

Sex Education and the Culture Wars

Josh Corngold

The University of Tulsa

In her thoughtful and nuanced essay, Lauren Bialystok argues that competing positions on sex education policy are not as irreducibly dichotomous as they are generally assumed to be.¹ She observes that many comprehensive sex education (CSE) advocates and abstinence-only-until-marriage education (AOUME) proponents share certain higher order values (e.g., public health, individual flourishing, and ethical relationships) as well as concrete aims (e.g., teenage pregnancy and disease prevention and the promotion of abstinence among youth). Bialystok makes a compelling case that these are important, non-trivial areas of agreement, even as the parties vehemently disagree about intermediary values, the best means of achieving shared aims, and whether some ends justify certain means. Given the hyper-partisan, polarized political climate we find ourselves in these days, Bialystok's analysis is particularly timely and cogent. There is significant value, in this climate especially, in acknowledging commonalities at the level of higher order values. Doing so does not mean that any one of us thereby becomes an apologist for particular policy and curriculum recommendations that we would otherwise regard as deeply misguided or misaligned with those values. It does, however, help us resist the all-too-easy and common tendency to vilify our political opponents, thereby increasing the likelihood that debates over sex education will be more edifying and productive for everyone involved.

At the same time as we acknowledge these commonalities at the level of higher order values, we must also recognize that deep divisions over sex education are, to a significant extent, a byproduct of willful demagoguery, propaganda, and manipulation of public opinion. Since at least the end of World War II in the U.S., political opportunists and various interest groups—in the service of their own social and political agendas—have succeeded in channeling widespread anxieties over social change into moral panics over youth sexuality.² Historian Jonathan Zimmerman notes that in the 1940s, right wing patriotic and veterans' organizations began raising conspiracies about school-based sex

education, which they depicted as a Soviet plot to encourage “unrestrained sexual license,” corrupt America’s youth, and thereby lay the groundwork for a communist revolution in America.³ By the late 1960s, the Reverend Billy James Hargis—founder of the Christian Crusade and a pioneering figure in the religious right movement—had joined in the efforts of other organizations, such as the anti-communist John Birch Society, to ignite a grassroots movement against sex education in the public schools. In 1968, the Crusade published “Is the School House the Proper Place to Teach Raw Sex?”—a pamphlet which contained lurid, apocryphal accounts of alleged sex education practices, including schools setting up “joint boy-girl toilet facilities without partitions” as a way to liberate students from the sexual insecurities and hang-ups plaguing mainstream society.⁴ The pamphlet struck fear into the hearts of parents and community groups nationwide, becoming an instant bestseller. Buoyed by this success, Hargis and his associates began traversing the country, drumming up local opposition to sex education while appealing to parents not to allow so called “sexperts” to usurp their own God-given authority over the hearts and minds of their children. Ultimately, Hargis, the Crusaders, and other groups such as the Birchers, succeeded in mobilizing substantial parental opposition to sex education. Local protest groups—with names like People Against Unconstitutional Sex Education (PAUSE), Parents United for a Responsible Education (PURE), Parents Opposed to Sex and Sensitivity Education (POSSE), and Citizens for Parental Rights (CPR)—exerted pressure on school officials, district board members, and state legislators across the country.⁵ By the early 1970s hundreds of localities and nineteen states had considered proposals to either strictly limit sex education in the public schools, or drop it altogether.⁶

Reflecting on this period of wildly successful political organization, one representative of the Birch Society gushed that sex education was “the best recruiting device to come down the pike since fluoridation.”⁷ The political right had discovered an issue around which a broad constituency of religious and secular conservatives coalesced. They found success with tactics—highly emotive rhetoric, straw man argumentation, and fearmongering—that would be employed again and again in the decades to come, even as the obsession with

communism gave way to an obsession with “secular humanism,” and even as the debate shifted in the early 1980s from whether schools should teach sex education at all to what form sex education should take. In reference to episodic outbreaks of collective panic over youth sexuality that sprang up in the ensuing decades, Janice Irvine writes that “rather than epiphenomenal, intense emotional reactions were strategically produced through a discourse of sexual danger and depravity that shaped how citizens throughout the United States spoke and felt about sex education.”⁸

One lasting legacy of this cultural and political agitation is that sex education continues to occupy a central place in the culture wars that divide Americans along ideological fault lines. Furthermore, the politically motivated scare tactics that the Crusaders, Birchers, and other right-wing organizations found such success with in the 1960s continue to be employed today for recruitment and political mobilization purposes. Consider the 2020 brochure issued by the Family Research Council entitled, “Sex Education in Public Schools: Sexualization of Children and LGBT Indoctrination.”⁹ The brochure takes a page from the Christian Crusade’s 1968 “School House” pamphlet and adds a vehemently homophobic and transphobic twist. Among other incendiary claims, it asserts that schools across the country are “devoting significant classroom time” to teaching children “techniques to pleasure their sex partners,” “the joys of sex toys,” and “how to get secret abortions without telling [your] parents.”¹⁰ It also condemns comprehensive sexuality education curricula for “[promoting] homosexual/bisexual behavior” and “transgender ideology,” which it warns may have “potentially devastating” consequences, such as pushing children “down the path that can lead to irreversible chemical and surgical mutilation of their bodies.”¹¹ Clearly, now as in the past, sex education is a focus of intense fearmongering among activists who seek to divide the public, consolidate and galvanize their supporters, and expand their sphere of influence.

My attempt here to provide some historical context for the bitter disputes over sex education in no way diminishes Bialystok’s thesis. Again, acknowledging areas of agreement—even at the level of more abstract, higher order values—is a vital and necessary step in de-escalating these acrimonious and too frequently

unproductive disputes. Perhaps, I am suggesting that as a further step, we need to recognize and publicize how political opportunists and interest groups actively and intentionally inflame passions over sex education for their own ends. And we need to think more about our collective susceptibility to disinformation and demagoguery in this area, and how to counteract it.

1 Lauren Bialystok, "Sex Education and the De-Polarization of Public Values," *Philosophy of Education* 77, no. 3 (2021).

2 Steven Angelides, *The Fear of Child Sexuality: Young People, Sex, and Agency* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019); Gilbert Herdt, ed., *Moral Panics, Sex Panics: Fear and the Fight over Sexual Rights* (New York: NYU Press, 2009).

3 Jonathan Zimmerman, *Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 194.

4 Jeffrey P. Moran, *Teaching Sex: The Shaping of Adolescence in the 20th Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 180-1.

5 Moran, *Teaching Sex*, 183-4; Zimmerman, *Whose America?*, 197.

6 Zimmerman, *Whose America?*, 190.

7 Moran, *Teaching Sex*, 186.

8 Janice M. Irvine, "Transient Feelings: Sex Panics and the Politics of Emotions," in *Moral Panics, Sex Panics*, ed. Gilbert Herdt, 238.

9 Cathy Ruse, "Sex Education in Public Schools: Sexualization of Children and LGBT Indoctrination," Family Research Council (2020), <https://www.frc.org/brochure/sex-education-in-public-schools-sexualization-of-children-and-lgbt-indoctrination>.

10 Ruse, "Sex Education."

11 Ruse, "Sex Education."