

EXPOSING HATE

# The Truth about Attacks on Our Kids, Schools, and Diversity





**SIECUS: Sex Ed for Social Change** has served as one of the national voices for sex education for 55 years, asserting that sexuality is a fundamental part of being human, one worthy of dignity and respect. SIECUS works to create a world that ensures social justice is inclusive of sexual and reproductive rights. Through policy, advocacy, education, and strategic communications efforts, SIECUS advances sex education as a vehicle for social change—working toward a world where all people can access and enjoy their own sexual and reproductive freedom.



Young. Powerful. Taking Over.

**Advocates for Youth** partners with youth leaders, adult allies, and youth-serving organizations to advocate for policies and champion programs that recognize young people's rights to honest sexual health information; accessible, confidential, and affordable sexual health services; and the resources and opportunities necessary to create sexual health equity for all youth.



**American Atheists** is dedicated to advancing the civil rights of atheists, promoting separation of religion from government, and providing information about atheism. Over the last fifty years, American Atheists has fought to defend the separation of religion from government with legal actions, lobbying the federal and state government, and engaging in protests and other public actions to ensure that the rights of atheists are protected.



**Equality Federation** is an advocacy accelerator rooted in social justice, building power in our network of state-based lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) advocacy organizations. Equality Federation works collaboratively on critical non-partisan issues—from advancing workplace fairness and family recognition to defeating anti-transgender bills and HIV criminalization laws—that affect how LGBTQ+ people experience the world from cradle to grave.



**The Human Rights Campaign** strives to end discrimination against LGBTQ+ people and realize a world that achieves fundamental fairness and equality for all. HRC envisions a world where lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people plus community members who use different language to describe identity are ensured equality and embraced as full members of society at home, at work and in every community.



**Ipas: Partners for Reproductive Justice** works with partners to build sustainable abortion ecosystems. This comprehensive approach works across institutions and communities and recognizes there are multiple factors that influence a person's ability to access abortion—including individual knowledge and power, community and political support, trained and equipped health systems, and laws and policies that uphold the human rights to health and to bodily autonomy.

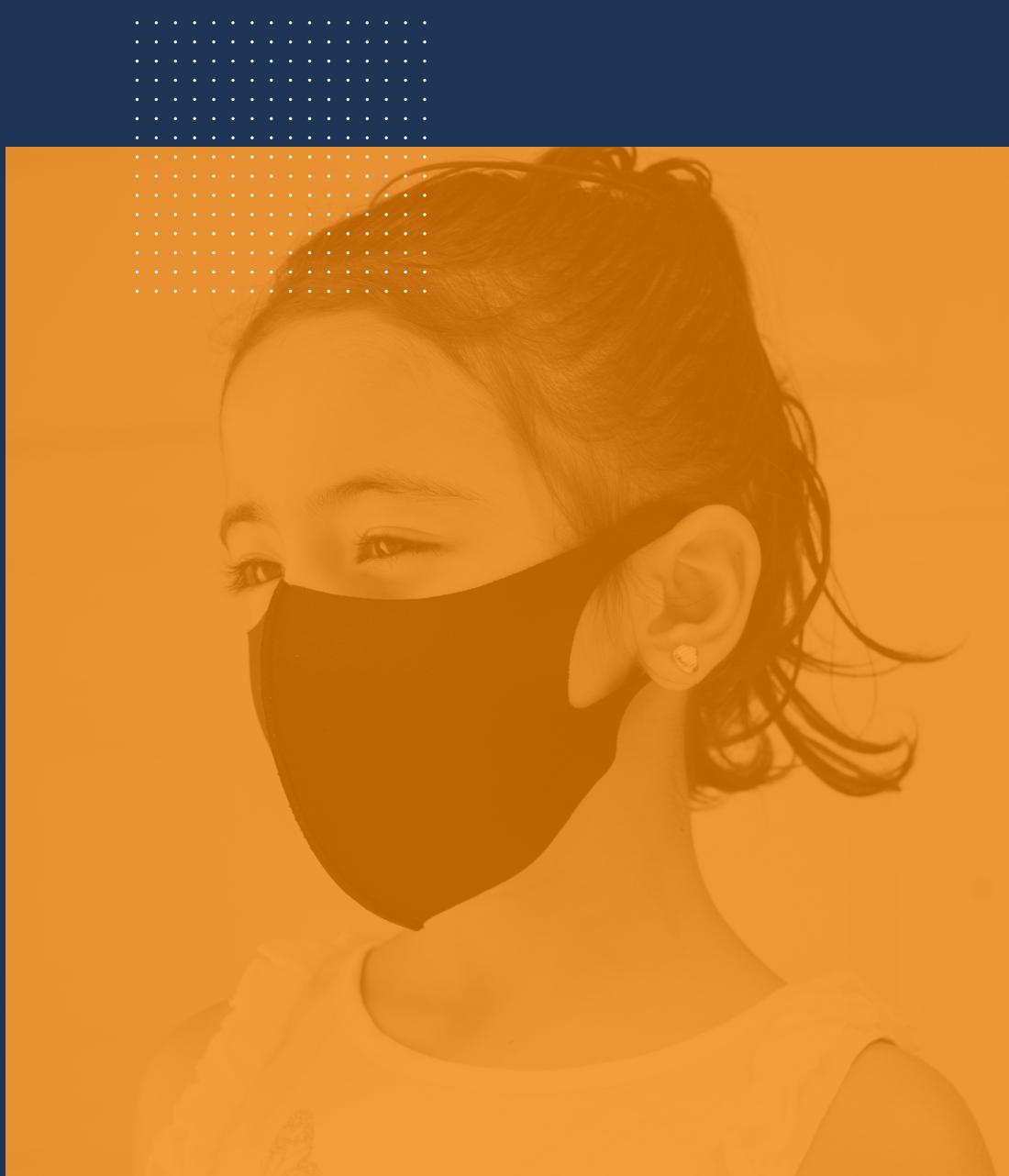


**URGE: Unite for Reproductive & Gender Equity** envisions a liberated world where we can live with justice, love freely, express our gender and sexuality, and define and create families of our choosing. To achieve our vision of liberation, URGE builds power and sustains a young people's movement for reproductive justice by centering the leadership of young people of color who are women, queer, trans, nonbinary, and people of low-income.



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# Executive Summary



Despite decades of research demonstrating the positive outcomes associated with comprehensive sex education (CSE), there is a small international movement that is well-funded, fear-mongering, and vocal in its opposition to not only advancing this widely supported instruction, but is also starting to attack other school-based programs to affirm the increasing diversity of today's youth. SIECUS: Sex Ed for Social Change has partnered with Ipas: Partners for Reproductive Justice, Human Rights Campaign Foundation, URGE: Unite for Reproductive & Gender Equity, Advocates for Youth, the Equality Federation, and American Atheists to reveal the ways in which the anti-CSE movement has morphed with other far-right groups to organize against inclusive programs in public schools, and explore how advocates can best work against these efforts. We refer to the organizations, donors, and individuals that comprise this movement as the **Regressive Minority**.

## The anti-CSE movement has morphed with other far-right groups to organize against inclusive programs in public schools.

When it comes to sex education, the Regressive Minority staunchly supports ineffective and harmful Sexual Risk Avoidance (SRA) programs—which are rebranded Abstinence Only Until Marriage (AOUM) programs—and works to inhibit the adoption of CSE. This movement operates under an ideology of homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, patriarchal ideals, and white supremacy that has proliferated into broader attacks against public education. Under the guise of concerns such as “parental rights” and “school transparency,” the Regressive Minority has carried out targeted attacks against CSE, critical race theory (CRT), inclusive LGBTQ programs, access to a diverse selection of books, and even the use of face masks during a global pandemic. Major organizations fueling these attacks include familiar conservative groups like The Family Policy Alliance, The Heritage Foundation, and The Alliance Defending Freedom, and major donors include the DeVos Family Foundation, Koch Family Foundation, and National Christian Foundation.

The Regressive Minority has increasingly mobilized in global and U.S. spaces to maintain the heteronormative white family as the cornerstone of far-right and fascist movements spaces. Opposing the promotion, development, and implementation of CSE programs and other educational programs that affirm population diversity makes these attacks an international concern.



Opposition groups show up at school board meetings and collaborate through well-funded misinformation campaigns. These actions are carried out with a rhetoric that incites moral panic, distorts the goals of inclusive educational programs, and discourages critical thinking in their audience.

Advocates can counteract the Regressive Minority through both organizational and individual action. Some helpful approaches at the organizational level include understanding the Regressive Minority and their common tactics, engaging in proactive and value-based messaging rather than reactionary myth-busting, organizing through coalitions, and advocating for legislative changes. There is already overwhelming public support for CSE, so when the true mainstream majority champions sex education that is effective and affirming of each student's lived experiences, humanity can prevail. More broadly, advocates can protect a public education system that values diversity, equity, and inclusion. ■

**The Regressive Minority has increasingly mobilized in global and U.S. spaces to maintain the heteronormative white family as the cornerstone of far-right and fascist movements spaces.**



**PART ONE**

# Introduction





All young people deserve access to sex education that is medically accurate, culturally responsive, and affirming of their identity. Comprehensive sex education (CSE) is designed to achieve these goals. Beyond delivering information, CSE can drive change at the intersection of broader social issues by supporting LGBTQ+ rights and reproductive justice and by working to end white supremacy and gender-based violence. CSE provides young people with the tools they need to develop healthy relationships and ensure long-term well-being, not only equipping them with the skills they need to individually explore their identities and values, but also fostering more inclusive communities that honor and affirm differences.

## All young people deserve access to sex education that is medically accurate, culturally responsive, and affirming of their identity.

The vast majority of U.S. adults support the principles of CSE,<sup>1</sup> and decades of research have proven that CSE programs deliver widespread associated positive outcomes.<sup>2</sup> But there is a vocal, coordinated, well-funded, and fear-mongering minority that stands in opposition to advancing sex education. This anti-CSE movement has long worked in a variety of ways to inhibit progress and maintain the ineffective—and sometimes outright harmful—Sexual Risk Avoidance (SRA) programs, also known as Abstinence Only Until Marriage (AOUM) programs. Now, this movement is coalescing under a broader framework of harmful ideology, showing up under the guise of concerns such as “parental rights”

and “school transparency” to attack the very purpose of public education. Throughout this report, we will refer to the groups behind these efforts as the **“Regressive Minority,”** as they are a unified vocal minority that is regressive in its opposition to CSE and other inclusion programming in educational settings, such as critical race theory (CRT), inclusive LGBTQ+ programs, and even face masks.

If we are to succeed in advancing CSE, advocates must understand the Regressive Minority and learn how to best counteract their harmful yet effective tactics. The purpose of this report is to:

1. Provide context for CSE and why inclusive programming is essential;
2. Reveal the organizations, people, and ideologies that comprise the Regressive Minority;
3. Explore how to best work against the rhetoric and actions from the Regressive Minority.

This report can be used as a resource for organizations, advocates, and/or individuals that are interested in advancing progressive sex education, inclusive programs, and countering the harmful rhetoric seen in their own communities. ■

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Bleakley, Michael Hennessy, and Martin Fishbein, “Public opinion on sex education in US schools,” *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine* 160, no. 11(2006): 1155, [jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/article-abstract/205706](https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/article-abstract/205706).

<sup>2</sup> Eva S. Goldfarb and Lisa D. Liberman, “Three decades of research: The case for comprehensive sex education,” *Journal of Adolescent Health* 68, no. 1 (2021): 24, [www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1054139X20304560](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1054139X20304560).

**PART TWO**

# Background and Context





## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

# An Overview of Comprehensive Sex Education

Education is meant to encourage critical thinking, autonomy, confidence, freedom, and—in the U.S.—has been upheld as a right all young people must have access to.

The Department of Education's (DoE) current mission is to "promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access."

Due to archaic beliefs around women, age, race, and ability, public education has not always been as accessible as it is today – and we still have a long way to go toward achieving true educational equity. Thanks to landmark legislation, like the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Education Amendments of 1972, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the Age Discrimination Act of 1975, discrimination based on race, sex, ability, and age are prohibited in public schools, though, in practice, public schools still perpetuate these harms every day.<sup>3</sup> Still, these laws, and the DoE's own standards, afford us powerful tools for holding the public education system to standards rooted in equity, fact, and best practices based on current research.

Because a separation of church and state is foundational to our government, public schools are intended to be secular spaces. When it comes to the Regressive Minority's attempt to impose a religious agenda on our public schools, it is critical that advocates defend CSE in order to uphold the values, civil rights, and religious liberties that should be the cornerstone of the U.S. democracy and its public education system.

**Religious neutrality allows every student to decide whether or not to practice their faith of choice, without external pressure or influence. This distinction is meant to ensure that no one can be discriminated against based on their religion and that no one's belief system or religion is imposed upon others.**

## CSE in public schools embodies this critical foundation of equity, fact, and liberty.

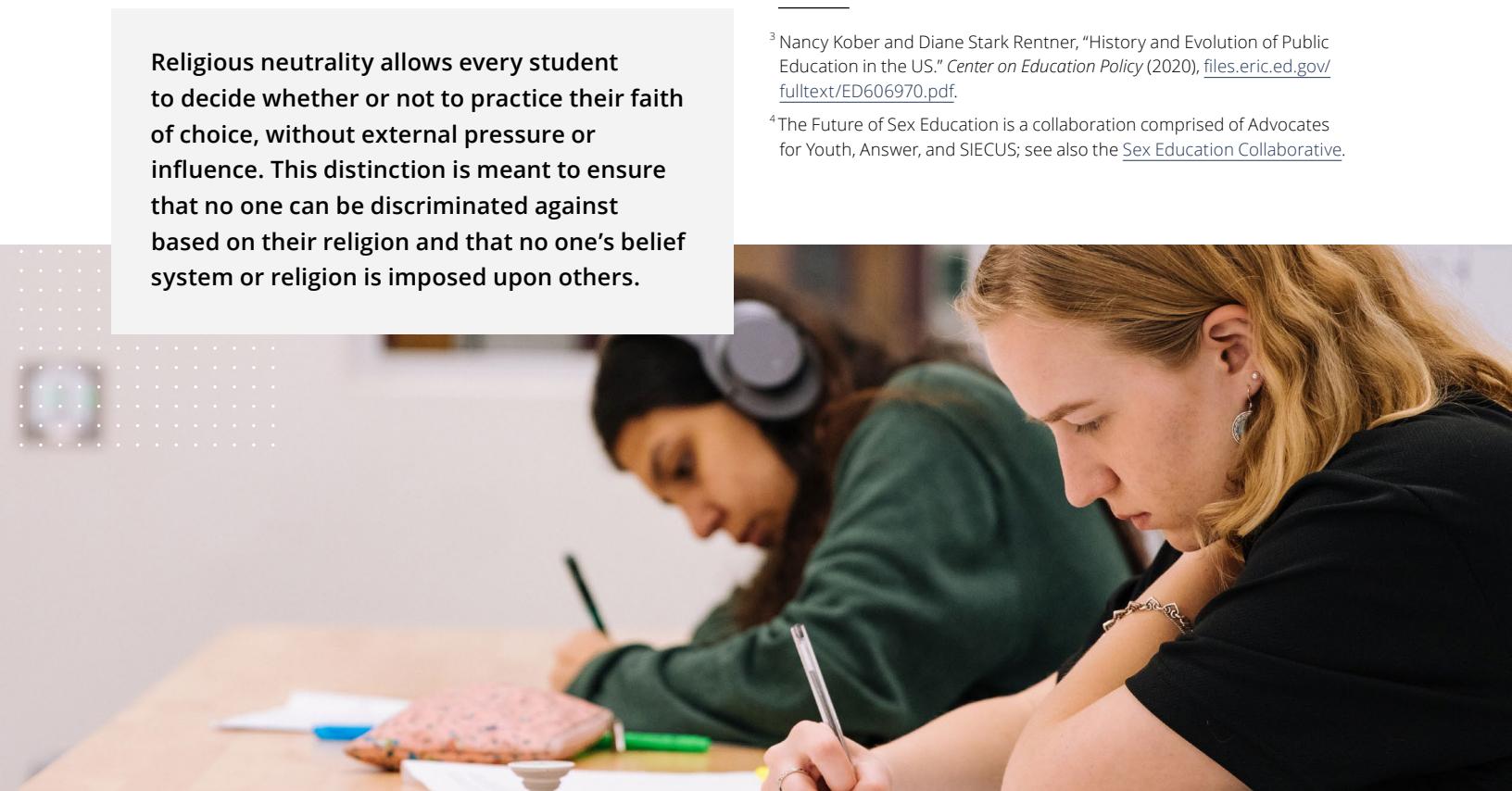
CSE in public schools embodies this critical foundation of equity, fact, and liberty. Guidelines for CSE were first published by SIECUS in 1991, eventually evolving into the National Sex Education Standards (NSES), published by the [Future of Sex Education](#) collaborative, which was most recently updated in 2020.<sup>4</sup>

Under the NSES, CSE is described as:

- Medically accurate and complete;
- Age-appropriate;
- Science-based;
- Developmentally and culturally responsive;
- Affirming and inclusive of LGBTQ+ identities;
- Intersectional;
- Trauma-informed.

<sup>3</sup> Nancy Kober and Diane Stark Rentner, "History and Evolution of Public Education in the US." *Center on Education Policy* (2020), [files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED606970.pdf](https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED606970.pdf).

<sup>4</sup>The Future of Sex Education is a collaboration comprised of Advocates for Youth, Answer, and SIECUS; see also the [Sex Education Collaborative](#).



When taught according to these standards, CSE includes basic information about anatomy and physiology, puberty, and adolescent development. CSE also includes information about consent and healthy relationships, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation and identity, sexual health, and interpersonal violence. These seven topic areas are scaffolded across K-12 grade levels through curricula that are age appropriate. By teaching these topics, CSE has been proven to improve both the physical and the mental health of young people and their academic success with lasting impacts throughout an individual's life. Students who have received CSE are

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more likely to acknowledge and support sexual diversity; less likely to be victims or perpetrators of dating and intimate partner violence (IPV); less likely to attempt suicide if they're LGBTQ+;<sup>5</sup> better equipped to develop healthy relationship skills; less likely to become victims of child sexual abuse; and more likely to have improved social and emotional learning, media literacy,<sup>6</sup> and academic performance.<sup>7</sup> ■

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<sup>5</sup>The Trevor Project, "LGBTQ Youth Suicide Prevention in Schools," (2021), [www.thetrevorproject.org/research-briefs/lgbtq-youth-suicide-prevention-in-schools/](http://www.thetrevorproject.org/research-briefs/lgbtq-youth-suicide-prevention-in-schools/).

<sup>6</sup>Goldfarb and Lieberman, "Three decades of research," 13.

<sup>7</sup> Future of Sex Education Initiative. "National Sex Education Standards: Core Content and Skills, K-12 (Second Edition)." (2020). [www.advocatesforyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/NSES-2020-web-updated.pdf](http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/NSES-2020-web-updated.pdf).



## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

# Current State of Sex Education in the United States



CSE is overwhelmingly supported by parents as well as by leading educational organizations and medical institutions.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, this support has not historically translated into policy. At the time of publication, this is the current state of sex education in the U.S.:

- 29** states and Washington, D.C., **mandate sex education** of some kind to be taught;
- 30** states **require an emphasis on abstinence** when any sex education, including HIV and sexually transmitted infection (STI) education, is taught;
- 19** states **require curricula on condoms or contraception** when sex education or HIV/STI education is taught;
- 13** states **do not require sex education or HIV/STI education** to be age-appropriate, medically accurate, evidence-based/evidence-informed, or culturally responsive;
- 13** states require sex education or HIV/STI education to **include consent education**;
- 10** states require **culturally responsive sex education** or HIV/STI education;
- 9** states require **LGBTQ+ inclusiveness** in sex education;
- 6** states require **LGBTQ+ discriminatory sex education**.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Leslie Kantor, Nicole Levitz, and Amelia Holstrom, "Support for sex education and teenage pregnancy prevention programmes in the USA: Results from a national survey of likely voters," *Sex Education* 20, no.3 (2020): 239, doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2019.1652807.

<sup>9</sup> "The SIECUS State Profiles 2019 / 2020," SIECUS, March 29, 2021, <https://siecus.org/state-profiles-2019-2020/>.

As such, students face inequitable access to high-quality sex education across the country. Part of this is due to the fact that systemic racism inhibits equitable research practices. When sex education is not culturally responsive or asset-based, the public education system does not help students to make informed decisions that fit the complex context of their lives. Systemic racism also creates a disparity in access to CSE versus harmful AOUM programs for students. Federally funded AOUM programs are often directed at low-income areas, and since many Black and other youth of color live in these areas, they are more likely to receive AOUM education than their white peers. This disparity exists even when funds are not federally allocated, as lack of private sources of funding make AOUM more likely to be accepted by schools with fewer resources that have less flexibility to turn down free programs.<sup>10</sup> This disparity in access puts young people of color (POC) at disproportionate risk for experiencing the empirically proven harmful effects of AOUM compared to other students. ■

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<sup>10</sup> Sarah Smith Kuehnel, "Abstinence-only education fails African American youth," *Wash. UL Rev.* 86 (2008): 1251, [openscholarship.wustl.edu/cgi/view-content.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1136&context=law\\_lawreview](https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/cgi/view-content.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1136&context=law_lawreview).





## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

# The Anti-Comprehensive Sex Education Movement

SRA programs, which are AOUM programs that have been rebranded, maintain the ultimate goal of encouraging students to delay sex “preferably until marriage.”<sup>11</sup> These programs have received over \$2.2 billion in funding over the past three decades since their inception during the Reagan administration.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> “Sexual Risk Avoidance Education: What You Need To Know,” Ascend, 2017: 2, [weascend.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Sexual-Risk-Avoidance-Education-What-You-Need-to-Know.pdf](http://weascend.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Sexual-Risk-Avoidance-Education-What-You-Need-to-Know.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> “Sexual Risk Avoidance? Let’s Avoid It,” SIECUS, 2019, [siecus.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Nay-to-SRA-1-pager-May-2019-Update.pdf](http://siecus.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Nay-to-SRA-1-pager-May-2019-Update.pdf).

AOUM and SRA commonly do not discuss condoms and other forms of contraception, let alone consent or healthy communication with a partner. When contraception is included in the curriculum, it is to communicate the (often exaggerated or falsified) failure rates of such products.<sup>13</sup> As a result, young people who receive this type of education are left with inaccurate information and no understanding of how to negotiate positive sexual interactions. This can have a negative ripple effect on an individual throughout their life. AOUM or SRA programs must adhere to the “A-H standards” as outlined by the federal government. The “A-H standards” dictate that curricula must:

- Teach social, psychological, and health benefits of abstaining from sexual activity;
- Teach that it is the standard to abstain from all sexual activity outside of (heterosexual) marriage for school-aged children;
- Teach that abstaining from sexual activity outside of (heterosexual) marriage is the only guaranteed way of preventing unwanted pregnancies, STIs, and other health problems;
- Teach that sexual activity should only occur in a mutually faithful, monogamous marriage;
- Teach that negative physical and mental health outcomes are likely consequences of sexual activity outside of (heterosexual) marriage;
- Teach that having children outside of a marriage will cause problems for the child, the parents, and society;
- Teach how to reject sexual advances and how drugs and alcohol reduce one’s ability to reject sexual advances;
- Teach the importance of self-sufficiency before engaging in sexual activity.<sup>14</sup>

Ironically, the “A-H Framework” fails to meet its own goal of increasing abstinence among students. Instead, it stigmatizes sexual desire and activity; promotes shame, fear and silence; and teaches the harmful and false idea that a certain lifestyle, sexual orientation, marital status, or way of being in the world is better and more moral than others. This viewpoint does not take into consideration the lived experience of the individual student, the validity of a wide range of family structures, or even our basic right to individual freedom.

## **Young people who receive this type of education are left with inaccurate information and no understanding of how to negotiate positive sexual interactions.**

Additionally, the “A-H Framework” does not prepare young people for their future. In other aspects of the education system, subject matter information is taught so that when a young person needs a certain skill, they will be prepared to use it. If we look at the concepts of algebra, for example, they are taught to young people in the event that they may need this skill in a future career. They may not need the skill as a young person in their day-to-day activities, but we, as a society, recognize the need to prepare the student with the correct steps and applications of algebra as they could be used in the future. Sex education should be no different. If we do not teach all of the necessary information, or if we teach the information in a way that is inaccessible, young people are not positioned to be successful in their future relationships.

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<sup>13</sup> “Abstinence education programs: Definition, funding, and impact on teen sexual behavior,” Kaiser Family Foundation, 2018: 1, [www.kff.org/womens-health-policy/fact-sheet/abstinence-education-programs-definition-funding-and-impact-on-teen-sexual-behavior/](http://www.kff.org/womens-health-policy/fact-sheet/abstinence-education-programs-definition-funding-and-impact-on-teen-sexual-behavior/).

<sup>14</sup> Kaiser Family Foundation, “Abstinence education,” 3.

Certain students are particularly impacted by the failures of AOUM. For example, lesbian, gay, and bisexual students are at greater risk of developing HIV and STIs and experiencing physical and sexual violence<sup>15</sup> while transgender students are more likely to experience physical and sexual violence, forced intercourse, and bullying,<sup>16</sup> meaning that the shame and silence introduced in AOUM programs leave these student populations especially vulnerable to negative outcomes. AOUM curricula fail to teach these students to expect that sex and relationships should feel good to them, so when abusers tell them that abuse is normal, they don't know otherwise. If they do recognize that they are being abused, the fact that they've been taught to feel shame for being sexually active or for their sexual orientation can further isolate them and make them afraid to report the abuse to anyone. In these ways, even when AOUM curricula aren't explicitly sexist and homophobic in content, they have a disproportionately negative impact on girls and LGBTQ+ students. ■

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<sup>15</sup> Jameson K. Hirsch, Tracy J. Cohn, Catherine A. Rowe, and Sarah E. Rimmer, "Minority sexual orientation, gender identity status and suicidal behavior: Serial indirect effects of hope, hopelessness and depressive symptoms," *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction* 15, no. 2 (2017): 260-70, [link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11469-016-9723-x](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11469-016-9723-x).

<sup>16</sup> Michelle M. Johns, V. Paul Poteat, Stacey S. Horn, and Joseph Kosciw, "Strengthening our schools to promote resilience and health among LGBTQ youth: Emerging evidence and research priorities from The State of LGBTQ Youth Health and Wellbeing Symposium," *LGBT health* 6, no. 4 (2019): 146-55, [www.liebertpub.com/doi/abs/10.1089/lgbt.2018.0109](https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/abs/10.1089/lgbt.2018.0109).



# A Mom from California's Story

Many conservative social movements and their fights against social justice are rooted in a biological essentialist belief system. This belief system specifies that biological sex is the primary factor determining gender, that women and men have distinct gender roles, and they should not stray from those defined expectations. Anti-CSE advocates often believe that CSE will encourage deviance from this biological essentialist belief system, and they want to punish any deviance by continuing to promote traditional values rooted in male supremacy. This story shares the experience of one parent's fight for CSE in California.

This mom lives with her husband and two children, including a transgender daughter. In California, the CA Healthy Youth Act (CHYA) and the Transgender Student Support Law were enacted in 2015 and 2013, respectively. However, implementation of these laws faced significant opposition in the county where she and her family live. Neighbors opposed the LGBTQ+ content and how it supposedly encouraged deviation from strict heterosexual, heteronormative gender roles.

**Many conservative social movements and their fights against social justice are rooted in a biological essentialist belief system.**



Opponents of the law created a group called Informed Parents of California, where they spread rampant misinformation. Parents in the community created their own local chapter of the group where they promoted anti-LGBTQ+ and transphobic rhetoric. They even held meetings and spread the names of trans youth and where those students went to school. They tried to get separate bathrooms installed outside of the schools for trans children to use, and they wanted separate elevators for trans youth. In the first month, opponents of the law got a large group to show up at the school board meeting, and while the number of attendees fell off over time, the homophobic and transphobic speeches continued with no push back from the school board.

This mom went to the school every day despite her full-time job. The privilege of being able to spend that much time advocating for her child and other youth was not lost on her. She and other community members pushed back against the opposition, resulting in the laws being fully implemented now, but there have been negative repercussions from the fight. The sex education provided is deeply lacking in content, and there are many mistakes in the information taught about gender. The LGBTQ+ content and material is still labeled as “controversial.” In one positive outcome, the school system did create a training program for all staff on transgender youth, and mental health personnel are better equipped to help and support LGBTQ+ youth.

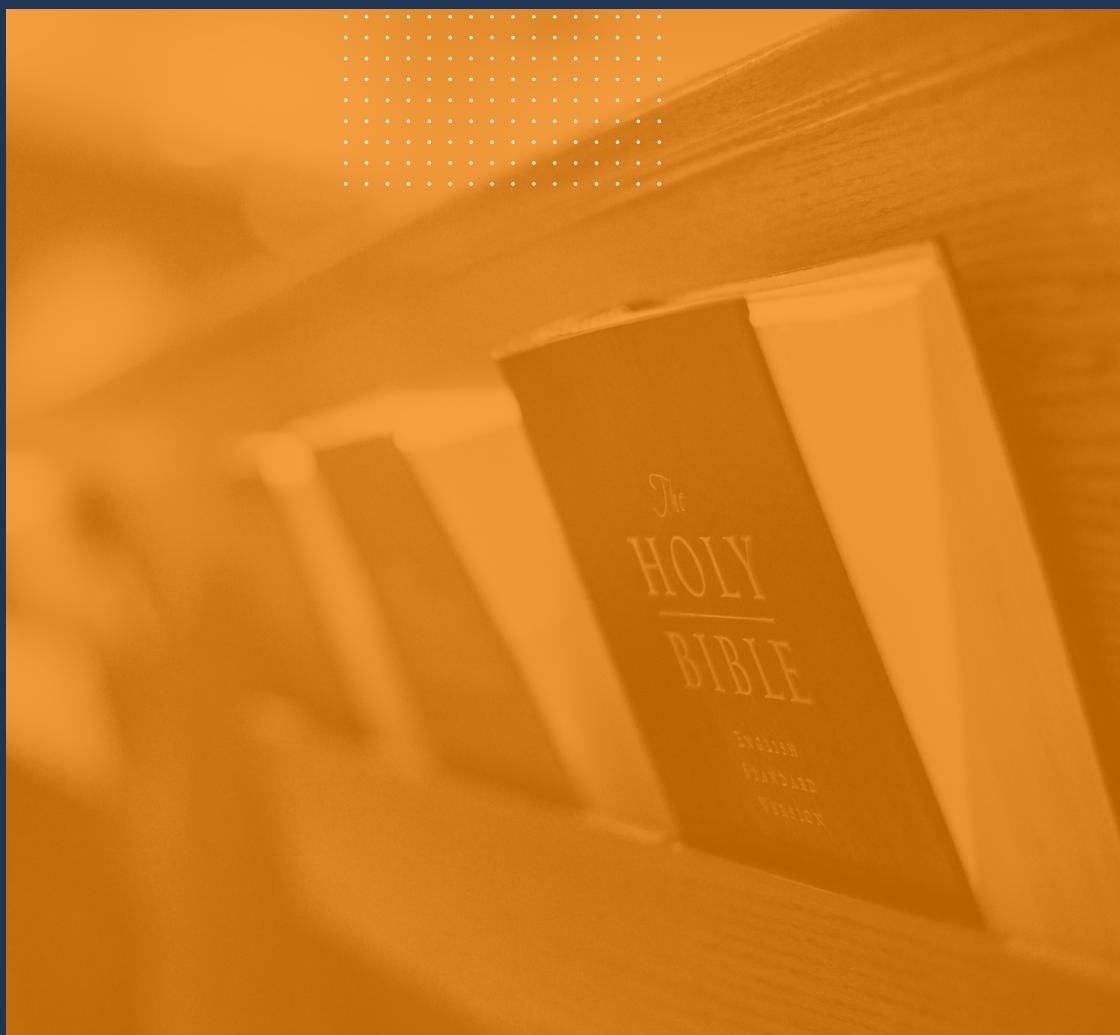
This parent’s most significant lesson learned from this fight is that local school districts need increased support for implementation. Grassroots organizing is an essential tool in building community and collective power to advance sex education, but time and resource constraints can impact the level of involvement by individuals in a community. ■



**Grassroots organizing is an essential tool in building community and collective power to advance sex education.**

**PART THREE**

# The Evolution of the Regressive Minority Movement





## THE EVOLUTION OF THE REGRESSIVE MINORITY MOVEMENT

# The Anti-CSE Movement Ideology

For decades, the AOUM movement has worked to insert the ideology of regressive and conservative religious views into schools by teaching AOUM programs infused with archaic gender roles and definitions of gender, promoting the concept of marriage and a specific familial structure, denying historical trauma, denying the impacts of race, perpetuating rape culture, and stigmatizing individuals who do not align with their belief system.



SRA/AOUM programming incorporates a heteronormative lens that is based on conservative religious nationalist principles rooted in homophobia. This lens promotes a monogamous, marital, "American Dream"-style standard of white heterosexuality, effectively stigmatizing and pathologizing homosexuality.<sup>17</sup> Whether implicitly or explicitly, SRA/AOUM programming provides heteronormative definitions for sex and marriage, with sex often defined as penis-in-vagina intercourse and marriage often defined as being between one man and one woman.<sup>18</sup> These principles alienate and stigmatize LGBTQ+ students.

The anti-CSE ideological framework is deeply rooted in patriarchal values and uses rhetoric about protecting the nuclear family as a thin veil for misogyny and desire to control women's lives and bodies. By limiting education related to contraception and abortion as options for reproductive health care, they are trying to limit the bodily autonomy of people who can get pregnant, particularly those of color. Patriarchal values are especially manifested in AOUM lesson plans that emphasize the need for girls to be "pure" and virginal in order to be worthy of a husband, stigmatizing female sexual agency and reinforcing the idea that girls and women must be heterosexual, and that they exist solely for the twin purposes of reproduction and satisfying men's desires.

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Using fear-based and stigmatizing messages, the AOUM movement is an attempt by the Regressive Minority to impose their beliefs on others. For years, they have attacked CSE programs with outright lies about content and intent. These have played out as parental rights ideology developing opt-in vs opt-out policy changes. Under opt-in policies, all parents must provide written permission before their child can receive any sex education. This creates unnecessary barriers for students to receive essential curricula. Conversely, under opt-out policies, students are automatically enrolled in sex education classes, and it is the responsibility of the parents to provide written notification if they do *not* want their child to receive that instruction.

It is important to note that the AOUM movement is wildly unpopular, as it has come to be widely recognized as ineffective, harmful, and an explicit violation of the separation of church and state. That's why anti-CSE advocates have recently attempted to rebrand AOUM as SRA programs. It is through this rebrand that the American people have yet again been duped into funding the delivery of curricula rooted in the values of Christian Nationalism—sometimes even explicitly developed and delivered by right-wing religious institutions—with taxpayer dollars. This funding has allowed America's young people to continue to be taught religious principles despite attending public schools and clear laws and repeated rulings against such programs. ■

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<sup>17</sup>Tanya McNeill, "Sex education and the promotion of heteronormativity," *Sexualities* 16, no. 7 (2013): 826-46, doi.org/10.1177%2F1363460713497216.

<sup>18</sup> McNeill, "heteronormativity," 826-46.



## THE EVOLUTION OF THE REGRESSIVE MINORITY MOVEMENT

# Broadening the Reach of the Regressive Minority

Since the summer of 2021, there has been a sudden outbreak of so-called “parental rights” groups, posing as grassroots parent activists protesting a range of inclusive educational programming and safety measures in schools, from anti-racist education to library books to mask mandates. Moreover, these agitators are replicating many of the shared values and tactics of the anti-CSE movement while broadening the scope of their attacks on public education.



It's not coincidental that this effort erupted a year after the country was called to grapple with systemic racism by the Movement for Black Lives. The homophobic, misogynist, and generally racist conservative religious ideologues behind this movement have, especially in recent years, made common cause with authoritarian-leaning political opportunists who hold a range of religious beliefs. One thing these groups have in common is a feeling that the social and structural power they once held is being undermined by those they perceive as "others"—POC, women, immigrants, LGBTQ+ people, Muslims, Jews, etc.

### **One thing these groups have in common is a feeling that the social and structural power they once held is being undermined by those they perceive as "others".**

AOUM fits seamlessly into an authoritarian playbook because it maintains the dominance of white cisgender men; stokes fear, shame, and division; and is a powerful tool for social control. Together, the ideologue's leadership and the political opportunists have become very effective at leveraging the rage, grievance, and fear this perceived loss of power inspires to activate persuadable, mostly white parents who themselves received inadequate or harmful sex education and can be convinced that genuinely comprehensive, shame-free sex education is a threat to their children.

While not all of the Regressive Minority are blatantly racist, they continue to benefit from or are invested in protecting privileged social systems and are reacting to the social pressure to create a more equitable society. This includes the campaign against critical race theory (CRT), efforts to exclude trans students from participating in school, the proliferation of book bans that restrict access to authors and stories that discuss issues such as race and sexuality, and the promotion of creationism in schools.

Their inherent bias is evident, especially as we look at their cries against masking during a worldwide pandemic.<sup>19</sup> Language such as, "masks are equivalent of child abuse," for example, demonstrates that their understanding of oppression largely misses the mark. They wrongly conflate their inconvenience and annoyance at having to wear a mask to protect their health and the health of those around them with the depth of social and economic oppression experienced by Indigenous, Black, and Brown individuals historically and currently.

#### **Common strategies used by the Regressive Minority to attack public schools:**

- "Parental Rights"
- Book bans in public libraries
- Censorship of "obscene" images
- Censorship of "divisive concepts"
- Calls for "Transparency in Education"
- Creation of extra administrative work for teachers and administrators
- Creation of unrealistic expectations regarding availability of curricula
- Changing parental "opt out" language to "opt-in" requirements
- Creating civil and criminal penalties for teachers and schools
- Bans on Critical Race Theory (CRT)
- Bans on teaching or discussing sexual orientation
- Bans on teaching about racial differences
- Bans on teaching about gender roles and gender identity
- Prohibiting transgender students from accessing bathrooms, using their identified pronouns, and/or accessing sports



The ideology of the Regressive Minority contributes to the upholding of white supremacist systems. White supremacist systems exist in the U.S. as a result of hundreds of years of legalized slavery and laws created to perpetuate a social hierarchy that ensures white people remain “at the top” and in a privileged position. According to the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), “white supremacy is a term used to characterize various belief systems central to which are one or more of the following key tenets: 1) Whites should have dominance over people of other backgrounds, especially where they may co-exist; 2) whites should live by themselves in a whites-only society; 3) white people have their own ‘culture’ that is superior to other cultures; 4) white people are genetically superior to other people.”

The Regressive Minority’s values, developed through a strict interpretation of the Bible, have served as a vocal platform for terrorist groups such as the Proud Boys. Defined as an “extremist hate group,” the Proud Boys use violence and intimidation in an attempt to enforce their misogynistic, white supremacist views.<sup>20</sup> They have joined forces with less violent, but no less hateful, groups showing up at School Board meetings, book banning events,<sup>21</sup> and lending their tactics to the anti-mask movement. Misogyny and White Supremacy are, more often than not, found hand-in-hand.<sup>22</sup> **These belief systems stem from individuals who are possessed by a particular fear: fear of not being in a position of power.** Unfortunately many people who join with the “parental rights” movements are insecure of their position in a rapidly changing world and may be easily manipulated by distortions and lies—the propaganda fed to them through the Regressive Minority.

**These belief systems stem from individuals who are possessed by a particular fear: fear of not being in a position of power.**

While this report focuses specifically on sex education, anti-CSE groups tend to have a strong overlap with groups related to these issues through the guise of the “parental rights” narrative and use this language as a tool in their arsenal for attacking public education. They are politically active on several key fronts in America’s public school system. ■

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<sup>19</sup> “White Supremacy Culture Resources,” National Education Association Center for Social Justice, 2020, [www.nea.org/resource-library/white-supremacy-culture-resources](http://www.nea.org/resource-library/white-supremacy-culture-resources).

<sup>20</sup> “Proud Boys,” Anti-Defamation League, [www.adl.org/proudboys](http://www.adl.org/proudboys).

<sup>21</sup> Tom Schuba and Nader Issa. “Proud Boys Join Effort to Ban ‘Gender Queer’ Book from School Library — Rattling Students in Suburban Chicago.” *Chicago Sun-Times*. November 22, 2021. <https://chicago.suntimes.com/education/2021/11/21/22789363/gender-queer-proud-boys-downers-grove-north-south-culture-wars-school-board-illinois>.

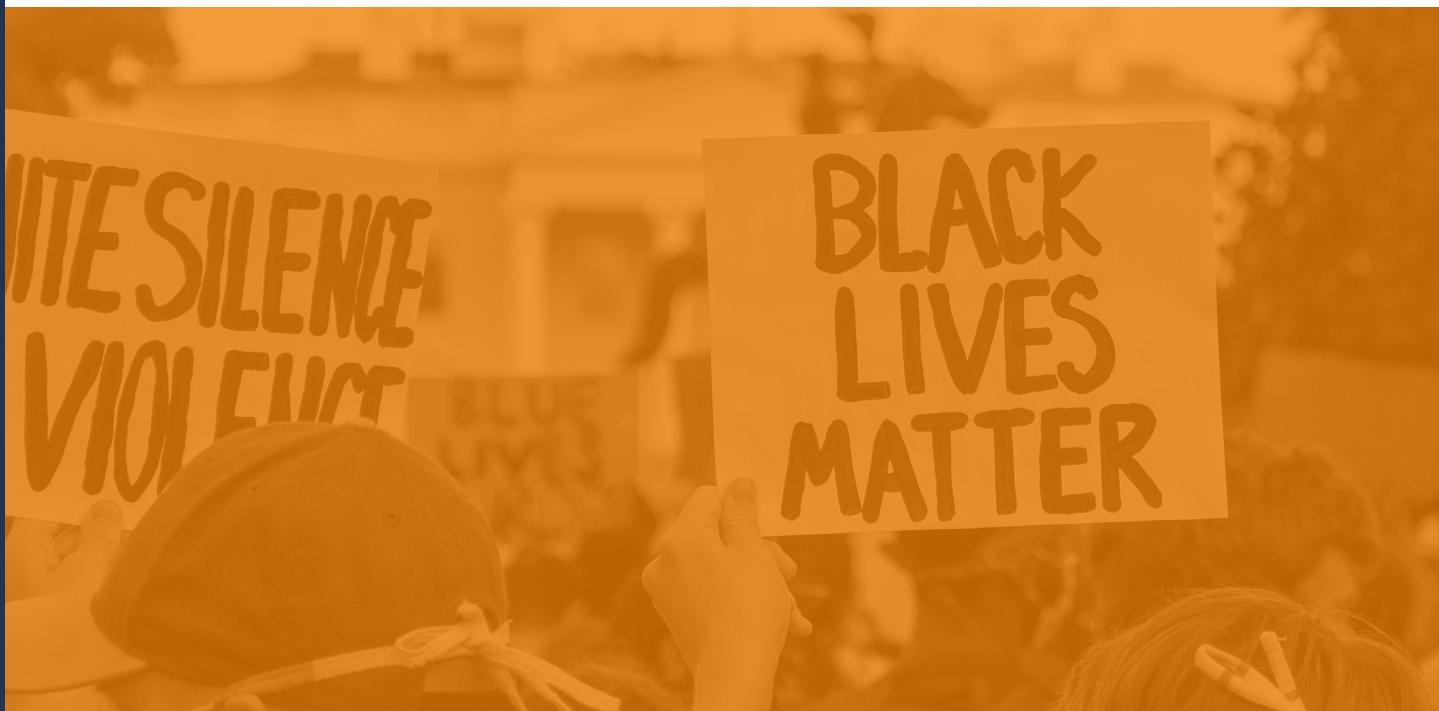
<sup>22</sup> Anti-Defamation League Center on Extremism, “When women are the enemy: The intersection of misogyny and white supremacy,” *ADL Center on Extremism Report* (2018): 5, <https://www.adl.org/media/11707/download>.

# Attacks Against “Critical Race Theory”

*Withholding Information, Upholding the Status Quo: Connecting Anti-Comprehensive Sex Education “Advocates” to the Rising Phenomenon of Banning Anti-Racist Education*

The term “intersectionality” was coined by legal scholar and professor Kimberle’ Crenshaw during the beginnings of another moment in the legal field: the introduction of Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT is a theory about interrogating the role of race and racism in society that emerged in the legal field in the ‘80s and ‘90s and eventually spread to other fields of scholarship. In 1989, Crenshaw used “intersectionality” to critique the narrow ways in which the law discussed and analyzed race and gender in discrimination cases and more broadly. In essence, she argued we all have a multitude of identities that intersect and impact how we live and experience the world. By attempting to silo these identities in the legal field and in the world more broadly, it consequently ignores the unique challenges that people with multiple marginalized identities face and, as a result, fails them.

**CRT is a theory about interrogating the role of race and racism in society that emerged in the legal field in the ‘80s and ‘90s and eventually spread to other fields of scholarship.**



In 2020, right-wing agitator Christopher Rufo seized on the term CRT in his campaign to create a moral panic about anti-racist efforts in workplaces and schools, and the wider Regressive Minority quickly embraced it. Even though CRT is not taught in K-12 schools—it is generally taught at the graduate level, or in law schools—they have quickly warped the term beyond recognition and now use it to describe and attempt to censor any part of a curriculum that even acknowledges that racism exists.

But while this particular framework is new, the dishonest and deceptive attempt to paint multicultural curricula as anti-white or anti-Christian is not. It dates back at least to 1974, when the (then brand-new) Heritage Foundation backed Christian fundamentalist activists in Kenawha County, WV, who objected to over 300 books being introduced into the public school curriculum for the purpose of advancing multiculturalism and egalitarianism among West Virginian schoolchildren. Alice Moore, the leader of the local opposition, had previously been known for campaigning against sex education.

In the ensuing battle, opponents of the new books called for a boycott of public schools, resulting in 20% of the children in the district being held out of school. Opponents shot at school buses, dynamited an elementary school, and planted a bomb in the school board building. Eventually, the books were retracted from the curriculum, and the superintendent and the president of the Board of Education resigned.

The controversy is considered one of the key moments in the politicization of Christian evangelicals. Afterward, private Christian schools proliferated in West Virginia. The contested books were later returned to the curriculum by the Board of Education.

Considering this context, it may not be surprising that in many states, the convergence of anti-CRT and anti-sex ed opposition overlap significantly and share strategies for disrupting the implementation of inclusive school programming. ■



**Anti-CRT and anti-sex ed opposition overlap significantly and share strategies for disrupting the implementation of inclusive school programming.**



## THE EVOLUTION OF THE REGRESSIVE MINORITY MOVEMENT

# Who is Behind this Movement?

Organized efforts to restrict educational access to topics including CRT, evolution, and CSE, and to restrict trans kids from being able to participate in school at all, are often carried out by the same collection of organizations, churches, and donors that have mobilized under a Christian Nationalist ideological framework. Christian nationalism is a Christian sect and ideological movement that is rooted in a literal interpretation of the Christian Bible.

Christian nationalists believe they are commanded to convert others and have done so throughout history, coercing individuals and communities to behave according to their beliefs. The Christian nationalist movement does not believe that sex education is wrong or that it shouldn't happen in schools—only that their beliefs and sexual attitudes are the *only* lessons that should be taught. More specifically, this is the theory behind the SRA/AOUM program model. SRA/AOUM programming often goes beyond discussing the health implications of sexual decision-making, instead framing abstinence as an issue of morality that indicates one's character. This values-based approach to teaching abstinence is rooted in Christian nationalist ideals of purity, in which the only morally acceptable context for sexual activity is in a monogamous, and implicitly or explicitly heterosexual, marriage.<sup>23</sup> This makes SRA/AOUM programming the perfect vehicle for sustaining and expanding the political influence of Christian nationalist ideology.

There are many organizations and coalitions dedicated to Christian nationalism further propagating hate and fear-based Regressive Minority beliefs in the U.S.

#### **The most well-known “Big Three” organizations are:**

- The Family Policy Alliance
- The Heritage Foundation
- The Alliance Defending Freedom

<sup>23</sup> Claire Greslé-Favier, “Raising Sexually Pure Kids”: *Sexual Abstinence, Conservative Christians and American Politics*, Vol. 59, Rodopi, 2009: 28, [https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=oVlmNWQ3a\\_EC&oi=fnd&pg=PR5&dq=christian+fundamentalism+and+abstinence&ots=fP4e8q-FOF-&sig=GVgsS82lDKZs9vl-KmcuSsq4AMg#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=oVlmNWQ3a_EC&oi=fnd&pg=PR5&dq=christian+fundamentalism+and+abstinence&ots=fP4e8q-FOF-&sig=GVgsS82lDKZs9vl-KmcuSsq4AMg#v=onepage&q&f=false).

<sup>24</sup> Atterbury, Andrew, and Juan Perez Jr. “Republicans Eye New Front in Education Wars: Making School Board Races Partisan.” *POLITICO*, December 29, 2021, [www.politico.com/news/2021/12/29/republicans-education-wars-school-board-races-526053](http://www.politico.com/news/2021/12/29/republicans-education-wars-school-board-races-526053).

**THE FAMILY POLICY ALLIANCE**—previously called Focus on the Family Action, then CitizenLink and rebranded once again to Family Policy Alliance—is an alliance of state organizations organized by Focus on the Family (see more about Focus on the Family below) with a goal to activate individuals to inject their Christian nationalist agenda into the public sphere.

**THE HERITAGE FOUNDATION** is one of the most influential conservative think tanks. This organization dedicates massive amounts of time and resources to advocate for extreme policy changes that restrict reproductive healthcare access and LGBTQ+ rights. Recently, the Foundation has pushed state legislation that would further politicize the school system by allowing ballots to display partisan affiliation next to school board candidates. These recent efforts are in support of their broader goal of ending CRT in schools.<sup>24</sup>

**THE ALLIANCE DEFENDING FREEDOM** is a conservative Christian nonprofit and legal interest group that advocates for a regressive, hate-based agenda.





Beyond the “Big Three,” there are many other powerful organizations that comprise the Regressive Minority. Some of these major groups include:

- The Family Research Council
- The Medical Institute
- Focus on the Family

**THE FAMILY RESEARCH COUNCIL** is a Protestant fundamentalist organization that promotes their restrictive version of “family values” by lobbying against abortion, divorce, and LGBTQ+ rights, among other things.

**THE MEDICAL INSTITUTE** is a nonprofit that provides “sexual health” material to youth organizations and educators. Despite efforts to brand their work as science-based, the Medical Institute is a very conservative organization that heavily promotes AOUM education.

**FOCUS ON THE FAMILY** is a nonprofit Christian fundamentalist organization that promotes prayer in schools, creationism, traditional gender roles, and AOUM programs. Additionally, Focus on the Family is blatantly homophobic in its stances, publicly opposing LGBTQ+ equality, LGBTQ+ adoption and parenting, and same-sex marriage.

In addition to these organizations and groups, the Regressive Minority is backed by powerful donors.

**Some major donors that fuel the anti-CSE movement include:**

- DeVos Family Foundation
- Koch Family Foundation
- Federal, state, and local governments diverting our tax dollars to support SRA/AOUM
- National Christian Foundation

These U.S.-based organizations and donors have influence far outside their domestic borders, serving as leaders within the global anti-CSE movement that is anti-gender equality, anti-rights, and anti-science. Homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, patriarchal ideals, and white supremacy are the foundation of the global anti-CSE movement. Anti-gender equality in this context is broader than anti-choice and “includes being against the right to abortion, against LGBTQ+ rights, against children’s rights, and against equality overall.”<sup>25</sup> Much like the U.S. movement, the global Regressive Minority is led by networks of religious groups, ultra-conservative organizations, key decision-makers, policymakers, and governments. These networks are increasingly collaborating, learning from each other, and adopting common tactics to lead attacks against CSE in global spaces, especially against United Nations agencies that work directly in the promotion, development, dissemination, and adaptation of CSE guidelines. The UN supports CSE because it supports the dissemination of information in conjunction with skill development that helps young people develop strong social and emotional well-being. Further, it recognizes that CSE “promotes human rights, knowledge, values and skills necessary for HIV prevention and gender equity.”<sup>26</sup> **Some of the most active of these global Regressive Minority groups that target United Nations agencies include:**

- Family Watch International (FWI)
- The Center for Family and Human Rights (C-Fam)
- The World Youth Alliance
- CitizenGo (located in Spain)

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<sup>25</sup> Hughson, Greta. “Who’s Financing the ‘Anti-Gender’ Movement in Europe?” Aidsmap.com, May 27, 2021, [www.aidsmap.com/news/may-2021/whos-financing-anti-gender-movement-europe](https://www.aidsmap.com/news/may-2021/whos-financing-anti-gender-movement-europe).

<sup>26</sup> United Nations Youth. “Youth and Comprehensive Sexuality Education.” *United Nations* (2013). <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth-fact-sheets/youth-sexuality-education.pdf>.

Religious organizations are also influential at the global scale, with some notable groups including:

- U.S. evangelical organizations
- The Catholic Church
- The Russian Orthodox Church

In recent years, these international organizations have trained, funded, and mobilized anti-rights advocates in the Global South to oppose CSE and promote AOUM programs, or to completely ban sexuality education programs. For example, Family Watch International (FWI) campaigns to ban CSE in at least 10 African countries and hosts regular anti-LGBTQ+ trainings for African diplomats in the U.S. In Latin America, a leader of the Peruvian anti-CSE movement has ties to the U.S. ultra-conservative lobby group the Moral Majority, which is affiliated with Liberty University. In Spain, there is CitizenGo. Overall, it is difficult to get a clear picture of specifically how much U.S. funding goes to global anti-CSE efforts. However, some studies have found that U.S. groups have spent \$280 million on anti-gender equality activities in Europe since 2009 and just 20 anti-rights U.S. Christian groups have poured some \$54 million in Africa since 2007, targeting abortion and contraception, LGBTQ+ rights, and CSE.<sup>27</sup>

All of these well-established and well-funded organizations, both domestic and international, are rife with hypocrisy as countless leaders in the movement have been convicted of crimes they purport to be working to protect the populace from. Take such notables as television evangelist Jim Bakker, who has been accused of rape, and who was sentenced to 45 years in prison for accounting fraud; Fred Phelps, the founder of the Westboro Baptist Church who was convicted of assault and battery and found to be so offensive that he was excommunicated from his own church; Representative Tim Murphy of Pennsylvania who encouraged his mistress to get an abortion despite being praised as an anti-abortion crusader; and, most recently, Josh Duggar, the former executive director of the Freedom Research Council, who was convicted in 2021 of receiving and possessing child pornography and who is accused of molesting his underaged sisters and family friends. These individuals are a small sample of leaders in the Regressive Minority movement who hold themselves to a different standard. ■

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<sup>27</sup> Shift Media News. "SHOCKING: US Ultra Conservatives Injects More Than \$50 Million Into Africa For Sex Education, And LGBT Rights." *Shift Media News*, Nov 5, 2020, <https://shiftmedianews.com/shocking-us-ultra-conservatives-injects-more-than-50-million-into-africa-for-sex-education-and-lgbt-rights/>.



## THE EVOLUTION OF THE REGRESSIVE MINORITY MOVEMENT

# How Does the Regressive Minority Show Up?



### School Board Meetings

In part on the heels of pandemic-related campaigns, and then anti-CRT activism, the Regressive Minority has become fixated on school district-level action. Even though they are in the minority in most school districts across the country, they have become adept at projecting a sense of overwhelming momentum behind them, often by bringing in supporters from out of the district who act like they belong there. They commonly use disruptive tactics, including aggressive disruptions sustained enough to shut down school board meetings. When rules are put in place to try to constrain their disruptions, they sometimes use their deep pockets to find workarounds, as in the case of a Tennessee radio host who said he planned to rent a home in order to speak at a Loudoun County, VA, school board meeting<sup>28</sup> after that, the district set a rule prohibiting people from outside the district from speaking at school board meetings.<sup>29</sup> Another woman is now suing to have this rule rescinded altogether.

### Project Blitz

Formed by a coalition of Christian nationalists, Project Blitz is a coordinated attack on public education, LGBTQ+ rights, and reproductive healthcare in the name of “religious freedom.” This campaign is carried out by politically conservative groups—including the Congressional Prayer Caucus Foundation, the National Legal Foundation, Wallbuilders Pro-Family Legislators Conference, and Prayer Caucuses in 41 state legislatures—that advance their regressive agenda through a legislative guide, arming state-level politicians with harmful model bills, proclamations, and talking points. Advocates can get a comprehensive overview of Project Blitz and monitor their regressive actions by visiting the [BlitzWatch](#) website.

<sup>28</sup> Stephanie Ramirez. “Tennessee Blogger, Podcaster Says He’s Leasing a Loudoun County Home in Order to Speak at BOE Meeting.” *FOX 5 DC*, September 28, 2021, [www.fox5dc.com/news/tennessee-radio-host-says-he-is-leasing-a-loudoun-county-home-in-order-to-speak-at-boe-meeting](http://www.fox5dc.com/news/tennessee-radio-host-says-he-is-leasing-a-loudoun-county-home-in-order-to-speak-at-boe-meeting).

<sup>29</sup> Stephanie Saul. “How Loudoun Schools Got Caught in Virginia’s Political Maelstrom.” *The New York Times*, November 14, 2021, [www.nytimes.com/2021/11/14/us/loudoun-county-school-board-va.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/14/us/loudoun-county-school-board-va.html).



## Promise to America's Children

From their misleading tagline “Let Kids Be Kids” to their anti-transgender resource guide, Promise to America’s Children includes a host of harmful materials and rhetoric. This coalition—formed by a partnership between the “Big Three” anti-CSE organizations—aims to generate support for what they refer to as the “Promise Movement.” This movement falsely claims that children have become “political pawns” in a larger effort to sexualize youth through school curricula and calls for oppositional action to be taken against progressive legislation such as the Equality Act.

## Moms for Liberty

Founded by two Florida school board members, Tiffany Justice and Tina Descovich, Moms for Liberty defines itself as a 501(c)(4) nonprofit organization fighting for parental rights. Its stated mission is that it is “dedicated to fighting for the survival of America by unifying, educating, and empowering parents to defend their parental rights at all levels of government.” Moms for Liberty advocates for, among other things, lifting COVID restrictions, preventing sex education, and banning CRT in schools, all under a misleading framework of parental rights. Moms for Liberty is also seemingly affiliated to some degree with the Heritage Foundation.

## Stop-CSE.org

This anti-CSE website, which has claimed the URL “comprehensivesexualityeducation.org,” was built by Family Watch International, the UN Family Rights Caucus, Protect Child Health Coalition, the Stop the Kinsey Institute coalition, and individual parents. The website hosts a variety of anti-CSE materials including deceptive “exposé videos” intended to generate fear among parents and policymakers, CSE curriculum examples that are

devoid of proper context and are often paired with “harm analysis” documents that list objections, and a “defenders’ toolkit” that includes a detailed action plan for opposition groups. This website is international in scope, covering curricula from a variety of countries and producing materials in multiple languages. For example, their most prominent video—“The War on Children”—is available in 12 different languages.

## International collaboration and attacks against CSE

Regressive Minority groups, usually from the U.S. or Europe, often test out national opposition campaigns against CSE, gender equity, LGBTQ+ rights, and abortion in the Global South, in Europe and in southern U.S. states before exporting successful methods to other countries and different geographic regions. These actors work to shut down CSE programs and limit access to sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR), services, information, and education so that they can promote a heteronormative ideology of the “natural family” by placing “parental rights” above the rights of children. For example, in Mexico, anti-gender equality activists adapted a “parental pin” initiative that originated in Spain. This initiative requires schools to let parents pull their children from classes where gender, sexuality, contraception, or other “sensitive” issues are discussed. In Peru, the Regressive Minority utilizes framing that was conceptualized by the Vatican to oppose inclusive and science-based gender ideology. This framing has since expanded to neighboring countries in South America. Finally, in Ghana, anti-CSE efforts have been combined with disinformation, public outcry, and anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric seen in other Anglophone sub-Saharan African countries. ■



## THE EVOLUTION OF THE REGRESSIVE MINORITY MOVEMENT

# Rhetoric and Tactics of the Regressive Minority

Groups who are in opposition to CSE incite moral panic in their audience by creating a misleading and fabricated version of CSE, twisting context, and employing emotionally charged language that discourages critical thinking. Examples of these tactics are everywhere across their messaging and are evident when looking at the materials provided on their websites. Through these tactics, a common rhetoric has developed; a language of the Regressive Minority that includes phrases such as “parental freedom,” “grooming,” and “too much too soon.” Recognizing these common tactics and rhetoric will help CSE advocates combat the resulting fear-mongered misinformation.



These groups lie, twist context to fit their narrative, and purposefully provide deceitful information. For example, on the main page of the Stop CSE website, readers are told “CSE teaches children to use statements such as ‘I like it when you touch me here’” as a way of “negotiating sexual encounters,” implying that CSE is encouraging children to become sexually active. This message is paired with a photo of a toddler covering their ears, implying this kind of curriculum is shared with toddlers. In reality, these kinds of statements are intended to exemplify enthusiastic consent, which is key in sexual violence prevention, and consent is intended as a sex education topic between 9th to 12th grade per the [National Sexuality Education Standards](#), which provides the widely referenced guidelines for CSE. By twisting context, Regressive Minority groups take real aspects of CSE and engage with them under false pretenses that are intended to alarm their audience.

## These groups lie, twist context to fit their narrative, and purposefully provide deceitful information.

Regressive Minority groups have also created a fabricated version of CSE. It’s easier for these groups to argue against a curriculum that doesn’t exist—an obscene distortion of CSE—than it is for them to address in good faith the research-backed and publicly supported curriculum that actually exists. For example, the Stop CSE website’s main page showcases a short film titled “The War On Children: Exposing the Comprehensive Sexuality Education Agenda” that openly lies by claiming the goal of CSE is to “get parents out of the picture and then radicalize and sexualize our children.” By creating this false version of CSE, the Regressive Minority invokes in their audience a misguided sense of urgency and moral righteousness.

The messaging of the Regressive Minority is emotionally charged, often framing aspects of CSE as bad without naming *why* they are bad. Instead, they employ emotional

indicators such as ominous music and foreboding tones to imply what the viewer should think. For example, the [Institute of Marriage and Family Canada \(IMFC\) video](#), titled “Ten Things to Know about the new Sex Ed,” says that under the CSE framework, teachers encourage children to make a “personal plan” for sex.<sup>30</sup> This statement is paired with menacing music, framing “personal plans” as something to be feared and avoided in schools. However, this video doesn’t acknowledge that abstinence is itself a personal plan for sex. It also doesn’t discuss how adolescents will be more motivated to advocate for their own sexual boundaries if they have taken the time to consider what those are.

As the Regressive Minority has employed these tactics, a common, easily recognizable rhetoric has emerged. **Some of the rallying cries and purported concerns of the movement include:**

- Erosion of nuclear family
- Parental rights
- Save the children

Some of their common claims surrounding CSE include that the curriculum is:

- Pornographic or obscene
- Too much too soon
- Grooming of children<sup>31</sup>
- A “war on children”<sup>32</sup>
- Confusing for kids
- “Mental molestation”
- Trying to turn children gay or trans

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<sup>30</sup> IMF Canada. “10 Things Parents Need to Know about the New Sex Ed.” YouTube, uploaded by IMF Canada, October 15, 2015, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=m9TAE\\_RF0hk&t=12s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m9TAE_RF0hk&t=12s).

<sup>31</sup> Berry, Susan. “AZ House Speaker: ‘Radicalized’ Sex Ed ‘Grooming Children to Be Sexualized.’” *Breitbart*, September 26, 2019, [www.breitbart.com/politics/2019/09/26/az-house-speaker-radicalized-sex-ed-grooming-children-to-be-sexualized/](https://www.breitbart.com/politics/2019/09/26/az-house-speaker-radicalized-sex-ed-grooming-children-to-be-sexualized/).

<sup>32</sup> StopCSE.org, [www.comprehensivesexualityeducation.org](http://www.comprehensivesexualityeducation.org).

On the surface, some of these positions seem reasonable enough—no one wants their child to be encouraged to watch pornography in school, for example. However, this rhetoric operates under an intentionally distorted and false version of CSE, which has never and will never endorse pornography distributed by schools. And the lies don't stop there. The Regressive Minority produced a short documentary on StopCSE.org which, among other things, claims to be concerned over a "gender bread" person handout, saying that it will confuse the students and that it is "mental molestation." There is no way to understand the use of this visceral descriptor without acknowledging the transphobic rhetoric informing it. In fact, much anti-CSE rhetoric serves as a Trojan horse for the harmful underlying ideologies that fuel this movement, such as the transphobia inherent in the last example.

In another example, in Worcester, MA, opponents who have organized against the implementation of K-12 CSE in the school district have staked their main public claim on the "pornography" lie—even going so far as to create lawn signs that riff on the Pornhub logo. This is an impossible assertion to defend, as the curriculum is publicly available and age-appropriate—anyone who investigates their claim will easily discover it's false. But privately, when they think only sympathetic stakeholders are listening, they're peddling an assertion that they don't want to defend publicly—they claim that CSE curriculum is designed to usurp parents' rights and make their children transgender. Not only is this untrue, but it is also not possible. It is a fear that is entirely not grounded in reality. But because they are not making the claim publicly, it's hard for advocates to have the opportunity to debunk it. ■



# Lizette's Story

*Lizette shared her story of pushing for CSE within her community despite the challenges she faced, including increased backlash for creating awareness around the intersectionality of school curriculum attacks.*

Lizette is a first-generation Mexican woman living in Arizona with her child, a transgender boy. Her school district in Tucson, AZ, had been working on a new CSE curriculum created by doctors, educators, and religious communities, and this curriculum was up for a vote at the school board meeting. As a leader of a support group for parents and families of trans youth, she spoke at the school board meeting in support of CSE as a parent advocate with some of the families from her support group.

Meanwhile, a member of the school board was also part of a conservative group called "Protecting Arizona's Children." This conservative group created an anti-CSE video, demonizing trans youth, and took it to local churches to garner support. Soon, Protecting Arizona's Children, along with other local conservative groups, began hosting brunches to gain more support to fight the CSE curriculum. The fight went on for five months, including three public hearings each with six to eight hours of public comment. The opposition used disruptive tactics, like making walls of people in entryways to scream at pro-CSE advocates, bringing balloons that said "it's a girl" and "it's a boy," and busing in opponents to CSE. One parent even followed a trans community member home. Lizette recounts this time as borderline violent, very scary, and ultimately quite traumatic for her family.

Still, Lizette and other advocates fought back. They wore t-shirts that had "comprehensive, inclusive, medically accurate sex education" written on the back. They staged a walkout of one of the board meetings, arguing that the school district was allowing hate speech for hours, and over 200 people walked out with them. They drafted a letter to the board, another letter that they published, and reached out to the media.



**One parent even followed a trans community member home. Lizette recounts this time as borderline violent, very scary, and ultimately quite traumatic for her family.**

In the end, the curriculum quietly passed during the COVID-19 lockdown, when they were able to vote without the public's attendance. This was not without cost, though, as the board removed some important components of the curriculum.

For example, gender identity was supposed to be introduced in fourth grade but is now discussed at the high school level. However, parents within the community were able to push for trans-inclusive policies in the school system and have shared their experiences advocating for CSE with parents in surrounding school districts who are now fighting the same battles.

The biggest takeaway for Lizette was the lack of understanding that marginalization of any kind is rooted in racism. The fight against CSE is deeply connected to the battles against CRT within schools. CRT bans across the country also include provisions like saying that teachers cannot ask pronouns in classrooms and tying it into "gender ideology teaching." Intersectionality is key when considering the fights against CSE. ■

**The fight against CSE is deeply connected to the battles against CRT within schools. CRT bans across the country also include provisions like saying that teachers cannot ask pronouns in classrooms and tying it into "gender ideology teaching."**



**PART FOUR**

# Counteracting the Regressive Minority to Advance CSE

In addition to taking proactive steps to advance CSE, advocates need to be prepared for the regressive actions and rhetoric spread by the Regressive Minority. It is time to develop a strategy for effectively counteracting these anti-CSE groups. Whether acting as an organization, coalition, or as an individual, there are a variety of strategies that we recommend based on our research on the Regressive Minority and how they operate.



## COUNTERACTING THE REGRESSIVE MINORITY TO ADVANCE CSE

# Organizational Action



### Understand the Regressive Minority and their common tactics

Knowing who the major organizations and donors are behind this movement will make it easier to recognize and publicly name them when they show up. Knowing their common tactics will make it easier to proactively inoculate against and counteract them. Keep in mind that the Regressive Minority is a small minority of the U.S. population that has disproportionate power due to strong funding and influence paired with the vocal bandwidth they often take up in public events such as school board meetings. While the adherents to anti-CSE messaging are lacking in numbers, they are incredibly politically active. This means that although they try to present themselves as a majority, with the proper messaging and advocacy efforts, pro-CSE groups have the advantage of appealing to the majority of Americans. Given this existing widespread support, the goal is not to convince people who are currently anti-CSE to support CSE, but rather mobilize the majority that already supports—or is open to supporting—CSE to see it as a salient issue worth taking action on.

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## Engage in proactive messaging rather than reactionary myth-busting

Research has shown that repeating misinformation, even when done to expose lies and protect the truth, actually elevates that misinformation to a larger audience and unintentionally solidifies it in people's minds as true.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, organizations should avoid the temptation of repeating the misinformation spread by Regressive Minority groups in order to refute it. Instead, advocates can develop messaging strategies that are proactive rather than reactionary while also accounting for common anti-CSE rhetoric. For example, we know that Regressive Minority groups espouse their concern for "family values," so instead of repeating individual iterations of this values-based messaging, advocates can reclaim "family values" as part of their own proactive messaging, making sure to emphasize the importance of CSE in developing values such as inclusion, respect for diverse family structures, and loving young people for who they are. Over time, this can change the societal narrative around sex education and dampen opposition efforts to distort it.

**Repeating misinformation, even when done to expose lies and protect the truth, actually elevates that misinformation to a larger audience and unintentionally solidifies it in people's minds as true.**

Additionally, it's always a good idea to promote the facts that refute the Regressive Minority's misinformation, which can easily be done without repeating the misinformation itself. It can also be effective to publicly name the Regressive Minority as liars, and to tell the people we are trying to reach that they have been lied to, that we know it's awful to be lied to, and that we're here to help set the record straight. In this way, we can leverage the Regressive Minority lies against them without repeating it.

## Organize through coalition work

The Regressive Minority creates the illusion of their broad reach by uniting small and disparate pockets of supporters through a common rhetoric and collaboration between organizations. Advocates for CSE must also rely on effective collaboration across and within states and school districts, as well as building solidarity with advocacy organizations focused on related causes also targeted by Christian nationalist organizations. Strengthening our movement through coalition work and united advocacy in response to any attack on public education regardless of the specific inclusion program targeted is the path to building an active majority powerful enough to defeat the Regressive Minority and win the policies every child in this country deserves.

## Change the narrative

Many people think, falsely, that kids are already getting quality sex education at school. Others are in favor of improving public sex education, but believe (erroneously) that this puts them in the minority, so they are afraid to speak up about it and risk anticipated judgment from their neighbors. But most of all, far too many people don't know what's at stake. They don't know what's included in CSE, and they don't know why or how it could play a major role in creating a flourishing future for us all.

This ignorance is compounded by the fact that too many campaigns for CSE policy focus on a narrow, stigma- and fear-based message about teen pregnancy and STI prevention. The problem with this approach is threefold: first, it reinscribes the stigma that teen parents and people living with HIV and other STIs already experience. Second, many parents don't want to think about these issues. They don't think their kids will have sex while still teenagers at all, so they don't believe their children need this kind of prevention effort. Third, this messaging undersells the culturally transformative potential of comprehensive sex education, missing out entirely

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<sup>33</sup> Ian Skurnik, Carolyn Yoon, Denise C. Park, and Norbert Schwarz, "How warnings about false claims become recommendations," *Journal of Consumer Research* 31, no. 4 (2005): 713, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/426605?seq=1](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/426605?seq=1).



on the chance to inspire people—whether or not they are directly connected to the public education system—to get involved in making real, meaningful positive change in their communities.

What's needed is a new, values-based, emotionally evocative narrative that will efficiently neutralize and leverage Regressive Minority messaging, while being bold, positive, and grounded enough to motivate the majority of people who already support CSE in principle to take action to make sure it is enacted and implemented across the country. Cutting-edge messaging research like the [Race Class Narrative](#) (and the newly expanded [Race Class Gender Narrative](#)) and [Story at Scale's audience segmentations](#) offer promising models and evidence-based approaches that point the way forward for the pro-CSE movement.

### **Reach and mobilize new audiences with our pro-CSE message**

School board meetings have become a battleground over the right to a free public education, with Regressive Minority groups choosing specific policies and issues to publicly rally against. These public displays of political activity bring their messaging to a wider audience and insert their beliefs into a larger sphere of public debate, elevating this vocal minority to a distorted level of relevance. Many pro-CSE groups also take public stands for or against legislation, but often these messages reach an audience already engaged with the issues. Finding new, innovative ways to support or oppose legislation and initiatives will be a major growth area for advocacy groups to consider. For example, how can we better reach individuals who might agree with the principles of CSE but don't actively think about this issue? Some options might be tapping into a wider audience by utilizing popular platforms such as TikTok and YouTube or creating material in easily digestible formats such as podcasting. This work will also require significant new investment from pro-CSE funders, in order to properly resource the grassroots and grassstops organizing work that many passionate community activists are already trying to do to advance CSE in their communities and states.

### **Advocate for progressive legislation**

In addition to developing strong messaging strategies, supporting concrete legislative action is one of the best ways to advance CSE. This support can include anything from being outspoken on social media to meeting with congressional offices.

### **Consider differences between advocacy in conservative states versus in liberal states**

Advocacy strategies will look different from state to state and from community to community. In some places, there is little foundation for CSE at all, so advocates may need to start by focusing on enacting progressive legislation. In other places, there is existing policy but a lack of implementation, so advocates may need to focus more on implementation strategies. And in states where progress at the state level is blocked, consider advancing progressive changes at the school district level. Not only can this help some students more immediately, it can also slowly build support locality by locality until sufficient buy-in exists to build meaningful pressure on the state legislature to act.

### **Collaborate with faith-based leaders and religious groups that support the principles of CSE**

Although this report has discussed in-depth the religious ties of the Regressive Minority, specifically to the movement of Christian Nationalism, it is important to remember that not all religious leaders and groups stand in opposition to CSE. In fact, there is overwhelming support for CSE among faith leaders, and starting with an organization such as the [Interfaith Alliance](#) is a great opportunity for advocates to connect with faith leaders in their community. Actively inviting these people and organizations into the conversation can help mobilize a wider group of advocates in advancing CSE while creating space for religious considerations within the movement. ■

## COUNTERACTING THE REGRESSIVE MINORITY TO ADVANCE CSE

# Individual Action



### Utilize your social media

Social media platforms have built-in infrastructures for easily dispersing information, so with just a few clicks, individuals can significantly spread CSE messaging by following new accounts and sharing relevant posts. Examples include retweeting Tweets on Twitter, sharing posts to an Instagram story, and sharing posts on Facebook. Individuals who want to be more actively engaged can also craft their own posts on these issues, sparking dialogue among their followers and communities. There is a multitude of accounts related to sex education and CSE advocacy, so here are some ideas for accounts to start following:

- Accounts that directly provide sex education information
  - Scarleteen
  - AMAZE International
- Accounts that advocate for policy and other social changes
  - SIECUS: Sex Ed for Social Change on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#)
  - EducateUS: SIECUS in Action on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook
  - Equality Federation
  - URGE
  - SisterSong
  - Advocates for Youth

Review the [SIECUS Community Action Toolkit](#) pull out on [Digital Advocacy](#) for further guidance.



## Research local and state policies

Staying informed on policies and legislative changes will prepare individuals to knowledgeably engage in dialogue on these issues when they come up in discussion. Following news stories related to health or sex education can also make it easier to know when and how to take action. A good place to start is by looking at the [SIECUS state profiles](#) that give a detailed overview on sex education standards and the efforts to advance it in each state.

## Advocate for progressive legislation

In addition to developing strong messaging strategies, supporting concrete legislative action is one of the best ways to advance CSE. This support can include anything from being outspoken on social media to meeting with congressional offices.

**Supporting concrete  
legislative action is one of the  
best ways to advance CSE.**

## Stay civically engaged

One of the best ways for individuals to influence incremental change is by staying engaged in their own communities; for example, by voicing support against Regressive Minority district-level changes to sex education or by advocating for change to existing policies. Some avenues for civic engagement include reaching out to representatives, going to school board meetings, and voting in local elections where members of local school boards are voted on.

There are also opportunities to engage on the federal level. One place to start is by supporting the [Real Education and Access for Healthy Youth Act \(REAHYA\)](#) which is currently introduced in Congress. REAHYA, which would ban federal dollars from going to AOUM programs, instead redirecting those funds to incentivise schools to teach CSE. It would also increase access to sexual and reproductive health services for students who often cannot get the care they need. One simple action you can take now is to contact your Senators and your Representatives to ask them where they stand on REAHYA, and encourage them to sign on as a co-sponsor if they haven't already.

If you want to get more engaged on this issue, be sure to sign up with EducateUS: SIECUS In Action, SIECUS's c4 partner, which is building a movement of people just like you who want to take action together to advance CSE around the country. [Use this form](#) to let them know what kind of actions you're most interested in taking.

## Get involved with existing CSE advocacy groups

Join email lists, attend webinars, engage with action weeks, and review published advocacy resources such as the [SIECUS Community Action Toolkit](#). ■

# Community Sex Education in St. Mary's County, Maryland

In 2017, the St. Mary's County Public Library announced a sex-ed class for teens to cover medically accurate and LGBTQ+ inclusive sex education, as well as issues such as consent and STIs. The class instructor, Bianca Palmisano, was a well-qualified professional, and class attendance would be limited to teens so that they could have a safe space to ask questions they might be afraid to broach in the presence of classmates, teachers, and parents. However, there was immediate backlash from local residents and elected officials. The opponents, during county commissioners public forums, library board meetings, and in the local paper, voiced objections that were based on their religious beliefs, many ripe with bigotry and homophobia. Under pressure, the library canceled the class in the face of the opposition and apologized to critics.

Shortly thereafter, Southern Maryland Area Secular Humanists (SMASH) stepped in and reserved a private meeting room at the same library and rebooked Bianca for the class. The announcements made it clear that the event was sponsored and funded by a private organization and that parental permission was required. Nevertheless, the event was again subject to criticism in the local paper as opponents submitted numerous letters to the editor objecting to the "sinful" nature of the class, the instructor, and SMASH. Despite the pressure to cancel, the class proceeded as planned, drawing a small group of protesters and a much larger crowd of supporters. Despite the controversy and disruptions, the teens who attended and their parents reported that the class was a wonderful educational experience.

**Under pressure, the library canceled the class in the face of the opposition and apologized to critics.**



In 2019, SMASH and the local chapter of PFLAG (the country's largest organization for families and allies of LGBTQ+ people) organized and sponsored a Drag Queen Story Hour and a makeup tutorial for teens for Pride month. A private room at the library was reserved, and announcements made clear that the event was privately sponsored and that parents were expected to attend with their children. Again, objections flooded the local newspapers, radio shows, and social media sites, and opponents took every opportunity to show their outrage in testimony to the county board and other public forums. Both opponents and elected officials decried the event as immoral and against the community's values, despite the fact that it was organized by members of the community and there was overwhelming interest in the event from local parents.

During the event, the sidewalk to enter the library was lined with protesters on one side and supporters on the other. The event was disrupted when a man rushed into the room, past security officers, shouting and toppling furniture. This terrified children and their parents, and the man was arrested. During his trial, he said "Because of my faith, my faith in Christ, I look for opportunities to help people ... if I see a trend that's harmful to people, to children, I also want to combat that as well." He continued, "I did it to help those kids and even everybody in that room. The parents. The drag queens. It was for their sakes." His aim was to force his religious beliefs and bigoted views upon the parents and children who were enjoying an afternoon of fun and stories. ■



**Despite the controversy and disruptions, the teens who attended and their parents reported that the class was a wonderful educational experience.**

**PART FIVE**

# Conclusion



Like the country as a whole, the U.S. public education system has democratic and egalitarian guiding principles. But in practice, it still recreates and reinforces an unearned advantage for groups that are already in power. Many Americans recognize and continue to work toward eradicating these forms of systemic oppression.

In 1972, inspired by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Congress passed Title IX, which simply states that, “no person in the United States shall, based on sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.” In practice, Title IX has been used to ensure girls have equal opportunities to play sports, to force schools to take affirmative action to prevent and address sexual harassment and gender-based violence, and, affirmed under the Obama administration, to protect trans students from school-based discrimination and further codified in law through the 2020 ruling in the Supreme Court case of *Bostock v. Cayton County* and in the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights. In other words: If something a school is doing is disproportionately preventing students from fully accessing their education based on gender, federal law says that the school must stop.

The First Amendment protects the right of young people to express and practice their faith free from discrimination. But freedom of religion also includes freedom from religion—including in public schools. As a result, we often see battles in the public school system between the governmental obligation to separate church and state, and individuals who experience that secularity as an infringement on their own freedom to practice their religion. This is especially evident when vocal minorities assert that their religion is morally superior and that it is therefore their responsibility to convert others to their faith practices. They use this argument to justify their work to manipulate the public educational system to further their agenda, despite the 1987 ruling in *Edwards v. Aguillard*, where the Supreme Court ruled it unconstitutional for religion to be taught as truth and that creationism cannot be taught as fact in public schools. In subsequent rulings, this argument has been upheld on the grounds of the constitutional separation of church and state protected by the First Amendment.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> John Taylor, “30 Years after *Edwards v. Aguillard*: Why Creationism Lingers in Public Schools,” *The Conversation*, June 24, 2017, [theconversation.com/30-years-after-edwards-v-aguillard-why-creationism-lingers-in-public-schools-79603](https://theconversation.com/30-years-after-edwards-v-aguillard-why-creationism-lingers-in-public-schools-79603).



As values of embracing diversity and inclusion in our society continue to gain support, we once again see a Regressive Minority seeking to force their deeply unpopular and dangerous beliefs on others through attacks on the public education system. These well-connected organizations and individuals continue to impose religious-based programming—rooted in homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, patriarchal fundamentalism, and racism—on public school students.

But as the case studies included throughout this report show, when the mainstream majority speak up, push back, and refuse to acquiesce to the Regressive Minority, the values of diversity, equity, inclusion, and love without stigma prevail.

American youth have the right to a public education system that supports their growth into global citizens equipped with the skills and attitudes to successfully navigate our increasingly diverse, connected, and complex world.

**When the mainstream majority speak up, push back, and refuse to acquiesce to the Regressive Minority, the values of diversity, equity, inclusion, and love without stigma prevail.**

Inclusive programs, such as comprehensive sex education, CRT, and LGBTQ+ positive efforts, are just some of the tools that public schools must continue to develop to support young people. Young people deserve to be taught with values that recognize their lived experiences, affirm their identities, and empower them to change the world. Commit to the fight for a future where we are all taught to affirm each other's humanity. ■



**PART SIX**

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