

N.J. board mandates sex ed

NT-Sex Education

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Staff Writer
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State education officials are still a little squeamish about using the word, but soon it will be part of the curriculum in every school in New Jersey — possibly as early as 1981.

The study of sex, or "family life," as the subject has been formally named, must be offered to every schoolchild from kindergarten through 12th grade, the state Board of Education determined yesterday, rendering its recommendation of 12 years ago a requirement for the state's 611 school districts.

The board unanimously endorsed a report by its Family Life Committee, recommending that instruction in human sexuality be integrated into each school system's health education program, while permitting teachers to excuse children whose parents object to sex education on "grounds of conscience."

The board also adopted a committee recommendation that would require local districts to implement special programs for pregnant teen-agers and teen-age parents, in the hopes of combating their high dropout rate.

There was a consensus of pride among the state's top school officials yesterday over the passage of a program they agreed would lend an enlightened image to education in New Jersey. But there was also an uneasiness in some quarters that the public would perceive "family life" not as a broad, inclusive area of study, but merely a euphemism for a once forbidden subject.

"It's more than sex," state School Board President P. Paul Ricci declared. "It's the whole human and social development of the child."

Education Commissioner Fred G. Burke said: "The state board is not obsessed by the question of human sexuality. It's concerned about the role of the family." The board's action, Burke said, reflected a desire that schools give greater consideration to "the whole range of interpersonal relationships."

Board member Susan Wilson, who headed the Family Life Committee, put it somewhat more frankly. "We'll be

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teaching the facts of life," she said, pausing, "and their implications."

Noting the dramatic increase in reported teen-age sexual activity, and concomitant rises in pregnancies and venereal disease among teens, Mrs. Wilson said, "We felt there weren't enough children receiving instruction in this important area."

She estimated that about half of the state's 611 local school districts already offer some sort of sex education, though only 40 percent of all public schools students are receiving such instruction. "We felt it wasn't growing fast enough," Mrs. Wilson said of the number of programs started since the board's 1967 recommendation that school districts across the state make sex education courses available. "We needed to take the next step and require it."

The entire package of board decisions will now be forwarded to the Department of Education, whose staff will formulate an administrative code, with regulations for implementation and guidelines for courses. If the board approves the department's code, it carries the force of law. Mrs. Wilson said she expects that to happen by the end of this year, or early 1980.

Officials agreed that department guidelines for course offerings would be somewhat general, leaving a good deal of discretion to local school districts.

"Traditionally state boards have stayed away from spelling out course content, and this board is no different," Ricci said. "How narrowly the curriculum will be defined, I cannot say at this time."

The wide-scale implementation of sex education has been slowed and obstructed by those who oppose it on religious and moral grounds. Some have argued that the classroom is no place for discussion of abortion or contraception — topics that will clearly be included in the course offerings Ricci hopes will be ready September 1981.

"I think there has been a real shift in public attitude on this in the last several years," Mrs. Wilson said. Results of Gallup Polls taken last year indicate that 77 percent of the American public and 95 percent of the nation's schoolchildren favor sex education, she said.

Nonetheless, she said the board found it necessary to appease parents who find sex education objectionable "on grounds of conscience" by giving them the right to have their children excused from those classes.

"It's a very sensitive subject, and there are parents who will have strong feelings about this," she said. "We wanted to get this information to as many kids as we could, so therefore we made this compromise."

"If the family feels sufficiently deeply about their role regarding certain aspects of the process, they should have the prerogative to take that student out of class," Commissioner Burke said. "I

think the family is still more important than the state."

Ricci said that student visitors at yesterday's regular board meeting in Trenton where the program was approved, told members that "Beginning sex education in the 9th grade is not soon enough — I agree with that."

He also stressed that sex education instructors would not impose their personal moral convictions on students. "Judgments will be left on the kids," he said.

Burke also appeared intent in his effort to assuage the fears of local school leaders that Trenton bureaucrats might try to dictate what every New Jersey schoolchild needs to know about sex. "I am very reluctant to say to local school districts, 'This is what you will teach,' " the commissioner said.

Burke expressed enthusiastic support for the "family life" concept, adding, "I think the state board has acted wisely."

Reaction at the local level varied from a "let's wait-and-see-how-it-all-turns-out" attitude, to unqualified endorsement. Dr. David Adler, Bergen County Schools Superintendent, said, "My personal feeling about it is very favorable . . . One would hope this would make all of us feel less mystical about the sex condition."

Adler said sex education could lead to an improvement in overall male-female relations by "assisting society in viewing sexual differences with something other than a sexual bias."



Fred G. Burke

Paterson Superintendent Frank Napier said his district has been trying to implement a program "around human sexuality," but local board opposition has kept it on the drawing board for 10 years. For right now, he said, "I really can't get too excited about what the state approves."

"We're offering it now," Superintendent David Dervitz said of Dumont schools, whose sex education program is regarded as one of the best in Bergen County. Dervitz noted that in Dumont, the nine-week course is mandatory for all high school seniors — and that's the only way it should be, he insisted.

"State law says that when a subject is required, no one should be excused on racial, sexual or religious grounds," Dervitz said. A Dumont school board has been upheld thus far by Commissioner Burke and the state board, Dervitz added. The matter is now before the Appellate Division of Superior Court.