Why Are We Losing The Drug War?

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In a televised Public Service Announcement sponsored by the Partnership for a Drug-Free America, sibling tennis champions Venus and Serena Williams shared the secrets of their success. According to the champs, their triumphs in tennis would not have been achieved had they used illegal drugs.

The punch line was: "The decision is yours. Make the right one." But, since when is it just a personal decision whether or not to obey the law?

This same skewed message is what is taught in most of the school- based drug-prevention programs funded by the federal Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities (SDFSC) Act. Yet the SDFSC Act in section 4132 mandates that "Drug prevention programs supported under this part shall convey a clear and consistent message that the illegal use of alcohol and other drugs is wrong and harmful."

The education establishment manifests a peculiar phobia toward teaching that anything is wrong. It's almost as though wrong is a forbidden five-letter word banned from the public school classroom.

The prevailing philosophy in education today is that teachers should not tell children how to behave on moral issues but instead should teach children to look within themselves and make up their own minds. The theory is that children will feel better about themselves, have more self-esteem, if they draw their own conclusions about life.

Many teachers accept the popular belief that disciplining, judging and moralizing will wobble a child's precariously balanced self-image. In fact, real self-esteem is the by-product of academic and personal achievement, not the result of doing your own thing.

Current pedagogical practice is to make education child-centered. Teachers are cautioned to stop lecturing and to start listening, while classrooms are dominated by group discussion and peer counseling.

Most if not all of the widely used programs funded by SDFSC monies use non-directive, values-clarification techniques that teach children drug decisions are up to them. Illegal drugs are presented to children as a choice that they, despite their immaturity, can make.

But the decision to use illegal drugs should NOT be left to a child. Our society has already made the decision that illegal drugs are wrong, harmful, unhealthy, and illegal.

After a high school student takes drivers ed, it would be ridiculous for the instructor to say, "The decision is yours whether to drive on the right side of the street or the left."

Drug education should carry a clear message. Unfortunately, there is no accountability to ensure that the federally financed programs actually teach children that illegal drugs are "wrong and harmful."

In 1990 a General Accounting Office review showed that most of the 21 commonly used drug curricula in public schools spend most of their class time playing psychological games under the rubric of enhancing students' self-awareness and self-esteem. Not a single course stated that illegal drugs are "wrong" or that a student may not consider using illegal drugs.

Another GAO report in 1997 didn't report any improvement. It again pointed out the "ineffective use of funds."

A 1996 report by the House Committee on Government Reform and Oversight stated that "accountability concerns are serious, specifically in Safe and Drug Free Schools Act monies." The committee discovered that many so-called drug prevention programs are neither validated nor accountable.

A five-year study of 19 school districts completed in 1997 by the Research Triangle Institute for the U.S. Department of Education found that the drug prevention programs across all the districts studied had little or no effect on the use of students' use of illegal drugs.

Common complaints made by parents are that (1) the drug ed courses are non-judgmental -- they do not tell children that illegal drugs are wrong, illegal, unhealthy, and sometimes fatal; (2) the courses lead the child to believe that he is capable of "critical thinking" and "decision making" about drug use depending

on his feelings and the situation; and (3) the courses are psychological and intrusive of pupil and family privacy, requiring the child to reveal all sorts of personal information about himself and his family to the entire class.

When a child is taught to look inward as the sole source of authority, he will become convinced that any decision is acceptable. A child with fuzzy values about drugs is a drug dealer's favorite target and the peddler (who certainly won't use a non-directive sales talk) will be happy to guide the child to his decision.

Because some curricula give children an integrated list that includes both legal drugs (aspirin, Tums, cough syrup, coffee) and illegal drugs (marijuana, LSD, cocaine), the message is conveyed that everybody takes drugs of some kind. The child concludes that his decision is simply a matter of the circumstances or the quantity of drugs he takes.

The war against drugs is being lost in the classroom. We need a congressional investigation to find out what we got for the $6.3 billion poured into drug education since 1986.