Nearly all polled favor teaching teens about AIDS

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Ninety-five percent of Louisiana voters in a recent poll said they believe schools should teach teen-agers about the danger of AIDS, and most said such lessons also should instruct students about both safe sex and abstinence.

Only 4 percent of the 904 registered voters interviewed in The Advocate’s annual year-end poll said schools should not teach students about the dangers of AIDS.

The disease has grown in the public consciousness from obscurity in the early 1980s to broad recognition through protests, news reports and such events as the decision last fall of NBA basketball star Earvin “Magic” Johnson to retire after he contracted the virus that causes the disease.

The 1991 poll results show an apparent increase in public support for AIDS education since The Advocate’s annual poll last year, when 87 percent of those interviewed said they believed schools should teach students about the danger of AIDS.

The disease, for which there is no known cure, is transmitted primarily through sexual contact and use of infected hypodermic needles.

State law does not require schools to teach teen-agers about AIDS, and in many Louisiana schools, AIDS education is not provided.

The law does permit schools to teach an AIDS curriculum to students in grades 7-12, and the state has 680 public schools with students in those grades. However, only about half of those schools actually offer AIDS education, said Lillie Brown, AIDS education program manager for the state.
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Department of Education.
"We wish that schools would provide it, but without a mandated curriculum, a lot of schools are hesitant," Brown said.

The state has developed an AIDS education program that it recommends to schools, but schools have been wary of adopting it, she said.

In addition, part of the curriculum concerning prevention of the disease can be taught only if a school system has an approved sex education program. Only about 15 of the state's 86 public school systems have an approved sex education program, the state's most recent survey showed.

East Baton Rouge Parish public schools have no sex education program and cannot teach that portion of the AIDS curriculum, but the rest of the AIDS program is taught in local public schools, local school officials said.

"Basically, our people are going by this curriculum, but we're not tying it to sex," said Mary Ellen Jordan, assistant superintendent for instructional services in the local system.

In the poll, respondents were asked the question: Do you think schools should teach teen-agers about the dangers of AIDS?

If the respondents answered the first question affirmatively, they were then asked: should such a course teach only about AIDS, about safe sex, about abstinence, about all three, or some other combination or subjects?

The poll results show that 95 percent of those surveyed said schools should educate teen-agers about AIDS, and that support was spread evenly among various groups. For example, 98 percent of blacks and 93 percent of whites supported AIDS education for teens.

In responses to the second question, the results showed that 76 percent of the respondents favor education on all three, AIDS, safe sex and abstinence. After that combination, the respondents preferred, in decreasing proportion, the following options: abstinence only, 6 percent; AIDS only, 4 percent; AIDS and abstinence only, 4 percent; safe sex only, 2 percent; and AIDS and safe sex only, 1 percent.

Sara Sims, who heads a local group that provides services to people with AIDS, said greater AIDS education is necessary in part because statistics show, for example, that Louisiana has the nation's eighth-highest rate of positive tests for the AIDS virus among non-white females aged 13-18.

Parents should work with schools, and such groups as Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts also should join to educate teen-agers about AIDS, said Sims, executive director of Friends for Life — Capital Area HIV/AIDS Services.

"Not only is it the responsibility of the school system, but first of all it's the responsibility of the parents," she said.

Sims said she doubts the effectiveness of teaching only abstinence, and said she encourages teaching about AIDS, abstinence and safe sex.

There have been 3,016 cases of AIDS reported in Louisiana. Sixty-six of those cases have been reported in people age 19 or younger, and most of those cases are due to infection from parents who have AIDS or the virus.

The number of people who have the AIDS virus, known as HIV for human immuno-deficiency virus, is believed to be significantly larger. An AIDS task force estimated last year that as many as 20,000 Louisianians could have the virus, which can take years to cause full-scale AIDS.

A recent state study of 71 people between the ages of 18 and 22 found that 21 percent of the cases were caused by heterosexual transmission, 12 percent were caused by intravenous drug use, and 53 percent were caused by homosexual or bisexual transmission, said state epidemiologist Louise McFarland.