

What to Tell the Children

The battle over
sex ed

DANIEL MINDUS

'MAINSTREAM" sex educators tend to view their task as a comprehensive one: They lump almost all subjects in with sex ed, and start the curriculum as early as kindergarten; the younger the kids, after all, the easier they are to influence. Technical skills are imparted early: The average age at which a child is taught to use a condom is 11.8 years.

But those who stock cucumbers, bananas, and wooden penises in elementary schools aren't the only ones hoping to teach children about sex. Abstinence (before marriage) has become the guiding principle of sex education in a growing number of school districts, and many of its advocates, too, have embraced the younger-is-better philosophy. They also agree with their looser colleagues that sexuality does not concern sex acts alone: It involves—and therefore must be taught with an eye toward—"the whole child." The result is a district-by-district, state-by-state battle between two camps for the chance to indoctrinate this whole child.

Thanks to the 1996 welfare-reform bill, federal money has been pouring into abstinence-only education. The Republican platform endorses it; George W. Bush backs it; President Clinton, in his usual fashion, has expressed support for it while seeking to undermine it. Abstinence-only curricula omit condom training, of course; but they often include "non-inclusive" lessons such as, "Human babies are best cared for by loving and mature parents."

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As a result, mainstream sex educators are feeling a little beleaguered, a little angry. "One in three school districts prohibits or distorts the teaching of contraception," the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) complains—and that was before the federal funds from the welfare-reform bill kicked in. A more recent study concludes that of the 70 percent of schools under a district-wide sex-education policy, 35 percent teach abstinence-only curricula. Meanwhile, 900,000 teens become pregnant every year, and 3 million get a sexually transmitted disease. Sexual innocence means sexual ignorance, according to SIECUS—and ignorance results in numbers like these.

The organization's solution calls for the kind of anti-majoritarianism conservatives fear most: a group of experts who use the power of government to reinvent the culture. Cram kids full of information—the value-free science of sex—and they can be trusted to make sexual decisions all on their own, rationally, using the evaluative and normative criterion of personal comfort. The more explicit the talk gets in school, the more rational students will be in bed, since sex has been demystified. Thus SIECUS's curriculum guidelines—which have been endorsed by, among dozens of other groups, the American Medical Association, the American Psychiatric Association, and the United States Conference of Mayors—call for children as young as five to learn that "both boys and girls have body parts that feel good when touched," the names of those body

parts, and how they are used during intercourse. Teens are trained in non-coital sexual techniques, under the assumption that foreplay won't live up to its name.

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Gay techniques are frequently taught too, in the later years, but SIECUS's guidelines ask even five-year-olds to learn about homosexuality; young children, gay-advocacy groups reason, are less likely than older ones to resist exercises aimed at normalizing homosexuality. Those same messages are justified to teenagers and their parents as necessary to the prevention of suicide and bigoted assault, as well as to the countering of the AIDS threat. Kevin Jennings of the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) has explained: "We immediately seized upon the opponents' calling card—safety." Thus a "Safe Schools Program" administered by the Massachusetts Department of Education funded a GLSEN training session where students were given a how-to and why-to in various sex acts; they were also told that condoms were optional. The parents who taped this hardly anomalous conference were slapped with a gag order and a lawsuit.


Recognizing the gap between their lesson plans and most parents' sensibilities, mainstream sex educators openly embrace a policy of secrecy. The Centers for Disease Control lauds one program, *Becoming a Responsible Teen*, that insists students sign a contract of secrecy; if a student talks to his parents about what he has learned in class, he is thrown out of the program. The hope is to establish an intimate, safe environment—like a shrink's office. But the goal of turning every student into a mental-health patient doesn't explain the teacher-training programs that CDC funds. One, in Ohio, stamped all material "Work in

Progress—Do Not Distribute," and attendees were told, "What's said in this room, stays in this room." Little wonder SIECUS believes that "sexuality education should only be taught by specially trained teachers." Only the select few can be trusted.

It's no surprise that sex-education technocrats consider parents and other laymen little more than obstacles to be overcome; concerned citizens have even forced changes to CDC curricula. Outraged parents in one California town revolted against lesson plans that asked teachers to match same-sex students in sexual role-playing exercises. Now the text encourages the pairing of Bob and Bill in a scene of sexual tension only indirectly, by assigning unisex names to the characters. Bob and Bill play Lee and Chris.

One CDC-recommended teacher's guide addresses abstinence before marriage by noting, "You could become a hermit." But haughty attitudes and technocratic methods aren't limited to the more sexually liberal: Abstinence programs too can be contemptuous of parental authority. As the mainstream philosophy supports informed choice, abstinence programs advocate informed not-choice. Project Reality, one of the most respected abstinence-only programs, strives to have students "discover for themselves that abstinence until marriage is their best choice." To the great credit of this program, parents receive a copy of its teacher's guide; but that doesn't mean they can guide the teacher. Legislators, school boards, and principals, not parents, decide when the goal of sex education will be abstinence.

"Should sex education be taught in schools?" the Center for AIDS Prevention Studies asks. The group's answer: "The question is no longer *should* sex education be taught, but rather *how* should it be taught." Yet some recalcitrants seem to believe that the question of "should" is still relevant. "Teach them the reproductive stuff in biology, and tackle questions of love in literature and the arts," says Dana Mack, author of *The Assault on Parenthood*. "The works of Tolstoy or Jane Austen—that's sex education with a shelf life." NR



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