Controversial clinics get School Board OK

By MARK LAMBERT
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The School Board, by an 11-1 vote, decided on Thursday that controversial adolescent health-care clinics in public schools will become a reality, despite howls of protest from community and church groups.

Board member Maudine Ault cast the dissenting vote. If the $600,000 in funding is approved by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the clinics will be set up at Westside Middle School and Istrouma High School. Baton Rouge is one of 10 systems applying for the 24 grants.

Discussion from audience members took up about 90 minutes as people opposing the clinics outnumbered the proponents by about 1-7 margin.

Opponents have labeled similar clinics across the country as sex clinics that encourage sexual promiscuity, pregnancy and abortion among adolescents. They have pointed out that, in each community where the clinics are introduced, pregnancy rates rise but birth rates drop.

The Pupil Services Committee earlier agreed to amend portions of the clinic proposal, including eliminating the dispensing of contraceptives and prescriptions for contraceptives. The Community Advisory Committee also agreed that "no counseling, referral or performance of abortion will take place" in the clinics.

But, for many hard-core opponents of the school-based clinics, those concessions were not enough.

Ford Pickering, who said he was "representing thousands of voters in East Baton Rouge Parish," presented a petition against the clinics. He said the petition was signed in one day by 2,173 voters who disapproved of "illicit sexual teen-age activity."

"We beg you, we plead with you, don't ignore the majority of people in East Baton Rouge Parish," Pickering said.

SEE CLINICS, 10A

Board member Maudine Ault listens to clinic opponents

"I realize there are probably some things in the (proposal) now that you don't like, but we need to teach children the real issues," said Meador.

Meador said that, because the clinics would be a pilot program, "it turns out no good, we'll get rid of it." He added that he is "broad-minded about it," he said. "I'm in a position as an elected official, I have to look at both sides."

Board member Eva Legard cited her numerous affiliations with the Catholic Church and said that she still could support the clinics.

"If contraceptives are dispensed in any form or fashion... if abortion is discussed in any manner with our children, I'll be the first to come back and oppose this," Legard said. "You're not find a single board member who's not a true Christian. We will not tolerate the trust of this community."

Board member Clyde Geddes said the clinics would work because "the sole purpose of the Johnson Foundation is health services."

"If you have the local control, you have a good program," Geddes said.

I think we need to leave certain things to the parents," audience member Margaret Bayan said. "We've got to get away from what we're all about."

Several questions were raised during the debate about the monitoring of the clinics. Several audience members also said the Johnson Foundation would not approve the funding if the pregnancy-related aspects of the clinic were removed.

More questions were brought up concerning the school system's liability for malpractice if the clinics were approved.

PropONENTS of the clinics said parents who could afford private physicians for their children generally were the ones opposed to the clinics.

"The people speaking against this, they send their children to a private doctor," said Monte Milner, a teacher and president of the East Baton Rouge Parish Association of Educators. Milner said parents at Westside and Istrouma favor the clinics.

Marguerite Adams, a school nurse, said there are not enough school nurses to care for all of the children in the schools. "We are in favor of this program," Adams said. "It's hard for us to be in four schools at one time."

Board member Robert Meador, who originally spoke out strongly against the clinics, said he had studied the proposal very carefully and concluded that "we need to teach children the real issues."

"I don't think there's anyone more violently opposed to the birth control paraphernalia and abortion referral than I am," Meador told the opponents.

Clinics CONTINUED FROM 1A

Ford Pickering presents a petition against health clinics to the School Board

Margaret Bayan speaks out against the clinics