

(Revised version of a document prepared to assist the legislators in their deliberation regarding the value of premarital education. The bill was approved and signed into law effective August 1, 2001.)

## Rationale for the Premarital Education Bill State of Minnesota

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“Failing to prepare is like preparing to fail.”

### What is the Premarital Education Bill?

The premarital bill was designed to encourage couples planning to marry to take a premarital education program of at least 12 hours. The financial incentive to the couple is that their marriage license fee would be reduced.

The Minnesota State law was initiated and sponsored by Senator Dill and Representative Elaine Harder. The bill was developed by the Minnesota Marriage Initiative (MMI), chaired by Dr. William Doherty, consisted of a variety of professionals representing various organizations. The 12 hours of premarital education can be provided by a licensed or ordained minister of any religious denomination or their designee (which could include lay/mentor couples, family life educators or other persons) or a person licensed to practice marriage and family therapy in Minnesota.

The marriage education bill contains the essential components of a successful premarital program (Olson & DeFrain, 2000) and those components include the following:

- **12 hours of premarital preparation**
- **take a premarital couple inventory**
- **learn communication skills**
- **learn conflict resolution skills**

### What is the rationale for passing a Premarital Education Bill?

*“It (marriage) happens as with cages. The birds without despair to get in and those within despair of getting out.”*

Montaigne (1595)

The ultimate goal of this bill is to help to strengthen marriage and reduce the rate of divorce. With the current rate of divorce about 50% in Minnesota and nationally, the goal is to improve the quality of marriage so that both people will be more satisfied and less interested in divorce.

Even for the 50% of marriages that survive, the quality of some of those marriages may be poor (Popenoe and Whitehead, 1999). An intensive study of newlyweds by Arond & Pauker (1987) found that 51% of the couples had serious doubts their marriage would last, 49% felt they had serious marital problems and 42% found their marriage was harder than they thought. A respected sociologist, Norval Glenn (1996) found that after ten years of marriage, only 25% of the couples will still be happily married.

Annually about 1.8 million couples marry each year and about 1 million divorce in the United States. The average length of marriage for those that end in divorce is only 7 years and over 1 million children are affected by divorce each year (U. S. Bureau of Census, 1999).

Except for marriage, in no other important area of life do we assume that you can be successful without having any training. To be successful in a career or to even get a driver's license, we assume that you need some education and training. But people planning to marry falsely assume that just being in love is sufficient to have a successful marriage. However, we now know that you need to be get prepared for marriage just like you do for other important aspects of life.

By giving premarital couples important relationship skills (communication and conflict resolution) and ways to build on their relationship strengths, couples will be able to get their marriage off to a better start. Studies of premarital education programs have demonstrated that the couples have a greater chance for marital success and will less likely divorce ( Berger and Hannah, 1999; Markman, Stanley & Blumberg, 1996; Bray & Jouriles, 1995).

### **What are the advantages of a good Premarital Education Program?**

*“The dignity of a vocation is always to be measured by the seriousness of the preparation for it. How then do we appraise marriage?”*

R. Herbert Newton

- It can help couples get their marriage off to a better start and also help couples build a stronger marriage. Outcome studies on premarital programs have demonstrated their value in improving relationship skills and preventing divorce (Berger and Hannah, 1999).
- Stronger marriages can reduce the chance of divorce.
- It can help couples learn important relationship skills that they can use to strengthen their marriage over time.
- It can motivate couples to see the value of attending future marriage education programs.
- It can encourage married couples to seek marital therapy early on if they have ongoing marital problems rather than waiting until they are ready for divorce.

### **What are the advantages of taking a premarital couple inventory?**

- There are a variety of premarital couple inventories available and three of the highest quality ones include PREPARE, FOCCUS and RELATE. Larson (1999) reviewed these inventories and found them to be of high quality and they are each described in a recent book by Berger and Hannah (1999).
- Premarital inventories can help the couple begin talking about important relationship issues that they typically avoid.
- A recent outcome study with the PREPARE Program has demonstrated that just taking the inventory can have a positive impact on the couple and getting feedback can even be more helpful (Knutson & Olson, 2001).
- Premarital inventories can help the professional get to know the couple in a more efficient way so that they can be more helpful to the couple in the short time they are together.
- Premarital inventories can identify premarital couples who are considered high-risk for divorce who need more intensive counseling before marriage. These couples can then be offered more intensive counseling before marriage.

- It can discourage some premarital couples from getting married. We have found with the PREPARE Program that 10-15% of couples who take the program six months to a year before marriage cancel their wedding plans (Fowers & Olson, 1986).
- Preventing a bad marriage is, thereby, one way to prevent divorce.

### **What are the possible limitations or risks of the bill?**

One possible limitation of the bill is that there is no guarantee that these premarital education programs will prevent all divorces. Some couples will feel that they can not afford the premarital preparation, even though it is a good investment. Since this program is voluntary, many of the couples most needing the programs will not choose this option.

### **What is the cost of good premarital preparation?**

*Most couples spend more time and money on their wedding that lasts one day than on their relationship, which is intended to last a lifetime.*

It is important to put the cost of the premarital education programs into a broader perspective. Most couples (and their parents) getting married typically spend between \$10,000 to \$15,000 for the wedding and reception. The flowers alone often cost at least \$1,000.

It would be much wiser for the couple and their parents to put some of the money they plan to spend on the wedding into investing in future couple education programs.

The cost of the premarital program will cost the couple anywhere from \$30 to \$500, depending on the nature of the program they receive and who provides the program. The least expensive programs are provided by clergy of various denominations since they provide these programs as a service to a couple. Most clergy only charge a fee for the cost of a premarital inventory (about \$30). The most expensive programs are provided by marital and family therapists who need to charge for their professional time. Because of the growing interest in these premarital programs, more packaged premarital programs for individual couples and for a group of couples will increasingly be available.

### **Why should a state care about promoting more stable marriages?**

First, strong marriages have multiple benefits to individuals and society. A major review of several hundred studies on the impact of marriage by Waite and Gallagher (2000) clearly demonstrated the very positive impact of being married. Married individuals were generally happier, had better emotional health, were healthier physically, had a more satisfying sexual relationship, greater financial well being and lived longer.

Second, children raised in a two parent home tend to be more emotionally stable, more successful in school and more popular with peers (Amato & Booth, 1997). Conversely, children of divorce have less academic success and more emotional problems, regardless of their economic or social class (Cherlin, et al., 1998).

Third, when children of divorce become young adults, they have a higher rate of cohabitation and have more problems in their marriages resulting in a higher rate of divorce (Amato & Booth, 1997).

Fourth, the state could save tax payers money by investing in building strong marriages rather than having to support individuals and children after divorce. States currently pay a great deal of money for child support, court services and other expensive support services to families of divorce.

### **Would taking a Premarital Education Program delay how quickly a couple could get married?**

Taking a premarital education program would not delay marriage for most couples since they are often engaged for six months to one year before marriage. Couples planning a wedding often make reservations for their church and for their wedding party and reception at least 6-12 months in advance of the wedding.

Since most couples already know at least 6-12 months before marriage, some of this time could be spent preparing for their marriage and not just planning for the wedding.

However, taking a premarital program could delay marriage for some couples wanting to marry quickly. This is because the law requires 12 hours of premarital education; most programs are spread over several weeks. But delaying marriage can be a positive aspect of this requirement since many fast marriages are with younger couples that are high risk for divorce.

### **Are premarital couples required to take a Premarital Education course before marriage?**

No, this law does not require the premarital education program since it is completely voluntary. It is hoped that by having it voluntary rather than mandated for everyone, couples will have a more positive attitude about taking advantage of this opportunity.

### **Have other states passed similar legislation and what is the impact of the legislation?**

Florida was the first state to pass similar legislation in 1998 and they are currently studying the interest in the premarital education programs and the impact that they are having on marriage (Ooms, 1999). Many other states are currently considering very similar marriage education bills. Minnesota has the opportunity now to become a leader in pro-marriage legislation in the nation.

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