

History of Sex Education



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Introduction

Sex education in the United States has great potential to educate both individuals and society. It can give us knowledge about our bodies; debunk harmful stereotypes about sex, race, and gender; provide opportunities for us to think critically about our own values and relationships; and empower us to stand up for our rights and the rights of others to pleasure, bodily autonomy, and consent. This was not, however, what sex education was initially designed to do. **Too often, over the past 100 years of American history, it has been used to do just the opposite.**

Those who originally pushed the importance of educating the public about sexuality did so out of a fear that their comfortable, white, middle class way of living was being threatened by the loosening of sexual morals. Their programs relied on a racist, sexist, and classist belief system, and even leaned toward eugenics—the idea that only certain people should reproduce.

Throughout modern history, each time society grappled with “a problem” related to sex and relationships—whether it was the perceived rise in prostitution in the early 1900s, the fear of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) among soldiers during WWI, the changing role of women working outside the home during the second World War, or the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 70s—sex education was offered up as part of the “solution.” It has alternatively been sold as a way to prevent disease, end unintended pregnancy, preserve marriage, and ensure wealth and prosperity.

SIECUS believes, however, that sex education—if done properly—has the power to serve as a vehicle for social change. Understanding the history of sex education in this country, the enduring debates on the topic, and the overall pushes and pulls of the last century can help us understand how to best educate young people and change our society. ■





The social hygiene movement

The turn of the 20th century was marked by racist and classist fears that the social norms of the Victorian Era were breaking down and the institution of the family was under threat.

Marriage rates were down, divorce rates were on the rise, and the birth rate among White Anglo-Saxon families was dropping.

The biggest proof of society's imminent moral decline, according to social hygienists, were the high rates of prostitution and venereal disease, especially as they began to rise among middle-class white men.¹

The social hygiene movement was born out of public health, medicine, and social work to help control sex work and “vice.” But it was also born out of the **eugenics movement** which believed that the human race would be improved if only certain people—white, middle class, Anglo-Saxons—reproduced. Social hygienists believed that disseminating information about the dangers of promiscuous sex was key; that if people truly understood the risks, they would steer clear of sex workers and keep sex within marriage where it was not just “safe,” but where it was “meant to be.” They did not, however, believe that everyone was capable of that kind of sexual morality. As Courtney Q. Shah explains in *Sex Ed, Segregated*, the result was that early sex education “...bolstered existing stereotypes. It normalized white male (middle class) sexuality and pathologized any departures from the white male norm. It was rife with eugenics language about improving the race—usually with obvious connotation of racial superiority. And it was used to justify existing political hierarchies in the name of science and morality.”ⁱ

Social hygienists reached out to young white men by hosting lectures in union halls and YMCAs where physicians would show terrible slides of what could happen if one was not careful and “virtuous.” In his book, *Teaching Sex: The Shaping of Adolescence in the 20th Century*, Jeffrey P. Moran notes that “social hygienists stressed the physical horrors of syphilis with such vigor that it was common for listeners to faint in their seats.”ⁱⁱ Though medical information took center stage, the social message of these lectures was just as clear—sex was only appropriate within the confines of marriage.

The American Social Hygiene Association (ASHA)—which was created in 1914 by the merger of the American Purity Alliance and the National Vigilance Campaign—was one of the earliest advocates for these kinds of programs. In some ways, the founding of ASHA was a sign of sexual progress because its leaders blamed the rise in STIs on the Victorian Era’s obsession with purity and society’s refusal to talk about sex. They believed that all institutions, from schools

to the press, should be talking about sex in an effort to help people protect themselves. At the same time, however, some of the organization’s founders had strong eugenics beliefs, and their programs perpetuated the racial and sexual stereotypes of the era.

ASHA educators recognized that there was a double standard for men and women when it came to sexual behavior, with men being allowed more sexual freedom. Their solution, however, was to hold men to the same no-sex-outside-of-marriage standard that women were held to at the time. Moreover, they did not believe in educating women about sex. It was assumed that women had no interest in sex outside of reproduction. The goal was, therefore, to educate men as a means of protecting women.ⁱⁱⁱ

ASHA produced sex education pamphlets, exhibits, and posters for young people and adults, and hosted lectures across the country. Today, the organization is now known as the **American Sexual Health Association**, and is a

progressive organization that reaches millions with sex positive messages through its educational and advocacy efforts.^{iv} ■

ⁱ Public health has stopped using the terms venereal disease and prostitution, in part, because they are stigmatizing. Though we are discussing historical events, throughout this document we will instead use the accepted terms of today—sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and sex work.



Schools and character-building organizations

The social hygiene movement was gaining momentum at the same time that Progressive Era education reformers were working to expand and improve public secondary schools by increasing the number of students who attended high school, expanding the curricula, and relying on trained educators. Schools were already adding an emphasis on health and sanitation, and social hygiene seemed like a logical extension. **Sex education became part of the call for schools to teach “complete living” and “moral instruction.”^v**

In 1913, Chicago public schools became some of the first in the nation to implement formal sex education programs. This was a passion project for Ella Flagg Young, the 68-year-old superintendent at that time. She believed that teaching about sex would not only improve health, but have positive “ethical effects” as well.^{vi} Young brought her idea to the school board, and received permission to host a series of lectures by physicians that came to be known as **“personal purity” talks.** At least 20,000 Chicago students participated in these lectures during the 1913-14 school year.^{vii}

Despite the conservative nature of these lectures by today’s standards, some members of the community, including Catholic leaders, felt the lessons were nothing more than smut. Schools had, for the most part, been silent about sexuality up until that point, and many people believed that it should remain that way. To talk to young people about sex, they said, was to plant ideas in their heads and stoke their curiosity (an argument still heard today). Young’s opponents,

who led a campaign to get her fired, called the talks “unwarranted interference with the rights and prerogatives of parents.”^{viii} The Chicago Experiment, as it came to be known, failed—the school board rescinded its permission for the following year.

Without support for bringing sex education into schools, ASHA and other groups focused on character-building organizations like the YMCA and the Boy Scouts. These organizations tried to help young men grow up to be moral members of society through education, adult guidance, and distraction. By focusing on camping, exercise, and leisure activities, scouting aimed to channel boys’ sexual energy and occupy their time with more wholesome pursuits. As Shah points out, this too, was meant only for some: “Character-building organizations rooted their reform efforts in specific ideas about gender, race, and class. Created by white middle-class reformers and largely segregated by race and sex, they often did not adequately reach or allow significant voices of youth outside the white middle class.”^{ix}

White reformers did not put much effort into sex education for Black populations. Some, especially in the South, saw such efforts as futile: “Building on stereotypes supported by scientific racism, white medical professionals blamed blacks for high rates of venereal disease.”^x Moreover, they believed efforts to prevent or treat the disease in the Black community would be futile. Instead, they argued for strict racial segregation as a means of keeping STIs out of white communities.^{xi} The growing Black medical establishment was also hesitant to promote sex education in fear that suggesting the need for it would play into destructive sexual stereotypes about their community.^{xii}

There was also very little effort made to reach young women with sex education messages. It was still assumed that white women had such low sex drives that efforts to educate them, or distract them the way scouting did for boys, were unnecessary and could only backfire. In fact, social hygienists were “...hesitant to insult the reputations of white middle class girls by

advocating sex education for them.”^{xiii} Moreover, whereas men were encouraged to spend time with other men as a way to avoid sexual thoughts, some believed that women spending too much time together would encourage lesbianism. ■



The influence of WWI

During the first World War, fear of STIs reached a fever pitch and the government took an interest in disease prevention programs.

These programs were mostly aimed at soldiers themselves, and suggested that truly patriotic soldiers would choose abstinence for the good of their country. This programming also played into messages of class and social status by portraying abstinence outside of marriage as key to upward mobility (this would become a recurring theme in modern abstinence-only-until-marriage programs and success sequencing theories).^{xiv}

Part of the effort to keep soldiers free from disease included a crackdown on sex work which mostly targeted non-white women who were seen as overly sexual and a threat to U.S. troops. There was also, finally, an interest in providing sex education programs for women. But, not surprisingly, the goal of these presentations was to teach purity and responsibility.

The government interest in the prevention of STIs continued after the war. It passed the **Chamberlain-Kahn Act** which provided \$4 million dollars during the 1919-20 school year to train teachers about STIs, so they could then train high school students. This represented the first-ever federally funded initiative for sex education in the United States. The act also sparked the creation of the **Venereal Disease Division of the U.S. Public Health Service** which had a subsection

devoted to education policy. This government support legitimized sex education as something that did, in fact, belong in schools. But, by no means did it settle the arguments about school-based sex education which continue to this day.^{xv} ■

Moving beyond disease prevention

As the war came to an end, the public behavior of young people was changing yet again, and **it seemed like everyone was willing to admit that they thought about sex**. Modest clothing fell out of fashion and became replaced with short, sleeveless Flapper dresses. Young people turned away from waltzes and toward foxtrots, shimmies, and other dances that encouraged physical closeness. It was even becoming socially acceptable for young, unmarried couples to engage in “petting.”

Sex educators feared that in these changing times, discussion of disease would neither interest nor scare young people, especially as it became more likely that science would find a cure for syphilis. Moreover, the changing view of marriage—in which couples were seen as friends and companions—meant that relationship experts had started stressing the importance of a satisfying sex life within marriage. Sex education of the past had basically stopped on the wedding night except to say, “don’t have sex with anyone else after that.” However, this, too, would have to change to keep up.^{xvi} As Luker explains: “If sex within marriage was troubled or unsatisfying, social hygienists were astute enough to observe, their warnings about sex outside marriage would be only minimally successful.”^{xvii} Moran adds, “Locating the deepest human satisfaction in marriage allowed sex educators to accept the new philosophy of pleasure seeking without sacrificing their central assertion that extramarital and premarital sex were forbidden.”^{xviii}

To do this properly, sex education had to expand past one-off lectures and biology class. It had to be integrated throughout the curriculum in other classes like social studies and home economics. This meshed nicely with the philosophy of the **National Education Association** which had published new goals for education in 1918, including: “health,” “worthy home-membership,” “citizenship,” “worthy use of leisure,” and “ethical character.”^{xix} ■

Family life education

The move away from a strictly biological focus continued over the next few decades as educators agreed that young people needed more. The American Association of School Administrators explained it this way in 1938: “[Students] have been taught the names, functions, and physical disorders of the various sex organs, but that is a minor contribution to the great problems of affection, courtship, and marriage in modern society. **Most of the conflicts that keep youth awake in troubled nights are psychological and social problems...** persons well trained in psychology and sociology will help much more than any but the very exceptional physician.”^{xx}

Enter **Family Life Education (FLE) programs**, which gained popularity in the 1940s and 50s and continue in some communities today. They were described as “part preparation for marriage, part an attempt to discourage premarital sex, and part training for ‘responsible parenting.’ ... Rather than focus on the single agenda that had brought it into being—the single standard of sexual behavior and the prevention of venereal disease—sex education became increasingly all-encompassing, expanding to cover almost everything under the rubric of ‘family and personal living.’”^{xxi} ASHA became a leading voice in FLE. The organization suggested that this approach could solve the societal and personal problems of divorce, masturbation, lack of self-control in sexual and financial life, and sexual delinquency.

On the one hand, FLE presented a seemingly modern vision of a companionable marriage in which men shared in chores and child rearing. At the same time, however, these programs reinforced traditional gender roles around sex,

portraying boys as perpetual aggressors and putting the responsibility for setting limits on girls.^{xxii} Moreover, they continued to push racist and segregationist views of the world and relationships. A 1944 course offered in San Diego public schools was described as discussing the “disastrous results that interfere with happiness when an individual ‘bucks’ societal conventions,” “role of both sexes in family life,” “family harmony,” “budgeting,” “respect for the opposite sex,” and “social values of controlling the urge to fall in love,” among other topics.^{xxiii} It also taught students about the “difficulties commonly involved when marriage is made between differing races, religions, and nationalities.”^{xxiv}

This was by no means a course in critical thinking designed to help young people determine their own values and actions. Courses would have students plan mock weddings, balance a check book, and go shopping for crystal.^{xxv} And, educators dictated appropriate roles and behaviors both in marriage and in society, and continued to discuss the consequences of

deviating from these roles (in this case, an unhappy marriage). Moran explained: “Although family life educators lauded the family as a haven from regimented, bureaucratic society, their fundamental purpose was nevertheless to standardize and rationalize home life along what educators considered to be a scientifically approved line.”^{xxvi}

Its innocuous nature and ability to disappear into other curricula, however, was part of the appeal to educators. It was unlikely to draw the kind of attention or controversy that had sunk the Chicago Experiment. Of course, this also meant that program content varied widely and any frank discussion of sex itself tended to get lost. In fact, critics and even supporters worried that FLE programs merely provided the illusion of sex education. Though it had replaced other versions of sex education, it never really did talk about sex.^{xxvii}

Luker explains that the expansion of FLE up to that point had been made possible because, “Outside of a few ‘sex radicals,’ whose opinions did not have much effect on mainstream American opinion, individuals, despite their own practices, agreed in principle that sex before marriage was wrong for both men and women.”^{xxviii} But society was, once again, experiencing major shifts around sexuality with the publication of the *Kinsey Report* and the introduction of *Playboy Magazine*. Some argued it was time to put the sex back in sex ed. ■



The sexual revolution and culture wars

Dr. Mary S. Calderone, a physician who had served as medical director for Planned Parenthood, believed that adults and young people alike needed unfettered access to information about sex. Though her focus was not on schools directly, Dr. Calderone thought that it was time to stop looking at sex as a force that needed to be controlled and, instead, to look at it as a fundamental part of being human. "Sex," she said, "is not just something you do in marriage, in a bed, in the dark, in one position. **Sex is what it means to be a man or woman.**"^{xxix}

In 1964, Calderone and five colleagues—Wallace Fulton, Reverend William Genne, Lester Kirkendall, Dr. Harold Lief, and Clark Vincent—founded **SIECUS** as the Sex Information and Education Council of the United States (later to be changed to the **Sexuality Information and Education Council of the U.S.**). The founding mission of the organization was to “establish man’s sexuality as a health entity...to the end that human beings may be aided toward responsible use of the sexual faculty toward assimilation of sex into their individual life patterns as a creative and recreative force.”^{xxx} Calderone later explained: “We were saying that sex is a part of total health. It doesn’t belong to the church. It doesn’t belong to the law. It belongs to you—the person. It’s part of your total health and your total personality structure.”^{xxxi}

Lester A. Kirkendall, a former elementary school principal who began studying sexuality in the 1950s, had come to believe that premarital sex was not actually harmful to individuals or couples. He explained: “The purpose of sex education is

not primarily to control and suppress sex expression, as in the past, but to indicate the immense possibilities for human fulfillment that human sexuality offers.”^{xxxii}

In the early days, SIECUS published study guides on sex education, masturbation, and homosexuality. SIECUS also received funding from the Office of Education at the federal Department of Health, Education, and Welfare to host a conference in Washington, DC, called “Sex, the Individual, and Society: Implications for Education.” It reached out to leaders in the fields of medicine, education, and religion, and spoke to the general public through radio and television appearances as well as speeches that Calderone gave across the country.

To understand how revolutionary these early acts of simply talking about sex openly were, it is important to remember that the effects of the **Comstock Laws**, which targeted “obscene” materials, were still being felt across the country; that access to contraception, even among married couples, remained illegal in some states

until 1965; and that homosexuality was still considered a mental illness, and homosexual sex was illegal in some states.

SIECUS was inundated with requests from schools for help with their sex education programs and responded to as many as it could. However, the organization had a small staff and its direct reach was limited. Calderone pointed out in a 1969 article that the main role of the organization was to serve “...as catalyst between the professions and the general society regarding human sexuality and in the growing comprehension of its many facets, roles and importance in the human condition....” Her proof that SIECUS was succeeding came from the progress they saw on sex education in “...many communities which SIECUS had never even visited nor had contact with.”^{xxxiii}

Moran argues that moral panic about shifting sexual values helped SIECUS make an early impact: “Concern over sexual changes provided the real energy for proliferation of sex education programs; SIECUS and related organizations

tried to stimulate and channel this energy but by and large they merely followed popular demand for some kind of public response to the sexual revolution.”^{xxxiv} Fearing for their children, many parents came to think of sex education as necessary. ■



Controversies erupt

Unfortunately, catalysts also frequently become lightning rods.

Opposition to sex education was part of a backlash both to shifting sexual values and to what some saw as overreach on the part of schools. In 1968, Gordon Drake who worked with two conservative organizations—the John Birch Society and the Christian Crusade—wrote an article entitled, “Black Board Power: NEA Threat to America,” in which he warned that the National Education Association was turning kids away from parents and religion and toward “secularism and groupthink.”^{xxxv}

Sex education was mentioned only briefly in this pamphlet, but the positive feedback he received on that section convinced him to expand on it.

His 40-page follow up, *Is the Schoolhouse the Proper Place to Teach Raw Sex?*, was published by the John Birch Society in 1969. Drake claims to have sold 90,000 copies within the first three months.^{xxxvi} The first chapter of the pamphlet is dedicated to skewering SIECUS. He opens by saying that Calderone is on a "burning mission... to alert and convert the youth of America to a new sexuality. She pursues children and youth for her cause as ardently as the missionary of old pursued souls."^{xxxvii}

Drake and his pamphlet received national attention as did his unfounded anecdotes of what was going on in classrooms across the country. He told stories of condom demonstrations on life-like phalluses, co-ed bathrooms with no partitions as a way to desensitize youth to the opposite sex, and "unbelievably clever models which even include multi-colored plastic human

figures with interchangeable male and female sex organs—instant tranvestitism."^{xxxviii} These tall tales had little basis in truth and did not represent the sex education that SIECUS was supporting. But having a national enemy, in the form of a large, liberal organization founded by a woman with ties to Planned Parenthood was helpful to Drake's cause.

At the same time that Drake was pillorying SIECUS, local activists in Anaheim, California, were trying to get what they saw as an overly explicit program kicked out of their schools. The program, called **Family Life and Sex Education (FLSE)**, was created by the district's school nurse Sally Williams. She believed in an open and honest version of sex education that included discussions of sexual excitement, erections, orgasms, and birth control, and, for high school seniors, she did this in mixed sex groups—which was unheard of at the time. Nonetheless, her course remained firmly rooted in the idea that sex belonged in marriage and that even engaging in petting before

marriage was a problem. She included warnings about STIs and stories from young people who had had premarital sex and regretted it.^{xxxix}

SIECUS was not involved in developing or facilitating the program—it had started before the organization was founded. But SIECUS did hold the program up as an example of good sex education and hired Sally Williams as a consultant. The Anaheim activists, who had formed a group called MOPS (Mothers Organized for Moral Stability), contacted Drake and together they began to make the case that the Anaheim program and the SIECUS philosophy were one and the same. Again, SIECUS made a good enemy—certainly it was better to be seen as going after a national organization in New York City than the local school nurse. Not only did they tie the program to SIECUS (they took to calling FLSE "the SIECUS program"), they began to argue that it was part of a communist conspiracy to corrupt children, and that Mary Calderone herself had been labeled a communist by the House Committee on Un-American Activities.^{xl}

Calderone explained the controversy in a 1969 article saying: "The SIECUS 'program' (actually non-existent as such) was pictured as infiltrating the schools to teach kindergartners techniques of sexual intercourse, copulatory positions, etc. Various bits and pieces of SIECUS publications or reprinted articles or illustrations from commercially produced audio-visual aids for which SIECUS had acted as consultant, and even some in which it had played no part at all, were pulled out of context, distorted or juxtaposed to 'prove' the point."^{xli}

The attacks, which became increasingly personal against Calderone, worked. A Louisiana congressman called for a Congressional investigation of SIECUS, 15 states introduced legislation outlawing or limiting sex education, and two states (California and Nebraska) specifically outlawed the use of SIECUS materials in schools. Officials in California, according to Calderone, interpreted their state law to mean that no resources published or even promoted by SIECUS could be used in schools.^{xlii}

Calderone argued at the time that the purpose of these attacks was ultimately to sow local distrust in public education so that morality crusaders could run for school boards themselves at election time. Her analysis of the situation would prove to be prescient—over the next few decades social conservatives would wage countless local wars against sex education programs in attempts to divide communities and gain political power. These efforts never succeeded in the stated goal of removing sex education from schools entirely. They did, however, help bring attention to groups like the

Eagle Forum, the Moral Majority, Concerned Women for America, and Focus on the Family, and, ultimately, contributed to the coming rise of abstinence-only-until-marriage programs. ■

The culture wars

By the 1970s, most people acknowledged that the country had undergone an all-out “sexual revolution.” The invention of the pill had given women control of their own fertility in a way they had never had before. Supreme Court decisions had legalized abortion and made birth control more readily available. **This reproductive freedom gave women the ability to plan families and invest in their careers and changed the way many in society viewed premarital sex, relationships, and even marriage itself.**

Public opinion changed rapidly in just a few years. A 1969 poll found that 70 percent of Americans were opposed to premarital sex. By 1973, that was down to just under 50 percent. Similarly, fewer people were offended by nudity in magazines and plays (from three-quarters to just over half). Even the percentage who were offended by topless waitresses went down by 17 percent. On the flip side, the percentage of people who thought everyone who wanted birth control should have access to it went up by 10 points.^{xliii}

Not surprisingly, there was a strong backlash to these changing values. In fact, by the mid-1970s, a cohesive movement known as the **Christian Right** had organized. Janet Irvine explains in *Talk About Sex*: "Activists condensed opposition to a series of social issues, including abortion, the Equal Rights Amendment, pornography, sex education, and homosexuality, under 'pro-family' rubric."^{xliv} They created think tanks and research foundations, and worked politically on national, state, and local levels. And, they ran for public office. As a Florida minister told Newsweek in

1980, "We're running for everything from dogcatcher to senator."^{xlv}

Sex education was one of their favorite topics because the role of sex in society was really at the center of the culture wars of the time. Luker explains that, "...all other issues—clothing, teen pregnancy, family values, special rights for gay people—are different ways of talking about the same thing."^{xlvi} Moreover, Irvine notes that arguments about sex "...could perform significant rhetorical work. For one, they could serve as code for race, a way to implicitly tap racial fears. Welfare, teen pregnancy, public funding for abortion, and rock and later rap music were all issues that melded race and sexuality."^{xlvii}

The Christian Right also seized on a supposed epidemic of teen pregnancy. In truth, births to adolescents had peaked in the 1950s, but there were fears of a growing number of single mothers, especially in low-income communities of color. Irvine notes that regardless of the actual numbers, the pregnant teenager became a central

character in the culture wars, "...a construct that reflected social anxieties about sexuality and race...."^{xlviii} Preventing teen pregnancy by promoting abstinence became one of the rallying cries of the Christian Right that it has continued to use through the present day.

One of the movement's earliest successes on a national level came at the beginning of the Reagan Administration with the creation of a new federal funding stream under the **Adolescent and Family Life Act (AFLA)** to support "chastity education." Both the funding and the curricula that were created using the money would become the blueprint for expanding abstinence-only programs over the next few decades. ■



AIDS changes the debate

One of the central arguments around sex education has always revolved around whether sex education belonged in school. Over the years, whether they were railing against a social hygiene lecture, a FLE program, or the non-existent “SIECUS program,” some opponents of sex education stuck to the position that this was a private matter that should only be discussed in homes and religious institutions. **The AIDS epidemic—and the panic it brought with it—effectively put an end to this argument.**

The Reagan Administration largely ignored the early AIDS epidemic because it was thought to be a problem limited to gay men—an already stigmatized group that had little political power. At the time, there were even groups who publicly argued that AIDS was a deserved punishment for homosexual behavior. Videos show that Reagan's press secretary made light of what was considered the "Gay Plague" and joked with the press that the reporter asking the question must be "a fairy."^{xlix} The **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)** named AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) in 1982, and identified HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) as the cause of it in 1984. Still, Ronald Reagan himself did not address the epidemic until 1985, by which point over 5,500 Americans had already died from the disease.^l

In 1986, Surgeon General C. Everett Koop said: "There is no doubt now that we need sex education in schools."^{li} The following year, the Congressional Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families declared: "Until a vaccine or

cure is found and becomes available, education is the only tool we have to prevent the spread of this deadly disease."^{lii} The government offered funding to states that mandated AIDS education and state legislatures took up the cause. By 1990, 41 states encouraged or required sex education and all 50 required education on HIV/ AIDS.^{liii}

While the introduction of a deadly STI may have settled the debate over whether sex education belonged in school, it did little to resolve the many arguments about what should and should not be covered in such courses. SIECUS and other organizations pushed for a comprehensive approach to sex education that covered health, development, and relationships, in addition to contraception and disease prevention. But the Christian Right continued to argue that this was too much information, too soon, and would only further divorce sex from morality. In too many communities, fear-based lessons about HIV/AIDS became the only sex education young people ever received. ■

The fight between abstinence-only and comprehensive sexuality education

In 1990, SIECUS brought together a group of experts to draft the first ever *Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education K-12*. The Task Force began by delineating the "Life Behaviors of a Sexually Healthy Adult," which served as the outcome measures for a successful sex education course. The Task Force then worked backwards to determine the key concepts, topics, and messages that young people need to learn.

The Guidelines were not a curriculum themselves because SIECUS believed that local educators had the best understanding about what young people in their districts needed. Instead, they were meant as a framework to help educators create new programs and evaluate existing ones. Well over 100,000 copies of the Guidelines were distributed over the next 15 years. *The Guidelines* were translated into Spanish and adapted for use in a number of other countries.

One of the most vocal supporters of a comprehensive approach to sex education was Dr. M. Joycelyn Elders, a pediatrician from Arkansas who became the first African American and second woman to serve as U.S. Surgeon General. Dr. Elders had been the State Health Director in Arkansas when Bill Clinton was governor and was one of his first appointments when he became President. She was an outspoken advocate of sex education, contraception, condoms, and access to abortion. In Arkansas, she spearheaded school-based health clinics that provided contraception to students.^{liv}

Elders called out the hypocrisy in the messages given to teens about sex, telling *The New York Times* in 1994, "Everybody in the world is opposed to sex outside of marriage, and yet everybody does it. I'm saying, 'Get real.' Our kids already know we're not real... People realize that we all support the moral view, but we know that an awful lot of our children are not being abstinent. ...Since we can't legislate morals, we have to teach them how to take care of themselves."^{lv} She wanted sex education that was honest and practical. She was frequently quoted as saying, "Sure condoms break, but I assure you that vows of abstinence break more often."^{lvi}

Elders became a target for the Christian Right as it continued to push an abstinence-only approach to sex education. The Traditional Values Coalition mailed petitions to 30,000 churches to request her dismissal.^{lvii} More than once, the Clinton Administration was forced to distance itself from something that its Surgeon General had said. In 1994, Elders was speaking at a United Nations conference on AIDS and was asked whether she

thought teaching children about masturbation might reduce unsafe sex. She replied: "I think that is something that is a part of human sexuality, and it's a part of something that perhaps should be taught. But we've not even taught our children the very basics." This response caused an outcry among conservative groups and President Clinton asked for her resignation after just 15 months in office.^{lviii}

Though Dr. Elders has remained a champion for sex education until this day, she lost her position within the government just as opponents were ramping up efforts to sell their brand of abstinence-only programs to school boards across the country. ■



The rise of the abstinence-only movement

Building on the success of AFLA's chastity programs, **Christian Right organizations began pushing abstinence-only-until-marriage programs as a way to put morality and family values back in sex education.** They promised that these programs would not only prevent HIV/AIDS and teen pregnancy, but also fix a variety of issues that plagued society from high divorce rates to poverty to crime.

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, with ever-increasing support from the federal government, conservative organizations—some that had existed for decades, others founded for this specific purpose—created their own pre-packaged, **abstinence-only-until-marriage** curricula. These same groups offered to send engaging speakers to local schools to tell students the “real deal” about sex outside of marriage. Like the social hygiene and family life education programs of the past, abstinence-only-until-marriage programs were based on racist, classist, and sexist views of sex and marriage and sold an idyllic view of the white, middle class family as aspirational.

In fact, the first big investment in abstinence-only-until-marriage programs came as part of sweeping “welfare reform,” which was itself designed to promote middle class values and punish poor women for having “too many” children. Those pushing these changes argued that the root of poverty was, in fact, personal characteristics of poor women on welfare who

were irresponsible, promiscuous, and willing to have children outside of marriage. The myth of the “welfare mother”—a black, inner city woman who continued to have children in order to live off government subsidies—was perpetuated by Ronald Reagan and continued through the 1990s when lawmakers replaced the existing welfare program with **Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)**.^{lxix} Under the guise of “personal responsibility,” the new program changed the way states received federal money, and made it much harder for individual recipients to qualify for aid by adding work requirements and time limits on assistance.^{lx}

Included in TANF was **Title V, Section 510(b)**, which established a new federal funding stream to support abstinence-only-until-marriage programs. The accompanying guidance, written by congressional staff members Ron Haskins and Carol Satuto Bevin, explained that the new money “was intended to align Congress with the social tradition that sex should be confined to married couples.”^{lxii} Title V came with a strict, A-H

definition of “abstinence education” that required funded programs to have as their “exclusive purpose teaching the social, psychological, and health gains to be realized by abstaining from sexual activity.” Other tenets of the definition said that programs must teach that a “mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of sexual activity,” and that having children “out-of-wedlock is likely to have harmful consequences for the child, the child’s parents, and society.”^{lxiii}

Title V allocated \$50 million dollars which was given in block grants to states. States that accepted the grants had to match every four federal dollars with three state-raised dollars and then disburse the money to state agencies and/or community-based organizations. In order to meet the strict definition, most funded programs relied on fear and shame to control young people’s behaviors, suggesting that STDs were inevitable and that teens who had sex before marriage were less worthy of love and respect (without ever acknowledging the fact that

some young people may have been victims of sexual assault or abuse). They proclaimed that the only appropriate place for sex and child rearing was within a heterosexual marriage, thereby passing judgement on the families of many of their students.^{lxvii} And, they ignored the possibility that anyone—parents or students—might not be heterosexual or cisgender.²

Some states and community-based organizations, however, managed to run useful media campaigns, youth development projects, and after school programs by focusing on the two less ideological components of the A-H definition—“teach young people how to reject sexual advances and how alcohol and drug use increases vulnerability to sexual advances” and “teach the importance of attaining self-sufficiency before engaging in sexual activity.” This angered some conservative lawmakers who, in 2000, created yet another funding stream for abstinence-only-until-marriage programs known as the **Community-Based Abstinence Education (CBAE) program**. This funding bypassed the

states and went straight from the federal government to community-based organizations. Grantees were also held to a higher standard of compliance with the program's main messages. CBAE was originally funded at \$20 million but increased exponentially over its first five years, reaching a height of \$113 million each year for Fiscal Years 2006–2008.^{lxiv}

This proliferation of funding increased both the demand for and availability of abstinence-only-until-marriage curricula and speakers. Early drafts of these programs contained blatant religious messages, but conservative organizations seemed to realize that the underlying message that kids shouldn't have sex before marriage was more palatable to some communities when couched in secular terms. Rather than suggesting that young people take Jesus Christ on their date with them to avoid temptation (as an early draft of *Sex Respect* had done), newer versions talked about the importance of spirituality. Still, the religious biases of the authors crept in. The 2001 edition of *Sex Respect* gives the following dating

advice: "Set ending time for your date before you go out. Be home on time. Don't invite your date in. Lead yourselves not into temptation."^{lxv} The last part is a direct quote from the New Testament, Matthew 6:13.

In addition to religious biases, the curricula contained gender messages that justified a world in which "boys will be boys" and girls needed to help keep them in control. *Sex Respect* told young girls to "Watch what you wear, if you don't aim to please, don't aim to tease." And suggested biological reasons for these rules: "a young man's natural desire for sex is already strong due to testosterone, the powerful growth hormones... Females are becoming culturally conditioned to fantasize about sex as well."^{lxvi} While the social hygienists of the early 1900s called out gender differences in an attempt to get white men to improve their behavior, the abstinence-only proponents of the 2000s were entirely focused on the prevention of "promiscuous" behavior in young women.

Despite the fear and misinformation, these programs prospered under both the Clinton and Bush administrations. In addition to providing money, Title V and CBAE offered a federal stamp of approval for this conservative approach. Now, when a small group of parents in a community approached a school board in opposition to an existing comprehensive sexuality education program, they could point to federal support for a strict abstinence-only approach, offer a pre-packaged curriculum, and, in many cases, find a local organization that could provide it free of charge using government money. Moreover, a number of state legislatures adopted language

directly from the A–H definition that encouraged or even mandated schools to teach abstinence-only programs.^{lxvii} ■

² Cisgender is a term used to describe someone whose gender identity aligns with those typically associated with the sex assigned to them at birth. It was introduced in the 1990s to mean the opposite of transgender as a way to acknowledge our tendency to only label what is different from the norm. Though it remains controversial, it has become increasingly popular in the last few years after being added to the Oxford English Dictionary in 2015. (See S. Byrdy (July 31, 2015). The true meaning of the word cisgender. *The Advocate*. Accessed 2/25/2020 <https://www.advocate.com/transgender/2015/07/31>true-meaning-word-cisgender>)



Abstinence-only programs face criticism

SIECUS and its partners spent these decades arguing that **abstinence-only-until-marriage programs were nothing more than a social agenda masquerading as teen pregnancy and STI prevention**. They worked with advocates on the federal, state, and local levels to explain that the programs promoted a religious message in public schools, were based on fear and shame, contained blatantly inaccurate information, and ignored lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) youth.

Not surprisingly, however, the argument that got the most traction was that these programs simply didn't work. Abstinence-only-until-marriage programs had been sold on the promise that they would prevent STIs and pregnancy, but the research began to show that they did neither.

In 2007, a number of studies were published showing that abstinence-only programs did little to change young people's sexual behavior and could actually be damaging. A congressionally mandated study conducted by Mathematica, an independent research organization, looked at four federally funded abstinence-only-until-marriage programs and found that young people in these programs were no more likely to abstain than their peers not in the programs. This review was particularly damning because the four programs were cherry-picked by abstinence proponents as being the best. Moreover, the review found that young people in these programs were actually less likely to correctly report that condoms are effective in preventing STIs.^{lxviii}

Similarly, a 2007 meta-analysis of 13 abstinence-only programs found that such programs are not effective in reducing the age of sexual initiation, incidence of unprotected sex, frequency of sex, or number of sexual partners.^{lxix} A second review published that same year also found that these programs did not delay initiation of sexual intercourse, reduce the number of sexual partners, or increase abstinence among already sexually active young people.^{lxx} Future studies would confirm these findings, and discover that states that required an emphasis on abstinence had higher rates of teen pregnancy, even after accounting for other factors like socioeconomic status, education, ethnicity, and the availability of Medicaid.^{lxxi}

As a result of these studies and advocacy efforts, support for the strict abstinence-only-until-marriage approach was waning by the time President Barack Obama took office in 2009. ■

Evidence-based programs and beyond

While President George W. Bush had been an early adopter of abstinence-only-until-marriage programs since he served as the governor of Texas, Obama seemed to favor a different approach to sex education from the beginning of his presidency. **In 2010, Congress authorized the creation of the Office of Adolescent Health (OAH) within the Department of Health and Human Services.** OAH was dedicated to improving the health and well-being of adolescents to enable them to become healthy, productive adults.

OAH administered its own programs and also coordinated with programs for adolescents run by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) and the CDC.^{lxvii}

OAH administered the **Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program (TPPP)**, a new funding stream to support programs that were medically accurate, age appropriate, and evidence based. TPPP received \$110 million dollars in funding. Supported programs had to have been “proven through rigorous evaluation to reduce teen pregnancy, behavioral risk factors underlying teen pregnancy, or other associated risk behaviors.”^{lxviii} The funding was also available to organizations that were evaluating new approaches to pregnancy prevention.

Initially, there were 28 **Evidence-Based Initiatives (EBIs)** that were eligible for TPP funding.^{lxix} EBIs tend to be short, targeted programs designed for use with a specific population. These programs were certainly valuable in preventing teen pregnancy, STIs, and HIV, and the federal support for them was an important step away from the abstinence-

only approach of previous administrations. Funded programs were not, however, the comprehensive education that SIECUS and its partners had been working toward.

Despite having less funding available for abstinence-only programs and a more supportive administration, research found that fewer young people were actually receiving sex education. The Guttmacher Institute analyzed data from the National Survey of Family Growth. It found that between 2006 and 2013, there were significant declines in the percent of adolescent females who reported receiving formal instruction about birth control, saying no to sex, sexually transmitted infections, and HIV/AIDS.^{lxv}

In an attempt to institutionalize school-based sex education, the Future of Sex Education (FoSE) initiative—a partnership between SIECUS, Advocates for Youth, and Answer—published the **National Sexuality Education Standards (NSES)** in 2012. Many disciplines create education standards to help ensure consistency in topics and messages across classrooms, schools, and communities. NSES did just that by

providing guidance about essential content and skills students need to make informed decisions about sexual health, and setting clear and measurable goals for students in kindergarten through grade 12.

NSES focuses on seven topics: Anatomy and Physiology; Puberty and Adolescent Development; Identity; Pregnancy and Reproduction; Sexually Transmitted Diseases and HIV; Healthy Relationships; and Personal Safety. Topics are presented using performance indicators which clearly lay out what students should learn by the end of grades 2, 5, 8, and 12.

FoSE then created **The National Teacher Preparation Standards**, and another group of advocates came together as the Sex Ed Collaborative to create **The National Professional Development Standards for Sex Ed**. These documents help ensure that teachers are prepared to take on comprehensive sexuality education in schools. Teacher training has always been a challenge in sex education because in addition to understanding the information, teachers need to be comfortable with topics that are often

considered taboo and receive specialized classroom management skills. Advocates for Youth also created **Rights, Respect, Responsibility** (“the 3Rs”), a series of lesson plans that fully meets the NSES. The lessons address knowledge related to sexuality and the specific skills necessary to adopt healthy behaviors.

In recent years, FoSE members have helped numerous communities adopt programs based on the standards and train teachers to better provide sex education. There has also been a movement to let young people lead the way in sex education and to focus on the needs of LGBTQ youth and young people of color who have historically been left out of sex education programs. A revision of the NSES was released in 2020 to further help fill in these gaps. Unfortunately, the national conversation around sex education has largely remained focused on preventing teen pregnancy and the role various interventions (from abstinence-only programs to contraceptive access programs) have or have not played in historically low teen pregnancy rates. ■



The fight continues

Even under the Obama Administration, abstinence-only programs and funding did not go away. In 2010, the Title V funding stream was revived under the Affordable Care Act and the following year, Congress created a new discretionary funding stream called **Community Abstinence Education (CAE)** grant program.^{lxvvi} Still, proponents of abstinence-only-until-marriage programs knew that they did not have the support they once did among lawmakers or parents and began using new language to discuss their approach.

In 2012, the **National Abstinence Education Association (NAEA)**, which had emerged as the leading organization advocating for abstinence-only-until-marriage programs, changed its name to **Ascend**. The organization argued that teens need “skills, information, and encouragement to avoid all sexual activity, hopefully until they marry. We believe that helping teens eliminate—not simply reduce—sexual risk, is the right thing to do.”^{lxxvii} Taking phrases common in public health, Ascend and its partners began to call their programs **Sexual Risk Avoidance (SRA)** and, in doing so, likened teen sex to universally unhealthy behaviors like illegal drug use.

In addition to co-opting public health language, Ascend began marketing its programs as poverty prevention. Its argument hinges on **“success sequencing,”** a concept introduced by Brookings Institution researchers Ron Haskins and Isabel Sawhill. (Haskins was one of the congressional staff members who wrote the original guidance for Title V that included the

strict A-H definition of abstinence education.) This theory suggests that people who graduated from high school, got a job, and waited until they were married and older than 21 to have a child were less likely to be living in poverty. Ascend uses this research to argue that young people must live life in the proper order and, to do so, sex has to come after marriage.^{lxxviii}

This theory completely ignores the role of institutional racism and socioeconomic status; it inaccurately assumes that all young people have an equal chance of being middle class as an adult. In fact, in later research, the Brookings Institution itself acknowledged that success sequencing usually only works if you’re white.^{lxxix} Other reviews of this research have also found that only graduating and getting a job mattered in terms of future poverty.^{lxxx} Whether someone has had sex as a teenager is entirely irrelevant.

Nonetheless, the SRA approach gained support with conservatives in Congress. For Fiscal Year 2016, the CAE program was renamed the

Sexual Risk Avoidance Education program and new language was included that mimicked Ascend’s talking points. Funded programs had to “teach the benefits associated with self-regulation, and success sequencing for poverty prevention.” In 2017, Title V funding was also tied to an SRA approach.^{lxxxi} Perhaps the best illustration of the Trump Administration’s commitment to SRA, however, is the increasing responsibilities given to its champion, Valerie Huber.

Huber was the Title V coordinator in Ohio before she became the President of the NAEA. In fact, she oversaw the rebranding of the organization and spearheaded the SRA movement. In June 2017, Trump appointed Huber to serve as chief of staff to the assistant secretary of health. In that role, she attempted to cut TPPP grants that had already been promised to organizations across the country. A number of the organizations sued, and the courts ruled that the early termination of these grants was illegal.^{lxxxii} Huber was also involved in new guidelines for Title X family planning grants that favor natural family

planning over modern, effective contraceptive methods; prevent clinic staff from making abortion referrals; and forbid clinics from offering birth control and abortion in the same location.^{lxxxiii} In 2019, Huber moved to HHS’s Office of Global Affairs as a Senior Policy Advisor where she has substantial influence over U.S. foreign policy related to family planning.

The Trump Administration has made it clear that it supports a restrictive approach to sex education that is once again based on racial biases, sexist stereotypes, and extreme religious ideology. The good news is that even under this administration, advocates in states and communities continue to make progress in training teachers and bringing sex education based on the *NSES* to their students. ■



Looking forward: Sex ed as a vehicle for social change

Social change has often been referred to as a pendulum—it swings forward with momentum as formerly oppressed groups gain the rights they had been fighting for only to be punched forcibly backward by those afraid of how these changes will disrupt their once-comfortable view of the world. **Over the last 100 years, sex education has been part of this push and pull.**

Too often, it reacted to the changes by offering a solution to the problem of the moment. Of course, many of these perceived problems were actually just a changing society grappling with shifts in the norms around sex, gender, and relationships. These things did not need fixing so much as society needed help understanding the issues, pushing through the stereotypes and stigma, and moving forward.

Over the decades, sex education has, in fact, helped challenge how we think about gender; our vision of relationships, love, and family; our understanding of sexual behavior and pleasure; and our acceptance of the rights of ourselves and others to do what we want with our own bodies.

If allowed, sex education can continue to help us dismantle the systems of power, oppression, and misinformation that are at the heart of efforts to deny sexual and reproductive freedom to individuals and groups. It can model LGBTQ inclusion; support sexual violence prevention; and tackle racial, sexualized stereotypes that put

people of color at greater risk of experiencing violence. It can debunk harmful gender stereotypes; define and promote enthusiastic consent practices; and empower each of us to claim the right to our own bodily autonomy.

Sex education was not designed as a vehicle of social change. But, if allowed, it can be just that. Sex education has the power to create a culture shift across the United States—granting all people the ability to experience and enjoy sexual and reproductive freedom, as they define it for themselves. ■



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