

## **THE YOUTH SUICIDE PROBLEM: WASHINGTON COULD MAKE IT WORSE**

It generally is now accepted that educators must return to basics. Yet this has not stopped the proliferation of school programs designed to cure social ills, not to educate. "Education" programs aim at solving the problems of nuclear war, drunk driving, drug abuse, sex discrimination, child abuse, and global conflict. Some programs have more merit than others. One that, it seems, clearly would not attempt to address the distressing problem of youth suicide.

On July 14, the House passed by voice vote the Youth Suicide Prevention Act (H.R. 4650). The bill would provide \$1 million to fund a grant program in the Department of Education to assist local educational agencies and private nonprofit organizations to establish and operate programs of youth suicide prevention.

It is hard to fault the good intentions of the legislation. If a tried and tested method of preventing youth suicides existed, few Americans would oppose making it widely available. Such a method does not exist, and H.R. 4650 is not going to find one. What H.R. 4650 is likely to yield are programs run by unlicensed psychologists or other nonprofessionals and programs whose content will be kept secret from parents. It is even possible that H.R. 4650 could weaken the traditional and justifiable social stigma attached to suicide. The net result could exacerbate the problem.

Similar legislation in the Senate (S. 2551) would create a "National Center on Youth Suicide" within the Department of Health and Human Services. The Center would oversee a national public awareness campaign and create a national resource center to disseminate technical assistance, information, and organizational help to those wishing to help prevent youth suicide. By concentrating resources on research, this Senate bill recognizes better than the House bill that there is no clear answer to youth suicide that can be handled by legislative action. Yet S. 2551 still has a serious flaw--it would fund programs and raise public awareness without giving any reliable guides for action.

Much of this congressional legislation is based on the assumption that increased awareness and discussion of suicide is the means of its prevention. Yet evidence suggests the opposite. Discussions and increased awareness of suicide may actually put the idea of it into children's minds. Suicides generally increase, for example, after television news or drama that centers on suicide. One youth suicide in a neighborhood or school sometimes triggers others. Cautions Dr. David Shaffer, Chief of Psychiatry at Columbia University's New York State Psychiatric Institute: discussions of suicide "can lower the threshold of vulnerable kids." Adds Dr. Harold M. Voth, Chief of Staff at the Veterans Administration Medical Center in Topeka, Kansas: Emotionally charged "rap sessions" run by nonprofessionals could be more dangerous than constructive for suggestibility may actually be one of the factors that leads to some suicides. Another danger of the proposed legislation is that funding might go to controversial programs that actually look benignly upon the act of youth suicide. There are even those who feel that children should be informed of their "right" to commit suicide. Others dwell morbidly on the topics of death and dying or argue that suicide should be held out as an option to those in physical or mental distress.

Congress thus should consider warily any legislation funding suicide prevention programs. Federal efforts, moreover, should be run from the Justice Department to make it clear that suicide violates the law. Legislation should impose legal sanctions on any program that passively or actively encourages youths to commit suicide. Legislation also should ensure that any programs are in keeping with the Hatch Amendment, which requires that students cannot be subject to psychological testing without their parent's permission.

If there is to be a role for the Department of Education, it should be to use existing research resources to discover how curriculum may allay the suicide problem. Adolescence is a time when a child learns that life entails pains as well as joys. As such, a curriculum that emphasized "overcoming difficulties" might be far more effective in discouraging suicide than any well-meaning "awareness" program. Education Secretary William Bennett points out that a good curriculum can help build good and balanced character.

With a problem as delicate as youth suicide lawmakers should not rush to legislate just to show they are "doing something." Action based on insufficient knowledge can be worse than no action at all. Until the mental health community itself has reached a consensus about the best method of prevention; until reliable and accurate statistics on the problem are compiled; and until parents can be assured that school programs will not encourage suicide, lawmakers should stick to encouraging research. Congress is playing a dangerous game when it seeks to fund untested programs that experiment with children in matters of life and death.

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