US Congress members crucial to decisions regarding abstinence funding, and encouraging members to phone and write their representatives in support of abstinence funding.

States originally had some flexibility in choosing which aspects of Title V's definition of abstinence to emphasize in their programs. However, abstinence-only advocates, such as Focus on the Family and the National Coalition for Abstinence Education (NCAE), complained to the US Congress that states were circumventing the intent of Title V. The NCAE started using a 'report card' system to grade states' implementation of Title V funds; 11 earned failing grades (NCAE, 1998). In 1998, the NCAE reported:

There has been a concerted attempt by some in the public health establishment to water down, and in some cases to even violate, the intent of the law. This subversive effort has been successful in too many states. The potential and importance of the abstinence law is too exciting for Congress to allow anything short of full national commitment to the sexual health of our children. (Arsneault, 2001: 466)

Reacting to the states' circumvention of Title V guidelines, Congress passed legislation in 2007 requiring that state programs in receipt of Title V dollars abide by all eight points defining abstinence-only education. Additionally, the rules on how to teach abstinence became more stringent: 'states must provide "assurances" that funded curricula and materials "do not promote contraception and/or condom use"' (SIECUS, 2006).

With the resources available through Title V and the CBAE, collective action on the part of numerous abstinence and other conservative political and nonprofit groups, churches, and individuals, focused on promoting the use of abstinence curricula in the public schools, as well as continuing to criticize the sexual culture in the USA. Some organizations wrote curricula, such as Respect, Incorporated or Teen Aid. Others operated externally to the school system, such as Silver Ring Thing, the Abstainers and J.A.M., creating educational programs, running websites, designing and sponsoring weekend rallies where teens made virginity pledges, and providing guest speakers to church youth groups to teach the abstinence message.

The abstinence movement enjoyed success in its efforts to bring abstinence-only education to the public schools. 'Between 1988 and 1999, the proportion of teachers who taught in abstinence-only programs rose from 1 in 50 to 1 in 4' (Lord, 2010: 167). Abstinence-only education was the fastest growing type of sex education in US public schools by the end of the 1990s, with approximately one-third of public school districts teaching abstinence-only curricula (Landry et al., 1999; Vergari, 2001). When it comes to public school instruction, however, federal laws and funding tied to abstinence-only programming provide only part of the story because state and local governments have more power than the federal

government over sex education decisions. States can require public schools to teach sex education, and they can set guidelines regarding what should or should not be taught. In 2005, some states mandated that sex education curricula must *stress* abstinence, while others indicated that curricula had to *cover* abstinence. The laws of 20 states included direction on how to teach contraception (SIECUS, 2006). At the local level, school boards, School Health Advisory Committees, superintendents, principals, teachers, and other school administrators make more specific decisions about how sex education will be taught in individual schools (SIECUS, 2005). According to the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, (SIECUS), the varying levels of decision makers mean that it is quite difficult to quantify the number of school districts using abstinence-only curricula:

When it comes down to it, we often see that a state will have one policy and school districts will simply ignore it. Or the school district will have a policy, but it is unenforceable on the individual schools. We have even seen schools where one sex-ed teacher will bring in a guest speaker who promotes an abstinence-only message, while the other teacher brings in someone from Planned Parenthood. The only numbers that we have ready access to is how much federal money flows out, and who receives it. After that, the money can go anywhere. Also, many speakers will come in for free, or state money will be used, so we lose the trail there, too . . . We don't have an accurate picture of what the nation really looks like in terms of what is being taught in the classroom. (SIECUS, Personal communication with author, 12 July 2007)

Thus, the reach of abstinence-only education is probably more extensive than suggested by current reports. Until 2010, this was further complicated by the infusion of CBAE funds, which were significantly more difficult to track than Title V funds. CBAE funds bypassed the state by providing money directly to community organizations, including faith-based organizations (SIECUS, Personal communication with author, 12 July, 2007).

Abstinence organizations working directly with adolescents were sustained and complemented by groups that provided various kinds of support for the abstinence message at the elite level, many by involving themselves in national politics. The National Abstinence Education Association, for example, lobbied the US Congress and the Presidential administration for expanded funding for abstinence, while others focused on shaping the rules associated with programs such as the CBAE to ensure that groups receiving abstinence funds met all eight of the criteria articulated in the Title V abstinence definition, as well as emphasized the value of heterosexual marriage and sexual purity in their programs. Groups like the Heritage Foundation, The Institute for Research and Evaluation, and Family Research Council researched or provided interpretations of existing research on teen sexuality, pregnancy, and abstinence, in order to provide 'scientific' support for abstinence-only education.

Given the array of organizations committed to promoting abstinence education, it is of no surprise that the agenda of the abstinence-only movement is quite broad. In the context of promoting abstinence, advocates have attacked premarital sex, birth control, abortion, and lesbian, gay, and bisexual relationships. Many organizations perceive abstinence-only education as a method for furthering Evangelical Christian religious mores. Their approach is more or less explicit depending on whether they wish to receive public funding and whether their programs will be used in a public school setting. Specifically, abstinence-only public school curricula often contain messages shaped by a conservative Christian agenda, but couch the lessons in secular terms (Doan and Williams, 2008). Both public school curricula and programs external to the schools reference ‘purity’, chastity, and the centrality of heterosexual marriage, and most rely on narrow and traditional notions of gender identity and gender roles (Doan and Williams, 2008).

The role of Christianity

The role of Evangelical Christianity in the abstinence movement cannot be overstated. Evangelical Christianity both provides a nucleus for the movement and complicates it socially and politically. Conservative Christian organizations were key actors in the articulation and passage of abstinence education policy, and they continue to rally their members and supporters to provide political pressure at the local, state, and federal levels in defense of abstinence education. Since abstinence is defined in the context of Christianity, to make a virginity pledge as a teen, or to teach abstinence, is to do so with reference to Biblical notions of purity, commitment to God, and heterosexual marriage within the context of the church.

Silver Ring Thing’s program exemplifies the extent to which Christianity is inextricable from many abstinence programs. The organization derives its name from the silver rings it passes out to students willing to take virginity pledges at the end of Silver Ring Thing’s abstinence-only performance. The organization received federal abstinence-only funding until the American Civil Liberties Union sued the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) for funding organizations with an explicitly religious message. The suit – *ACLU of Massachusetts v. Leavitt* – resulted in HHS withdrawing federal funds from Silver Ring Thing,⁷ though the organization continues to operate with private funds.

Silver Ring Thing teaches that complete abstinence from sexual activity until heterosexual marriage is the sole method for maintaining physical and emotional health; contraception is not discussed. As Silver Ring Thing states, abstinence from sexual activity is wrapped up with Evangelical Christian faith: ‘The mission is to saturate the United States with a generation of young people who have taken a vow of sexual abstinence until marriage and put on the silver ring. This mission can only be achieved by offering a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as the best way to live a sexually pure life’ (Silver Ring Thing, 2004). This ‘mission’ is both personal and political. As Silver Ring Thing literature suggests, the movement hopes that this new generation of youth can turn the tide for a nation increasingly bereft of

sexual morality, by proselytizing about the importance of abstinence and voting for legislators who support abstinence education (Abstinence Clearinghouse, 2009a).

Denny Pattyn, founder of Silver Ring Thing, explains the links between Evangelical Christian faith and the abstinence message:

We do believe that without God inside a person – which we call coming to Christ, which is a personal relationship in which Christ lives in you through the Holy Spirit – without that we feel that they don't have as much of a chance to keep a[n abstinence] commitment, should they make one. Very much like you hear in AA. You need a higher power, you need someone or something to help you when you're really weak, where we want to hear that voice from within that says, 'Hey, get out of this situation now, you don't want to do this.' That inner voice, God speaking to you when you're vulnerable. That's why we feel it is so important to have the faith component. (Personal interview, 23 January 2008)

In addition to suggesting that abstinence is more achievable when linked with Christianity, Pattyn's comments also reveal more about the organization's (and the movement's) views on sexuality. Sexual activity outside heterosexual marriage is a temptation, a pitfall likely to entice those weak in mind or spirit. It is perceived as a 'sin', much the like other 'sinful' activities associated with morality policies, such as viewing pornography, gambling, and the like.

Pattyn also attempts to attract non-Christians to the program, hoping to connect them simultaneously to abstinence and to Evangelicalism:

I was always committed to reaching the kid who was furthest away. You know the kid who wouldn't want to come to anything Christian, who wouldn't want to come to a church, who would be uncomfortable in that environment. So we designed Silver Ring Thing for that person because we felt the Christian kids would come anyway. That's autopilot. How do you get the kid who would never come? When he's brought by a friend, or she is brought by a friend, to our event, the first thing we want to do is to let them know they shouldn't be uncomfortable. That we're ready to speak in a language they can understand, not just a Christian kid. So the front of our program is very funny, very humorous, very crazy, and the message gets more and more serious as we go, as the program goes along. (Pattyn, personal interview, 23 January 2008)

Using music, a light show, and comedy, Silver Ring Thing's program provides an opportunity for Pattyn to attract non-Christians to concurrently make a commitment to Jesus and to abstinence. Indeed, he contends that the two are not easily separated from one another: Evangelical Christians involved in the abstinence movement see the alternative to abstinence (participating in the 'sex-crazed world') as sinful, while pledging abstinence is one method of religiously committing oneself.

Likewise, True Love Waits, another influential organization that works directly with teens, approaches abstinence from a Christian perspective. True Love Waits is a project of LifeWay Christian Resources, a nonprofit organization affiliated with

the Southern Baptist Convention. LifeWay has several ‘ministries’, including True Love Waits and several other projects directed to adolescents. In addition, LifeWay conducts and publishes research on issues important to Evangelical Christians, and publishes and sells Christian products and literature on its website and in the 146 Christian stores it owns across the USA. Thus, True Love Waits is an abstinence program that grew out of a well-established and powerful Evangelical Christian organization with extensive programming on numerous issues. Jimmy Hester, a founder of True Love Waits, describes the abstinence pledge that teens are asked to make:

The commitment card itself says: ‘Believing that true love waits I make a commitment to God.’ That’s the first phrase: It’s God, my family, myself. But we did not put ‘I make a commitment to Jesus Christ.’ We put ‘a commitment to God’ in, and for some that can be interpreted in ways beyond the Evangelical Christian view point, and so they will make a commitment to their faith, whatever that may be. Now obviously when we teach it, we teach it based on a commitment to God, and we base it on a Christian perspective. That’s where we’re coming from, and we don’t apologize for that, because that’s what this is, that’s where this originated, that’s where it came from... There’s another phrase at the end of the commitment that talks about ‘until I enter into a Biblical marriage relationship’ which again points to a Christian perspective. (Hester, personal interview, 29 January 2008)

Thus, like Silver Ring Thing, True Love Waits’ approach is relatively narrow; the definition of abstinence is inextricable from religious ‘purity’ and a born-again Christian experiential frame. Silver Ring Thing and True Love Waits are the two largest organizations engaged in working with adolescents on issues of sexuality and abstinence and making personal commitments to chastity, each claiming to have reached thousands of teens, so their Evangelical Christian approach has significant impact in framing understandings abstinence.

Abstinence as public health policy

Notwithstanding the dominance of Evangelicalism as a frame for abstinence, in the past several years, groups like NAEA and Abstinence Clearinghouse have tried to reorient the public discussion from abstinence as physical and spiritual purity to abstinence as wise public health policy. Interviews completed with directors of these programs in February 2008 indicated an interest in foregrounding the idea of abstinence as a ‘best practice’ from a public health perspective. Public health arguments complement the movement’s recent focus on scientific arguments and research to show the benefits of abstinence. Several organizations, such as the Medical Institute for Sexual Health and the Heritage Foundation, pursue social scientific and medical research to strengthen the movement’s moral and political arguments. To some degree, a tension exists between those abstinence organizations where Evangelical Christianity plays a central role in defining abstinence

programs, and for those advocating a public health perspective. As this section will illustrate, the fervent arguments and devoted language used by some Evangelical Christian groups in support of abstinence contrasts sharply with the dispassionate, social scientific public health approach.⁸

In distancing their messages from the Evangelical Christian frame, until 2009 NAEA and Abstinence Clearinghouse had also rejected the social movement components of abstinence. NAEA, for example, preferred to describe itself as engaged in a policy debate relatively devoid of grassroots pressure tactics and questions of collective identity among abstinence advocates. As Valerie Huber, NAEA Executive Director put it: ‘When you talk about movements you think of it more in terms of ideology and things such as that, and I see [abstinence] more in terms of sitting very neatly within a public health model’ (Personal interview, 14 February 2008). Although outsiders may view the NAEA as a single-issue interest group, key to the abstinence movement’s success, the organization eschewed that description in favor of seeing itself as a ‘professional association’. Thus, deliberating the degree to which abstinence organizations are connected to and help to shape a Christian conservative message is destabilized here by a refusal to see abstinence as a movement at all.

NAEA provides the clearest example of the public health approach. Founded in 2007, NAEA is the first single-issue abstinence organization to open a Washington DC office to lobby on Capitol Hill, according to Huber. She describes the organization’s work:

We provide written resources and also assessments of bills that are coming, but we’re much more than a lobbying organization. It’s a professional association. We’re really interested in re-branding the abstinence message to provide an accurate assessment of it, and so that takes the form of not only meeting on Capitol Hill but also communicating with the general public . . . We also see a need to have increasing research, and expertise in research, to evaluate and look at raw data and see how all of those things contribute to what kind of decisions teens are making and the success of abstinence education. We really have a growing body of research that’s showing that indeed this approach is successful. Intuitively we know that, but now we’re beginning to get empirical evidence that also demonstrates that. (Personal interview, 14 February 2008)

Though scholars of social movements will find multiple examples to liken the work of NAEA to social movement organizations, the importance of Huber’s remarks is not so much to prove that NAEA is not part of a social movement, but rather in her interest in disconnecting her work from social movement politics.

Huber describes the group as a ‘professional association’, working with government, the public, and the media to correct misperceptions about abstinence dictated by an overly politicized opposition. She frames abstinence education not as the choice for ‘purity’, or as a way to save oneself for ‘Biblical marriage’; rather, her

emphasis is on empirical evidence that can show that teaching abstinence in the context of abstinence-only education furthers specific public health goals:

We know what's in our best interest from a health perspective, but we don't always make those best-health decisions. However, if a public health message doesn't promote that best decision making, then we will never reach what would be an optimal health decision. It will always be something less. And so I would say abstinence education gives the totality of information necessary to make the very best choice, and it also believes enough in youth, that given the skills and the motivation and the mentoring necessary throughout their adolescent years, they can, and increasingly are, making this decision. (Personal interview, 14 February 2008)

Likewise, Kimberly Martinez, Executive Director of Abstinence Clearinghouse uses the language of public health to advocate abstinence:

We're not a faith based organization. We deal with organizations that are faith based, and we deal with organizations that are secular. Really we're coming at this from – this is a public health issue. Kids who are becoming sexually active at higher rates, than even adults who are unmarried and sexually active, the sexually transmitted disease rates are skyrocketing. This is about public policy and public health. It's the healthiest decision for teens to wait or if they're sexually active to stop, and to wait because of the sexually transmitted diseases, the risk of pregnancy outside of marriage. (Personal interview, 13 February 2008)

The motive for using public health language and social science research to buttress the abstinence argument may have resulted from the failure of the movement's moral and religious claims among the general public. Some in the movement have referred to the need to switch their course for precisely this reason:

For those of us unconvinced by moral or religious arguments, it's time to re-order our priorities. Now that we have science behind us, it's time for society to change its collective mind when it comes to sex, just as it did with smoking. Maybe in one generation, we can undergo a transformation when it comes to sex outside of marriage. (Segelstein, 2009)

Regardless of the rationale behind the use of public health language, it clearly stands in contrast to the Evangelical Christian religious reasoning common to the movement. Compare Huber's and Martinez's emphasis on 'best-health decisions', and their public health focus, with that of Denny Pattyn of Silver Ring Thing. Pattyn has a more impassioned and ideological perspective, even arguing that risky health decisions should be made in order to support unequivocally abstinence-only education's ideological foundation. To illustrate, he describes a question and answer session with Ed Bradley during the filming of a *60 Minutes* segment

featuring the abstinence debate. Bradley asked Pattyn whether he would tell a teen planning to be sexually active to wear a condom. Pattyn describes his response:

‘Well Ed, let me make this real simple for you, let’s say that person was my 16-year-old daughter. Absolutely not. I wouldn’t tell her to wear a condom.’ He said, ‘Well wouldn’t it make her safer?’ I said, ‘For which disease do you want to talk about Ed? You know, if you can tell me which diseases that guy has, that my daughter is going to have sex with, I want to look at the percentage chance of her getting an STD using a condom, and I’ll get back to you.’

It’s ludicrous to think that you can trust a condom in a teenager’s hand. I certainly wouldn’t with mine. I’d rather take the chance that she might make a mistake or two in her life, but not be sexually active over six, eight, ten years. The number of partners that you have in a lifetime and the age when you have your onset to sexual activity is directly correlated to how many sexually transmitted diseases you’ll get. Exposure. If I can delay sex in my daughters’ lives for as long as possible, and limit their partners, I’ll put my chances there. Not in a condom. (Personal interview, 23 January 2008)

Pattyn’s claim that condoms do not work is echoed by all the organizations active in the movement, including the NAEA and Abstinence Clearinghouse. These organizations argue against condoms in the context of statistics about the prevalence of sexually transmitted infections and by focusing on (and often exaggerating) the failure rates of condoms (US House of Representatives, 2004). Even more important to Pattyn is his contention that condoms give teens a false sense of protection that will lead to more sexual activity. In other words, condom use both reflects and encourages a lifestyle that condones sex outside heterosexual marriage.

As umbrella organizations designed to provide information, training, and advocacy for the abstinence movement as a whole, Abstinence Clearinghouse and NAEA are aware of and attempt to reconcile the tension between the public health and Christian arguments. Martinez of Abstinence Clearinghouse states: ‘I would honestly say that, whether faith is at the core of who they are or not, abstinence is relevant to any young person, regardless of what their moral beliefs are’ (personal interview, 13 February 2008). Likewise, Huber of NAEA states: ‘Just because abstinence is a value and behavior that is esteemed by really most of the major world religions, not just Christianity, that doesn’t dismiss it as an important public health [issue]’ (personal interview, 14 February 2008). Given that both groups are connected to the Christian Right, the existing tension between the Evangelical and public health frames may be considered – at least at this point – largely a question of how to frame the issue for the media and public rather than an internal fissure in the movement. It does suggest, however, that some movement

organizations are concerned about the reach and resonance of the message should it be limited to the Evangelical framework.

The budding tension between public health and Evangelical religious approaches may fizzle before it even fully comes to fruition. With the loss of federal abstinence funding under President Obama's administration, as abstinence organizations become political outsiders, the language of social movement politics seems increasingly important. Advocates may continue to use public health language alongside movement language, but it appears that many organizations have begun to embrace the idea of abstinence as a movement connected to the Christian Right. Less than two years after the interview with Martinez where she stressed public health policy, for example, Abstinence Clearinghouse began to highlight the social movement aspects of abstinence education in their email communications and literature. A recap of their national Abstinence Conference in June 2009 emphasized a movement identity for abstinence educators, as exemplified by the summary of Dr Allen Unruh's address:

Sometimes you need to remember why you do what you do, and Dr. Unruh gave a brief 'Abstinence 101' review of the movement and the cultural forces that spawned it. From Kinsey to Situation Ethics to the Sexual Revolution, we have watched these influences change the face of America and then seen the rise of a counter-revolution striving to return our country and the world to standards of individual moral responsibility. (Abstinence Clearinghouse, 2009b)

Unruh points to cultural changes as responsible for the need for abstinence education, and refers to the abstinence 'movement.' He actually calls abstinence advocates a 'counter-revolution', which contrasts sharply with Martinez's contention that 'this is about public policy and public health'. This may indicate more than just a rhetorical change, but rather an increased emphasis on the collective identity at the heart of social movement organizing.

A teen social movement?

Although in theory the abstinence movement advocates abstinence for all unmarried (assumed heterosexual) individuals, it has primarily targeted its message to adolescents in the context of classes in public and private schools, websites, rallies and church retreats. Abstinence educators contend that an overly sexualized US culture threatens to sully adolescents' innocence, especially young women. Therefore, it is argued, some sexual material should be censored from music, movies, and other cultural outlets favored by teens, as well as school curricula (Maher, 2007; Wallace and Warner, 2002). The movement teaches teens that virginity is a 'priceless treasure' (Mast, 2001) and that sexually active adolescents are engaging in an 'illicit' and 'risky' activity that is psychologically and physically

harmful (Teen Aid, 1998). Moreover, the movement asserts that teen sexual choices are not individual; as reflections of the larger culture, they shape and impact the social fabric:

A sexual ethic that is fundamentally flawed can lead an unsuspecting society into this harm. Sexual chaos can result and where sexual chaos reigns, instability in almost every element of society soon follows. Throughout history when cultures have experienced deterioration, that deterioration has often first been preceded by deterioration in the commonly accepted sexual ethic of society. (McIlhane, 2001: 393)

Abstinence-only educators accuse multiple cultural outlets – from the media to Planned Parenthood to public schools that teach comprehensive sexuality education (Focus on the Family, 2001) – of contributing to a ‘deteriorating sexual ethic’, and making ‘sex seekers out of youth’ (Unruh, 2008).

Numerous groups attempt to change the dominant culture of the USA by involving teens themselves in promoting abstinence. For example, the Abstainers are a group of adolescents that travel and provide abstinence programs to other teen groups. True Love Waits reaches out to teens through its student ministry and campus contacts. And Abstinence Clearinghouse features an ‘Abstinence Idol’ competition for teens at its annual conference; teens may perform poetry, sing, or dance (Abstinence Clearinghouse, 2008). It couples such adolescent outreach with goods in its online store designed to attract adolescents and encourage them to proselytize to other teens. They sell a t-shirt with the slogan ‘Pet your dog, not your date’, a temporary tattoo stating ‘I’m worth waiting for’, and ‘purity’ rings with a variety of engravings, including ‘vow of purity’ and ‘faith, hope, love’ (Abstinence Clearinghouse Store, n.d.).

Some in the abstinence movement claim that teens themselves are questioning the ‘sex-crazed world’ around them, including teen sexual activity, pregnancy, and rates of sexually transmitted infections. For those like Pattyn and Hester who define abstinence primarily as a movement rather than in terms of public health policy, they emphasize that it is a movement created from the ground up, specifically from teens’ interest in and demands for abstinence programming. In that sense, they suggest that it is not elite Christian organizations or other politicized factions – or even public health officials – behind the movement for abstinence-only education. Rather, it is teens themselves, demanding new options, and in particular, a way to express their beliefs in abstinence and physical ‘purity.’ In this sense, Pattyn and Hester maintain that adolescents stimulated interest in abstinence, not that existing conservative Christian organizations worked to generate enthusiasm or compliance among teens.

Hester of True Love Waits, for example, describes the founding of that organization as a response to the needs and requests of adolescents themselves:

In 1993 . . . parents and students began to say to us, ‘We really don’t feel like today we have a way to express our beliefs about sexual abstinence.’ At that time, there was a

lot of information, and a lot of things going on related to the safe sex messages. And there was not a lot of information or even to let students know that sexual abstinence was an option for them . . . For example, we had a girl stand up in a meeting and say that she was the only virgin in her high school. Well, we knew that wasn't true, but that was her perception, because of all the safe sex and sexual activity messages that were going on at the time. The moment she said it, another girl popped up and said, 'Well that's not true I am too' . . . So out of that they said to us, 'Is there a way for you to help us to express our beliefs about sexual abstinence until marriage?' And it was out of that that True Love Waits was born. (Personal interview, 29 January 2008)

According to Hester, then, teens' sexual abstinence, and their pleas to have programming that reflected their desires to remain abstinent, preceded the founding of True Love Waits. Indeed, True Love Waits would not exist were it not for LifeWay Christian Resources' discovery that abstinent adolescents wanted to connect with others like themselves and to 'express their beliefs'.

Denny Pattyn similarly describes Silver Ring Thing growing out of adolescent longings for abstinence programming. Though he initially created Silver Ring Thing to respond to his and other community members' concerns about teen pregnancy, according to Pattyn, the program rapidly expanded and escalated because teens themselves wanted to participate and bring their friends to abstinence programming within a Christian perspective:

[W]e taught abstinence in our high tech room for about seven weeks, and about 27 kids put on the rings at the end of this seven weeks. And that was what I thought I was going to do. I taught abstinence, and after that I thought I was going to be done. Some of the students wanted to do it again because their friends didn't come, and they were concerned with the whole sexual issue; kids worry about their friends . . .

So we continued to do this three or four times a year and a couple hundred kids would show up each time, and I didn't know these kids and I was wondering, 'Why are these kids coming?' I soon found out there was this movement for abstinence that teenagers had discovered and we were simply just organizing it for them . . . We're sensing this huge moral decay right now, and . . . these kids are sensing it. Most revolutions often start with young people . . . [They are] searching for something, and abstinence is what they've concluded they want, as crazy as it sounds. (Personal interview, 23 January 2008)

Thus, Pattyn, Hester, and other abstinence-only organizations refute arguments from opponents that they are forcing unpopular sex education curricula and programs on the public via unsuspecting teens. They argue that groups like Silver Ring Thing, and those writing public school curricula such as Teen Aid and Respect Incorporated, are, in fact, simply responding to adolescents' own analysis of US culture and their disgust with the unrestrained sexuality that dominates media and other cultural outlets.

The claim that teens have generated an abstinence movement has become increasingly important since President Obama's election victory. That is, according to Hester and Pattyn, teens are the force behind a genuinely grassroots movement, one that would exist whether or not federal funding had been made available in 1996 and after. With adolescents bolstering the movement, it has a force independent of federal support and will not disappear simply because funding is cut. Consistent with this contention, Leslee Unruh of Abstinence Clearinghouse maintains that teens will punish legislators who do not support abstinence:

I believe there will be a political backlash for those who oppose these life saving abstinence programs. The enemies of sexual integrity programs will feel the heat from the army of youth who have seen the light through these programs as they approach voting age. (Abstinence Clearinghouse, 2009a)

According to Unruh, a movement engendered and driven by adolescents implies future electoral and political power for both the issue of abstinence and for the Christian Right.

Conclusion

Single-issue abstinence groups form the core of the abstinence movement. Because these organizations were established relatively recently, most since Title V was passed and some only a few years ago, the current abstinence movement represents a new political phenomenon. With its multiple ties to the Christian Right, the movement's effects on public policy and cultural norms regarding sexuality further a broader Evangelical Christian agenda. The principal movement activities of lobbying, public education, funding abstinence research, and teaching adolescents are structured by the movement's focus on adolescent sexuality within an Evangelical framework.

Until 2010, federal funding had been crucial to the appearance and growth of the movement, though the influx of federal dollars created some tensions as well. Some abstinence programs had too overt a religious focus to qualify for funding, such as curricula written expressly for parochial schools or church youth groups. Others received federal money initially, only to have it withdrawn over public outcry or court decisions that the government cannot fund religious messages, as in the case of Silver Ring Thing. Even for those public school curricula or other programs that did receive federal funding, an underlying conservative Christian definition of sexuality predominates. Though public health arguments have the potential to circumvent problems associated with funding religious materials, public health arguments have the potential to clash with Evangelical arguments in support of abstinence.

The abstinence movement carries with it these tensions and questions as funding is withdrawn and its elite allies lose power in US politics. Thus, the movement is at a critical juncture. How it solves its internal tensions will be connected to and

shaped by its increasing reliance on extra-institutional funding, most likely from committed Evangelical activists. Political activity will continue, though with fewer powerful connections at the federal level. Instead, abstinence advocates may rely increasingly on classic social movement politics to press for cultural change.

Notes

1. The 'Christian Right' is a social movement composed of individuals and organizations, mostly socially conservative and politically active white, Evangelical Christians. 'Christian Right' is used interchangeably with 'conservative Christian' in this article.
2. Poll data citing the views of Evangelical Christians includes perhaps 50 per cent of people not affiliated with the Christian Right as a social movement. Nevertheless, it is instructive to evaluate Evangelicals' beliefs about sexuality, since these views provide the premise for the abstinence movement's agenda.
3. True Love Waits is not a single-issue organization in the same sense as the others listed here. It is a 'ministry', that is, part of LifeWay Christian Resources, a nonprofit organization affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention.
4. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed, and quoted material has not been edited except to delete repeated words for clarity.
5. Portions of this section are adapted from a section in Doan and Williams *The Politics of Virginity* (2008).
6. The Appendix contains the full definition of abstinence from Title V, Section 510.
7. 'ACLU announces settlement in challenge to government-funded religion in the abstinence-only-until-marriage program the "Silver Ring Thing"', (ACLU, 2006). The ACLU of Louisiana filed a similar complaint against the Governor of Louisiana, winning a settlement in 2002 stating that the state could not use federal abstinence funds to support organizations that 'promoted or advocated religion' (see *American Civil Liberties Union of Louisiana v. Governor M.J. Foster and Dan Richey*). Other organizations were the targets of ACLU letters of complaint to HHS to warn it of impending litigation over misuse of federal funds (see ACLU, 2007).
8. It is important to note, however, that NAEA and Abstinence Clearinghouse are not critical of Evangelical Christianity, nor have they rejected the links between abstinence and Evangelical Christianity articulated by Pattyn and Hester. Indeed, Abstinence Clearinghouse particularly is strongly connected to the Christian Right; Leslee Unruh, a well-known advocate for conservative Christian causes, founded the group.

References

- Abstinence Clearinghouse (2009a) E-Mail Update, 7 May. URL (accessed 11 May 2009): updates@abstinence.net.
- Abstinence Clearinghouse (2009b) E-Mail Update, 23 June 2009. URL (accessed 23 June 2009): updates@abstinence.net.
- Abstinence Clearinghouse (2008) E-Mail Update 28 May. URL (accessed 20 August 2008): updates@abstinence.net.
- Abstinence Clearinghouse Store (n.d.) URL (accessed June 2009): www.abstinence.net/store.
- ACLU (2006) ACLU announces settlement in challenge to government-funded religion in the abstinence-only-until-marriage program the 'Silver Ring Thing'. American Civil

- Liberties Union, 23 February. URL (accessed 16 May 2011): <http://www.aclu.org/reproductive/sixed/24246prs20060223.html>.
- ACLU (2007) Notice of constitutional violations in abstinence-only-until-marriage programs. URL (accessed 16 May 2011): http://www.aclu.org/images/asset_upload_file14_29585.pdf.
- American Civil Liberties Union of Louisiana v. Governor M.J. Foster and Dan Richey* (2002) WL 1733651 (E.D. La).
- Ammerman NT (1994) Accounting for Christian fundamentalisms: Social dynamics and rhetorical strategies. In: Marty ME and Appleby RS (eds) *Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 149–170.
- Apple MW (2006) *Educating the Right Way: Markets, Standards, God, and Inequality*, 2nd edn. New York: Routledge.
- Apple MW and Oliver A (1996) Becoming right: Education and the formation of conservative movements. *Teachers College Record* 97(3): 419–445.
- Arsneault S (2001) Values and virtue: The politics of abstinence-only sex education. *American Review of Public Administration* 31(4): 436–454.
- Bleakley A, Hennessy M and Fishbein M (2010) Predicting preferences for types of sex education in US schools. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 7: 50–57.
- Bleakley A, Hennessy M and Fishbein M (2006) Public opinion on sex education in US schools. *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine* 160: 1151–1156.
- Clemmitt M (2010) Teen pregnancy. *CQ Researcher* 20(12): 265–288.
- CQ Congress Collection (1997) Welfare reform 1995–1996: Legislative chronology. *Congress and the Nation, 1993–1996*, Vol. 9. Washington: CQ Press, CQ Electronic Library, CQ Congress Collection, Document ID: catn93-0000141468. URL (accessed 13 September 2007): <http://library.cqpress.com/congress/catn93-0000141468>.
- Daley D (1997) Exclusive purpose: Abstinence-only proponents create federal entitlement in welfare reform. Report 24:4. New York: Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States.
- Darroch JE, Landry DJ and Singh S (2000) Changing emphases in sexuality education in US public secondary schools, 1988–1999. *Family Planning Perspectives* 32: 204–265.
- Diamond S (1995) *Road to Dominion: Right-Wing Power Movements and Political Power in the United States*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Diamond S (1998) *Not by Politics Alone: The Enduring Influence of the Christian Right*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- di Mauro D and Joffe C (2009) The religious right and the reshaping of sexual policy: Reproductive rights and sexuality education during the Bush years. In: Herdt G (ed.) *Moral Panics, Sex Panics: Fear and the Fight over Sexual Rights*. New York: New York University Press, 47–103.
- Doan A and Williams JC (2008) *The Politics of Virginity: Abstinence in Sex Education*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.
- Domke D (2004) *God Willing? Political Fundamentalism in the White House, the War on Terror, and the Echoing Press*. Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press.
- Elia JP and Eliason MJ (2009) Values-free sexuality education: Myth or reality? In: Schroeder E and Judy Kuriansky J (eds) *Sexuality Education: Past, Present, and Future, Volume 1*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 174–198.

- Focus on the Family (2001) *Take Twelve – The Truth About Abstinence Education*. Colorado Springs, CO: Focus on the Family.
- Green JC (1999) The spirit willing: Collective identity and the development of the Christian right. In: Freeman J and Johnson V (eds) *Waves of Protest: Social Movements Since the Sixties*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 153–167.
- Hauser D (2004) *Five Years of Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Education: Assessing the Impact*. Washington, DC: Advocates for Youth.
- Hunter JD (1991) *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. New York: Basic Books.
- Irvine J (2002) *Talk About Sex: The Battles over Sex Education in the United States*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Jemmott JB, Jemmott L and Fong GT (2010) Efficacy of a theory-based abstinence-only intervention over 24 months: A randomized controlled trial with young adolescents. *Archives of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine* 164(2): 152–159.
- Kaiser Family Foundation (2004) Sex Education in America. *Public Opinion and Media Research Program*. URL (accessed 17 May 2011): www.kff.org/newsmedia/upload/Sex-Education-in-America-summary.pdf.
- Kirby D (2001) *Emerging Answers: Research Findings on Programs to Reduce Teen Pregnancy*, summary. Washington, D.C: National Campaign to Reduce Teen Pregnancy.
- Klepacki L (2007) A look at the sexual revolution in the United States – and how it informs the work of abstinence educators. *Focus on Social Issues: Abstinence Policy*, Focus on the Family. URL (accessed 4 November 2007): sex_ed_history-a-different-view-wow.pdf.
- Landry D, Kaeser L and Richards CL (1999) Abstinence promotion and the provision of information about contraception in public school district sexuality education policies. *Family Planning Perspectives* 31(6): 280–286.
- LeClair D (2006) Let's talk about sex honestly: Why federal abstinence-only-until marriage education programs discriminate against girls, are bad public policy, and should be overturned. *Wisconsin Women's Law Journal* 29(291): 291–323.
- Liebau CP (2007) We get what we expect from our children. Townhall.com. URL (accessed 11 December 2007): www.townhall.com/Common/Print.aspx.
- Lord AM (2010) *Condom Nation: The U.S. Government's Sex Education Campaign from World War I to the Internet*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Luker K (2006) *When Sex Goes to School: Warring Views on Sex – and Sex Education – Since the Sixties*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Maher B (2007) *Talking Points on Abstinence Education*. Washington, DC: Family Research Council.
- Martin W (1996) *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America*. New York: Broadway Books.
- Mast CK (2001) *Sex Respect: The Option of True Sexual Freedom*. Frankfort, IL: Respect.
- McGirr L (2001) *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the American Right*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- McKeegan M (1992) *Abortion Politics: Mutiny in the Ranks of the Right*. New York: The Free Press.
- McIlhane J (2001) Sexual ethics. In: Eberly D (ed.) *Building a Healthy Culture: Strategies for an American Renaissance*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 381–393.
- Meier KJ (1994) *The Politics of Sin: Drugs, Alcohol, and Public Policy*. New York: ME Sharpe.
- Meier KJ (1999) Symposium: The Politics of Morality Policy – drugs, sex, rock, and roll: A theory of morality politics. *The Journal of Policy Studies* 27(4): 681–695.

- Mooney C (1999) The Politics of Morality Policy: Symposium editor's introduction. *Policy Studies Journal* 27(4): 675–680.
- Mooney C (2000) The decline of federalism and the rise of morality-policy conflict in the United States. *Publius* 30(1/2): 171–189.
- Mooney C (2001) *The Public Clash of Private Values: The Politics of Morality Policy*. New York: Chatham House Publishers.
- Mooney C and Lee MH (1995) Legislating morality in the American States: The case of pre-*Roe* abortion regulation reform. *American Journal of Political Science* 39(3): 599–627.
- NCAE – National Coalition for Abstinence Education (1998) *NCAE Title V Report Card Grading Guidelines*. Colorado Springs, CO: NCAE.
- Paterson J (2004) Conservative movement. In: Ness I (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Social Movements*, Vol. 4. Armonk, NY: ME Sharpe, 1387–1410.
- Rabasca L (1999) Not Enough Evidence to Support 'Abstinence-Only'. *APA Monitor Online* 30(11). URL (accessed 20 November 2001): <http://www.apa.org/monitor/dec99/pi1.html>.
- Rabin RC (2010) New spending for a wider range of sex education. *The New York Times*, 11 May: D5.
- Rose M (2007) *Safe, Legal, and Unavailable? Abortion Politics in the United States*. Washington, DC: CQ Press.
- Rose S (2005) Going too far? Sex, sin and social policy. *Social Forces* 84(2): 1207–1232.
- Segelstein M (2009) The science of sex. OneNewsNow.com, American Family News Network, 6/16/2009. URL (accessed 16 June 2009): <http://www.onenewsnow.com/Perspectives/Default.aspx?id=567964>.
- SIECUS (2001) Exclusive purpose: abstinence-only proponents create federal entitlement in welfare reform. *SIECUS Report Articles* 24(4). URL (accessed 20 November 2001): <http://www.siecus.org/policy/SReport/srep0001.html>.
- SIECUS (2005) Sexuality education policy: Who makes decisions? URL (accessed December 2005): http://www.communityactionkit.org/pdfs/Getting_Ready_To_Advocate/Education_Policy.html.
- SIECUS (2006) SIECUS state profiles: A portrait of sexuality education and abstinence-only-until-marriage programs in the States. URL (accessed December 2006): <http://www.siecus.org/policy/states/index.html>.
- Silver Ring Thing (2004) It's time: Silver Ring Thing Newsletter. The John Guest Team.
- Tatalovich R and Daynes BW (1998) Conclusion: Social regulatory policy process. In: Tatalovich R and Daynes B (eds) *Moral Controversies in American Politics: Cases in Social Regulatory Policy*. New York: ME Sharpe, 258–270.
- Tarrow S (1998) *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, 2nd edn. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Teen Aid (1998) *Sexuality, Commitment, and Family*. Spokane, WA: Teen Aid.
- Trenholm C, Devaney B, Fortson K, Quay L, Wheeler J and Clark M (2007) *Impacts of Four Title V, Section 510 Abstinence Education Programs: Final Report*. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research.
- Unruh L (2008) Stop making 'sex seekers' out of youth. 6 June. URL (accessed 18 August 2008): updates@abstinence.net.
- US House of Representatives Committee on Government Reform-Minority Staff (2004) *The Content of Federally Funded Abstinence-Only Education Programs*. Prepared for Rep. Henry A. Waxman. URL (accessed July 2008): <http://www.oversight.house.gov/documents/woo41201102153-50247.pdf>.

- Vergari S (2001) Morality politics and the implementation of abstinence-only sex education: A case of policy compromise. In: Mooney CZ (ed.) *The Public Clash of Private Values*. New York: Chatham House Publishers, 201–212.
- Wald K (2000) The context of gay politics. In: Rimmerman CA, Wald KD and Wilcox C (eds) *The Politics of Gay Rights*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1–28.
- Wallace M, Warner V (2002) Abstinence: Why sex is worth the wait. Concerned Women for America. URL (accessed December 2002): <http://www.cwfa.org/articledisplay.asp?id=1195&department=CWA&categoryid=family>.
- Watson J (1997) *The Christian Coalition: Dreams of Restoration, Demands for Recognition*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Public laws cited

- Adolescent Family Life Act of 1981. Pub. L. No. 97–35, 95 Stat. 357 (1981).
- Adolescent Health Services and Pregnancy Prevention and Care Act of 1978 Pub. L. 95–626, Tit. VI, 92 Stat (3595)–3601 (1978).
- (PRWORA) Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. Pub. L. no. 104–193, 110 Stat (2105) (1996).
- Public Health Service Act of 1970 Pub. L. no. 91–572, 84 Stat (1504) (1970).

Interviews

- Denny Pattyn Founder, The Silver Ring Thing, 23 January 2008.
- Jimmy Hester Founder, True Love Waits, 29 January 2008.
- Kimberly Martinez Executive Director, Abstinence Clearinghouse, 13 February 2008.
- Valerie Huber Executive Director, National Abstinence Education Association, 14 February 2008.

Jean Calterone Williams is Professor of Political Science and Interim Chair of the Department of Women's and Gender Studies at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo. Her research focuses on the politics and policies associated with class, gender, and sexuality. Dr Williams is the author of *'A Roof Over My Head': Homeless Women and the Shelter Industry* (University of Colorado Press, 2003), and *The Politics of Virginity: Abstinence in Sex Education* (Praeger Publishers, 2008). She writes and teaches courses on feminism, sexuality, homelessness and social movement politics.

Appendix

PL 104–193: Title V, Section 510

Definition of Abstinence. For purposes of this section, the term “abstinence education” means an educational or motivational program which—

- A. has as its exclusive purpose, teaching the social, psychological, and health gains to be realized by abstaining from sexual activity;

- B. teaches abstinence from sexual activity outside marriage as the expected standard for all school age children;
- C. teaches that abstinence from sexual activity is the only certain way to avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and other associated health problems;
- D. teaches that a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity;
- E. teaches that sexual activity outside of the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects;
- F. teaches that bearing children out-of-wedlock is likely to have harmful consequences for the child, the child's parents, and society;
- G. teaches young people how to reject sexual advances and how alcohol and drug use increases vulnerability to sexual advances; and
- H. teaches the importance of attaining self-sufficiency before engaging in sexual activity (PL 104–193).