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Why Sex Education is in Such a Mess

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Controversies over sex education seem constantly to roil the waters in local communities. Parents often launch revolts against what they (most often rightly) see as ideologically driven efforts to subvert parental authority. A recent review essay published in the *Boston Review* helpfully clarifies why this is so.

Maureen N. McLane, a lecturer in history and literature at Harvard University, [reviewed several recent works](#) on the sex education controversies. Specifically, she looks at Janie M. Irvine's *Talk About Sex: The Battles Over Sex Education in the United States*, Kristin Luker's *When Sex Goes to School: Warring Views on Sex—and Sex Education—Since the Sixties*, and Jeffrey Moran's *Teaching Sex: The Shaping of Adolescence in the 20th Century*. All three books offer interesting observations — and all three have an agenda.

McLane introduces the controversy as a fairly recent phenomenon:

Though sexual education dates back to Progressive Era “social hygienists” and their efforts to combat venereal disease and prostitution, the current vitriol is of more recent vintage, emerging in the late 1960s. Deeply disturbed by the sexual revolution, and agitated further by the comprehensive sex-ed curricula recently implemented in some school districts, traditionalists began to mobilize in such groups as MOMS (Mothers Organized for Moral Stability), SOS (Sanity on Sex) and MOTOREDE (Movement to Restore Decency). They rallied against sex ed and the funding of sex-ed programs by the National Education Association in a series of convulsive disputes in 1968 and 1969. Since then, sex ed has offered Americans a symbolic arena for persisting cultural combat, the terms of which have shifted over the past 40 years.

McLane correctly observes that the origins of the sex education movement are found in the social hygiene movement and post-war “family-life education.” As she describes these roots: “In the ’50s, sex ed typically appeared as one small precinct of “family-life education,” aimed primarily at training young people for monogamous, rigidly gendered, companionate marriages in a booming consumer culture.”

She argues that a major turn came in the 1960s, when more explicit sex education curricula were adopted by many school districts, leading to a conservative reaction. The early reaction was a call to end sex education. Eventually, the focus of conservative groups and many parents shifted to changing the curriculum.

As McLane argues:

By the ’80s conservatives pushed sex-ed discussions to a new place: the question now (as Irvine tells us) was not whether a sex-ed curriculum should be offered, but which one. A new battleground was emerging: “comprehensive” vs. “abstinence-only” sexual education. This distinction, though wobbly in practice, is significant: comprehensive sexual education communicates information about contraception and usually includes value-neutral discussion of abortion, sexual orientation, and other controversial topics; abstinence-only curricula promote abstinence as the only acceptable standard for youth—indeed for anyone not in heterosexual marriage—and mention contraception, if at all, only to emphasize failure rates.

A major problem immediately arises — there is no “value-neutral discussion of abortion, sexual orientation, and other controversial topics.” Value-neutrality is impossible. Suggesting abortion as an option is not value-neutral. There is no way to talk about sexual orientation without tripping ideological implications. The very concept is tied to an ideological agenda.

Of course, from the vantage point of “comprehensive” sex education proponents, a push for abstinence-only sex education looks similarly ideological — and it is, of course. The battles over sex education are battles that reveal worldviews in conflict, with our children on the battlefield.

McLane makes a very interesting observation in this paragraph:

More important, these writers under discussion suggest, rightly in my view, that a utilitarian-consequentialist rationale for sex ed (to invoke a philosophical discourse they do not) cannot counter a conservative rationale grounded in duty, right, or moral law. The value-neutrality of pluralistic sex education leaves advocates wide open to attacks in terms of “values”: most citizens will not absolutely detach sexual behavior from morality, and many continue to invoke religion as opposed to or alongside public health as the or a proper framework for transmitting sexual knowledges.

She seems somewhat perplexed that “most citizens will not absolutely detach sexual behavior from morality.” Added to that, she observes with regret that “many continue to invoke religion as opposed to or alongside public health as the or a proper framework for transmitting sexual knowledges.”

In the end, McLane calls for advocates of the more liberal approach to “try more seriously to ground their arguments in terms of justice and happiness” instead of “ceding talk of values to conservatives.”

In those words we find a frank admission of the worldview clash — a clash over “values” that determines what we think about sex, gender, sexuality, and a host of essentially related issues. This explains why sex education in the schools is in such a mess. It also explains why it is not likely to get better.

