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EDITORIAL

Sex, Science and Savings

President Bush's veto of Congress's main social spending bill has Democratic leaders looking for places to make trims to satisfy the president's sudden zeal for fiscal discipline. A small, but sensible, place to begin would be to eliminate the bill's \$28 million increase for one of Mr. Bush's signature boondoggles — abstinence-only sex education.

Federal government spending on highly restrictive abstinence-only sex education has ballooned under President Bush, while evidence of the program's danger as a public health strategy has continued to mount.

Last April, a Congressionally mandated evaluation found that students who received abstinence instruction in elementary and middle school were just as likely to have sex in the following years as students who did not get such instruction.

States are catching on. Last month, Virginia became the 14th state to reject federal grant money for abstinence-only sex education to pursue the comprehensive approach supported by science and most Americans. That approach encourages abstinence but also arms young people with information about sexually transmitted diseases, contraceptives and pregnancy.

Expectations that the new Democratic Congress would confront the abstinence-only hoax have proved unfounded. Instead of cutting support, or at least ditching outrageous rules that restrict information about condoms and contraception, the vetoed spending plan actually increased money for faith-based and other groups offering abstinence education programs above the wasteful \$113 million allotted for the current fiscal year.

The weak link is the House. Speaker Nancy Pelosi opposes the administration's ineffective abstinence-only approach. But she seems to have ceded the issue to Representative David Obey, the House Appropriations chairman, who continues to insist on using it as bait for Republican votes on a budget compromise. Forgoing principle failed to produce a veto-proof majority for the spending bill the first time. Ms. Pelosi needs to reconsider whether expanding a discredited sex education program should be on the rather meager list of achievements of the first Democratic Congress in a decade.

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