

Annual battleground

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Staff photos — Duane A. Laverty

Escorts lead children and parents past protesters at the Nobody's Fool sex education seminar. About 35 protesters from Pro-Life Waco gathered to question the reliability and the propriety of the curriculum.

Nobody's Fool still attracts kids, protesters

By Thaddeus DeJesus
Tribune-Herald staff writer

The Waco Convention Center is an unlikely battleground for the nation's culture wars, but the lines are drawn every summer at the onset of the local Planned Parenthood's sexual education program for youths.

About 400 youngsters Wednesday converged inside the center for Nobody's Fool, a half-day seminar that covered various subjects including anatomy, peer pressure and contraceptives. Outside, about 35 protesters from Pro-Life Waco gathered to question the reliability and the propriety of the curriculum.



"Comprehensive sex education without customary moral guidance does irreparable harm to them," said Barbara Myers, co-director of Pro-Life Waco.

Myers and other protesters said abstinence is the sole "foolproof" solution to curb teenage pregnan-

Protesters with Pro-Life Waco hold a news conference in front of the Waco Convention Center, while inside, children converged for Wednesday's program.

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cy and the growing transmission rates of sexually transmitted disease among the young.

Anti-abortion groups have greeted the annual gathering since 1994, the year when Planned Parenthood of Central Texas began offering abortions at its Waco clinic. While most voiced complaints about the comprehensive sex education course, a few also decried Planned Parenthood's roles in abortions and providing emergency contraception.

Program defended

Pam Smallwood, Planned Parenthood of Central Texas' executive director, said the purpose of Nobody's Fool is to offer age-appropriate information so teens can make better decisions. More controversial topics, such as homosexuality and contraception, are reserved for the older students. Nobody's Fool targets fifth through ninth graders.

Contrary to what some critics say, children are not taught how to give oral sex and props are not used to demonstrate condom use, she said.

Nobody's Fool is best described as an "abstinence-plus" program, she said. While it encourages teens to postpone sex, it also tells teens to be sensible and use caution if and when they do become sexually active.

"Kids who are given medically accurate information are much better decision makers," Smallwood said. "Kids for whom information is withheld are those who turn to information from their peers, and we know that's not the best source of information."

Pro-Life Waco invited Kylene Wright, president of Texans for Life Coalition, to speak Wednesday. That organization fought in 2004 to introduce state high school health textbooks that had no references to contraceptives or the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases except through abstinence.

Condom failure rates

Wright said she doubted Wednesday's Nobody's Fool course would mention the failure rates of condoms, especially in protecting against the human papillomavirus, or HPV. That virus causes common and genital warts. Certain strains are known to cause cervical cancer.

Given that condoms may not protect against HPV infection, which can be hard to detect, Wright said it's irresponsible to not teach abstinence.

"Telling our kids anything else... is not only foolish, it's criminal," she said.

The Centers for Disease Control notes the vast majority of HPV infections do not result in cancer. Scientists are continuing to study condom effectiveness against HPV. Several medical studies so far have found that condom use is associated with lower rates of cervical cancer, the CDC reports.

Housing authority's role

Pro-Life Waco also took to task the Waco Housing Authority, where Nobody's Fool yard signs were posted. To publicize Wednesday's event, Planned Parenthood used yard signs, similar to political advertisements, to announce this year's seminar. Supporters of Planned Parenthood and the sex education program posted such signs throughout the area.

Myers questioned the program's promotion by the agen-



Children register for the Nobody's Fool sex education conference Wednesday at the Waco Convention Center.

Staff photo — Duane A. Laverty

cy, which is supported by tax dollars.

Gary Moore, Waco Housing Authority's executive director, said it used its resources to transport 12 students to the convention center Wednesday. Those teens received scholarships to attend the course.

The agency, which manages area public housing including the Kate Ross Apartments, makes educational opportunities available to its residents as stipulated by state and federal mandates, Moore said. Given that a minor must obtain permission from a parent or guardian to participate in Nobody's Fool, Moore said the Pro-Life Waco's criticism is unfounded.

"I respect their opinion," Moore said. "All I'm saying here is that we at the housing authority promote free choice" for parents.

Pro-Life Waco pressured the Girl Scouts Bluebonnet Council to drop its sponsorship of Nobody's Fool after a brief boycott of its cookie sales. Its members also have lobbied individuals, business and entities to drop their support. The *Waco Tribune-Herald* is a sponsor of Nobody's Fool.

What schools teach

Since its start in 1989, about 8,000 area schoolchildren have attended Nobody's Fool. McLennan County school districts — with the exception of the Waco Independent School District — teach abstinence-only education.

Smallwood said arrangement clashes with messages teens receive from sexually saturated themes featured every day in print, radio, television and film. However, if part of the back-

lash against popular culture involves curbing comprehensive sex education in favor of abstinence-only programs, there will be major public health consequences, Smallwood said.

It will come in the form of higher birth rates and greater disease transmission among youth, she said.

"We've regressed as a society," she said. "Fifteen years ago, schools were doing a better job teaching sex education. Fifteen years ago, we didn't have protesters at Nobody's Fool. What I see in this environment is that people have become so intimidated to think that children don't have the right to information. We've stepped back decades."